A Serious Christian Journal of Life and its Significance

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Verba Vitae

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Verba Vitae is committed to bringing the classical Christian tradition into conversation with life issues now confronting us. Modeling the reasoned *logos* of the theological tradition, *Verba Vitae* explores the truth-claims made by thinkers and examines the grounds upon which these assertions are made.

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Welcome to the Summer Edition of *Verba Vitae*!

In this issue, we explore the profound relationship between Creation and Life—how the Christian understanding of origin, purpose, and destiny shapes our vocation in the world.

We begin with a biblical study, "Creation and the Meaning of Life in the Apocalypse: Eschatological Renewal and Divine Purpose," by Dan Lioy, who offers a cohesive and theologically rich exploration of Revelation's eschatological vision. Rooted in Lutheran theology, Lioy traces the biblical arc from the ordered creation in Genesis, through the Fall's corruption, to Revelation's vision of cosmic renewal centered in Christ's redemptive work. With theological clarity, he weaves together themes of creation, fall, redemption, and ultimate restoration—not only of the human creature but of the entire cosmos. His essay invites readers to embrace their Christian vocation as agents of God's redemptive plan in a world awaiting its final renewal at the eschaton.

In "Martin Luther's Definition of the Human Creature," Robert Kolb examines Luther's evolving theological anthropology. Grounded in Scripture and shaped by the distinction between law and gospel, Luther defines human identity not through autonomous performance—as in Ockhamist and scholastic traditions—but through the relationship of trust, love, and reverence before the Creator. Integrating body, soul, and spirit, and drawing deeply from Genesis, Luther's view emphasizes the imago Dei as expressed in reason, will, and emotion. Kolb's contribution offers both clarity and depth, inviting readers to reflect on what it truly means to be human in light of God's creative and redemptive grace.

The third article, "The Ontology of Decision" by Dennis Bielfeldt, probes the nature of human freedom, moral choice, and the metaphysical questions that underlie existence. Drawing on thinkers such as William James, Heidegger, Sartre, and Wittgenstein, Bielfeldt argues that fundamental decisions—such as whether to sustain life or embrace death—cannot be resolved by empirical reasoning alone. Instead, they reflect an ontological freedom that precedes empirical and rational evidence-giving and invites faith. He suggests that whether we see the universe as a divine gift or as a cosmic accident determines not only our ethical decisions but also our fundamental orientation toward meaning itself.

In "Life, Death, and Life Again: Natural Burial and Resurrection Promise," Beth Hoeltke challenges our culture's sanitized, death-denying practices. She contrasts today's professionalized, often detached approaches to death with historic Christian practices rooted in communal care and resurrection hope. Advocating for natural burial—modeled on Christ's own—Hoeltke highlights its ecological, theological, and eschatological significance. Using biodegradable materials and avoiding embalming, natural burial honors the body, the earth, and the Creator. It serves as a liturgical and ecological witness to the promise of resurrection, allowing believers to testify to God's redemptive story even in death.

The final article, "Looking the Right Way through the Telescope" by Martin Christiansen, confronts the dominance of empirical scientism in modern thought. Christiansen argues that instead of seeking proof of God from within the narrow framework of Enlightenment rationalism, Christians must begin with the assumption of God's real and active presence. Drawing from Lennox, Hodge, Clarke, and Pannenberg, he proposes a renewed "faithful inquiry" grounded in the reality of divine theophysical causality. To look through the telescope the right way, he suggests, is to see the world first and foremost as God-created—and only then to explore its meaning through science and reason shaped by faith.

This issue concludes with four insightful book reviews, highlighting significant recent works that deepen our understanding of creation, human life, and Christian vocation. Each title invites theological reflection on what it means to be created, to live faithfully within a created order, and to bear witness to God's redemptive purposes in the world. Whether exploring science, ethics, or metaphysics, these books challenge and inspire us to engage the complexities of contemporary life through the lens of faithful Christian thought.

So pull up a chair, pour yourself a cup of coffee or tea, and enjoy this summer edition of *Verba Vitae*—a theological reflection on life as a gift, a calling, and a sacred mystery.

Dennis Bielfeldt

General Editor, *Verba Vitae*

Creation and the Meaning of Life in the Apocalypse

Eschatological Renewal and Divine Purpose

Dan Lioy

1.0 Introduction: Revelation's Vision of Eschatological Renewal and the Meaning of Life in a Broken World

The Apocalypse has long captivated readers with its vivid imagery, dramatic visions, and profound theological themes. Although often misconceived as a mere catalog of future catastrophes, Revelation is a literary masterpiece that explores the ultimate meaning of life, the nature of creation, and the destiny of redeemed humanity. This essay explores the theological significance of John's prophetic oracle, arguing that it reveals life's ultimate purpose as participation in God's restored cosmic order. Grounded in Lutheran theology, the study traces the biblical narrative from the ordered creation in Genesis, through the corruption introduced by the Fall, to the eschatological renewal depicted in the treatise's closing chapters. At the heart of this argument is the claim that Revelation's vision of renewal—centered on Christ and his redemptive work (1:1; 22:21)—reframes humanity's vocation and destiny, offering transformative hope amid a broken world.

The essay begins by establishing the Old Testament foundation of creation theology and highlighting the ordered and intentional nature of the cosmos as an act of God. The discussion then examines how Jewish apocalyptic literature, particularly from the Second Temple period, expanded on these themes, expressing hope for divine intervention and cosmic renewal. Moving to the New Testament, the essay highlights the Christological dimension of creation theology, in which the Messiah is both Creator and Redeemer—indeed, the one through whom all things are made and through whom all things will be restored. This sets the stage for an in-depth analysis of Revelation, where the themes of creation, fall, and redemption converge in a vision of eschatological renewal.

The study's significance lies in reshaping how Christians understand their purpose and vocation by considering Revelation's end-time vision. Rather than

conveying a message of doom, John's unfolding cosmic drama presents a hope-filled future of a restored creation, where evil is decisively overcome, and redeemed humanity is invited to participate in God's salvific plan. This eschatological perspective redefines Christian ethics and identity, calling believers to live as agents of the Lord's renewal through worship, witness, and service. The essay ultimately argues that life's true meaning is found in a restored relationship with the Triune God—a bond progressively realized in the present and consummated in the new Jerusalem at the end of the age.

To develop this argument, the essay is structured around key theological concepts, including creation theology, human vocation, the fall and redemption, and the "already/not yet" tension of eschatology. Also, at strategic points throughout the study, critical terms such as *imago Dei* (the image of God), *creatio continua* (continuous creation), and *theologia crucis* (the theology of the cross) are revisited to deepen the analytical understanding of readers. The study also engages Lutheran theological principles, particularly justification by grace through faith, to illuminate how Revelation's vision of renewal is grounded in God's gracious action rather than human effort.

These themes are of vital importance because they address one of humanity's most fundamental questions: *What is the meaning of life?* In a world marred by suffering, injustice, and brokenness, John's prophetic oracle offers a message of consolation and restoration, assuring believers that their lives have purpose and that creation itself is moving toward a glorious renewal. By deliberating the theological depth of Revelation, this essay invites Jesus' followers to see their lives within Scripture's broader narrative—one that culminates in the restoration of all things through Christ. In doing so, the study invites believers to live with courage and expectant faith, anchored in the promises of God.

2.0 Foundational Understandings of Creation

This section explores the biblical and theological foundations of creation—from Old Testament accounts to Jewish apocalyptic literature—showing how these traditions shape Revelation's eschatological vision of renewal. In Lutheran theology, creation is not merely the opening act of the biblical narrative but a foundational doctrine that shapes the Church's understanding of God's purpose across salvation history. Rooted in Luther's engagement with Genesis, this tradition views creation as the bedrock of the Lord's relationship with humanity and the cosmos. It reveals God's almighty power, gracious character, and intentional design for human life, laying the groundwork for both redemption and eschatological renewal.

2.1 Creation in the Old Testament

The Old Testament portrays creation as God's sovereign act, bringing order from chaos and establishing a cosmos in which humanity is called to share in divine governance. This theology, appearing throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, points forward to the eschatological renewal envisioned in apocalyptic texts and fulfilled in Revelation. For Lutherans, the creation accounts in Scripture establish core principles—the Lord's sovereignty, humanity's vocation, and the inherent goodness of the material world—that resonate through the entire biblical narrative.

2.1.1 Genesis 1–2: Creation as Divine Act and Ordered Design

Genesis 1–2 presents creation as God's deliberate and orderly work. In chapter 1, the divine Artisan and Architect shapes the cosmos over six days, separating light from darkness and water from land, and setting time's rhythms through the sun, moon, and stars. The repeated refrain, "God said," highlights a distinctly Lutheran insight: the universe arises from the power of the Lord's authoritative Word (Heb 1:1–3).1 This is the same Logos, incarnate in Christ (John 1:14), who is active today in proclamation and sacrament.

The repeated declaration, "God saw that it was good," culminating in "very good" (Gen 1:31), affirms creation's intrinsic worth and purpose. In Lutheran thought, this "goodness" reflects not just beauty but a divinely ordained order (*ordo creationis*), where every aspect of the universe functions according to God's will. Humanity stands apart in this order, uniquely bearing the divine image (*imago Dei*; vv. 26–28). More than a static quality, this image is a vocation. It is a call to steward creation and reflect the Lord's care within it. Lutherans extend this vocational emphasis beyond religious roles, viewing all lawful human work as participation in God's ongoing creative activity.

Genesis 2 deepens this portrayal with a relational focus. Formed from "dust" (v. 7) and enlivened by God's "breath," humanity is intimately tied to both the earth and the Creator. Eden, with its lush garden and rivers, embodies this harmony—humanity dwelling in fellowship with God, one another, and the created order. Lutheran theology underscores this relationality, viewing sin (Gen 3) as not merely a moral failure, but as a rupture of these sacred bonds. The vision of a new creation in Revelation 21–22 thus becomes the restoration of this harmony, fulfilling the Lord's original intent.

Lutherans also affirm *creatio continua*—God's ongoing sustenance of creation. Rejecting deistic notions of a distant Creator, Luther insisted that the Lord remains intimately involved, preserving the world through his Word. This dependence on

God's continual care shapes Lutheran eschatology. The new creation unveiled in John's unfolding cosmic drama is not a replacement but the perfection of the first, forever freed from sin's corruption. In Christ, the Creator and Redeemer, creation and redemption are one divine work.

2.1.2 Psalms: Creation as Witness to God's Glory and Care

The Psalter celebrates creation as a testament to God's majesty and providence. For example, Psalm 8:4 marvels at the heavens' grandeur while pondering humanity's role: "what is man that you remember him, the son of man that you pay attention to him!" Lutherans see human dignity here as wholly derived from the Lord's grace, not inherent merit. It echoes the doctrine of justification, where righteousness comes through Christ alone. This perspective finds its culmination in Revelation 22:5, where redeemed humanity reigns with the "Lord God."

Psalm 104 extols creation's beauty and God's sustaining hand. The Lord "stretches out the heavens like a canopy" (v. 2) and governs nature's cycles (vv. 19–23), revealing a dynamic creation reliant on his presence. Verses 29–30 align with Luther's emphasis on God's moment-by-moment preservation. This dependence rejects any autonomous view of nature, grounding Lutheran emphases on caring for creation as participation in the Lord's work.

Psalm 148 envisions all creation—stars, storms, plants, and people—praising God together. This cosmic chorus suggests that creation itself has an eschatological purpose. It is not merely serving as a backdrop to human salvation, but also sharing in its redemption (Acts 3:21; Rom 8:18–21; 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1). The praise hymn foreshadows the throne room worship in Revelation 4–5, where heaven and earth (personified) unite in glorifying the Lamb.

2.1.3 Wisdom Literature: Creation as Divine Wisdom

The Old Testament wisdom literature provides further insight into creation's purpose. For instance, Proverbs 8:22–31 personifies wisdom as God's partner in creation, hinting at an inherent rationality in the cosmos. Lutherans connect this to Christ, the Logos through whom "everything was made" (John 1:3), and the one who orders both creation and its renewal (Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17; Col 1:16–17). This emphasis enriches the portrayal of the Messiah in Revelation 21:6 as creation's "Alpha and Omega." Faith and reason, both divine gifts, find harmony in this view.

Moreover, in Job 38–41, God's questions from the whirlwind—about cosmic mysteries beyond human grasp—emphasize creation's grandeur and the Lord's ab-

solute freedom as Creator. Luther's concept of the "hidden God" (*Deus absconditus*) draws from such texts, balancing divine transcendence with immanence. This paradox informs Revelation's depiction of God as both majestic (4:2–3) and near (21:3).

2.1.4 Isaiah 65–66: Prophetic Visions of Creation's Renewal

Isaiah's eschatological vision ties creation to future hope. For example, 65:17 promises a "new heavens and a new earth." This is not a return to the ancient Eden orchard, but a transformed order free from sin and death (vv. 18–25). Lutheran theology sees this as the fulfillment of God's covenantal promises, not their replacement. Here, creation in its essence retains its functional integrity, yet awaits full renewal at the end of the age. Like the believer, *simul justus et peccator* (simultaneously righteous and sinner), creation is both God's gift and fallen, awaiting its restoration.

In addition, Isaiah 66 envisions God's presence filling a renewed world, where all nations worship him (v. 23). This anticipatory hope, culminating in judgment and renewal, prefigures Revelation's grand finale. For Lutherans, the prophetic oracle completes creation's sweeping narrative. In Christ, "all things hold together" (Col 1:17), and he makes "everything new" (Rev 21:5).

2.2 Jewish Apocalyptic Literature and the Paradox of Messianic Victory

During the Second Temple period (c. 516 BC–AD 70), Jewish apocalyptic literature flourished, weaving themes of divine intervention and cosmic renewal into a tapestry of hope amid affliction. Works such as 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra, and 2 Baruch proclaim God's ultimate purpose: to restore and transform the fallen cosmos into a new creation where righteousness reigns. From a Lutheran perspective, these expectations find their fulfillment in Christ, yet they are radically reframed by the *theologia crucis*, which reveals God's victory hidden in the suffering and death of the Messiah.

2.2.1 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch: Development of Eschatological Themes

In 1 Enoch, particularly the Book of the Watchers and the Book of Parables, the vision of a renewed cosmos emerges, a realm where righteousness prevails under the judgment of the "Son of Man" (1 Enoch 46). This figure, bearing divine authority, prefigures the eschatological Christ of Revelation, though the means of his triumph—through the Cross—marks a striking departure from Jewish expectations.

Likewise, 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch, composed after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, grapple with present suffering while anticipating a future restoration. Also, 4 Ezra 7:11–14 promises the righteous a new world, and 2 Baruch 32 envisions a renewed creation reflecting God's perfection.

These texts typically portray a triumphant Messiah who subdues evil through divine might, as exemplified in Daniel 7:13–14, where "one like a son of man" receives everlasting "dominion" from the "Ancient of Days." Early Christianity reinterprets this celestial figure through the prism of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, unveiling a Messiah whose victory is achieved not by earthly power but by sacrificial love.

2.2.2 The Cruciform Paradox: Reinterpreting Apocalyptic Expectations

As noted above, the *theologia crucis*, a cornerstone of Lutheran theology, redefines Jewish apocalyptic hopes by centering them on the crucified Messiah. Where traditional apocalypticism awaits God's overwhelming power to crush evil, the New Testament proclaims the Cross as the decisive act of divine triumph. Paul's writings (e.g., Col 2:15) and Revelation unveil this cruciform paradox: Christ's apparent defeat—his suffering and death—becomes the very means of cosmic victory, disarming the powers of sin, death, and the Devil.

Far from obstructing messianic identity, the Cross defines it. This *apocalyptic irony* reveals God's strength in weakness, most vividly in Revelation 5, where the slain Lamb—Christ crucified—alone is worthy to open the scroll detailing God's end-time plan. Jesus' suffering, then, is no longer a mere precursor to redemption. It is woven tightly into the fabric of God's saving pattern, a truth Lutherans embrace as the heart of the Gospel.

2.2.3 Divine Intervention and Cosmic Transformation

Jewish apocalypticism hinges on divine intervention as the catalyst for eschatological renewal. Unlike secular notions of cyclical time or human progress, texts like 1 Enoch and Daniel depict history as advancing toward a divine climax—marked by cosmic upheaval, celestial signs, and the remaking of creation—where God establishes a righteous order. The *theologia crucis* preserves this emphasis on divine action but reorients it. The Father's intervention begins not in a distant future but in the historical events of the Son's cross and resurrection.

This Lutheran understanding, often called *inaugurated eschatology*, holds that the apocalyptic battle has already been won at Calvary, though its full realization awaits Christ's return. Colossians 2:15 declares that the Messiah disarmed the "rulers and authorities" through the Cross, initiating the renewal of all things. This creates the "already/not yet" tension of New Testament eschatology. Believers live in the victory of the Cross while awaiting the consummation of God's kingdom, trusting in the promise of a new heaven and a new earth.

2.2.4 Present Suffering and Future Hope: A Theological Reinterpretation

Jewish apocalyptic literature links present suffering to the promise of future renewal, a theme the *theologia crucis* deepens by uniting believers with the Messiah's crucifixion. Paul writes in Romans 8:17 that "we suffer with him, so that we may also be glorified with him," reflecting a Lutheran conviction that affliction is not mere endurance, but participation in Christ's redemptive work. In Revelation, the faithful do not simply await deliverance. Their anguish becomes an eschatological witness, echoing the Lamb's victory through apparent defeat. The martyrs under the altar testify against the world's powers, their cries hastening God's final justice (6:9–11).

This perspective shapes Revelation's end-time vision, where present trials culminate in the descent of the new Jerusalem (chap. 21). This city is not an external reward, but the fulfillment of the cruciform pattern established in the Messiah—sacrificed, risen, and returning. Even creation (personified) groans with "birth pains" (Rom 8:22), joining the faithful in the journey from suffering to glory. For Lutherans, this hope rests not in human effort but in God's promise, sealed at Calvary and proclaimed in the Word.

2.3 Christ as the Word and Creation

Before bridging to Revelation, it is essential to recognize the Christological dimension of creation theology that informs Lutheran understanding. The prologue of the Fourth Gospel (1:1–14) identifies Christ as the eternal Word (*Logos*) through whom "everything was made." This profound connection between the creating Word and the incarnate Christ provides a crucial theological link between creation and redemption. In Lutheran teaching, the Messiah's centrality in both creation and new creation emphasizes that the end-time renewal envisioned in Revelation is the completion of the Father's redemptive work through the Son, who is the "Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end" (21:6).

2.4 Bridge to Revelation

The eschatological vision of Revelation builds upon these foundational themes, synthesizing Old Testament creation theology with Jewish apocalyptic expectations. The importance of God as Creator is reaffirmed in Revelation 4:11. This doxology emphasizes that the eschatological hope presented in John's prophetic oracle is deeply rooted in the conviction that the entire cosmos belongs to God and will ultimately be restored according to his purpose in the Messiah.

2.4.1 How These Foundational Traditions Shape the Eschatological Vision of Revelation

Revelation draws upon Genesis, Psalms, Isaiah, and Jewish apocalyptic literature to construct a vision of ultimate renewal. The imagery of a "new heaven and a new earth" (Rev 21:1) echoes Isaiah's prophecy, while the description of the new Jerusalem, with its river and tree of life (Rev 22:1–2), hearkens back to the primordial garden in Eden, now perfected. The overthrow of evil, symbolized by the implosion of Babylon (Rev 18), aligns with the apocalyptic expectation of divine judgment preceding renewal.

2.4.2 The Importance of the Creator God

At the heart of Revelation's eschatology is the affirmation that God, as the Creator, is also the one who brings about a new creation. This perspective reinforces the essay's central thesis: that the Apocalypse presents a vision of renewed creation in which the ultimate meaning of life is found through participation in God's restored cosmic order. By rooting eschatology in creation theology, Revelation provides a framework in which salvation is not merely individual redemption but the transformation of the entire cosmos into a realm where the Lord's sacred presence fully dwells.

3.0 Christological Foundation of the New Creation

Revelation presents Christ as the foundation of the new creation, portraying him as both the Creator and the Redeemer. He is uniquely the one who brings the cosmos into existence and restores it through his atoning sacrifice. This profound unity of creation and redemption is most vividly seen in the throne room vision, where worship is revealed as the ultimate purpose of creation and the appropriate response to God's gracious gifts. Moreover, throughout John's unfolding cosmic drama, the Messiah's sovereignty over history and the universe is unwaveringly affirmed, encompassing both judgment and redemption as expressions of his providential rule.

3.1 Christ as Creator and Redeemer

Revelation presents a compelling image of Christ as both Creator and Redeemer, a dual role central to understanding eschatological renewal. This affirmation is evident in 3:14, where Jesus declares himself to be the "Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation." Within the framework of Lutheran theology, this statement does not suggest that the Son is a created being but rather affirms his divine preeminence. It resonates with the Nicene Creed's declaration that the Messiah is "very God of very God, begotten, not made," underscoring his eternal and sovereign authority over all things. The eternal Word, through whom every entity owes its existence (John 1:1–3), is the same One who proclaims his dominion over creation. This understanding aligns with Colossians 1:15–20, which portrays Jesus as the divine Son, the image of the invisible God, through whom and for whom all things were created and are sustained. This foundational Lutheran doctrine affirms that the one who brought the world into being is also the one who will bring it to its ultimate fulfillment (Heb 1:1–3).

That said, Christ's work extends beyond creation, for he is also the Redeemer. John's prophetic oracle repeatedly depicts him as the Lamb who was slain (5:6–13; 7:4; 13:8; discussed further in section 3.2), emphasizing that the same divine Person who created the cosmos redeems it through his atoning sacrifice on the cross. This unity of creation and redemption is a cornerstone of Lutheran teaching, which rejects any dualistic separation between the material and spiritual realms. God's purpose in creation is fully realized in Christ's redemptive work, culminating in the eschatological renewal of all things. Therefore, the Cross is not an afterthought, but the very means by which creation is restored to its intended purpose.

3.2 The Throne Room Vision: Worship as the Fulfillment of Creation

Revelation 4–5 provides a glimpse into the divine throne room, offering a cosmic liturgical framework that reveals creation's ultimate meaning. In 4:11, the 24 elders cast their crowns before God's royal seat of power. This doxology affirms the Father's sovereign role as Creator, providing the theological foundation for the apocalyptic events that follow.

Chapter 5 introduces the Lamb who was slain, the only one worthy to open the scroll with its seven seals (v. 9). This vision unites creation and redemption, as the Son's authority to initiate cosmic renewal derives from his sacrificial death at Calvary. In Lutheran theology, this passage highlights the centrality of Jesus' atonement in God's plan for creation's renewal.

The throne room vision also emphasizes the fundamental role of worship in creation's purpose. Within Lutheran liturgical teaching, worship is not primarily a human act of offering, but the reception of God's gifts—Word and Sacrament—through which believers respond in faith. This understanding aligns with Revelation's depiction of worship as the ultimate response of the cosmos (personified) to its Creator and Redeemer. Just as the heavenly host extols the Lord's work in creation and salvation, so too does the church militant on earth, reflecting the eschatological reality to come as the church triumphant in heaven. This worship is the very purpose of creation, the glorification of God's name, and the reception of his gracious gifts.

3.3 Divine Sovereignty over History and Creation

Revelation consistently testifies to God's sovereignty over both creation and the course of history. In 10:6, a mighty angel swears by the "one who lives forever and ever, who created the sky and the things in it, the earth and the things in it, and the sea and the things in it." Similarly, in 14:7, an angel proclaims, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the sky, the earth, the sea, and the springs of water." These declarations reinforce the truth that the Lord's sovereignty over creation is the foundation for his authority in both judgment and redemption.

Lutheran theology maintains that God's providential rule extends over all history, including eschatological tribulation. While Revelation portrays human and demonic forces acting in a seemingly unchecked manner, the treatise ultimately demonstrates that all events unfold according to the redemptive purposes of the supreme Monarch of the universe. His power is neither arbitrary nor capricious but reflects his unwavering faithfulness to his creation and his beleaguered children.

The above understanding of divine sovereignty is shaped by the Lutheran emphasis on *theologia crucis*. Here, God's power is revealed in apparent weakness, most definitively in the crucifixion of the Messiah. Even amid cosmic upheaval, the Lord's sovereignty is exercised, not through sheer force, but through sacrificial love. Thus, the new creation emerges not from the destruction of the old by raw, unchecked power, but from the transformative work of Christ's atoning sacrifice. In this way, John's prophetic oracle reveals that the meaning of life—both now and in eternity—is found in the Son's creative and redemptive work, to whom the entire universe rightly gives worship and praise. The Apocalypse is not merely an account about destruction, but also the disclosure of God's enduring compassion and his commitment to restoring all things through the cross of Christ.

4.0 The Brokenness of the Current Creation

From a Lutheran perspective, the present creation exists as a profound paradox: it simultaneously bears witness to God-ordained, functional integrity while laboring under the devastating consequences of the Fall. When the Lord completed his creative work, he declared it "very good" (Gen 1:31), establishing a harmonious order in which humanity lived in perfect communion with the Creator, with one another, and with the natural world. This reality, however, was fractured by humanity's rebellion. The result is that the creation, while still bearing traces of its original glory, now suffers under the burden of corruption, decay, and death.

The Lutheran understanding of this brokenness is distinctly theological rather than empirical or philosophical. Drawing on Article II of the *Augsburg Confession*, Lutheranism affirms that since the Fall of Adam, all humans are born with original sin—a hereditary disease and corruption that inclines people toward evil and renders them unable, by their own powers, to truly fear and love God. This corruption is not just individual but has cosmic implications, as Paul emphasizes in Romans 8:22.

As the culmination of Scripture's narrative arc, Revelation portrays this brokenness in eschatological terms, unveiling the spiritual realities behind earthly suffering and corruption. The cosmic struggle between God's redemptive purposes and the degrading power of sin is portrayed using vivid symbolism, which Lutheran theology interprets through the lens of Law and Gospel. The Law reveals the depth of creation's fall, while the Gospel promises creation's ultimate renewal through Christ alone.

Such profound brokenness manifests in multiple dimensions: the physical (disease, natural disasters, and death), the moral (humanity's inclination toward evil), the spiritual (idolatry and false worship), and the social (injustice, oppression, and war). Lutheran theology recognizes that these dimensions are interconnected, forming a web of degradation from which neither humanity nor creation can escape apart from divine intervention. Creation's brokenness extends to humanity's inability to recognize their lost condition and seek its remedy.

Revelation's eschatological vision does not simply inventory creation's corruption but also places it within the context of God's sovereign plan for redemption. As the *Formula of Concord* (SD XI) affirms, the Lord even uses human evil to accomplish his purposes, though without being the author of sin. The current creation, while fallen, remains under the Father's providential care as it awaits the fulfillment of his redemptive purposes in the Son.

4.1 The Fallen World and Its Symbols

Revelation employs apocalyptic symbolism to unveil the spiritual realities beneath the surface of human experience. These symbols are not merely literary devices but theological diagnoses of creation's fallen condition. Specifically, through the imagery of the dragon, the sea-beast, the land-beast, and Babylon, John's prophetic oracle discloses how sin has corrupted every dimension of created existence, from the individual human heart to the structures of civilization.

Lutheran hermeneutics approaches these symbols through the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture (*sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres*). The images of Revelation thus find their meaning not in speculative futurism or historical allegory, but in their connection to the broader biblical narrative and, ultimately, to the Messiah. Even the terrifying visions of corruption and judgment serve to highlight the necessity and glory of Jesus' redemptive work.

4.1.1 The Dragon (Satan): The Source of Corruption

The fiendish entity referred to as the "great dragon" (Rev 12:9) is the "ancient serpent," otherwise known as the "Devil" (meaning "slanderer" and "adversary") and "Satan" (meaning "opponent" and "accuser"). Like a hostile prosecutor in a court of law, he attempts to bring false charges of wrongdoing against God's children (v. 10). Here, John identifies the Dragon as the primordial enemy of God and his creation. Lutheran theology, following Scripture, understands Satan not as an eternal principle of evil (which would contradict monotheism) but as a fallen creature who rebelled against the Creator and initiated cosmic degradation through the Devil's temptation of humanity.

The Dragon's description in Revelation contains several significant theological elements. He is the "ancient serpent" (v. 9), linking him directly to Genesis 3 and the original deception that led to humanity's fall. He is the "one who leads the whole inhabited earth astray" (Rev 12:9), indicating that his corruption extends beyond individual temptation to encompass global systems of falsehood. The Devil's "seven heads and ten horns" (v. 3) symbolize his claim to complete authority and power, a blasphemous parody of divine perfection.

Luther's theology of evil emphasized Satan's role as the adversary not only of humanity but also of God's Word. In the *Large Catechism*, Luther discussed the Devil's all-out opposition to God's creation and redemption. This realization clarifies the nature of the Dragon's actions in Revelation, where he wages war against those who "keep the commandments of God and who hold on to the testimony about

Jesus" (v. 17). The Devil's maniacal hostility toward the woman and her offspring represents the fundamental spiritual conflict underlying all of history.

Yet, Lutheran theology also emphasizes the paradoxical limitation of Satan's power. Though he appears formidable, the Dragon has already been decisively vanquished through Christ's death and resurrection. Jesus' followers do not overcome Satan's false accusations by either sheer willpower or physical exertion. Instead, they prevail due to the Lamb's sacrificial death at Calvary. This becomes the basis for their witness about his atoning sacrifice. Even in the "face of death" (v. 11), the martyred saints remain loyal to Christ.

Luther's *theologia crucis* recognizes that Jesus' apparent weakness at Calvary was the vehicle of his victory over the powers of darkness (i.e., *Christus Victor* through penal substitution; Col 2:13–15). This paradox—Satan defeated yet still active—characterizes the "already/not yet" tension of Lutheran eschatology. The Dragon's expulsion from heaven signifies his categorical defeat, while his continued presence on earth explains the ongoing reality of evil that believers experience (Rev 13:7–9). Christians are simultaneously justified and sinful (*simul justus et peccator*), living in a creation that is at the same time redeemed and still groaning for complete renewal (Rom 8:22).

4.1.2 The Beasts from the Sea and Land: Political and Religious Corruption

Revelation 13 introduces two beasts that serve as extensions of the Dragon's corrupting influence. The first emerges from the sea, symbolizing the chaos that opposes God's ordered creation. This ogre, bearing a striking resemblance to the Dragon (v. 1), represents political powers that exalt themselves against God and persecute his children. The second brute rises from the land and exercises religious authority in service to the first beast, compelling worship and marking those who participate in its idolatrous system.

Lutheran theology, forged in the crucible of the Reformation's confrontation with both imperial and ecclesiastical abuses, recognizes these predators as manifestations of how sin corrupts human institutions. The sea-beast's demand for worship (vv. 4, 8) represents the state's tendency to claim ultimate allegiance, usurping God's rightful place as the sole object of worship. The land-beast's deceptive signs and enforcement of false worship (vv. 13–15) represent religious systems that replace the Gospel with human traditions or manipulative spectacle.

Luther's doctrine of the Two Kingdoms (*Zwei-Reiche-Lehre*) provides a framework for understanding this corruption. God rules the world through two distinct

realms: the spiritual kingdom (*regnum spirituale*), governed by the Gospel, and the secular kingdom (*regnum civile*), governed by law. When properly distinguished yet held in dynamic tension, these realms serve the Lord's purposes for human flourishing. However, sin corrupts both realms, leading secular authorities to overstep their bounds and religious authorities to abandon their spiritual calling.

The two ogres of Revelation 13 represent this corruption taken to its extreme. The sea-beast's authority to "wage war against the saints and to overcome them" (v. 7) parallels historical regimes that have persecuted the Church, from ancient Rome to modern totalitarian states. The land-beast's deception through "great miracles" (v. 13) recalls Luther's critique of ecclesiastical corruption that relied on superstition rather than Scripture. Together, they form a demonic parody of God's intended order, replacing justice with oppression and truth with manipulation.

For Lutheran theology, the sea-beast's mark of allegiance (vv. 16–17) symbolizes not a literal imprint but the spiritual reality of loyalty to worldly powers rather than to Christ. Those who bear this demonic stamp have chosen economic participation and social acceptance over faithfulness to God. In contrast, Peter and the rest of the apostles declared, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). This is an ethical principle that has guided Christian resistance to tyrannical demands throughout history.

Yet, even as Revelation unveils this corruption, it reminds believers that the authority of the sea-beast and land-beast is derived from the Dragon and limited to "forty-two months" (13:5). Their power, though fearsome, is temporary and ultimately subject to Christ's victory on the cross (John 12:31; 16:11; 1 John 4:4). This assurance empowers his followers to maintain their witness even under persecution, knowing that "here patient endurance and confidence are needed by the saints" (Rev 13:10).

4.1.3 Babylon: The Perverted City of Sinful Humanity

"Fallen, fallen, is Babylon the Great!" (Rev 18:2). This proclamation introduces one of the most compelling symbols of John's unfolding cosmic drama: Babylon the harlot, the corrupt city that stands in opposition to the new Jerusalem. Babylon is described as a sacrilegious, bloodthirsty "prostitute" (17:1), who sits on "many waters." Verse 2 discloses that the planet's rulers practice "sexual immorality" with the harlot. Meanwhile, people around the globe are intoxicated by ingesting the "wine" of the prostitute's brazen ways. It represents the seductive power of worldly systems that promise fulfillment apart from God.

Lutheran theology interprets Babylon in light of Augustine's distinction between the City of God and the City of Man, while maintaining an intentional focus

on justification by faith alone. Babylon embodies human civilization organized around self-love rather than love of God, pursuing material prosperity, sensual pleasure, and temporal power as ultimate goods (1 John 2:15–17). Its opulent description—"clothed with purple and scarlet" (Rev 17:4) and "adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls"—represents the allure of worldly wealth and status.

In Luther's *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount*, he offers a critique of Mammon's domination, which mirrors Revelation's condemnation of Babylon's economic injustice. The "merchants of the earth became rich from the abundance of her luxury" (18:3), while the "blood of prophets and saints" (v. 24) testifies to Babylon's violent suppression of godly witness. This conjunction of luxury and cruelty reveals how material excess often depends upon moral corruption.

Babylon's collapse underscores the futility of life apart from God and points to the new Jerusalem as redeemed humanity's true purpose. Furthermore, the city's implosion serves as a warning against placing ultimate trust in earthly systems and powers. The merchants who weep over her destruction (vv. 11–19) represent those whose identity and security have become tied to the corrupt order. Their lament draws attention to the emptiness of prosperity built on exploitation rather than on God's justice.

Lutheran theology recognizes Babylon both as a historical entity and a spiritual reality present whenever human communities reject God's righteous order. The summons to "Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins" (v. 4) echoes through history, challenging believers to maintain critical distance from pagan cultural systems that oppose the Lord's will (Isa 48:20; Jer 50:8; 51:6, 9, 45; 2 Cor 6:17). As Luther demonstrated in his own confrontation with the corrupt authorities of his day, faithfulness to Christ often requires standing against prevailing currents of wealth, power, and prestige.

Yet, even as Revelation pronounces judgment on Babylon, the prophetic oracle points toward the true city that will replace it: the "Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (21:2; discussed further in section 4.3.4). This contrast embodies the Lutheran principle that what the Law condemns, the Gospel fulfills. Where Babylon represents fallen humanity's futile attempt to create meaning apart from God, the new Jerusalem represents his perfect restoration of redeemed humanity in Christ.

4.1.4 The Systematic Corruption of Creation

Together, the Dragon, the two beasts, and Babylon form a homicidal syndicate that systematically undermines God's created order. This diabolic pattern caricatures

yet distorts the divine pattern of creation, revealing how sin corrupts by perverting good things rather than creating *ex nihilo* (out of nothing; Gen 1:1; Heb 11:3).

The Dragon assaults the spiritual foundation of creation, sowing chaos where God intended *shalom* (peace) and turning creatures against their Creator. Like the serpent in Eden, Satan casts doubt on God's word of promise and holy character, suggesting that divine boundaries are arbitrary restrictions rather than loving protections. Lutheran theology recognizes this spiritual deception as the root of all other corruptions.

The two ogres corrupt human governance and worship, transforming stewardship into domination and devotion into manipulation. Where God established authority for the flourishing of community (Rom 13:1–7), the sea-beast exercises authority for self-glorification. Where God ordained worship to center on his saving acts in Christ (John 4:23–24), the land-beast institutes veneration based on spectacle and coercion. This corruption of authority and worship reflects Luther's critique of both secular and ecclesiastical abuses in his time.

Babylon perverts abundance into excess, transforming God's provision into a means of enslavement. The Lord created material goods for human flourishing, enjoyment, and sharing (Acts 14:17; 1 Tim 6:17–19), but Babylon hoards wealth at the expense of the vulnerable. The harlot's economic system, which enriches merchants while exploiting the poor, contradicts the Lutheran understanding that material goods should serve the common good rather than individual greed.

This systematic corruption fractures the harmony of creation depicted in Genesis 1–2, alienating humanity from God, from one another, and from the earth itself. As Luther observed in his *Commentary on Genesis*, sin disrupts all relationships, turning love into selfishness, cooperation into competition, and stewardship into exploitation. The eschatological vision of Revelation diagnoses symptoms as well as the underlying disease of sin that infects every dimension of created existence.

Yet, Lutheran theology insists that these corrupting forces, though formidable, are ultimately subject to the Messiah's victory at Calvary (Col 2:15). The Dragon, two brutes, and Babylon exercise only delegated and temporary authority, destined to be overcome by the Lamb who was slain. This assurance emboldens Jesus' followers to resist corruption without falling into either despair or triumphalism.

4.2 Human Alienation and Suffering

The corruption of creation manifests most poignantly in human experience. Revelation portrays this reality through vivid depictions of persecution, deception, and exploitation—all consequences of humanity's alienation from God. Lutheran

teaching, with its repeated emphasis on *theologia crucis*, recognizes suffering as an inevitable aspect of Christian life in a fallen world. Yet, Lutheranism also affirms that such suffering occurs within the boundaries of God's sovereign purpose and is transformed through faith into a witness to the Messiah's own suffering.

4.2.1 Persecution of the Saints

According to Revelation 6:9, after the Lamb broke the "fifth seal" (v. 9), John saw an "altar" in the heavenly temple. It was reminiscent of the golden altar of incense or the altar of burnt offering in Jerusalem. At the altar's base were the "souls" of martyrs "slaughtered" for their unwavering "testimony" to the gospel and for remaining Jesus' faithful followers. This powerful image reveals how the world's hostility toward God manifests in hostility toward his children. The saints' blood cries out for justice, echoing Abel's blood in Genesis 4:10 and foreshadowing the final judgment when God will vindicate his children's unwavering commitment to him (Heb 11:4; 1 John 3:12).

Lutheran theology understands this persecution not as an aberration but as an expected consequence of faithfulness in a fallen world. As Jesus warned, "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you too" (John 15:20). The *Formula of Concord* affirms that the Church will bear the Cross in this life, following its Head through suffering to glory. This recognition stands in contrast to theologies of self-glory that promise worldly success and prosperity to the faithful.

The martyrs' cry in Revelation 6:10 expresses the dynamic tension between present suffering and future vindication that characterizes the Christian life. Lutheran theology acknowledges this dichotomy without resolving it prematurely. Persecution is genuinely evil, a manifestation of sin's corruption. Yet, God uses even this wickedness to accomplish his purposes and to conform believers to the image of Christ (Rom 8:28–30; 1 Cor 15:49; 2 Cor 3:18; Phil 3:21; 1 John 3:2).

The white robes given to the martyrs (Rev 6:11) symbolize the righteousness of Christ that clothes all believers, an image particularly meaningful in Lutheran theology with its emphasis on alien righteousness (*justitia aliena*). Though persecuted and slain, the saints are justified before God not by their own works or suffering but by the Messiah's perfect sacrifice. Their martyrdom does not earn merit but serves as a testimony to the sufficiency of Jesus' atonement. Lutheran doctrine emphasizes that Christians are called to endure such trials, not as a means of gaining favor with God, but as participation in the Son's affliction for the sake of his body, the Church (Col 1:24). This understanding transforms suffering from meaningless torment into purposeful witness.

4.2.2 Spiritual Deception and Idolatry

Just as Pharaoh's heart remained hardened and obstinate, so too survivors of the "plagues" (Rev 9:20) spurn God rather than repent. They continue to venerate lifeless and powerless objects. Earth's wicked inhabitants also refuse to "repent" (v. 21) from murdering one another, practicing witchcraft, being sexually immoral, and stealing. This sobering assessment indicates how sin blinds humanity to its own condition, leading to persistent idolatry despite clear evidence of its destructiveness. Lutheran theology defines idolatry not merely as the worship of literal statues, but as placing ultimate trust in anything other than the living and true God. Such idolatry pervades human experience, taking forms as diverse as materialism, nationalism, technological utopianism, and self-worship (1 Cor 10:14; 1 Thess 1:9; 1 John 5:21).

The demonic forces described in Revelation 9 represent the spiritual realities behind human sin. Lutheran teaching recognizes that humanity's moral corruption stems not only from ignorance or weakness but from active rebellion against God, often encouraged by demonic influence. These spiritual deficits make humanity vulnerable to deception and manipulation.

Perhaps most troubling is the observation that even severe judgment does not automatically produce repentance. The people described in verses 20–21 experience divine chastisement yet continue in idolatry and immorality. This illustrates Luther's understanding that the Law can restrain evil and reveal sin but cannot change the human heart. Only the proclamation of the Gospel can create true faith, which results in a genuine love for God and a genuine desire to offer our "bodies as a living sacrifice—holy and pleasing to God—which is [our] appropriate worship" (Rom 12:1).

The spiritual blindness that leads to persistent idolatry reflects Paul's scathing diagnosis in Romans 1:21–23, where rejection of God's revelation results in darkened understanding and worship of created things rather than the Creator. Lutheranism recognizes that this blindness cannot be overcome through human reasoning or moral effort. It requires the illumination of the Spirit through Word and Sacrament.

4.2.3 Social Injustice and Economic Exploitation

Revelation 18:3 declares that Babylon has intoxicated the world's monarchs with the "wine" (v. 3) of her idolatry and immorality. Likewise, the planet's merchants have grown "rich" (and spiritually complacent) from the "abundance" of the harlot's "luxury." This indictment of Babylon reveals how corruption manifests in systemic injustice and economic exploitation. The imagery of drunkenness suggests that material excess clouds moral judgment, creating societies where prosperity for some depends upon the impoverishment of others.

Lutheran theology upholds the dignity of all persons as created in God's image and condemns economic injustice as a violation of both revealed and natural law. Luther's explanation of the seventh commandment in his *Small Catechism* extends beyond the mere prohibition of theft to include positive obligations. This ethical framework challenges economic systems that concentrate wealth through exploitation, rather than creating prosperity through mutual service.

The merchants' lament over Babylon's fall (vv. 11–19) indicates how economic self-interest becomes entangled with corrupt systems. Their grief focuses not on heartfelt repentance, but on lost profits (v. 17). Lutheran theology recognizes this preoccupation with material gain as a form of idolatry that blinds people to higher values.

Revelation's critique of Babylon's luxury purchased at the cost of institutionalized slave trade (v. 13) particularly resonates with Lutheran concerns for vocational ethics. All legitimate work should serve the neighbor, rather than merely enriching oneself. Economic activity that reduces human beings to commodities contradicts this vocational understanding and violates the created order in which persons are ends, not means. In Luther's treatise, *The Freedom of a Christian*, he explores the dual nature of the Christian life: freedom from works for justification before God and service to others through love.

The divine judgment upon economic injustice (v. 6) reflects the Lutheran understanding that while salvation comes by grace alone, temporal consequences often follow moral choices. God's justice ultimately prevails, even when human justice fails. This assurance does not excuse passivity in the face of injustice, but rather empowers believers to work for reform, knowing that their efforts, however imperfect, participate in the Lord's larger purposes for creation's renewal (1 Cor 15:58).

4.2.4 The Erosion of Human Dignity

Persecution, idolatry, and injustice collectively undermine the dignity and vocation of humanity. Created to reflect God's image and to exercise dominion as stewards of creation (Gen 1:26–28), humans instead experience degradation, delusion, and deprivation under sin's reign. This corruption not only distorts individual lives but also undermines the very meaning and purpose of human existence.

Lutheran anthropology asserts that apart from Christ, humanity cannot reclaim its intended role. The *Formula of Concord* (SD II.9) affirms that human reason retains a faint awareness of God's existence and of the moral law. Yet this capacity is spiritually blind regarding the Gospel and salvation, and this blindness inhibits people's comprehension of their own nature and purpose (1 Cor 2:14; 2 Cor 4:3–4). Rather than recognizing their dependence on God and

interdependence with others and creation, fallen humanity pursues autonomy, domination, and self-gratification.

The image of God in humanity, while not erased by sin, is severely distorted. In Luther's *Lectures on Romans* (specifically his commentary on 3:23 and chap 7), he describes how human beings, in their fallen state, turn inward (*incurvatus in se*) rather than outward toward God and neighbor. This narcissism manifests in the exploitation of others for personal gain, the veneration of human achievements rather than the worship of the Creator, and the treatment of God's gifts as entitlements rather than as occasions for gratitude and service.

Yet, Lutheran theology also affirms that through faith in the Messiah, believers begin to recover their true dignity and vocation even within a broken world. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession emphasizes that faith is how people receive God's grace and promises. The focus is on faith as the instrument that receives the Lord's gifts, rather than as a work that earns merit. This receptivity to grace forms the foundation for a renewed understanding of human dignity, which is based not on achievement but on Christ's redemptive work.

Such a renewed dignity finds expression in the royal priesthood of all believers, a central Lutheran emphasis drawn from 1 Peter 2:9. Though still living in a fallen world, Christians participate in the Messiah's reign through faith, exercising spiritual authority through prayer, witness, and service. Thus, the erosion of human dignity under sin does not have the final word. Revelation's vision of the saints reigning with the Savior (20:4–6) points toward the ultimate restoration of redeemed humanity's royal vocation. This future hope sustains believers amid present degradation, assuring them that their true identity is not determined by the world's corrupt systems but by God's gracious election in Christ.

4.3 Creation's Groaning and Hope for Renewal

The eschatological visions of Revelation, filled with cosmic upheaval and apparent destruction, can leave believers feeling profoundly unsettled. However, through the interpretive lens of Lutheran theology, these images are not merely harbingers of doom but more importantly symbolic representations of creation's present groaning and the glorious hope of its renewal. Drawing heavily on Paul's poignant articulation in Romans 8:20–22, believers can discern a framework for understanding the interplay between creation's suffering, divine purpose, and the ultimate restoration promised in union with Christ.

4.3.1 The Subjection of Creation and the Reality of Sin's Cosmic Reach

Paul's assertion that the "creation was subjected to futility" (Rom 8:20) is not a condemnation of the material realm, but an acknowledgment of the pervasive influence of sin. Lutheran theology, rooted in the doctrine of original sin, posits that humanity's fall in the ancient Eden orchard resulted not only in spiritual alienation but also in a disruption of the entire created order. The cosmic upheavals depicted in Revelation—such as the four horsemen unleashing military conquest, bloodshed in armed conflict, famine, and death (6:1–8), poisoning of waters (8:10–11), and darkening of celestial bodies (v. 12)—are not arbitrary acts of divine wrath, but manifestations of the inherent disharmony that sin has introduced into God's supremely "good" (Gen 1:31) creation.

From a Lutheran perspective, these apocalyptic images signify more than literal, chronological predictions of future events. They entail symbolic representations of the ongoing reality of sin's corruption. They portray the deep-seated brokenness that permeates all aspects of existence, from the natural world to human society to the cosmic realm. This understanding emphasizes the gravity of sin's consequences and the urgent need for divine intervention. It rejects any notion that creation's suffering is merely a natural cycle or a consequence of impersonal forces. Instead, it affirms that the world's groaning is a direct result of humanity's rebellion against God and its subsequent alienation from the created order.

4.3.2 Birth Pangs of Renewal: Suffering as a Prelude to Glory

While acknowledging the reality of creation's suffering, Lutheran doctrine also emphasizes that this groaning is not without purpose. The metaphor of birth pangs in Romans 8:22 offers a crucial interpretive key. As Luther noted in his *Lectures on Romans*, these are not meaningless or indicative of ultimate destruction but point to the birth of redemption and eternal life.

The birth pangs metaphor highlights that the suffering experienced by creation (personified) is not an end in itself but a prelude to a new and glorious reality. Just as childbirth involves intense pain that culminates in the joy of new life, so too the present suffering of creation will ultimately give way to its end-time renewal. This outlook provides a powerful antidote to despair and hopelessness, reminding believers that even amid chaos and suffering, God is working to bring about a new creation.

From a Lutheran perspective, this renewal is not achieved through human effort or evolutionary progress, but solely through the gracious action of God in Christ.

The "new heaven and new earth" (Rev 21:1) are not human constructions but divine gifts, fulfilling God's promise that he is "making everything new" (v. 5). This emphasis on divine agency preserves the *solus Christus* principle, affirming that only the Messiah can redeem and restore what sin has corrupted.

4.3.3 The Cosmic Scope of Redemption and the Stewardship of Creation

Lutheran eschatology rejects any notion that salvation is merely a matter of disembodied souls escaping a doomed material world. All creation remains the object of God's redemptive love. This affirmation of the goodness of embodied existence is central to Lutheran teaching, which anticipates the perfection of the universe rather than its abandonment.

The grand scope of redemption also provides an ethical framework for Christian stewardship in the present age. While acknowledging that human efforts cannot establish God's kingdom, Lutheran theology emphasizes the believers' vocation as caretakers of creation even in its fallen state. Scripture affirms that the Lord is both present throughout all creation (immanent) and beyond it (transcendent). He actively sustains and governs everything he has made, while remaining unconfined by it. Moreover, God is fully present everywhere in creation, yet he is not limited to or contained within it. While intimately involved in his creation, the supreme Monarch of the universe exists independently, beyond all constraints of space and time (Ps 139:7–10; Isa 40:26; Jer 23:24).

The above paradox of divine transcendence and immanence grounds a stewardship ethic that values creation while recognizing its contingency. Believers are called to act as stewards of creation, not because they can ultimately save it, but because they recognize its inherent value as a gift from God. This stewardship involves responsible use of resources, care for the environment, and a commitment to promote justice and peace. Even in the face of ecological challenges and social injustices, believers are called to act in hope, knowing that the Lord's ultimate purpose is the redemption and renewal of all creation.

4.3.4 The Consummation of God's Purpose: The New Jerusalem and the Healing of the Nations

Revelation proclaims both the judgment of sin and the fulfillment of God's creative purpose. The vision of the new Jerusalem, where there will be "no more death or sorrow or crying or pain, because the former things have passed away" (21:4), represents

the ultimate remediation of creation's brokenness. The "tree of life" (22:2), whose "leaves are for the healing of the nations," recalls Eden's functional integrity while surpassing it through Christ's redemptive work. This vision of the new Jerusalem is not a restoration of the past, but a transformation of creation into a state of perfect harmony and communion with God. It represents the culmination of his redemptive plan, in which all things are made new in Christ (discussed further in section 5.0).

Lutheran theology thus interprets apocalyptic literature not as a literal catalog of destructive events, but as a canvas depicting God's ultimate triumph over evil. The meaning of life in Revelation is found not in escape from an accursed planet but in participation—through faith, hope, and love—in the Lord's cosmic renewal. Here one finds the paradoxical nature of Christian hope: it is realistic about present brokenness while anticipating future restoration through the Messiah. It is in this confident expectation, grounded in God's covenantal promises, that believers find the meaning of life amid the groaning of creation and the promise of its glorious renewal.

5.0 The Vision of the New Creation

Revelation unveils the profound mystery of creation's ultimate destiny and humanity's purpose within it. Through the use of apocalyptic imagery, God's redemptive plan culminates in the victory of the Lamb, the cosmic restoration of all things, and the establishment of a new heaven and new earth. This eschatological renewal, grounded in the sacrificial love of Christ, answers humanity's deepest existential concerns, such as their origin in God's creative will, their fall into sin, and the restoration of the redeemed through divine grace. From a Lutheran perspective, this vision reveals that the true meaning of life is found in communion with the Triune God, fully realized in the renewed creation where righteousness dwells forever.

5.1 The Lamb's Victory and Cosmic Restoration (Rev 19–20)

Central to Revelation's end-time vision is the triumph of the Lamb, whose victory over sin, death, and the powers of evil inaugurates the renewal of creation (Rev 19–20). This victory is not achieved through brute force, but through divine love, exemplified in the paradox of the slain yet conquering Lamb (Rev 5:6; 19:11–16). Lutheran theology emphasizes that this triumph is accomplished by Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross, where God's justice and mercy intersect to reconcile a fallen world to himself (Rom 5:9–11; 2 Cor 5:18–21).

As Revelation 19:19–20:10 depicts the judgment and casting down of the Dragon (Satan), the sea-beast, and the land-beast (false prophet), it symbolizes the final defeat of the chaos and evil that have plagued creation since the Fall (Gen 3).

This cosmic restoration reflects God's unwavering commitment to his creation, reversing the corruption introduced by sin and establishing his eternal kingdom. For Lutherans, this draws attention to the core doctrine of *sola gratia*: salvation, and thus the renewal of all things, rests solely on Christ's merits, received by grace alone through faith alone.

5.2 The New Heaven and New Earth (Rev 21:1–8)

The vision of a new heaven and new earth in Revelation 21:1–8 marks the climax of God's redemptive work. The "first heaven and the first earth" (v. 1) passing away does not signify annihilation but rather a transformative renewal, analogous to the resurrection of Christ's glorified body, which retains continuity with his earthly form (Luke 24:36–43; John 20:27). This emphasis reflects Lutheran theology's valuing the material world as God's good gift. The absence of the sea, a biblical symbol of chaos and evil (Isa 57:20; Rev 13:1), signifies the complete eradication of all that opposes the Lord's good order.

The cosmic renewal fulfills the covenantal promise in Revelation 21:3 that God will dwell with his children. From a Lutheran standpoint, this echoes Genesis 3:8, where the Lord manifested his sacred presence to Adam and Eve in Eden, now restored beyond the ravages of sin. The promise that God will "wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Rev 21:4) assures believers that suffering, death, and sorrow—consequences of the Fall—are forever abolished. Lutheran theology affirms that this is not a human achievement but the work of divine grace, bringing creation to its intended purpose: a realm of perfect communion with its Creator (7:14–17).

5.3 The New Jerusalem: The Fulfillment of Human Purpose (Rev 21:9–22:5)

The detailed portrayal of the new Jerusalem in Revelation 21:9–22:5 emphasizes the fulfillment of human purpose within God's renewed creation. Described as both a city and a bride (21:9–10), the domicile symbolizes the redeemed community—perfected through Christ's work and united with him as his Church. Its twelve gates, inscribed with the names of Israel's twelve tribes (vv. 12–14), and its radiant materials of gold and precious stones (vv. 18–21) reflect the continuity of the Father's promises to his children and the expansive scope of salvation through the Son. The life-giving river and tree (22:1–2), reminiscent of Eden (Gen 2:9–10), signify the restoration of redeemed humanity's lost communion with God. The tree's "leaves for the healing of the nations" (Rev 22:2) and its perpetual fruitfulness point to eternal peace and sustenance, secured by the cross-resurrection event.

For Lutherans, the ultimate fulfillment of human existence is found in eternal life with God, in which believers will see him face to face (v. 4). This consummation fulfills the threefold purpose for which he originally created humanity: (1) to know and trust the Lord; (2) to glorify him through praise, obedience, and service; and (3) to enjoy everlasting communion with him. This destiny is not earned but is a gift of God's grace, received through faith in Christ alone.

5.4 The Overcoming of Evil and Death (Revelation 20–22)

The new creation is only possible because evil and death are decisively overcome. Revelation 20 describes the absolute defeat of Satan, culminating in his consignment to the "lake of fire" (v. 10). This symbolizes the total and eternal eradication of evil. The last judgment (vv. 11–15) establishes divine justice, separating the wicked from the faithful and reinforcing the moral order of the renewed cosmos (Matt 25:31–46).

The fiery "lake" (Rev 20:10) filled with burning "sulfur" underscores the irreversible nature of divine judgment. In contrast, the faithful are granted eternal life in the sacred presence of Almighty God, where they "reign" (22:5) with him "forever and ever." The ultimate reversal of the "curse" (v. 3) restores what was lost in Eden, fulfilling the Lord's redemptive purposes. This transformation reflects the Lutheran understanding of salvation as wholly dependent on God's grace through Christ, ensuring that creation is not merely repaired, but gloriously renewed.

This eschatological hope, rooted in the Lamb's victory, affirms that creation's ultimate destiny is not destruction but renewal in Christ, where "righteousness dwells" (2 Pet 3:13) forever. This vision, understood through the interpretive lens of Lutheran theology, emphasizes the centrality of the Messiah's atoning sacrifice on the cross and the grace of God in restoring both redeemed humanity and creation to their intended purpose.

6.0 The Meaning of Life in the Context of Eschatological Renewal

The eschatological vision of renewal presented in Revelation fundamentally reframes humanity's understanding of its God-given purpose. Grounded in the Lutheran theological tradition, which emphasizes both human sinfulness and the Lord's transformative grace through Christ's justifying work, this section explores the profound vocational calling of redeemed humanity within the context of end-time renewal. It begins with the core Lutheran understanding of justification by grace through faith, as this is the foundation upon which all other aspects of the Church's future hope rest.

6.1 Human Vocation in the New Creation: Royal Priesthood and Servant Kingship

In the new creation, God's redeemed children, justified by faith alone (*sola fide*), are not simply passive recipients of salvation but active participants in his redemptive plan, empowered by the Holy Spirit. Drawing from Revelation 1:6 and 5:9–10, Lutheran theology understands that all Christians are called to be a royal priesthood—a status that echoes yet transcends the original mandate given to Adam and Eve in the ancient Eden orchard. This priestly kingship, understood through the prism of the Messiah's own sacrificial priesthood (Heb 5:5–6; 7:1–3, 17; 8:1–2), is not a self-aggrandizing role but a humble service of worship, witness, and mediation. This priesthood is not based on human merit but on the imputed righteousness of Christ, received by faith.

The significance of faithfulness, even to the point of martyrdom, cannot be overstated. Revelation 2:10 and 12:11 present martyrdom not as a tragic end, but as a profound witness to God's transformative power and a testament to the power of the Gospel. From a Lutheran perspective, such faithfulness is not a result of human merit (against any notion of works-righteousness), but a manifestation of the Spirit's sanctifying grace, which flows from justification. The martyrs, empowered by the Spirit, bear a collective witness that powerfully proclaims the Gospel. Their testimony demonstrates that true life is not found in self-preservation but in wholehearted surrender to God's purpose, rooted in Christ's own self-sacrificial love.

As noted earlier, participation in the Lord's rule (22:3–5) represents a radical restoration of humanity's original created purpose, now fully realized in union with Christ (Dan 7:18, 27; Matt 19:28; Luke 22:30; 1 Cor 6:2–3; 2 Tim 2:12; Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:4, 6). Unlike the hierarchical and often oppressive human dominion throughout history, this divine governance is characterized by unconditional compassion, redemptive service, and perfect communion, reflecting the very nature of the Triune God. The new creation restores and elevates humanity's role from mere stewards to co-laborers with the Lord, not in a way that suggests human autonomy but as instruments of God's grace in the ongoing work of renewal and reconciliation, all under the headship of Christ.

6.2 The Kingdom of God: Already and Not Yet, Through Word and Sacrament

The Lutheran doctrinal framework embraces a nuanced understanding of the kingdom of God as simultaneously present and future, reflecting the previously discussed "already/not yet" paradigm. This dynamic tension, understood through the prism

of the means of grace, provides both hope and ethical imperative for believers navigating the complexities of a fallen world. The kingdom of God is present through the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments, where Christ is truly present.

The vision of new creation is not a distant, disconnected promise but an active source of transformative hope, grounded in the promises of God delivered through baptism and the Lord's Supper. It provides Christians with a normative foundation for understanding present realities through the conceptual perspective of ultimate redemption, not as a blueprint to create a utopian society but as a framework to recognize God's activity in the world and to live as those who are justified and sanctified by his grace. This eschatological hope does not encourage passive waiting but active engagement, motivating God's children to live as agents of his restorative justice and love, recognizing that all good works flow from their trust in the Messiah.

In practice, the above observations mean that the future promise of complete renewal informs and shapes current ethical decisions, not as a legalistic imposition, but as a natural outflow of a life lived in faith. Believers are called to let the future reality of God's kingdom shape their present actions, not through human effort, but in the power of the Spirit. Doing so means forgiving as Christ forgives, reflecting the new creation's peace in today's broken world (Gal 6:15–16). This approach transcends moral behavior and invites a radical reimagining of human relationships, societal structures, and personal identity, always grounded in the Gospel.

6.3 The Church as Anticipatory Community: Means of Grace and Witness

In Lutheran teaching, the Church is not merely an institutional structure but a dynamic, Spirit-empowered community of believers, justified by grace through faith, who gather around the means of grace (Word and Sacrament) and embody God's redemptive intentions. As an anticipatory community, the Church serves as a living testament to the Lord's ongoing work of reconciliation and renewal, centered on the proclamation of the Gospel.

The Church's mission extends beyond traditional notions of evangelism, encompassing heralding of the good news and administering the Sacraments. The Church is called to be a prophetic witness that promotes justice, facilitates healing, and models reconciliation, all grounded in the forgiveness of sins won by Christ. By embodying the values of the new creation—characterized by radical love, sacrificial service, and inclusive community—the Church becomes a tangible manifestation of God's transformative power, not by its own merit, but by the power

of the Spirit. This missional understanding rejects both spiritual individualism and institutional self-preservation. Instead, it embraces a holistic vision where worship, social engagement, and spiritual formation are integrally connected, reflecting the comprehensive nature of the Lord's redemptive plan.

6.4 Eternal Life: True Existence in Communion with the Creator, through Christ

From a Lutheran theological perspective, eternal life is not merely an extension of temporal existence, but a qualitative transformation of life itself, granted through Christ's work and received by faith. It represents the fullness of life as God originally intended—a state of perfect communion, unbroken relationship, and complete alignment with his purposes, all made possible by Jesus' atoning sacrifice at Calvary (John 3:17; 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25; Phil 3:7–11).

This understanding challenges reductive concepts of the afterlife as a passive, static experience. Instead, eternal life is dynamic, characterized by ongoing discovery, worship, and participation in the Lord's creative and redemptive work, all centered on Christ, the Lamb who was slain. It is an existence lived in its most authentic, complete form—free from the distortions introduced by sin, yet maintaining the unique personhood of redeemed humanity, all due to the grace of God.

The eschatological vision of Revelation ultimately points to this profound reality: that human life finds its deepest meaning not in self-actualization or worldly achievements but in a restored relationship with the Triune God, who continually makes all things new. This metamorphosis is not simply a return to an Edenic past but a movement toward a glorified existence, where redeemed humanity, fully conformed to Christ, participates in the eternal unfolding of God's purposes. When viewed through this analytical paradigm, the meaning of life is understood as a call to faithful service, joyful worship, and unceasing fellowship with the Creator, both now and in the age to come, all grounded in the Gospel.

7.0 Conclusion: Embracing God's Purpose for Redeemed Humanity in Revelation's Vision of Eschatological Renewal

Revelation, far from being a dire forecast of upcoming events, unveils a profound theological vision that illuminates humanity's purpose and ultimate destiny through the Lutheran interpretive lens of God's redemptive work. This essay has traced the biblical narrative from the creation in Genesis to the eschatological renewal depicted in the Apocalypse, asserting that the true meaning of life is found in a restored and abiding communion with the Lord, made possible solely through Christ's saving grace.

From the foundational Old Testament accounts of creation to the apocalyptic pronouncements of Second Temple Jewish literature and the New Testament, there is a consistent chorus about God's unwavering purpose: the restoration of fellowship between Creator and creature. The Messiah, the eternal Word through whom all things were created and will be renewed, stands at the heart of the divine plan. It is not a matter of human achievement, but of God's gracious gift.

This essay has examined the brokenness of creation—including the pervasive effects of sin, alienation, and injustice—which spotlights humanity's profound need for redemption. Yet, Revelation's message is not one of despair but of triumphant hope. John's unfolding cosmic drama announces the Messiah's definitive victory over evil and the promise of a renewed creation. The judgment depicted in Revelation is not arbitrary destruction but God's purifying action, ensuring the complete restoration of righteousness, peace, and communion. This aligns with the Lutheran understanding of the Lord's judgment as a necessary step in his saving work, not a contradiction to it.

Such an end-time vision is not a nebulous promise. Rather, it provides a clear framework for Christian living in the present. It calls believers to participate actively in God's ongoing work of reconciliation, not to withdraw from the world. Furthermore, the new creation is not an annihilation of history but its glorification and transformation, a central aspect of Luther's understanding of the "already/not yet" dialectic. Through grace, received by faith alone, believers are called to serve collectively as a royal priesthood, reflecting God's love and reign in the world.

The Church, as the body of Christ, lives in anticipation of this coming reality. Through the faithful preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments, the Church embodies the values of the new creation, testifying to the Gospel's hope. The essence of life's meaning, as unveiled in Revelation, is communion with the Triune God—a life of worship, faithfulness, and deepening relationship, grounded in the cross-resurrection event. This aligns with the Lutheran emphasis on justification by grace through faith.

The end-time promises of Revelation—God's dwelling with his children, his elimination of sorrow, and his healing of the nations—is not a mere aspiration, but the certain destiny toward which all creation is moving. This reality has been inaugurated by Jesus' first coming and is progressively realized through the Church's witness and the Spirit's sanctifying work. This understanding of progressive sanctification is a key component of Lutheran theology.

So then, Revelation calls God's children to live with faith, hope, and courage, anchored in the promises of Scripture. The meaning of life is not found in human endeavors, but through participation in the Lord's redemptive narrative. Every act

of love, faithful witness, and moment of worship testifies to the reality of God's kingdom manifesting itself in the present age.

As followers of Christ, living between the "already" of his accomplished redemption and the "not yet" of its full consummation, believers are summoned to be witnesses to the coming kingdom. Secure in the promise of the Messiah's return, they are sent forth as agents of hope, bearers of divine love, and stewards of the Gospel. They can live this way with the assurance that the victory is already won, for in Christ, God is making all things new.

Dan Lioy *is Professor of Biblical Studies at ILT Christ School of Theology. He holds the Ph.D. from North-West University (South Africa) and is a teaching pastor at Our Savior's Lutheran Church (NALC) in Salem, Oregon.*

Note

1. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Evangelical Heritage Version, © 2019 Wartburg Project, Inc. All rights reserved.

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Martin Luther's Definition of the Human Creature

Robert Kolb

Most people have presumed that they knew how to define what constitutes being human. However, the thinking that has gone into these presumptions about what precisely constitutes the final creature of the sixth day reveals a spectrum of opinions regarding the vital elements in the discussion of reality in every branch of philosophy and every kind of religion. Martin Luther inherited presuppositions about what comprises the human creature that God fashioned in his own image. Many of those presuppositions arose out of ancient Greek philosophies. In the course of his career as a professor of Bible at the University of Wittenberg, his own discussion of being human evolved on the basis of an ever deeper immersion in the texts of the prophets, evangelists, and apostles. His growing awareness of the mystery of what it means to be the Creator's human creature led him to define the human creature within the framework of biblical terminology and the distinction of law and gospel. He found in Scripture that God is almighty and responsible for everything. That led him not only to his high appreciation of God as Creator, but also to his conviction that human core identity could be understood only through the unconditional gospel of God's plan for salvation in the death and resurrection of Christ. At the same time, he knew that God holds his human creatures responsible for being the children created in his own image, and his expectations for their exercise of these responsibilities set down his law for their lives. This theological axiom existed within the context of his use of biblical descriptions of the elements that constitute the person of the human being.

Commentators on Luther's anthropology have noted that Luther failed to formulate precise standard usage for the several biblical terms for elements that constitute humanity as God's creation and his use of medieval variants and expressions of them. He developed his holistic view of the thinking-willing-feeling-acting human creature using the terms given to him by biblical and theological texts. Thus, his writings defy succinct systematic synthesizing on how terms for various activities and organs of human thinking and feeling relate to each other.[1] Nonetheless, his use of biblical terminology following the texts gives a clear outline of the reformer's understanding of what it is to be human.

The Framework of Luther's Anthropology

In school and university Luther learned the fundamental anthropology of scholastic theologians, constructed out of ideas handed down from Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and other ancient authorities. Luther's teachers had studied under the foremost representative of the train of thinking that flowed from the works of William of Ockham (1287-1347) and Gabriel Biel (1418-1495) at the University of Tübingen. Before the fall, Biel taught that, in the state of innocence, human reason or the intellect possessed a natural knowledge of good and evil and an inborn love of virtue. The will conformed to the judgment of reason and initiated the performance of good acts. However, following the fall, the intellect and the will are subject to the flesh and inclined to defy God. The intellect cannot give the will proper wisdom regarding God and proper human action, and the will is blinded by sin. The will is free and is able to produce the best that the sinner is capable of performing; that is sufficient to earn the aid of the grace that is necessary to equip the person to act in God-pleasing fashion.[2]

Luther rejected this Ockhamist estimate of the need for human performance "with purely natural powers" to initiate the relationship with God. Nonetheless, he retained the anthropological estimation that reason and will, as well as the emotions, constitute the human being's fundamental structure along with the body. Luther's colleague Philip Melanchthon sketched the elements that every human being possesses: reason, will, emotions, and bodily, physical activities (*ratio*, *voluntas*, *affectus*, locomotive).[3]

However, Luther's understanding of humanity was not ultimately determined by his knowledge of the philosophical traditions of the Hellenistic world and the processing of them in Christian thought in the Middle Ages: "the heart of the matter was neither in the philosophical substance of human nature, the 'quiddities' that so fascinated late medieval theology, nor in the principles of ethics found among Greek philosophers. Biblical anthropology centered on the relationship of humanity to its Creator."[4] For this reason Luther and Melanchthon found Aristotle wanting, for his Unmoved Mover had no personal communication with that which he moved. Luther's understanding of humanity rested ultimately on the personal relationship with the Creator, who spoke with Adam and Eve, and who went looking for them when they decided to avoid conversation with him. In 1529, Luther formulated his first principle for defining the human creature in his explanation of the first commandment. In his Small Catechism, he described human beings as those who "fear, love, and trust in God above all things."[5] In speaking of Adam's trust in Eden, the professor noted that "just as it is the nature of the eye to see, so it was the nature of reason and will in Adam to know God, to trust God, and to fear God."[6] In the Large Catechism, he described human beings as those who have "true faith and confidence of the heart,

which fly straight to the one true God and cling to him alone," those who "do not let [their] hearts cling to or rest in anyone else." For in him they find the source "of all good" and a "refuge in all need."[7] Luther's understanding of what the human creature is revolves around those elements that produce this true faith or trust in the one to whom the person clings and around the ways in which the body and its life receive God's providing care. He regarded trust as a function of thinking, willing, and feeling, a product of the entire human being.

This conviction that God speaks and human beings respond led Luther to his conviction that God addresses them in two fundamental modes. He tells his people what he has done and is doing for them out of his parental love and faithfulness, the gospel or the promise of new life. He tells them what he expects them to be doing, in commands or the law. Luther preached twice specifically on the proper distinction of law and gospel, once when his understanding of the gospel had come under intense fire from Roman Catholics, and once when the understanding of the distinction of law and gospel had been misrepresented within his own ranks.[8] In addition, a basic hermeneutical principle delineated his understanding of the shape of human life, the principle of the twofold righteousness, two aspects of human identity.[9] Luther contrasted as "alien righteousness, that is the righteousness of another person, infused from outside ourselves, … the righteousness by which the righteous Christ justifies through faith," with the "righteousness that we perform, belongs to us, not that we do this on our own but working together with the first righteousness from outside ourselves."[10] These presuppositions about the conversation between God and his human creature and about the created nature of the latter shaped what he said in more concrete, detailed terms that defined "the human."

Luther on Moses's Description of the Human Creature

Beyond the foundational relationship with the Creator, Luther found a fuller description of the constitutive elements of humanness in Genesis 1 and 2. His treatment of the account of creation in Genesis in his sermons of 1523 on the book (and in the German translation of them, published 1527) examined the text of Genesis 1:26-31 and 2:18-25. God created the human creature in accord with his own image. His human beings came into existence as male and female, according to Genesis 1:27, without describing in Genesis 1 precisely how that happened. It is nonetheless clear from the words "let us make" that God deliberated specifically over the design of the human creature. Luther repeated the estimation of past teachers of the church that the image of God consists of "three powers of the soul, namely memory, understanding, and will." Augustine had joined these three together based on Plato's idea of memory as the basis from which reason and will function.[11] The reformer expressed his own hesitation to carry this analysis too far, specifically in

associating these three aspects of humanity with the Holy Trinity. He told his hearers and readers that he preferred to remain with the simple words of the text and set aside such speculation. He did comment on Paul's contrast of the "earthly" and the "heavenly" images that shape humanity in 1 Corinthians 15:48-59 and Ephesians 4:22-24, viewing the former as the sin-ridden person whose reason is blinded, whose flesh is corrupted by evil desires and love for course sinning and unbelief, false belief, and despair. The heavenly image of Christ is reflected in "love, mercy and grace, humility, patience, wisdom, light, and everything good." Christ embodied this image in his death and resurrection.[12] In preaching to the people, Luther did not try to describe the original shape of humanity in detail, avoiding speculation about what he had not experienced.

Luther informed the congregation that since the fall all people are found either in God's image or Satan's image. God's image expresses itself in wisdom, virtue, and love and is saturated with the good, lacking all evil desires, with a natural uprightness in body and soul.[13] God's command to be fruitful and multiply belongs to the essential characteristics of being human, Luther asserted. This command gave him the occasion to criticize papal devaluation of marriage through its ascribing a higher holiness to celibacy.[14]

Genesis also provided the text for Luther's last lecture course, which extended over a decade until shortly before his death. In 1535, he addressed his students in Wittenberg on human nature as created and as fallen from the relationship in which God had originally created it. Some elements of his earlier, much briefer exposition of the last verses of Genesis 1 reoccurred, such as that "let us make" reveals that God dedicated special "deliberation and plan" to this human creature. This distinguished human beings from beings, *animalia*, of other kinds. Beasts (*animalia*) and human beings (*homines*) share many characteristics: they live and eat together, receiving nourishment from the same materials. However, God created human beings according to his special providential plan. Luther dismissed Epicurus' view that there is no more to life than eating and drinking. The descendants of Adam and Eve were destined for a life beyond the perfectly good life that they had enjoyed in Eden. Their relationship with God would not change from the complete harmony they had when they were first created, but Luther speculated they would have enjoyed "immortal" life beyond Eden.[15]

Luther indulged in some speculation regarding the original state of humanity. He imagined that in that original state, Adam must have displayed the most lucid reason, the sharpest memory, and the most faithful will. He had a sense of peace and rest, free from fear of death and other fears. His reason was enlightened, and he knew God truly. Adam desired to love both God and his neighbor, specifically Eve. And he had a perfect knowledge of the nature of animals, vegetation, and all other creatures. Not only his non-physical qualities exceeded the sinful imagina-

tion's ability to conceive. His body, every member, possessed the highest degree of beauty and strength. His eyes saw better than the lynx and the eagle; his strength exceeded that of lions and bears, and he played with them as Luther would deal with a puppy. Adam gave orders to the lions as Luther would to a dog. In addition, he ate the produce of the land that tasted far better than what Luther ate. His relationship with Eve produced no shame before God, since their relationship was lived out in obedience to God without any evil thought. Luther sketched the contrast between this image of God in the beginning with the present inability of the human imagination to grasp the fullness of what this creature was.[16] Physical work, such as cultivating the ground, would not have been toilsome but rather pleasurable. Best of all, Adam and Eve enjoyed harmony with God.[17]

They also enjoyed harmony among themselves. Luther spent some time combating views that belittled women, common among medieval scholastic and Renaissance thinkers of his time. Eve reflected the image of God just as fully as Adam and shared in their common rule over creation. Luther did not abandon a certain preeminence of the male gender over the female, but Eve partnered with Adam in the management of family and property.[18] In commenting on Genesis 2:18 a few weeks later, Luther noted that God created Eve according to a special plan and that she was in every way Adam's equal in terms of the qualities of body and mind. Luther described the partnership of the two as foundational for human life in community, living out the tasks to which God called them. After the fall, Eve and other women became both an antidote for sin to prevent men from sexual sinning and a companion to help them manage life.[19] God designed them to share property, children, food, bed, and dwelling. Man and woman had a common purpose in life.[20] Thus, Luther found human community and mutual dependence fundamental to God's plan for his human creatures. His understanding that God has assigned to each human being responsibilities in the household (*oeconomia*, embracing family and economic activities), society and its governing structures (*politia*), and church (*ecclesia*), formed the basis of his placement of every individual human being within the warp and woof of communities, from family to nation and culture. Christians recognize that these responsibilities are "callings" or "vocations" from God, who exercises his providential care of all through other human beings.[21]

Luther did view gender as intrinsic to the human creature. Engaging in precisely the kind of speculation he had just forbidden regarding the nature of the spiritual body after the resurrection as he preached on 1 Corinthians 15: 35-38, he asserted gender would remain even though eating, drinking, sleeping, family life, work in the fields, and secular government would disappear.[22]

This overview of human nature and life reveals that Luther placed great importance on the physical element of the human being, the body. Sin introduced dangers to health, including overindulgence in food and drink.[23] However, he devoted even

more attention to the non-physical, using at times the dichotomous description of the human creature as body and soul. At other times, depending on the biblical text, he uses the trichotomous distinction of body, soul, and spirit. His definitions or descriptions of "soul" and "spirit" vary, depending on the biblical text he is commenting on and the binary opposite he is criticizing. His lectures on Genesis also addressed this subject.

On the eve of the Wittenberg reform movement, controversy arose over the argument made by Italian thinker Pietro Pomponazzi (1462-1525), who claimed Aristotle had not taught that the soul is immortal and that the immortality of the soul cannot be demonstrated by reason. In 1513, the Fifth Lateran Council had condemned the idea that the soul is mortal and affirmed that it is immortal and that which establishes the formal aspect of the body.[24] Although Luther did not engage in this debate, it certainly helped form his thinking on the subject. In commenting on Genesis 2:7, God's breathing the "nephesh" into the clod of earth, which God had chosen as Adam's chemical base, Luther speaks of the "immortality of the soul," in direct criticism of Aristotle's denial that the human soul lives forever. Luther here was not thinking of a "soul" without beginning but only of the continuation of life for the human creature through and after earthly death. Luther clearly marked the beginning of the "immortal soul" at this act of creation by God.[25] For Luther went on to struggle with the usage of the term "living soul" in Genesis, for God deemed all animals living beings but then created Adam as the only living soul. The professor attempted a solution by turning to 1 Corinthians 15:45, "It is written: the first human being, Adam, was made a living soul, but the last Adam a quickening spirit." This led Luther to conclude that "living soul refers to physical life that includes eating, drinking, giving birth, growing, characteristics of all living beings." Three years earlier, he had defined nephesh as "the whole person with five senses" and all the activities that constitute the maintenance and use of the body.[26] In 1535, Luther reasoned that Moses must have intended through this expression in Genesis 2:7 to indicate that bodily existence continues into eternity even if the mortal body passes away. In this context, Luther used "immortality" to refer to life beyond the grave and "living soul" to refer to the life of the body that continues in the state of being a "quickening spirit."[27] However, he did not use this distinction consistently.

"Body and Soul" or "Body, Soul, and Spirit"

Luther's writings reflect the fact that biblical writers sometimes summarized the human creature as consisting of "body and soul" and sometimes they differentiated "body, soul, and spirit." Luther usually let the text on which he was commenting or preaching determine his usage. His general usage spoke of a person as "body and soul." But a text such as Luke 1:46-55 elicited comment on the soul and spirit. His

meditation on Mary's "Magnificat" of 1521, dedicated to giving comfort to Elector Frederick the Wise, echoed Mary's own usage. Luther recognized that Mary's use of her "spirit" and her "soul" probably mirrors Hebrew and Aramaic synonyms. He strove to demonstrate how the two terms expressed the location of a person's faith in God. He defined the "spirit" as "the loftiest, deepest, noblest part of the human creature." The spirit enables a person to grasp the divine. It is the organ of faith in God, the depository for God's Word. Psalm 51:37 spoke of the spirit, in Luther's words, as sincere faith; Psalm 78:37 equated the "spirit" with the "heart."[28] God governs the human spirit that is turned toward him. He defined "soul" as the same spirit in essence but seen performing a different function. The soul is directed into the earthly realm, as it animates the body. The spirit is what gives a person essential identity that exists even apart from the body. The soul remains with the body during sleep, keeping the body alive. The body serves to accomplish what the soul and spirit tell it.[29] However, the body cannot deal with the divine matters that reason cannot fathom. Reason provides light for earthly life, for the body. Without the spirit and its connection with God through faith, it will fall into error.[30] The spirit provides wisdom, while the soul provides knowledge and feelings.[31]

Luther drew an analogy between this structure of the human creature and the Old Testament tabernacle with its three sections. The Holy of Holies, where God dwells, had no light. The Holy Place had its seven lamps. The Outer Court was fully open, and bathed in sunlight. The human spirit believes what cannot be seen or comprehended. The soul reasons, knows, and understands the visible, the things of the body. The body, like the forecourt, is on public display so that others may observe what it does and how it lives.[32] Luther cited 1 Thessalonians 5:23, where Paul prayed for the holiness of spirit, soul, and body; he then observed that when the spirit loses its holiness—which is faith pure and simple—nothing holy remains in a person. The spirit preserves soul and body from sin and error so long as it trusts in God. When it does not, neither soul nor body please God. God must preserve the human spirit so that the soul and body belong to him.[33]

Luther's views varied in the ensuing years as he interpreted various biblical texts. In 1526, he commented on Ecclesiastes 12:7, associating the spirit that returns to God at death is the same breath of life mentioned in Genesis 2:7. He made the obscure observation that since we do not know whence God fashioned the spirit, we do not know whither it goes, apart from being with God.[34] In his 1538 annotations on the Gospel according to Matthew, based on earlier work on the Gospel, Luther explicated Matthew 10:28 by affirming that the soul lives even when the body is killed. He claimed that the soul is the life of the body, an axiom in medieval theology. Murderers can separate the soul from the body—that is, they can take life away from the body—"but they cannot kill you completely, whether they want to or not, the soul lives and cannot be killed." Luther asserted that this relationship of soul

and body lies beyond human comprehension because our life is hidden in God (Col. 3:3). But the dead Abel, Luther reasoned, could accuse the living Cain (Gen. 4:10), and Abraham, though dead, could be alive for all things live to God (Luke 20:38).[35]

Flesh and Spirit

Luther placed this analysis of the elements of the human creature as designed and formed by God within the context of the corruption of God's good creature by sin, reflecting, above all, the formulations of the Apostle Paul. Paul bestowed on the thinking of Christians a contrast or conflict between the "flesh," not to be confused with the "body," and the "spirit," not to be equated with the spirit as a component of the human creature. Instead, this "flesh" and "spirit" dichotomy describes the person who lives apart from God in contrast to the person who lives by faith in Christ. Both "flesh" and "spirit" in this case permeate the entire Christian person. Christians experience the battle that goes on between God and Satan within their own lives, between the "flesh" as a designation for desires and actions in defiance of God and in service to self and "spirit" as trust in God and the actions that flow from it.

In 1520, Luther's programmatic effort to construct a framework for Evangelical piety, *On Christian Freedom*, treated the distinction of flesh and spirit as the conflict between the spirit of faith and joy over the benefits that Christ has conferred and the flesh, "a contrary will … which strives to serve the world and seeks its own advantage." In 1520, the shadow of the cloister focused his taming this flesh on keeping the body active and disciplined.[36] In 1531, while lecturing on Galatians 5:17, he included in the "flesh" not only "sexual desire, pride, anger, sadness, impatience, unbelief" but also "party spirit, pride, hatred, contempt for the neighbor, trust in their own righteousness, presumption, neglect of godliness and the Word, blasphemy." He placed the conflict with the spirit that is faithful to God in the midst of his own experience, as it had been in Paul's, as described in Romans 7.[37]

In 1522, offering readers of his translation of the New Testament a series of key biblical terms to aid their understanding of Scripture, Luther sketched his understanding of each term. "Flesh" does not refer to sexual deviations, and "spirit" is not limited to internal thoughts about God. Paul's term "flesh" in Galatians 5:16-25 embraces "the whole person with body and soul, mind and senses, because everything about a person longs for the flesh." Even learned theologians can be fleshly in discussing spiritual subjects if they do this apart from God's grace. The pinnacle of "fleshliness" is failing to trust God. By the same token, "spiritual" describes the person of faith with very bodily works of love, such as Christ's washing the feet of the disciples and Peter's practicing his vocation as a fisherman. Luther asserted that fleshly people are those who work in the service of their own temporal gain,

while spiritual people are those whose lives inwardly and outwardly serve the Holy Spirit and point to the future life.[38] In one of his last sermons, he treated Galatians 5:16-24, defining "flesh" as that which drives human beings not only to sexual offenses against God's plan for their sexuality but also to hatred, envy, anger, greed, and other wickedness.[39]

Luther on the Body

Luther's background in the philosophy of William of Ockham equipped him with an appreciation of the created order. Ockham held that in the created objects of daily human experience, human beings encountered the fundamentals of language. Luther regarded language as an essential element in the personhood of those created in the image of the speaking God. As a result, the Wittenberg professor abandoned the spiritualizing dismissal of the body that led to the monastic life with its rejection of marriage and its ascetic ideals of using abstinence from and denial of God's temporal blessings as a path for earning merit in his sight.

Luther taught that God made each new human creature to grow in the womb of the mother, but he also concluded that this creature's origin and growth remain a mystery. Even if the womb were open, a human observer would not see how a person grows any more than we can observe the growth of trees, he told his students in 1526.[40] In 1532, his homiletical exposition of 1 Corinthians 15 affirmed that fundamental for the human creature are "body, soul, and all the senses." On the other hand, he noted that certain characteristics of the mortal body, including decaying and stinking, would not be part of the spiritual, resurrected body. For, he observed, the mortal body begins to stink a day after death and then becomes home to maggots and worms. Its putrid smell generates worms, snakes, and toads, according to some.[41]

Luther's preaching often reminded his people of God's providence in supplying their daily needs for food, clothing, and other bodily necessities.[42] Explaining the first article of the Creed, he expressed his thankfulness for God's daily and abundant provision of "shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children, fields, livestock and all property—along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life."[43] Indeed, the fourth petition leads the whole person to recognize the Creator's goodness in giving "everything included in the necessities and nourishment for our bodies, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, farm, fields, livestock, money, property, an upright spouse, upright children, upright members of the household, upright and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, decency, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like."[44] He quoted Psalm 127:2, "so he gives [what people need] to his beloved

in sleep," in a sermon on Luke 5:1-11 in the Summer Postil to show that worry about temporal welfare is in vain, for "God bestows his gifts overnight. Grain and all food from the earth, indeed, all that a person has or may acquire must be given by God."[45]

In commenting on Matthew 10:30, Luther went beyond the words of Matthew 10:30 to rejoice that God keeps track not only of the hairs of our head, the most worthless part of the body since they are dead, but also of "your fingers, all your joints, even your nails." That meant that the devil could not touch a single hair if not permitted to do so by our Father.[46]

The "body" in Luther's view can refer to other material blessings, including property, honor or respect of others, and family, as he indicated in his hymn, "A Mighty Fortress,"[47] as well as to life lived in faith. Preaching on Psalm 110:4 in 1535, the reformer reminded the congregation that the sacrifice of Christ elicits in their lives what Paul labeled the body as a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1-2). Luther explained that meant the loss of life, possessions, and honor sacrificed in serving the Lord.[48] However, in 1523, while composing his preface introducing the Old Testament to readers of his translation, he interpreted this Romans passage as referring to "the constant exercise of the gospel both in preaching and in believing."[49] In his Church Postil of 1522, the living sacrifice of the body is summarized as its mortification by fasting, anticipating Christ's return, and working, such as Anna performed in the temple in Luke 2:37.[50] Luther's confidence in the presence and power of God extended beyond his restoration of the sinner's relationship with the Creator to his provision for the body in this life. Jesus's admonition not to worry about life, food, and clothing in Matthew 6:25 reminded the reformer that it is only reasonable to conclude that God has given his people "body and life" without our first being concerned about them, and he will preserve them as well. Jesus is saying, Luther concluded, that God gives life and preserves our bodies, including food and clothing, as part of that gift.[51]

Alongside such necessities of physical life, Luther was concerned about the health of those around him, having suffered again and again from a variety of ailments himself. He recognized that the borderline between purely physical afflictions and the mental and spiritual state of a person was not always firm. When his friend and colleague Philip Melanchthon fell ill in 1540 in the midst of the conflict around the bigamy of their supporter Landgrave Philip of Hesse, Luther visited him. In his usual brusque manner, Luther first stormed the gates of heaven with an imperative prayer, and then he threatened Melanchthon with excommunication if he did not place himself in God's hands and recover.[52] Four years later, Georg Spalatin, pastor in Altenburg, who had covered for Luther in the delicate days of Luther's excommunication and imperial ban, suffered from physical symptoms related to melancholy or depression. "God does not want the sinner to die but to

live and turn to him," Luther wrote his friend, whose conscience suffered from a bad pastoral decision. Luther took Spalatin's feelings of sin and guilt as seriously as Spalatin himself did. He assured Spalatin of forgiveness for his bad judgment, arguing that if he viewed himself as a real sinner, he should believe that Christ is a real savior.[53] Similarly, Luther encouraged his children's tutor Hieronymus Weller, and Weller's sister, Barbara Lisskirchen, when they were struggling with melancholia and its physical effects.[54] When Else von Kanitz, a fellow nun who had escaped from Cloister Nimbschen with Katharina von Bora, fell into melancholia, Luther gave her practical advice. She should recognize that she was sharing the cross that Christians bear, an aspect of the reformer's theology of the cross. He offered the practical suggestion that she come to Wittenberg to teach school there, a diversion from her affliction.[55]

Luther often warned against overindulgence in eating and drinking. In his *Open Letter to the German Nobility* in 1520, he condemned the abuse of food and drink, which had given Germans a bad reputation in other lands.[56] In his lecture on Genesis 1:30 in 1535, he noted that the "leprous obesity" of his fellow Germans stood in contrast to the physical attractiveness and health of Adam and Eve. He criticized endangering one's health by brutish consumption, especially of meat; he preferred the delightful fruits of the earth.[57] His preface to the Smalcald Articles of 1538 denounced gluttony along with a series of other societal evils.[58]

Luther's concern for bodily health guided his answer to a request for counsel when the plague struck Breslau in 1527. Pastor Johann Hess wrote for aid in deciding whether Christians should flee the plague. Luther's practical wisdom rested on the principles of trusting God, carrying out the calling that he has given, and exercising reasonable care for the body that does not try to put God to the test. His confidence that God provides through the gifts of the physician and the pharmacist shaped his response to Hess, along with his conviction that God places certain people in callings with responsibilities for the public safety. Thus, he insisted that the governing officials and medical personnel in Breslau should remain at their posts and serve as agents of God's providence in times of plague. So should pastors charged with the spiritual care of the sick and dying.[59] On the other hand, God "commanded that by the sweat of our brow we should seek our daily food, clothing, and all we need and avoid destruction and disaster whenever we can, as long as we do so without detracting from our love and duty toward our neighbor." Because of this principle, he urged individuals to make every effort to care for themselves in the midst of the plague.[60] He prescribed public policy that provides "municipal homes and hospitals staffed with people to take care of the sick so that patients from private homes may be sent there."[61] Luther called failing to use medicine and other precautions to avoid the disease tempting God and a form of suicide. "Use medicine; take tonics, fumigate the house, yard, and street, avoid persons and places" where illness may

be contracted, he counseled. He urged following the Old Testament model of quarantine—practiced for lepers in his own time—as a precautionary measure when plague struck.[62] Luther's concern for both the bodily and the spiritual welfare of the sick demonstrates his holistic conception of the human being.

Other elements of life in which the body worked together with reason, will, and emotions included procreation, the use of language, and music. Luther emphasized both the companionship of the "helper" Eve and the cooperation of Adam and Eve in giving birth to children in his Genesis lectures and numerous other places.[63] He recognized that the physical nature of procreation is inextricably connected with reason, will, and especially emotions. His own family life publicly illustrated the relationship of husband and wife with their children, first of all in the companionship he and Katharina von Bora enjoyed.[64] His concern for wife and child surfaced in his seeking advice from one of his followers, Argula von Grumbach, in 1530, on how to wean the newborn Magdalena.[65] His grief over the death of his daughters Elisabeth and Magdalena depicts the bonds that weave together the generations.[66] His words of comfort for mothers who had experienced a miscarriage reveal his sensitivity to the bodily perils and emotional ordeals of childbirth and his confidence that God also controls and loves his people in the midst of evil's assaults.[67]

Integral to Luther's understanding of what it is to be human was his high appreciation of the acts of speaking and listening. He cultivated the use of language and exploited his gift of hearing the tones and rhythms, the sense and intention of the language spoken in the market place. He put this to use through his teaching and writing. More fundamentally, as Johannes von Lüpke observes, for Luther "language is the quintessence of living as human beings; compared to a speaking person, a person without words is nothing more than half-dead, and there is no more powerful or noble human activity than speaking since human beings are distinguished from other animals most decisively by speaking (WADB 10.2.100,10-31, LW 35: 254, cf. WA29.349.31-350.13, 350.2-4)." Von Lüpke asserts that for Luther, language occupies the place "where reason stands in the philosophical definition. Human beings are linguistic beings; even their reason is dependent on language."[68]

Thus, Luther emphasized rhetorical principles for communicating, just as Melanchthon did. He knew the importance of the relationship between spoken words (and written words as well) and both the fashioning and the reception of verbal communication by reason, will, and emotions.[69] For Luther, the ear served as the channel that received both the devil's deceptions and God's saving promise. Hearing leads to trust and obedience.[70] As important as speaking God's Word was to Luther, he also emphasized the importance of believers coming to God to listen. Oswald Bayer has pointed out the importance of entering into God's presence in silence, letting him speak new life into us.[71]

The ear and the tongue, along with associated instruments, such as vocal cords, not only served as the body's contribution to the vital center of being human—communication with God and with others. They also provided the tools that produced music, according to Luther. His well-known praise of music coupled this "divine and most precious" gift with the gift of speaking; together, these gifts enabled human beings to praise God and were thus vital for their relationship with God.[72] Early in his career, he noted that a heart that rejoices in the Lord produces song and singing.[73] Luther also recognized the power of music to tame human thinking that was out of control, as David used it to drive the evil spirit out of Saul.[74] To a degree uncommon in medieval theology, Luther expressed his high estimation of the human body and his deep concern for its welfare.

Luther's Vocabulary of Human Thinking, Willing, and Feeling

Body and non-corporeal elements of humanity work together in Luther's composite picture of the human creature. A review of some of his use of biblical terms for their activities reveal that Luther did not develop a succinct definition of how human beings live out their humanity but instead used the variety of terms Scripture and his teachers had placed at his disposal. In medieval thought, reason and intellect may be synonymous, or they may distinguish the action of the intellect and the entity that reasons. Luther is well-known for his dismissal of reason as a "whore," but his appreciation of properly functioning reason soared to lofty praise when it functioned within its proper bounds. Critical to understanding these two aspects of Luther's attitude toward human reasoning is his distinction between the realm in which our understanding absorbs who God is and what he has done for sinners, *and* the earthly realm that he has placed under human stewardship. Lecturing on Isaiah 9:1 in 1543, the professor commented, "reason is the greatest and most unbelievably precious gift of God, nor should it be held in contempt when it wisely puts things in order and discovers things in human affairs."[75] Brian Gerrish cites the reformer's sermon on Isaiah 60:1-6 in his Church Postil. There, Luther notes that in earthly activities "the rational person is self-sufficient" and reason is a sufficient guide, for instance, in knowing how to "build houses, make clothing, conduct marriage, wage war, navigate on the sea, etc." In relationship to God, however, "nature is absolutely stone-blind so that it cannot even catch a glimpse of what those things are." Reason produces government and law if rightly used. It elicits moral behavior that permits society to run more or less smoothly. But it can also construct false systems of government and errant codes of conduct.[76] In a sinful world reason's challenge is to foster living "soberly, righteously, and godly" (Titus 2:12), a challenge comparable to keeping sober in a tavern, chaste in a brothel, godly in a dance-hall, innocent among murderers.[77]

Luther did not discount the role reason can play in aiding human contemplation of God's revelation of himself so long as it only supplies tools for understanding and does not try to shape understanding.[78] Luther used elements of Aristotelian logic in explaining biblical concepts, for instance, through syllogisms or the physics of substance and accident, while carefully setting limits on the proper use of these tools.[79] Thus, reason functioned as a significant component part of the human creature; as such, it not only contributed to the fulfillment of the individual but also to the potential for abuse and succumbing to Satanic attack.

The will likewise functions as God's good gift and yet is subject to Satan's turning it away from God. Bengt Hägglund summarized Luther's definition of the human will (*voluntas*) as the inner orientation of human creatures which determines the entire direction of their lives and expresses, in the actions it causes, their very identity.[80] It included the process of making a decision and a choice (*arbitrium*). In 1535, he told his students that God commissioned Adam and Eve to have their wills make decisions in exercising their lordship over fish, birds, animals, and their fields. In relationship to God, however, Adam, even before the fall into sin, was like clay in the potter's hands, in what Luther called a state of "passive potentiality." His power to want to live in trusting harmony with his Creator was God's gift.[81]

The very understanding of the will as a decision-making agent imposed on Luther the struggle to define how the creature could freely will within an existence whose boundaries or definition had been set by the Creator. Early in his theological development, Luther began his struggle to solve the problem of his inability to turn his will to God alone, the impotence of his powers of choice (*arbitrium*) to choose God and his will instead of going his own contrary way. He avoided speculation about God's predestination of sinners for salvation since he had not been present in the divine counsels before the foundation of the world. Instead, Luther concentrated his attention on his own will since he had experienced that its choices in regard to God were bound. In his treatise *On Bound Choice* (*De servo arbitrio*), he further struggled with the mystery of how God the Creator can hold the human creature accountable for actions within the sphere of human responsibility when he, as Creator, is responsible for all things. Luther wanted to avoid the implication that the human will stood under "compulsion" in such a way that made this human creature like an automaton or marionette. In no way was he a determinist, nor did he deny human responsibility. Luther stated that the will performs acts of willing "spontaneously and freely" (or in Philip Watson's rendering "of its own accord and with a ready will"). Thus, even when overtaken by the mystery of sin, people "cannot by their own powers lay aside, restrain, or change, but they keep on willing ... even if compelled by external force [the devil] to do something different...."[82] Luther took over a medieval analogy that may seem limping to modern readers by asserting that "the human will is placed between the two like a beast of burden. If God rides

it, it wills and goes where God wills, as the psalm says, "I was like a brute beast in relationship to you; nevertheless, I am continually with you" [Ps. 73:22-23]. If Satan rides the animal, it wills and goes where Satan wills; nor can it choose to run to either of the two riders or to choose one or the other, but the riders themselves contend for the possession and control of the animal.[83] Hans-Joachim Iwand caught Luther's intention: "Therefore, we do not want to understand the human being on the basis of the will, but the will on the basis of what it means to be human."[84]

The reformer finally turned the focus to the transformation wrought by the Holy Spirit in converting the sinner to faith in Christ. This new creature in Christ lives according to God's design for human life "from pure willingness and inclination and of its own accord, not from compulsion…." The will of this new creature of faith "cannot be turned another way by any opposition, nor be overcome or compelled even by the gates of hell, but it goes on willing and delighting in and loving the good, just as before it willed and delighted in and loved evil." The Holy Spirit and God's grace continue to bestow the new life of the new creature, and that new life includes the restoration of the proper functioning of the human will.[85]

The word Luther used most frequently to describe the emotional aspects of humanity was the "heart." The emotions often appear in the context of the conversations human beings are having with either God or the devil. Luther picked up on biblical usage that treats emotions as inseparable from thinking, so that the "heart" may embrace feeling, willing, and reasoning. He noted already in his 1517 lectures on Hebrews that "mind" and "heart" designate intellect and affections.[86] Emotions may evade our expression in words, but they both proceed from and form concepts that finally follow some pattern, even if its unarticulated logic is totally flawed and faulty. Birgit Stolt summarizes the biblical understanding of the "heart" that Luther assumed as

> the seat of mental faculties, understanding, feeling, will, the power to make decisions, memory and other things. In one's heart as the center of personal consciousness and capacity to understand the human being receives in the Old Testament the commands of God, in the New Testament grace and divine enlightenment. In the heart, not in the head, the free decision for or against God takes place.[87]

The Holy Spirit, Luther told the Wittenberg congregation in 1537, is poured into the heart, is active there, and through baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the proclamation of the Word of God shapes our feelings and faith.[88] God addresses the heart by speaking and thus determines human existence through his Word.

Luther viewed the heart as the organ that connects with God by its trust. Jonathan Reinert's careful description of how Luther's use of the "heart" as the expression for the believer's trust in Christ begins in his lectures on the Psalms in 1513-1515.

There, it is often the heart that is said to turn to God in true repentance.[89] The professor's usage focused on the heart ever more as the source of all prayers of believers, and by 1520, the heart had become for Luther the agent of trust and faithfulness of Christ's people.[90] In 1534, Luther treated the connection joining believers to God by suggesting that he had not placed Jesus into their hands, nor drawn him for their eyes to capture, but that he had painted the Word into their hearts.[91]

However, the "heart," Luther observed, also fashioned false gods. Commenting on Genesis 6:5, he affirmed that the imagination of the heart fashioned evil continually.[92] Genesis 8:21 provoked the reflection that reason, will, and intellect work together as the heart to fashion something, as a "rational being whose heart is always inventing or imagining something." According to Moses, Luther stated that whatever it invents or fashions is evil.[93]

Stolt cites Luther's estimate of the heart's positive role in the work of translating Scripture as but one of many examples of how the heart works: "It requires an upright, devout, honest, sincere, God-fearing, Christian, trained, informed, and experienced heart." She refers to Luther's introduction to the Psalms. There, he treats the psalms as windows to the hearts of the psalmists so that readers can "see what kind of thoughts they had, how their hearts were disposed, and how they acted in all kinds of situations in danger and in need." Luther continued by describing the heart as

> a ship on a wild sea, driven by the storm winds from the four corners of the world. Here it is stuck with fear and worry about impending disaster; there comes grief and sadness because of present evil. Here breathes a breeze of hope and anticipated happiness; there blows security and joy in present blessings. These storm winds teach us to speak seriously, to open the heart and pour out what lies at its bottom.

The hearts of the people of God are like gardens, like heaven, where beautiful flowers blossom with joy because of God's blessings. Looking into the hearts of the saints can, on the other hand, be a glimpse of death and hell itself.[94]

Luther inherited the related terms "*conscientia*" and "*synderesis*" from his scholastic teachers. Bonaventura included *synderesis* in the will as that which moved the conscience to make proper moral judgments. Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus regarded the *synderesis* as a *habitus* within the intellect; Scotus used the word "*conscientia*" as the agent of applying the inborn principles of the *synderesis*. Biel believed that the *synderesis* was not merely a *habitus* but an integral part of human beings, directing them to right actions. The conscience provides knowledge and guidance to the freely deciding will with the aim of acting in a manner that earns initial grace.[95]

Luther used both terms, seemingly as synonyms, shaped in part by Augustine's usage. Following Augustine, Luther viewed the conscience as the human being's

hearing God's address to his whole self, the perception of God's will for his creatures. Luther's "*conscientia*" did more than provide moral guidance; it embraced a larger orientation toward God and other human creatures, toward the entire creation in accordance with God's will.[96] His student Johannes Mathesius remembered his teacher's defining conscience as having two aspects: in relationship to God, the conscience extends its trust; towards other human beings, it reaches out in love.[97] In his *On Christian Freedom*, Luther taught that Christ had bestowed righteousness on the consciences of his people by freeing them from sin and death, that is, orienting their view of God and his creation toward him and his Word.[98] Luther explained the "searing" of the conscience in lecturing on 1 Timothy 4:2 in 1528: a seared conscience cannot assess the world accurately. When Satan has seared the conscience, it does not perceive the reality of God and his world properly. For the conscience produces the content of what a person believes—the teaching or doctrine—and a person "lives by what the conscience teaches."[99] Here, Luther includes one's whole perception of God and all he has made in the conscience.

Luther also treated the "mind" (*der Sinn*), viewing the believer's way of thinking and perceiving reality as the mind of Christ. His sermon on Ephesians 4:1-6 in Caspar Cruciger's edition of the Summer Postil (1543) stated that this "mind" or way of thinking flows from the forgiveness of sins and the unmerited gift of eternal life, which produces the recognition that those who trust in Christ are children of God, partakers of the benefits that flow from Christ's death and resurrection. This directed the mind away from envy of those with other gifts, serving God and neighbor within the boundaries set by the Creator in the callings of daily life. Believers thus thank God for using them as instruments of his providence wherever he places them. This thankfulness for precisely the callings or assignments God has given to each believer leads to unity and harmony among the people of God.[100]

The biblical descriptions of the way in which faith in Christ moves and directs human beings in daily life relied on these terms that Luther found in the biblical text. Rather than giving a succinct definition of the component parts of God's human creature, he defined being human in terms of the relationship of fear, love, and trust in God above all else, and in terms of the relationships that flow from trust in God revealed in Christ with the neighbors whom we are to love and serve with a Christ-like spirit of self-sacrifice.

Conclusion

Martin Luther's view of what it is to be God's human creature focused on the relationship of love and trust that bound him to his God and on God's providence for his body and the life described as "soul," "spirit," and a series of other terms

that he assembled from the medieval tradition and Scripture. His sensitivity to the complexity of his own person, the complexity of every human creature, let him focus on his relationship with God as the fundamental element of his humanity. To describe the human role in that relationship, he employed a range of biblical and traditional terms that heightened appreciation of the gift of being God's human creature. His description of what makes human beings the creatures they are presented a holistic picture, with a higher appreciation of the physical body than had been present in medieval theologians. He acknowledged the ancient and medieval distinction of reason, will, affections, and the physical, but more prominently spoke in biblical terminology, both in setting forth the component parts of the human creature and in treating the struggle between God and Satan within this creature in Pauline terms of "flesh" and "spirit." Luther's definition of being human encompassed all of human life, from conception in the womb to the resurrection from death and life eternal, always in relationship with the Creator himself.

Robert Kolb *is Professor of Systematic Theology Emeritus at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, is co-editor with Timothy J. Wengert of the 2000 translation of* The Book of Concord *and co-editor with Irene Dingel and Lubomír Batka of* The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology *(2014). He has authored several books on Luther and Lutheran teaching, including two appearing in 2024*: Face to Face. Martin Luther's View of Reality *(Fortress Press) and the second edition of* The Christian Faith, a Lutheran Exposition*, co-authored with Theodore J. Hopkins (Concordia Publishing House).*

Notes

1. My thanks to Dennis Ngien, who has pointed me to this analysis as found in Pekka Kärkkäinen, "Emotions and Experience," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Martin Luther*, ed. Derek Nelson and Paul Hinlicky (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1: 436-448; Simeon Zahl, "The bondage of the affections: willing, feeling, and desiring in Luther's theology, 1513-1525," in *The Spirit, the Affections, and the Christian Tradition*, ed. Dale M. Coulter, & Amos Yong (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 181-206.
2. Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 48, 63-65.
3. In *Loci communes rerum theologicarum*, 1521, the topic "De hominis viribus adeoque de libero arbitrio," *Melanchthons Werke in Auswahl* [Studien–Ausgabe], 6 vols., ed. Robert Stupperich (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1951–1975), 2.1:8–17, and in *Loci praecipui theologici*, 1535/1559, *Melanchthons Werke*, 2.1: 236–252, esp. 237.17–25.
4. Erik H. Herrmann, "Luther and the Importance of the Hebrew Heritage for his World of Thought," in *Simul: Inquiries into Luther's Expression of the Christian Life*, ed. Robert Kolb, Torbjörn Johansson, and Daniel Johansson (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021), 53.

5. *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche*, ed. Irene Dingel (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014) 862/863.3-10) [henceforth BSELK]; *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 351 [henceforth BC].

6. *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883- 1993), 42: 124.11-12 [henceforth WA]; *Luther's Works* (Saint Louis/Philadelphia: Concordia/Fortress, 1958-1986) 1:165 [henceforth LW].

7. BSELK 932/933. 4-11; BC 286-387.

8. WA 36:8-23, and WA 45:145-156; see Robert Kolb, "'The Noblest Skill in the Christian Church': Luther's Sermons on the Proper Distinction of Law and Gospel," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 71 (2007): 301-318.

9. See essays in *The Alien + the Proper. Luther's Two-fold Righteousness in Controversy, Ministry, and Citizenship*, ed. Robert Kolb (Irvine, CA: 1517 Publishing, 2023).

10. WA 2: 145.9-10, 146.36-37; LW 31:297, 299.

11. Augustine, *De Trinitate* X, xi (18), *Corpus Christianorum L, Aurelii Augustini Opera Pars XVI, 1*, ed. W. J. Mountain (Turhout: Brepols, 1968), 330-331. See Lenka Karfíková, *Grace and the Will according to Augustine*, trans. Markéta Janebová (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 187-191. Medieval teachers used this trilogy, frequently refining Augustine's presentation.

12. WA 24:48.20-51, 9.

13. WA 24:51.10-25.

14. WA 24:53.16-57, 21.

15. WA 42:41.38-43, 18; LW 1:56-57.

16. WA 42:46.27-49, 8; LW 1:62-64.

17. WA 42:48.27-49,7; LW 1:65. See Christian Volkmar Witt, *Martin Luthers Reformation der Ehe: sein theologisches Eheverständnis vor dessen augustinisch-mittelalterlichem Hintergrund* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017).

18. WA 42:51/52.12-22; LW 1:69.

19. WA 42:87.11-89.5; LW 1:115-117; cf. WA 42:92.27-38; LW 1:123.

20. WA 42:103.14-22; LW 1:137.

21. Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*; trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957).

22. WA 36:635.22-25; LW 28:172-173.

23. WA 42:55.18-23; LW 1:72.

24. *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils. Volume Two. Trent to Vatican II*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, S.J. (London: Sheed & Ward, and Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 1:605-606.

25. WA 42:63.25-33; LW 1:84.

26. WA 36:659.16-36; LW 28:189.

27. WA 42:64.37-66, 19; LW 1:85-86.

28. WA 7:550.1-559.28; LW 21:303-312.

29. WA 7:550.19-551.11; LW 21:303.

30. WA 7:550.35-555.11, 555.25-226.4; LW 21:303, 304.
31. WA 7:551.9-11; LW 21:303.
32. WA 7:551.12-24; LW 21:304.
33. WA 7:551.25-552.4; LW 21:304.
34. WA 20:197:23-31; LW 15:182.
35. WA 38:505.5-506.2; LW 67:105-106.
36. WA 7:60.2-33; LW 31:359-360.
37. WA 40.II:88.17-90.21; LW 27:70-71.
38. WA DB 7:12-13.5-26; LW 35:371-372.
39. WA 51:50.1-57.9; LW 58:283-293.
40. Lecturing on Ecclesiastes 11:5, WA 20:187.22-188.2; LW 15:173-174.
41. WA 36:645.19-29, 647.34-650.22, 654.20-657.14; LW 28:178-179, 181-182, 185-187,
42. See Robert Kolb, "Luther's Providential God," in *The Interface of Science, Theology, and Religion. Essays in Honor of Alister E. McGrath*, ed. Dennis Ngien (Eugene: Pickwick, 2019), 48-65.
43. BSELK, 870-871.10-12; BC 354.
44. BSELK, 878-879.8-12; BC 357.
45. WA 22:75.35-76.8; LW 78:210.
46. WA 38:507.4-21; LW 67:108-109.
47. WA 35:457.8-9; LW 53:285.
48. WA 41:211.32-37; LW 13:333.
49. WA DB 8:31.7-18; LW 35:248.
50. WA 10.I, Part 1:433.5-435.15; LW 75:425-427.
51. WA 22:266.20-268.6; LW 79:104-105.
52. Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther and the Preservation of the Church*, 1532-1546, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 209-210. Cf. Luther's report to his wife, WA Br 9:168, 172.22-24; LW 50:215.
53. WA Br 10:638-640, Nr. 4021, cf. Stephen Pietsch, *Of Good Comfort. Martin Luther's Letters to the Depressed and their Significance for Pastoral Care Today* (Adelaide: ATF, 2016), 27-100, 137-254.
54. WA Br 10:373-375, Nr. 1593; WA Br 10:518-520, Nr. 1670, 10:546-547, Nr. 1684; WA Br 6:86-88, Nr. 1811. On the last mentioned, see Pietsch, *Of Good Comfort*, 269-272.
55. WA Br 4:236, Nr. 1133.
56. WA 6:467.7-16; LW 44:214.
57. WA 1:55.13-25; LW 1:72.
58. BSELK, 722-723.23; BC 299.
59. WA 23:340/341.12-344/345.13; LW 43:120-122.
60. WA 23:346/347.13-23; LW 43:123.
61. WA 23:352/353.14-354/355.23; LW 43:126-127.
62. WA 23:262/263.30-270/271.2 ; LW 43:131-134.

63. WA 42:87.9-90.9; LW 1:115-119, see Witt, *Reformation der Ehe*, 305-319, Jane E. Strohl, "Luther on Marriage, Sexuality, and the Family," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel and Lubomir Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 370-382. On Luther's family life, see Robert Kolb, *Face to Face: Martin Luther's View of Reality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024), 251-256.

64. Sabine Kramer, *Katherina von Bora in den schriftlichen Zeugnissen ihrer Zeit* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016).

65. Letter to Katharina, June 5, 1530, WA Br 5:347-348.

66. Neil R. Leroux, *Martin Luther as Comforter: Writings on Death* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 218-220.

67. WA 53:205-208; LW 43:247-250.

68. Johannes von Lüpke, "Luther's Use of Language," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel and Lubomir Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 149 (143-155).

69. Von Lüpke, "Luther's Use of Language," 149-151, Birgit Stolt, *Martin Luthers Rhetorik des Herzens* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2000), 82-83, 127-146; Ulrich Nembach, *Predigt des Evangeliums. Luther als Prediger Pädagoge und Rhetor* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1972).

70. WA 57,3:220.18-221.3, 222.1-9; LW 29:222-224.

71. Oswald Bayer, "Silence Before God," *Lutheran Quarterly* 34 (2020): 125-137.

72. WA 50:369.12/37-370.12/33.

73. WA 3:253.6-9; LW 10:208.

74. WA 50:370.13/34-371.13/36; LW 53:323.

75. WA 40.III:612.31-613.3.

76. WA 10.I, Part 1:531.5-532.12; LW 76:55. See Brian A. Gerrish, *Grace and Reason: A Study in the Theology of Luther* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962), 12-14.

77. WA 10.I, Part 1:40.18-41.11.

78. Gerrish, *Grace and Reason*, 14-16.

79. Theodor Dieter, *Der junge Luther und Aristoteles. Eine historisch-systematische Untersuchung zum Verhältnis von Theologie und Philosophie* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001), 378-422.

80. Bengt Hägglund, "Die Frage der Willensfreiheit in der Auseinandersetzung zwischen Erasmus und Luther," in *Renaissance – Reformation. Gegensätze imd Gemeinsamkeiten*, ed. August Buck (Wiesbaden: Harassowitz, 1984), 188-189, 193-194.

81. WA 42:64.27-36; LW 1:84-85.

82. WA 18:634.23-29; LW 33:64.

83. WA 18:635.7-22; LW 33:65-66.

84. Hans-Joachim Iwand, *Um den rechten Glauben, Gesammelte Aufsätze*, ed. Karl Gerhard Steck (Munich: Kaiser, 1959), 56.

85. WA 18:634.37-635.7; LW 33:65. Luther elaborates this point at WA 18:714.38-722.29.

86. WA 57, Part 3:196.13-19; LW 29:198.

87. Stolt, *Luthers Rhetorik des Herzens*, 51. Cf. WA 4:7.22, 40.II:425.20-426.19.

88. WA 45:22.6-23.12. Stolt, *Rhetorik des Herzens*, 53-55.

89. E.g., WA 4:307.32-309.11xx; LW 11:417-419, WA 4:325.21-22; LW 11:443.

90. Jonathan Reinert, "Das menschliche Herz und Luthers Theologie. Ein weiterer Blick auf den Weg des werdenden Reformators," *Lutherjahrbuch* 88 (2021): 44-68.

91. WA 37:456.37-457.16.

92. WA 42:290.3-291.23; LW 2:39-40.

93. WA 42:348.37-39; LW 2:122-123.

94. WA DB 10.I:100/101.32-102/103.15; LW 35:255-256.

95. Oberman, *Harvest*, 65-66.

96. Cf. the definition formulated by the student colleague of Luther's mentor, Johannes von Staupitz, Johannes Altenstaig, in his theological dictionary, *Vocabularius Theologie*… (Hagenau: Gran, 1517), LIa-b, consulted at the Herzog August Bibliothek Catalog at http://diglib.hab.de/drucke/b-49-2f-helmst-1/start.htm. Accessed January 24, 2022.

97. WA TR 5:40, Nr. 5273.

98. WA 7:59.24-60.9, LW 31:357-358.

99. WA 26:69.13-18, LW 28:311. Luther and his colleagues understood "doctrine" as the activity of teaching the dynamic Word of God. On Melanchthon's use of "*doctrina*" as a "verbal noun," cf. Peter Fraenkel, "Revelation and Tradition, Notes on Some Aspects of Doctrinal Continuity in the Theology of Philip Melanchthon," *Studia theologica* 13 (1959):116-118 (97-133). His analysis describes Luther's usage as well.

100. WA 22:297.21-298.12; LW 79:150-151.

The Ontology of Decision

Freedom, Faith, and the Meaning of Creation: A Room with Two Doors

Dennis Bielfeldt

This essay argues that certain moral choices, such as whether to carry a pregnancy to term or to end life support, cannot be resolved by empirical or ethical calculation alone. These decisions are rooted in the ontological structure of human freedom and point toward a metaphysical ground that invites theological reflection.

Imagine finding yourself locked in a room with two doors: one leads to light and life, the other to darkness and death. You have no memory of entering the room; you have simply always been there. The room is not comfortable—the air is thin, food and water are scarce, and the life inside is mind-numbingly dull. There is little to do except contemplate getting out.

Consider Jack, who finds himself in this strange room. While he might reflect on many things—the color of the floor, the ticking of the clock, the causes of the First World War, or even Cantor's Diagonal Argument[1]—his thoughts inevitably return to the two doors and the possibility of escape. After all, the question of which door leads to life and which to death is foundational to his existence in a way these other curiosities are not.

While Jack often wonders why he is in the room at all, a more urgent question compels him: how to get out? He must choose between Door I and Door II, and he doesn't know the basis on which to decide. Clearly, his life depends on choosing the right one, and he refuses simply to guess. So, he begins to ask: by what criterion might he decide? What considerations offer the best odds of choosing life over death?

Jack faces a question that is momentous. His choice will determine whether he lives or dies—and if he lives, what meaning his life might have. Moreover, the choice is unavoidable. The thin air and dwindling supplies will eventually force him to act. And in a sense, he already lives the question. It confronts him daily. He cannot escape it, for it is logically prior to all other questions. Even the significance of the Continuum Hypothesis depends on the prior question of whether anything can have meaning for him at all.[2]

Genuine Questions and Moral Choice

Molly is considering ending the little life within her, and Bob must give instructions to the hospital staff about Dad. Both decisions are difficult, for Molly has seen ultrasound images of the fetus she carries, and Bob recalls the Biblical phrase that "only God numbers our days."[3] While each is dimly aware of the gravity of the moment, like Jack in his existential room, neither can remain in indecision forever.

The American philosopher William James, in his 1896 lecture, *The Will to Believe*, describes what makes a decision a *genuine option*.[4] Three conditions must be met:[5]

- The decision must be *live* —it is a real possibility the person could act upon; both alternatives must be psychologically plausible.[6]
- The decision is *forced*, i.e., not choosing is itself a decision. Accordingly, there is no third path of avoidance.[7]
- Finally, the decision is *momentous*; it is unique, significant and likely irreversible. It may alter the entire course of one's life.[8]

James argues that for questions which transcend experience, such as whether we are free or determined, we are permitted to decide based on non-intellectual grounds when the option is genuine. He writes:

> *Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds*….[9]

In such cases, when evidence underdetermines the choice, it is rationally permissible for trust, commitment, or passion to influence belief. Waiting for sufficient evidence may result in the loss of a significant opportunity to act, to commit, to be transformed.

Applying this to the question of freedom, James contends that the debate between freedom and determinism meets all three criteria. The question is *live*—freedom is embedded in our everyday experience through responsibility, regret, and resolve.[10] It is *forced*—there is no neutral stance between "I freely did X" and "I was determined to do X."[11] And it is *momentous*—upon the reality of freedom rests the possibility of dignity, morality, and transformation.[12]

Against the strict evidentialism of W. K. Clifford, who maintained that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence,"[13] James affirms that some beliefs are justifiably held even when decisive evidence is lacking, precisely because what is at stake in the believing is so profound.[14]

Both Molly and Bob face *genuine options* in this Jamesian sense. Molly could terminate her pregnancy or carry it to term; Bob could authorize the removal of

life support or allow his father's condition to continue. Each choice is *live*, for both outcomes are psychologically real and morally defensible. Each is *forced*, for they cannot defer their decision indefinitely. And each is *momentous*: Molly's decision will shape her future irreversibly, and Bob's decision will end a life that can never be restored. Even if his father is near death, the act of ending life support closes the door on the unknown.

These are not hypothetical dilemmas but *ontic ethical alternatives*—real, live, moral crossroads.[15] They are evidence-transcending, not because they are irrational, but because no accumulation of empirical data can resolve what is fundamentally a *freedom-grounded* decision. Experience itself cannot decide that which transcends experience. Human freedom is displayed not merely in reflecting on options, but in choosing decisively and responsibly from among them.

Ontological Freedom and Existential Guilt

The nature of ontic ethical alternatives as lived, forced, and momentous is not accidental to human beings. We cannot evolve beyond such choice-making, nor can we delegate these decisions to AI systems, no matter how sophisticated. These ethical crossroads belong to the structure of human existence itself. While we are ontic agents who face particular decisions, the inescapability of these decisions has *ontological* roots. It was left to Heidegger and Sartre to lay bare this grounding in their analyses of freedom and the human condition.

Heidegger writes that "freedom is the ground of the ground."[16] By this, he means that freedom is not a property of the will, something we simply possess, but rather the very condition for understanding, reasoning, and meaning. Freedom enables the projection (*Entwurf*) of possibilities; it makes it possible to interpret ourselves and the world, even were we to interpret ourselves as lacking freedom.

Freedom, for Heidegger, is the "clearing" (*Lichtung*), the open region in which beings can appear meaningfully. This clearing is not chosen but discovered in our existence as *Dasein*. It is a kind of disclosedness (*Erschlossenheit*), the openness in which Being itself becomes intelligible.

Heidegger deepens this account by tying freedom to *Gelassenheit* (letting-be): "Freedom to disclose an openness lets the particular being be the being that it is. Freedom now reveals itself as the *letting-be of beings*."[17] This form of freedom is not a mastery over beings but a fundamental *receptivity*, a responsiveness that discloses beings in their being.

Human beings are, as Heidegger says, *thrown* into existence (*Geworfenheit*): we find ourselves in a world not of our own choosing. Yet, in that thrownness, we

are attuned (*Befindlichkeit*) to the world in ways that open up meaningful possibilities. Our existential structure as being-toward-death (*Sein zum Tode*) presses us toward resoluteness (*Entschlossenheit*), the decision to own our existence (*Eigentlichkeit*) rather than dissolve into the anonymous they-self (*das Man*).[18]

For Heidegger, then, the ontological ground of our ethical decisions is a freedom structured by temporality, finitude, and openness to Being. Freedom is not optional—it is the very structure of our being. As such, the traditional debates about freedom versus determinism miss the point; *freedom is not a metaphysical hypothesis but the existential condition for having possibilities at all*.

In Jamesian terms, the question of existence itself is an *ontological genuine option*. It is *lived*, because our existence is always underway; it is *forced*, because we cannot not choose; and it is *momentous*, because everything meaningful turns on whether we run forward into possibility or shrink back from it.[19]

Heidegger insists that freedom is not something human beings have; rather, it is something that *has* human beings.[20] To choose or refuse our existence is always already a lived, forced, and momentous act. And this ontological freedom is what makes ontic ethical decisions—like Molly's or Bob's—so profoundly significant.

Molly is a being whose being is open to Being.[21] She cannot escape her freedom, nor can she hand over her decision to abort or not abort. Whether she owns her possibilities or flees from them, the structure of freedom remains. To evade responsibility is not to eliminate freedom but to distort it. We are freedom, phenomenologically, and it is this ontological ground that enables our ethical decisions to carry such weight.

Sartre radicalizes this structure. In *Being and Nothingness*, he insists that freedom is not only constitutive of being human, but it is inescapable as well. Heidegger's ontological openness becomes, for Sartre, *radical spontaneity*. Where Heidegger sees freedom as historically and existentially situated, Sartre sees it as *absolute*: "[M]an is nothing other than what he makes of himself… [Man] is condemned to be free."[22]

Freedom, for Sartre, flows from the *nothingness* at the heart of consciousness. We are not what we are and are what we are not. Because we are not determined by any fixed essence, we are wholly responsible for what we become. "Freedom is not a being; it is the being of man—that is, his nothingness of being."[23] Sartre declares: "The for-itself has appeared to us as a being which exists in so far as it is not what it is and is what it is not."[24] Even the attempt to deny this responsibility – to say we "had no choice" – is itself an act of freedom. This is "bad faith" (*mauvaise foi*): "[I]n bad faith it is from myself that I am hiding the truth."[25]

Bad faith is our effort to mask our freedom by interpreting it as necessity. To affirm "I had no choice" is to flee from the anguish of having had one. Bob may remove his

father's life support out of compassion. Molly may decide not to carry a child into a world filled with suffering. While these choices may be understandable, they are not, and cannot be, *passive*. As Sartre puts it: "I am responsible for my very desire of fleeing responsibilities. To make myself passive ... is still to choose myself…."[26]

We have moved from *ontic decisions* to the *ontological structure* that makes such decisions possible. Decisions about the beginning and end of life are *genuine questions* because they arise from the structure of being itself. It is Molly who must decide whether the life within her will live. It is Bob who must decide whether his father breathes another day. These are not algorithmic problems, but rather they are the burden of beings whose being is at issue for them. Heidegger writes: "Dasein is an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather, in its very being, that being is an *issue* for it."[27]

Because our being is always at issue, our choices cannot be fully put behind us. They are retrievable, revisitable, and re-saturable with meaning and anguish. We are the kinds of beings who remember our choosing, who stand again before the door through which we once walked.

When Molly chooses to abort, or Bob to unplug, they are not just making moral choices; they are making *ontological affirmations*. To be or not to be, in this way and in this moment, is the fundamental human question. Choosing A rather than ~A is not merely a logical act, it is the actualization of one's being. Moreover, in the retrieval of the choice, one returns again to the *angst of freedom* (Heidegger) and the *anguish of transcendence* (Sartre). All of this is clear, but what does it have to do with *creation* and the title of this essay?

We have traced the weight of ontic ethical decisions to their ontological root in human freedom. Heidegger and Sartre unveil this freedom not as a faculty we possess but as the condition of our being. We are constituted by possibility. And it is precisely because our being is an issue for us that our choices carry such irreversible weight.

But if this is true, if our freedom is not merely psychological but structural, then a deeper question presses upon us: *Why are we free at all?* What makes it possible that there are beings whose being is at stake, whose essence is nothing other than the project of becoming? What explains this strange creature who walks through momentous thresholds and looks back with remembrance and regret?

In short, the question of *freedom opens onto the question of origin*. If our lives are saturated with ethical gravity because of our ontological structure, then the question of creation becomes unavoidable, for to ask, "What ought I to do?" is to already stand in a world that permits such a question. But why should such a world exist? Why should there be a clearing in which beings appear? Why should there be anything like freedom at all?

With this question, we turn to the metaphysics of creation, not as a diversion from the existential, but as its deepening. For the question of freedom is not merely a human question; it is a *cosmic one*.

Creation, Contingency and the Metaphysics of Meaning

If our ontological structure as free beings grounds the weight of our ethical decisions, a deeper mystery arises: How is it that we are free at all? What makes it possible for beings like us to exist—finite, conscious, burdened with responsibility, and yet open to meaning? The existential condition we have explored cannot explain itself. If human beings are marked by freedom, then if we are to be fully human, we must ask: *What makes freedom possible?*

This question leads beyond existential analysis into *metaphysical reflection*, towards the question of *creation*, for the clearing in which beings appear, the space in which possibilities open and decisions are made, is not itself self-explanatory, but stands in need of grounding. Why is there such a clearing at all? Why is there a world in which beings can be disclosed, a world in which questions can be live, forced, and momentous?

Classical theism answers this with the claim that the world, and the intelligibility of the world, depend on a reality beyond itself. The openness of being, the very possibility of *existential* freedom, is not *brute fact but gift*. We are not self-originating; we are created. Our freedom is real, but it is a *given* freedom, a participated openness grounded in a source beyond the totality of beings.

The metaphysics of creation is not a speculative add-on to existential philosophy, but rather a necessary deepening. Ultimately, to be free is not only to be responsible, but it is also to be *radically contingent*; it is to be dependent on a reality that makes such responsibility possible. Accordingly, to face the question of life, to walk through the door that leads to light or death, is to confront the mystery of being itself: *Why is there something rather than nothing? Why am I free rather than not?*

In the days before Christianity came to dominate the intellectual world, several options for understanding creation were current. For Plato in the *Timaeus*, creation occurs when the divine craftsman (*demiurge*) imposes order on pre-existent matter. He writes:

> For God desired that, so far as possible, all things should be good and nothing evil; wherefore, when He took over all that was visible, seeing that it was not in a state of rest but in a state of discordant and disorderly motion.[28]

For Plotinus, creation is the necessary emanation from the One.

> The One is all things and not a single one of them: it is the principle of all things, not all things, but all things have that other kind of transcendent existence….[29]

For the Stoics, creation happens through cycles of conflagration and rebirth. The universe is a material, rational organism shaped always by the *Logos*. Accordingly, all things come to be through Zeus' will, and nothing happens without it.[30] God is immanent, not transcendent, as with Plotinus, God is not separate from the cosmos.

The Genesis account of creation claims, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep…" (Genesis 1:1-2). This suggests that God ordered a formless chaos, a view that Philo of Alexandria adjusted by declaring that God imposed the formed ideas of the Logos upon matter.[31]

> Augustine, however, articulates a different view of creation.
>
> For you made heaven and earth, but not from your own self.... Apart from you there was nothing existing from which you could make these things, O Trinity in unity and unity in Trinity. Therefore you made heaven and earth from nothing....[32]

Augustine thus denies two alternatives. He argues that the universe is neither a transformation of Himself nor a mere ordering of uncreated matter. Instead, God wills into being both the potentiality of matter and the actuality of its forms. Accordingly, a sharp bifurcation forms between the uncreated and created orders. In the *City of God*, Augustine declares:

> God alone is the author of all natures, since He neither uses for His work any material which was not made by Him, nor any workmen who were not also made by Him.[33]

Moreover, that *what is* came from *what is not*.

> In the beginning God created heaven and earth—that is, all things contained in heaven and earth—out of nothing, by His Word.[34]

Finally, creation is rooted in divine will, not divine necessity.

> God created all things not out of any necessity, but in the freedom of His will.[35]

While there were earlier formulations of *creatio ex nihilo* in the tradition, Augustine's views stand as the paradigmatic.[36] His account claims the following:

> 1. God is uncreated and ontologically distinct from what is created. Both matter and time are created by God.

2. God's act of creation concerns both *form* and *matter*. There is nothing at all prior to divine creation.

3. God's act of creation is *free* and not somehow necessitated by God's nature.

4. Creation is ontologically dependent upon God, not God upon creation.

The question of *creatio ex nihilo* remains with us today as cosmologists consider the so-called fine-tuning of the universe and what could account for it. In the next sections, I argue that the *question of origination*—why is there something rather than nothing?—remains a *live*, *forced*, and *momentous* one. But why is this important?

We have already established that the ethical choices confronting Molly and Bob are genuine in the Jamesian sense. They are not grounded in uncontroversial fact, but rather in *ontological freedom*, and, as I have suggested, such ontological freedom ultimately points beyond itself towards a metaphysical ground, towards creation itself.

This means that Molly cannot retreat to some bedrock claim like "all is ultimately material" and make her decision on that basis, for *whether all is ultimately material is itself a genuine question*. Clearly, it is live, forced, momentous, and evidence-transcending. Likewise, the question of whether *God designs the universe* is not empirically verifiable, but it is perhaps the most important genuine question of all. Accordingly, Molly's answer to whether to protect the life within her is not merely a biological or moral judgment; it is a *metaphysical stance*. Is this world "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing"? Or is it the creation of One who speaks light into darkness? How does one address this genuine question without occupying metaphysical ground?

In the next section, I turn to Wittgenstein's famous example of the duck-rabbit figure. I shall argue there that our ability to see the universe as meaningful, or meaningless, is an act of *aspect-perception*, one that carries existential and moral consequences for Molly, Bob, and all of us.

Seeing the World Anew: Aspect-Perception and the Structure of Meaning

In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein introduces a subtle but powerful concept: *aspect-perception*. His famous example is a simple drawing—one viewer sees it as a rabbit, another as a duck. Crucially, nothing changes in the figure itself. What changes is the *way it is seen*.[37] Wittgenstein distinguishes this from ordinary recognition: saying "I see a rabbit" is a *seeing-that*, while saying "I now see this as a duck" is a *seeing-as*, an interpretive shift in perception.[38] Such

shifts are not the result of inference or deduction. They are not new beliefs but new *ways of seeing*: immediate, holistic, and context-dependent. Wittgenstein calls this "noticing an aspect." The object becomes intelligible *under a new aspect*, even though it remains perceptually the same.[39] It is a matter of *how one looks at things*. Wittgenstein writes:

> I wanted to put that picture before him, and his *acceptance* of the picture consists in his now being inclined to regard a given case differently: that is, to compare it with *this* rather than *that* set of pictures. I have changed his *way of looking at things*.[40]

This phenomenon drives Wittgenstein to claim that perception is not simply the passive reception of already-meaningful stimuli, but an *active configuration of meaning*. "Seeing-as" is not reducible to psychological mechanisms or isolated mental states. It arises within a shared background of meaning, what Wittgenstein calls a *form of life* (*Lebensform*).[41] We see-as because we are shaped by practices, contexts, and histories that allow certain meanings to appear at all. Thus, to perceive x is not to observe it in isolation, but to see it as meaningful within a *horizon of intelligibility*. Understanding is thus not a state but a skill, an ability formed through participation in a form of life.

Our most fundamental metaphysical stances often function in just this way. We see the universe as a gift or as a brute fact; as suffused with meaning or as indifferent machinery; as creation or as accident. These are not empirically deduced positions, but following Wittgenstein, they are better understood as *aspectual orientations*, lived out as perceptions of the whole. Moreover, once we see the world one way, it can be deeply difficult or even impossible to see otherwise.[42]

This has real implications for moral and theological discernment. Whether Molly sees the life within her as "a clump of cells" or as "a child," as "a burden" or as "a sacred trust," does not depend on data alone, but on the *frame of meaning* that the world presents to her. "Is life holy?" "Is being good?" I am suggesting that such questions are not answered by calculation but by perception. They are *theological ways of seeing*. So we must ask: *What governs our aspect-seeing?* Can one be trained to see differently? Can the world, like the duck-rabbit, be seen anew depending on the *posture of the soul*?

Consider the claim of 2 Corinthians 5:19: "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself" (KJV). Following Wittgenstein, this is best understood not merely as a propositional report, but rather involves a *way of seeing the world*, a theological aspect. Accordingly, statements like "Jesus is Lord" or "God is in Christ" involve not just cognition but *conversion*. As Paul writes: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become

new" (2 Cor. 5:17; NRSV). Theological affirmations do not merely describe reality; they *transform how reality is seen*.

But some are unable to see in this way. Wittgenstein speaks of *aspect-blindness*—the inability to shift how one sees a figure.[43] He compares this to meaning-blindness: a failure to find in language what others perceive as obvious. For such persons, theological claims appear nonsensical not because they are false, but because the form of life needed to disclose their sense is missing.[44]

Notice that these insights parallel Heidegger's existential analysis. For Heidegger, we do not encounter beings as neutral objects, but always already within a *structure of significance*—the *worldhood of the world* (*Weltlichkeit der Welt*). Accordingly, to "see" (*Sehen*) is to be open to beings as meaningful, disclosed within our thrown existence (*Geworfenheit*). Heidegger calls this process *Entdecken*—the uncovering of beings within *being-in-the-world* (*In-der-Welt-sein*). In this openness, things are not just present but *intelligible*. Even tools, like a hammer, are not understood by their physical features alone, but by their place within a *network of meaning* (*Bedeutsamkeit*).

Just as Wittgenstein's "seeing-as" is shaped by language-games and forms of life, so too Heidegger's *understanding* (*Verstehen*) is structured by worldhood. In both, meaning does not arise from the object alone but from its participation in a *prior horizon of disclosure*. We must acknowledge this, even though there is a crucial difference. While for Wittgenstein, language-games structure meaning, for Heidegger, *hermeneutics is ontological*. This means that *Auslegung* (interpretation) is not simply something we do, but it is what we *are*. Dasein does not just interpret the world; it is the being whose being is interpretation. Nonetheless, for both thinkers, understanding is a form of seeing-as. Things are meaningful only within a world or a form of life. There is no "view from nowhere." The real question, then, is: *What kind of world discloses itself to us? And what kind of life makes it visible?*

We are now able to see the existential stakes. If Jack stands before two doors, and if Molly must decide whether to give birth, their choices are not just about outcomes but about *vision*. What aspect does the world present to them? What kind of meaning is disclosed in the clearing of being—or refused in its absence? These decisions likely turn not on argument, but on what they see, and what they see depends on how the world primarily appears to them. Is it a gift or a burden, an accident or a call?

Interpretive Frameworks and the Conditions of Meaning

We are now able to ask a more refined version of our central question: What conditions must obtain for the universe to be meaningful to beings like us? If human beings are the sorts of creatures for whom being is at issue, then the very possibility of meaning must rest on a structure that can support such existential openness.

Here we face a metaphysical fork: *Is the world best interpreted under a naturalistic framework or a theistic one?* This question, too, is a genuine option in James' sense, for it is live, forced, and momentous. And like other genuine options, it transcends the evidence available from experience alone. It cannot be settled deductively. The choice is not irrational, but rather pre-rational, a decision about what aspect the world shall present to us.

From one angle, naturalism appears sufficient. Perhaps there is no need for God or for creation. Perhaps the world simply is, and its intelligibility emerges from within through evolved cognition, social construction, or emergent complexity. On this reading, the universe is, at bottom, impersonal and unintended. While it might have some meaning, this meaning must be imposed by us, not disclosed to us.

From another angle, such a view seems inadequate. The structure of reality appears strangely fitted for intelligibility. The laws of physics are not merely orderly, but exquisitely tuned to support life, beauty, and rational inquiry. That beings like us—finite, free, and self-interpreting—should arise within such a cosmos seems, not merely unlikely, but almost uncanny. The world begins to look not like a brute fact, but like a gift.

This returns us to the concept of *aspect-seeing*. The metaphysical question, whether the universe is created or accidental, is not merely a matter of evidence but of perception shaped by orientation. The rabbit of brute contingency becomes the duck of divine design. The cosmos itself may appear as a veil or a window, depending on how one sees.

In this sense, the naturalist and the theist are not simply disagreeing over facts. They are interpreting the same facts under different aspects. Their disagreement is not about what is seen, but about how to see it.[45]

The theological tradition, however, offers something the naturalist cannot: an account of the origin of meaning itself. For if meaning is not merely something we project, but something we discover, then we must ask why the world is the kind of place that can bear meaning at all. This is the question that *creatio ex nihilo* addresses. The Christian claim is not that God merely set up the initial conditions, but that *being itself is gifted*, that *meaning is ontologically prior to meaning-making*. The world does not merely permit significance; it radiates it.

This does not settle the debate, but it repositions it. The issue is not whether one can live without God, but whether one can live abundantly and meaningfully within a world that has no source. The question is whether our freedom and longing for intelligibility are *accidental byproducts* of a blind system or *intentional invitations* to respond to a Creator.

To ask the question this way is not to provide an answer. It is to see the question for what it is: a decision under risk, one that must be lived as much as thought. And

so, we are brought back again, not to certainty, but to vision, to whether we see this universe as ordered or arbitrary, luminous or inert, called or uncalled. This seeing, as we have argued, is not merely cognitive. It is ontological; it is theological. Moreover, it may be ultimately the most important decision we ever make.

In the next section, we shall move from the question of the relationship between interpretive frameworks and fundamental meaning to the issue of the plausibility of these frameworks. We are interested in which framework—naturalistic or theistic—is more likely *true*.

Naturalism, Design and the Weight of Explanation

If we take seriously the notion of a genuine option—live, forced, and momentous—then the question of whether the universe is a product of divine design or brute fact must itself be seen as a genuine and unavoidable decision. It cannot be deferred forever, and it shapes how we interpret not only the origin of the cosmos but the meaning of life within it.

As we saw in the previous section, naturalism offers one vision. It holds that the universe is a closed system of impersonal causes, its laws sufficient to explain all phenomena, including life, thought, and meaning. There is no need for God; nothing transcends the physical totality.

But naturalism faces a formidable challenge: the *apparent fine-tuning of the universe* for life. The physical constants and initial conditions of our cosmos fall within a narrow life-permitting range. Even slight variations would make complex structures, and with them life as we know it, impossible. Why should a universe capable of sustaining rational beings have the requisite fine-tuning such that we exist at all?

The most popular naturalistic response is the *multiverse hypothesis*. On this view, there exists a vast (perhaps infinite) ensemble of universes, each with its own physical parameters. Given enough trials, it becomes likely that at least one universe would be life-permitting, and ours just happens to be that one.

This response shifts the explanatory burden: instead of answering why this universe is fine-tuned, it posits a *probabilistic selection effect*. We could not observe any universe but a life-permitting one. The anthropic principle takes the place of design.[46]

But this move is not neutral. It multiplies entities dramatically, hypothesizing an entire ensemble of unobservable worlds, and relies on *mechanisms that themselves call for explanation*. Why should there be a multiverse? Why should it produce a universe capable of self-conscious observers?

By contrast, *theism offers a simpler, intentional explanation*. The universe is fine-tuned for life because it was designed to be so. Its order, rational transparency, and life-permitting balance are not random but willed, the product of an intelligence.

We can formalize this contrast using Bayesian reasoning. Suppose we let:

- T = the hypothesis that God exists.
- ~T = the hypothesis that God does not exist.
- E = the evidence that the universe is finely tuned for life.

Bayes' Theorem tells us that the posterior probability of T given E, written P(T|E), is proportional to the product of the forward probability of T and the probability of E given T.

- $P(T|E) \alpha [P(T) \times P(E|T)]$

Similarly:

- $P(\sim T|E) \alpha P(\sim T) \times P(E|\sim T)$

Here, P(E|T) is the probability that we would observe fine-tuning if God exists, and P(E|~T) is the probability of fine-tuning under naturalism. If theism makes fine-tuning more likely than naturalism does—that is, if P(E|T) > P(E|~T)—then E *increases the probability of T relative to ~T*.[47]

In less formal terms: fine-tuning fits better with theism than with naturalism. It is not that theism predicts the exact details of cosmology, but that *fine-tuning is more expected* on the assumption of a designing mind than on blind chance or physical necessity. Naturalism must either postulate an immense multiverse (with no independent evidence) or admit staggering improbability.

This doesn't prove theism, but it *tilts the balance*. It shows that belief in God is not a capitulation to mystery but a *rational interpretation of order*, one that preserves the intelligibility of our deepest experiences: wonder, responsibility, moral insight, and longing for meaning.

Still, the naturalist may resist. He or she may say that human consciousness, ethical normativity, and existential urgency are emergent artifacts, real enough for practical use, but ontologically derivative. From this perspective, our sense that life is meaningful is itself an evolutionary adaptation, not a sign of deeper truth.

But this leads to an unavoidable question: *If all we cherish is the product of blind processes, can we continue to believe it has genuine value?* Can we hold fast to dignity, responsibility, and love, if they are built upon nothing but chance and chemistry?

Theism answers with a resounding yes—not because it can deduce these values from axioms, but because it sees the world under a different aspect. It sees the universe as *gift*, not accident; life as *calling*, not fluke. Accordingly, the choice between naturalism and theism is not merely a matter of abstract probability, but rather a matter of *existential vision*. It is about what kind of world we are willing to affirm, and what kind of beings we believe ourselves to be.

Like Jack before the two doors, we cannot escape this decision. To live as though the universe is meaningful, as though our decisions matter, is already to live in light of something like design. Theism does not impose that meaning; it simply names the source from which it flows.

Decision, Faith and the Weight of the World

The question of life is not answered by science, nor finally by metaphysics, but by *decision*—not arbitrary, but necessary; not irrational, but evidence-transcending; not provable, but nonetheless *binding*.

In the end, we do not live by deduction. We live by vision, by a way of seeing the world that orients our action and forms our commitments. The question is not whether we see the universe as meaningful, but whether we can avoid seeing it that way. To see the world as bearing significance, as morally weighty, as worth living in, presupposes a *field of meaning* that cannot be fully accounted for from within the world itself.

That is the function of *faith*. It is not blind assent, but trust in what cannot be proved yet must be lived. It is the trust that the universe is not indifferent, that our freedom is not futile, that our loves are not absurd. This is not a "God-of-the-gaps" argument, filling ignorance with theology. It is a well-informed theology, a profound claim about the *conditions for meaning*, about what must be true if our most basic moral and existential experiences are not lies.

We return, finally, to Jack, to Molly, to Bob. Each faces a decision not only about what to do, but about *what kind of world they live in*. Is the child within Molly a coincidence of biochemistry, or a life entrusted to her care? Is Bob's father merely the residue of synaptic activity, or a person whose dignity is never fully extinguished? These are not questions we can answer *from the outside*. They must be lived from within and are thus unavoidably theological.

William James taught us to look for the genuine option: *live*, *forced*, *momentous*. But perhaps we must add a fourth term: foundational. The question of whether life is a gift or an accident is not simply one option among others. It is the *ground upon which all other decisions rest*.

At the heart of Christian faith lies a startling claim: that the source of all being has entered into being, not as a deduction, but as a person. In Jesus of Nazareth, the Creator steps into the clearing, not to impose certainty but to call forth response. The voice in Deuteronomy says that God set before his people both life and death, blessing and curse. He says, "choose life."[48]

Jack stands before the two doors. He cannot remain undecided. The air is growing thin. The question is no longer whether he will choose, but what his choice will reveal about what he has already chosen to see. He reaches for the handle.

Molly and Bob are likewise faced with choices that transcend the safeguards of easy algorithmic ethical calculation. In the end, their decisions rest not on a faith derived from the structure of the world, but on a faith received—one that gives structure to the world and remains consonant with what the world most deeply suggests.

Verba Vitae's General Editor Dennis Bielfeldt *is Founding President of the Institute of Lutheran Theology, and Chancellor and Professor of Philosophical Theology at its Christ School of Theology. Having taught previously at Bethany College, Grand View University, and Iowa State University, Rev. Bielfeldt is currently Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at South Dakota State University, holding an M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Iowa. He has published books and many articles in academic journals and encyclopedias.*

Notes

1. Cantor's diagonal argument is a proof showing that there are different orders of infinity, that the set of real numbers, though infinite, cannot be put into one-to-one correspondence with the set of natural numbers, that the real numbers are not countable (denumerable) as are the natural numbers, and that the cardinality of the reals is "higher" than that of the natural numbers. The argument proceeds by attempting to list all the real numbers between [0,1] as decimal expansions. So, assume, for contradiction, that all real numbers in [0,1] can be listed in a sequence. Then, by constructing a new number that differs from the *n*th number in the list at the *n*th decimal digit, a new real number is formed that is not in the list. This contradicts the assumption that all such numbers were already listed. Therefore, the real numbers are *uncountable*. Furthermore, by Cantor's theorem, the power set of the reals (the set of all subsets of real numbers) has an even greater cardinality.
2. The continuum hypothesis is the conjecture that there is no cardinality between the cardinality of the real numbers and the cardinality of the continuum, i.e., that the next cardinality after the cardinality of the natural numbers is the cardinality of the continuum. While the diagonal argument proves that the cardinality of the continuum is greater than that of natural numbers, it neither proves nor disproves the continuum hypothesis. The continuum hypothesis is thus independent of the axioms of ZFC (Zemelo-Fraenkel set theory with the axiom of choice). Accordingly, the continuum hypothesis is *undecidable* in ZFC, and ZFC is accordingly *incomplete*.

3. There are many Biblical verses dealing with this theme, e.g., Job 14:5-6: "Since their days are determined, and the number of their months is known to you, and you have appointed the bounds that they cannot pass, look away from them, and desist, that they may enjoy, like labourers, their days" (NRSVA).

4. William James, "The Will to Believe," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* in *The Works of William James*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, & Ignas K. Skrupskelis; Intro., Edward H. Madden (Cambridge, MA; London, UK: Harvard University Press, 1979), 1-31.

5. James, "The Will to Believe," 14: "Options may be of several kinds … and for our purposes we may call an option a *genuine* option when it is of the forced, living, and momentous kind."

6. Ibid., "A live hypothesis is one which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed…. The maximum of liveness in an hypothesis means willingness to act irrevocably."

7. Ibid., 15: "…If I say, 'Either accept this truth or go without it,' I put on you a forced option, for there is no standing place outside of the alternative," and again, "Every dilemma based on a complete logical disjunction, with no possibility of not choosing, is an option of this forced kind."

8. Ibid.: "... if I were Dr. Nansen and proposed to you to join my North Pole expedition, your option would be momentous; for this would probably be your only similar opportunity...."

9. Ibid., 20; italics in text.

10. When you deliberate between staying in a job or leaving, forgiving or retaliating, you *feel* the weight of agency. The idea of freedom is not abstract; it is existential.

11. With respect to believing something, James writes: "*Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions ... for to say, under such circumstances, 'Do not decide, but leave the question open,' is itself a passional decision—just like deciding yes or no—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth*" (James, "The Will to Believe," 20; italics in text).

12. If we are free, then moral responsibility and transformation is possible, but if we are not free, then we are neither responsible nor capable of change. Resignation and even nihilism seem to follow. James argues: 1) If determinism is true, we cannot genuinely regret or hope, because everything is inevitable. 2) But if indeterminism (freedom) is true, moral responsibility is meaningful, and the future is open to real change. Thus, *freedom is a* "*genuine option*"—choosing to believe in it is rationally permissible and ethically fruitful.

13. William Kingdon Clifford, *Essays and Lectures*, vol. 2, ed. Leslie Stephen & Frederick Pollock (London, UK: Macmillan & Company, 1879), 186.

14. James quotes Clifford on pp. 17-18 of "The Will to Believe." One might claim that James espouses a pragmatic voluntarism because of his willingness to accept that freedom is true despite there being no empirical evidence or any other "proof" of it obtaining.

15. The distinction between "ontic" and "ontological" is important in this essay. "Ontic" refers to what is, to beings, i.e., entities, properties, relations, events, and facts. Ontic investigations concern that which exists. "Ontological" refers to how beings are, i.e., to the conditions or structures by which beings have be-ing. Ontological investigations concern those structures that make possible the appearance and meaning of being. Molly must make the ontic ethical decision to abort or not abort. The conditions of her decision, that is, her existential freedom, responsibility and guilt, display the ontological structure of human existence itself.

16. Martin Heidegger, "Von Wesen des Grundes" in *Wegmarken*, Gesamtausgabe 9:174). "Die Freiheit ist der Grund des Grundes. Das freilich nicht im Sinne einer formalen, endlosen Iteration…" [hereafter GA]. See also Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Human Freedom: An Introduction to Philosophy*, trans. Ted Sadler (Continuum, 2002), p. 90.
17. See Martin Heidegger, "Von Wesen der Wahrheit," in *Wegmarken*, GA 9: p. 188: "Die Freiheit zum Offenbaren eines Offenen läßt das jeweilige Seiende das Seiende sein, das es ist. Freiheit enthüllt sich jetzt als das Seinlassen von Seiendem.
18. Human being is thrown into a world of possibilities and is free to project itself towards them. It is accordingly, a *Geworfenheit* having an *Entwurf*. Human being thus has *finite freedom*, a freedom within the structure it finds itself within.
19. Heidegger points out that the ontological ground for the will's autonomy in ontic decision-making is an attuned openness to Being in which one heeds the call of conscience back to oneself that allows an authentic projection into possibilities. Accordingly, one's freedom is tied to one's fundamental orientation towards the future. One can either await it passively (*Erwartung*) or one can run forward, leaping into possibilities (*Vorlaufen*). Ontological freedom thereby is situated at the foundation of existence itself, and thus it transcends the traditional ontic freedom/determinism issue. Accordingly, freedom is not optional but undergirds all the ontological structures that make Dasein who it is.
20. Heidegger, "Vom Wesen der Wahrheit," in *Wegmarken*, GA 9: 190: "Der Mensch »besitzt« die Freiheit nicht als Eigenschaft, sondern höchstens gilt das Umgekehrte: die Freiheit, das ek-sistente, entbergende Dasein besitzt den Menschen…"; Martin Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth," in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge, UK; New York, NY; Melbourne, AU: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 145: "The human being does not 'possess' freedom as a property. At best, the converse holds: Freedom, ek-sistent, disclosive Da-sein, possesses the human being...."
21. More prosaically, she is an entity whose very be-ing as an entity is to have her be-ing as the entity she is at issue for her.
22. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven, CT; London, UK: Yale University Press, 2007), 22, 29.
23. Ibid., 29: "[T]here is no determinism—man is free, man is freedom." Sartre: "That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free: condemned, because he did not create him, yet nonetheless free, become once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does" (ibid.).
24. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984, 1992), 399.
25. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 89. Sartre writes, "[T]he one to whom the lie is told and the one who lies are one and the same person" (ibid.) and "Thus the duality of the deceiver and the deceived does not exist here" (ibid.).
26. Ibid., 710.
27. *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962), § 4, p. 32: "Dasein is an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it.… Dasein is ontically distinctive in that it is ontological." See GA 2:16: "Das Dasein ist ein Seiendes, das nicht nur unter anderem Seienden vorkommt. Es ist vielmehr dadurch ontisch ausgezeichnet, daß es diesem Seienden in seinem Sein

um dieses Sein selbst geht.… Die ontische Auszeichnung des Daseins liegt darin, daß es ontologisch ist."

28. *Timaeus. Critias. Cleitophon. Menexenus. Epistles.*, trans. R. G. Bury, vol. 234 in Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA & London, UK: Harvard University Press, 1929), 55 [hereafter LCL]. Accessed July 18, 2025.

29. Plotinus, *Enneads* V.2.1. LCL 444, p. 59. DOI:10.4159/DLCL.plotinus-enneas.1969. Accessed July 18, 2025.

30. This is the sentiment of Cleanthes hymn to Zeus. Edward Caird writes, "From the first, Stoicism was a religious philosophy, as is shown by the great hymn of Cleanthes, the successor of Zeno as head of the school—a hymn which is inspired by the consciousness that it is one spiritual power which penetrates and controls the universe and is the source of every work done under the sun, 'except what evil men endeavour in their folly.'" Edward Caird, *The Evolution of Philosophy in the Greek Philosophers*, vol. 2 (Glasgow: James MacLehose & Sons, 1904), 76-77.

31. Philo declares, "So when [God] willed to create this visible world He first fully formed the intelligible world, in order that He might have the use of a pattern...." (See *De Opificio Mundi*, in LCL 226, p. 15, § 4, line 16). Accordingly, while God Himself is transcendent, God created by applying the Logos to pre-existing matter. Early Christians were struck by the reality that the world created by God was not as it seemingly should be. Various gnostic texts attempted to explain how an all-good God could have brought the deeply-flawed material world into being. The Gnostics assumed that somehow the All-good God begot beings with a mutilated pedigree issuing in the Demiurge who created the world as a corrupt imitation of the spiritual realm.

32. *Confessions* XII.7; Augustine, *Confessions: Books 9-13*, ed. & trans. Carolyn J.-B. Hammond, vol. 27 in Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London, UK: Harvard University Press, 2016), 269. LCL. DOI:10.4159/DLCL.augustine-confessions_2014.2014. Accessed July 18, 2025.

33. Augustine, *The City of God*, XII.25, trans. Marcus Dods; intro. Thomas Merton (New York: The Modern Library, 1993), 409.

34. Augustine. *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim*, ed. Joseph Zycha. CSEL 28/1 (Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1894), Book I, Chapter 1: "In principio Deus creavit caelum et terram, id est—omnia quae continentur in caelo et in terra—ex nihilo, verbo suo." See also Augustine. *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*. Translated and annotated by John Hammond Taylor, S.J. 2 vols. Ancient Christian Writers 41-42 (New York: Newman Press, 1982), 19.

35. *City of God* XI.24. LCL 27, p. 525: "Again in the statement: 'God saw that it was good,' it is made abundantly clear that it was not from any compulsion, nor from the least need of any personal advantage, that God made what was made, but solely from his goodness, that is, he made it because it is good. And it is so described after it was made, in order to show that the thing that was made corresponds exactly to the goodness that was the purpose of its creation." DOI:10.4159/DLCL.augustine-city_god_pagans.1957. Accessed July 18, 2025.

36. Theophilus of Antioch's work *Ad Autolycum* offers an apologetic defense of Christianity to a pagan. Directly engaging the earlier tradition, he wrote, "*God made* everything *out of what did not exist* (ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων)" and "God is more power than man, so he is in his making and having made the existent out of the non-existent; he made whatever his wish in whatever way he wish." Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autolycum* in *Theophilus of*

Antioch: Ad Autolycum, *Text and Translation by Robert M. Grant* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1970), Book I.4 & Book II.4, 7, 27. While Irenaeus of Lyons and Tertullian affirmed that earlier forms of *creatio ex nihilo*, Augustine developed these earlier views by claiming that time itself is created by God.

37. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (*PI*), trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe, Part II, Section XI, 194e.

38. *PI*, 194eff.

39. This is not to suggest that aspect-perception is relative; one cannot see anything one wants when looking at the rabbit-duck. Instead, aspect-perception is an invitation to reflect upon the very conditions of intelligibility.

40. *PI*, #144, 57e.

41. *PI*, #241: " 'So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?'—It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life (*Lebensform*)."

42. Cf. Charles Taylor's discussion of closed takes and spins in his *The Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). While *takes* on the universe as denying transcendence can be argued against, this is not so of *spins*. Those occupying a naturalistic spin believe that anyone thinking otherwise is uniformed, ignorant, or irrational.

43. *PI*, II, xi, 214e: "Aspect-blindness will be *akin* to the lack of a 'musical ear.' The importance of this concept lies in the connexion between the concepts of 'seeing an aspect' and 'experiencing the meaning of a word.'"

44. *PI*, Part II, xi. Charles Taylor famously explores in *The Secular Age* the question as to how it was that 500 years ago in the North Atlantic countries everybody believed in God, but now why is belief so difficult even for those professing it. His argument details the *social construction* of atheism that eventuates in the present firmly entrenched "closed spin" that there is nothing beyond the material, and that we must somehow manufacture any meaning we might have in life upon the basis of this already established fact. One might say that the *Lebensform* of the contemporary academic precludes the very possibility of there being genuine transcendence.

45. Just as the ontic concerns what is, and the ontological the meaning of what is, so too the naturalist and theist can agree on what our empirical observations and established scientific theories are, while still disagreeing upon the meaning of those observations and established scientific theories.

46. It is standard to distinguish the *weak anthropic principle* (WAP) from the *strong anthropic principle* (SAP). While both principles assume that it is necessary that observations of the universe are consistent with the conscious life observing it, the WAP differs from the SAP in claiming that the universe is the way it is because only within the observed conditions could there be observers like us. The apparent presence of fine-tuning is due to a *selection effect*. The SAP, on the other hand, claims that the existence of observers like us is a necessary condition of the universe, that the universe is so ordered as to produce conscious observers. Some versions claim that fine-tuning—that is, the observed fundamental physical laws and constants—are necessarily what they are so that life might emerge. Clearly, SAP is consonant with divine design in a way that the WAP is not.

47. The sign 'α' stands for 'proportional to'. It is important to grasp that Bayes' Theorem does not deal with proof, but with updating plausibility in the light of new evidence. Bayes'

Theorem is concerned with forward and conditional probabilities. Assume the *forward probability* P(E|H), the probability of the observed evidence given a particular hypothesis, and the *conditional probability* P(H|E), the probability of that hypothesis given the observed evidence. Bayes' theorem states that P(H|E) = [P(E|H) x P(H)]/P(E). Let H be 'God exists' and E the observed evidence of fine-tuning. Thus, P(H|E) is the probability that God exists given the evidence, P(E|H) the probability of observed fined-tuning if God exists, P(H) the probability that God exists and P(E) the total probability of fine-tuning under competing hypotheses. Now define H_{God} as God exists, and H_{chance} that only chance obtains. Assume that given E—the universe is fine-tuned for life—we have the forward probability of theism $P(E|H_{God})$ approaching 1 (100%), and the forward probability of chance $P(E|H_{chance})$ approaching 0 (0%). Now let's suppose that in these naturalistic times, we assume that $P(H_{God})$ is 0.01 (1%) and that $P(H_{chance})$ is 0.99 (99%). Let us further assume that $P(E|H_{God})$ is 1 (100%), and the $P(E|H_{chance})$ is 10^{-50}. Using Bayes' theorem, we have $P(H_{God})|E) = (1 \times 0.01)/[(1 \times 0.01) + (10^{-50} \times 0.99)] = .01/[0.01 + (9.9 \times 10^{-49})]$ which is still almost 1 (100%). Notice that we could make the forward probability of God's existence 10^{-25}, and since the conditional probability $P(E|H_{chance}) = 10^{-50}$, the chance of God's existence is still nearly 100%. Richard Swinburne famously employed the argument in Chapter 8 of his *Existence of God* and, more accessibly, in *Is There a God?* Richard Collins defends the argument rigorously in "The Teleological Argument: An Exploration of the Fine-Tuning of the Universe" in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (2009). William Craig has also sanctioned the argument in a number of his works.

48. See Deuteronomy 30:15-19.

Life, Death, and Life Again

Natural Burial and Resurrection Promise

Beth Hoeltke

Introduction

Today, our culture seems to drift further and further away from the topic of death. Funerals are now celebrations of life or a simple memorial service long after a loved one has died. Why is this happening? I think the simple fact is that our culture continues to want to deny death at every corner. But here's the crazy flip of that coin: more people today are interested in supporting and passing laws to support physician-assisted suicide, but are not willing to talk about death. As of right now, physician-assisted suicide is legal in eleven states in the U.S., with fifteen more states considering making it legal. As Christians, we should be appalled by this number.

Yes, the "proper term" is Death with Dignity or Medical Aid in Dying, but let's be honest, it truly is physician-assisted suicide. How can so many people support allowing a loved one to commit physician-assisted suicide while denying death at every turn? I am truly perplexed by this. There is so much to wrestle with on this topic, but that's an article for another time.

Prior to around the nineteenth century, everyone in a community participated in the death of a loved one, neighbor, or friend. Someone in the community, usually the men, built the coffin, while others went out to dig the grave where the body would be placed. The women typically washed, dressed, wrapped, and prepared the body for viewing in the parlor, while others began preparing meals to support the family. Many gathered at the home of the deceased to sit with the family and, yes, even the dead. Throughout this time, the body of the deceased was present among the living. We sat with our dead, prayed for our dead, and cared for those tending to the body. We spent time—days—with each other in the midst of our dead.

Today is a whole different picture. Typically, when someone dies today, either at home or in the hospital, the "professional" is called in, and the dead are removed from our sight as soon as possible. We have been trained to believe that the bodies of our loved ones, after death has occurred, are not "safe" to be around. Unfortunately, this is so far from the truth. The bodies of our dead are as safe as they were when they were alive.[1]

This article invites you to consider what death might look like if we truly embrace it with as much love and passion as we had when our loved one was living. Who knows our loved one better, the professional or those who have loved them their entire lives? The obvious answer is us. So, how do we go about this? What steps do we take now to ensure that our loved one can be cared for before, during, and after death has occurred? We talk about death in the midst of life, and I am asking you to consider burying your dead in the same fashion in which Christ himself was buried, known as natural burial.

Resurrection Promise

But we can't talk about death without first reminding the reader that the promise of resurrection looms brightly in the face of death. It's a funny but true story; when Kent Burreson and I were writing our book, *Lay Me in God's Good Earth*,[2] we had the chapter on resurrection as one of the last, if not the last chapter. An editor who read the book stated, "Why are you keeping the great stuff to the end of the book? Move it forward so the promise is first; then you can lay out your case." So, we did, and now it properly flips the book to start with the promise we have in the resurrection.

"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). One of my many favorite lines Jesus speaks in relation to life and death is spoken to the thief on the cross next to him. Christ even in death brings forth life. Not in the future, not at some unknown time, but *today*. What a gift we have in that promise. Our death and the death of all Christians is a declaration of victory. This declaration of victory should be proclaimed at every single Christian death or burial, "May God the Father, who created you, may God the Son, who redeemed and saved you with his blood, may God the Holy Spirit, who sanctified you in the water of holy baptism, receive you into the company of saints and angels to live in the light of His glory forever."[3] Christ's death and resurrection give us victory, give us life. Because he was raised from the dead, we also will be raised.

Bodily resurrection is one of those great mysteries of our faith. We have no idea what we will look like or what it means to be changed, but Paul provides us a glimpse into the qualities of a resurrected body:

1. It will be changed from perishable to imperishable (1 Corinthians 15:43).
2. It will be glorious (1 Corinthians 15:43).
3. It will be raised in power (1 Corinthians 15:43).
4. It will be a spiritual body (1 Corinthians 15:44).

Once again, we will be molded and shaped by the Great Potter himself, our Creator. Life will return to our bodies in some mysterious way, and our only real image or

pattern of this is Jesus himself. Recognition took a little time, but when he spoke, his disciples and friends knew it was Jesus. So, we too will be known in the new creation.

Another great text to ponder, and one of my favorites, is Ezekiel 37, the story of the dry bones.

> So I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, slain that they may live." So I prophesied as he commended me, and breath came into them, and they lived and stood upon their feet, an exceeding great host. (Ezekiel 37:7–10, RSV)

How it happens is not as important as that it will happen. We will have life and breath again and live eternally in the new creation.

Yes, we can't forget that the new creation will also burst forth. All things will be made new once again. "Behold the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God" (Revelation 21:2–3). God restores his paradise. This is the kingdom of God, where our resurrected bodies will dwell on the resurrected, restored, and renewed earth. This new creation can already, although dimly, be seen in the beauty of creation each day. Open your eyes now to see a glimpse of the new creation. It's right in front of you, in the blue of the sky, the green of the grass, and the songs of creation. But before this last life, death will occur.

Death and Dying

Death is our final physical act in this life and in this body. Yet, it is a reality that we must all face, unless Jesus returns first. Moreover, it's a reality we can't really hide from now or in the future. So, let's tackle death head-on, with hope, love, and beauty that can be experienced if we are willing to try.

Death does not have to be an agonizing, painful final hurrah. If you receive news of a diagnosis such as cancer or heart failure, almost every individual has options regarding how to spend their time after such a diagnosis. The primary choices usually are: Do you want to fight aggressively to try to live longer? Or do you prefer an alternative, such as palliative care or perhaps even hospice care? Each decision has its pros and cons. However, whatever choice you make, know that it's your decision, and each offers options and alternatives to the dying process. Furthermore, each should be thoughtfully considered and presented when a life-altering summons arrives at your doorstep.

A note of caution: Don't just accept what the medical professionals tell you. In their world, death is typically seen as failure, and they may want to do everything possible to fight off death, whether a cure exists or not. That is what they have been trained to do. However, remember above all that God is in control of both your life and your death. He is the one who gives breath and the one who takes it away. I want to reiterate what was stated earlier: assisted or non-assisted suicide is not an option. Instead, I want to emphasize that if death is closer than further away, the importance of considering the extent of medical care you opt for is in your hands.

Life is just as sacred and valuable at the end as it is at the beginning. So, allow yourself time to consider your options and don't feel pressured to accept end-of-life care if doing so is against your wishes. For some, they see it no other way, but for others, they find beauty in living each day with intention, making the most of each day. "The key element of dying well is to maintain the relationship and meaningful activities that are a significant part of life.... The virtue of loving our neighbor and the priority of family relationships ... can be both taught and strengthened at the end of life—even by someone with a terminal illness."[4] Christianity teaches us to love deeply and to care for both the living and the dying with the grace and peace we are given in Jesus' love.

I typically work with hospice patients, specifically those who are "actively" dying. This is usually within the 24–48 hour window, but not always. Our motto is "no one dies alone." And that has become my motto too. To walk alongside those who are dying is a special time. It's a time in space where the "now and not yet" collide. It's spiritual, it's mystical, it's prayerful, and yes, even beautiful.

Death should be a place each of us learns to walk before we are literally walking in the valley of death. Death should not be a wrestling match between good and evil, but instead a spiritual process of letting go of this world and looking forward to the next. Death is where God does some of his most remarkable work. Walking alongside the dying as they experience death is a unique spiritual experience. Paul helps us visualize this in 2 Corinthians 4:16–18: "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So, we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." Our body will decay and return to earth from which it came, but the spirit, that part of us that is eternal, will remain with Jesus until he comes again.

This, if nothing else, should comfort us in the midst of death and dying. Death is not only a biological phenomenon, "It is a human, social and spiritual event."[5] So, how might we participate in it? We start by pushing away the fear, denial, and isolation and invite death back into our lives. We see it for what it is and face it

head-on. One way I've found to do that is to discuss dying openly, not just when it happens, but by walking alongside those who are dying. It is never too early to plan for your death, even while you are fully living. In fact, planning for your death makes your death easier for those who will one day deal with your death.

As for myself, I have completed all the necessary paperwork, chosen and purchased my burial plot, and have shared my loves and desires with all those who may need to participate in helping me reach my goal should death approach sooner rather than later. I've chosen, if at all possible, to spend my final days in my home with music and fresh air, with those I love, those who will remind me of the resurrection promise. Finally, when the day arrives: a wonderful funeral, with my body present at my local church and then buried naturally at my local cemetery, wrapped in a shroud, laid in a basket, and placed directly in the ground until the day of resurrection.

After Death Care

Although burying naturally sounds far-fetched at the moment, it's simply a return to the days of our grandparents or great-grandparents. It was a time before the funeral industry gave rise to hiding death completely from our view. This can be one of the most daunting steps because it is so far removed from our culture to sit with, touch, and simply spend time with the body after death has occurred. One of the greatest benefits of participating in after-death care is the affordability of time. Time to be with the one you once loved. It affords time not only to sit with the body, but possibly to wash, dress, and care for it. It allows loved ones to slow down and simply be present in the moment, allowing time to grieve. Unfortunately, today, all of these opportunities have been removed from the family's care. One of my goals is to reclaim this beautiful gift of caring for the body before and after death occurs.

Prior to the twentieth century, almost every funeral was organized and conducted by the family, their church, and the deceased's friends and neighbors. All the duties were shared and carried out by those nearest to the deceased. The body was always present, especially at the funeral, and no one ever considered embalming the body. The body was still considered a gift, a sacred creation of God, and therefore treated with love and respect. As Christians, this can be uniquely different from other religions, where the body is seen as disposable. This is a Gnostic or dualistic perspective, which views all matter as evil and the spiritual as good. Therefore, it is beneficial for Christians to thoughtfully reflect on the gift of the body, not only in life but also in death. This leads to the practice of natural burial, which I will discuss shortly.

But first, we need to discuss the preservation of the body. If, as Christians, we believe that God created and molded each body as a unique and beautiful gift, then

why have we allowed the "industry" to tell us that bodies need to be embalmed? Most people are unaware that embalming *is not* a requirement in any U.S. state. The only caveat is that if you hold the viewing/wake or church service at the funeral home, they will inform you that it is required.

The practice of embalming dates back to ancient Egypt, but in the United States, it only gained prominence during the Civil War. While it's a long story, the short version is that there was a need to preserve bodies long enough to return them home to their families, as many battles occurred in the heat of summer. This need is understandable, but once the war ended, the "funeral industry" viewed it as an opportunity to make the business of dying more profitable—something families themselves could not provide for their deceased loved ones.

The fact is that embalming is a very intrusive practice that dishonors the body God created. Embalming is a preservation process that drains the body and its cavities of all bodily fluids and replaces them with chemicals, the most familiar of which is a carcinogenic substance called formaldehyde, discovered in 1868.[6] Its purpose was to slow down the decomposition process and stop the growth of bacteria. Because the chemical typically causes the body to shrivel and change its color to gray or brown tints, morticians began to apply cosmetics and pastes in an attempt to restore color, ultimately making the body appear more lifelike.

Here are a couple of interesting facts. Embalming, not widely used in other countries is predominantly practiced in the United States and Canada. There is a high mortality rate among morticians dying of myeloid leukemia, which is caused by the embalming process. Finally, be aware that embalming typically only preserves the body for about a week. Depending on the mortician and the embalming process used, leakage can begin to occur from the body, which has been known to contaminate the ground and sometimes the water supply.

There are many options available today that are neither invasive nor dangerous to the people caring for the body as alternatives to preserving the body. The primary goal is to keep the body cool before burial. For more information on how to keep the body cool, please see chapter five of *Lay Me in God's Good Earth*.

So, we've decided not to embalm. Great! So, where do we go from here? Now it's time to consider being involved in caring for our dead. What if we consider returning to our past practices? What if we washed, dressed, shrouded, cooled the body, and placed it in a coffin, and then sat with the body of our loved one until the time had come for the funeral and burial? The main point to highlight here is to be present with the body. I would also suggest considering having the body present for the funeral. The body that was created by God deserves its last moments to be present with the people of God, whether you decide on burial or cremation, before that final act, honor the body by having it present.

Thomas Long, author of *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral*,[7] highlights four ways in which we honor our dead in the Christian funeral rite, rather than having a celebration of life. First, the rite facilitates the final baptismal journey. The one who once lived will live again. Second, it celebrates the creature's ties to the creation. That which sustained the body every day of life now sustains them in death. Third, the funeral remembers the dead as part of the church community, where bread and wine were shared, and Christ was proclaimed repeatedly as the one who has conquered death. And finally, the funeral is a corporate remembrance of the story, God's story of creation and recreation. The story of their death is incorporated into God's story, and the church rehearses that story. "Holy person, holy land, holy community, and holy scripts... allow us to remember the dead as creatures, bound to earth and to the story of God who hold both the dead and those who will die together within the life-giving soil of a renewed creation."[8]

Natural Burial

By now, many should be aware of, or at least have heard of, "green" or my preferred name, natural burial. Natural burial is simply the best pattern when following Christ's own burial, and it best reflects God's story. Natural burial consists of four primary characteristics:

- Elimination of embalming
- Burial in a biodegradable covering/casket
- Placement of the body directly in the ground without a concrete vault
- And burial in an environmentally conscious burial ground that encourages natural decomposition of the body, in other words, returning it to the earth from which God created it

Why should we be concerned with being environmentally conscious? Because of the vocation of "gardener" that God gave to all humanity in the Garden of Eden. He commanded us to till and keep the garden. One way to do this is to consider burying naturally.

Burial practices today cause so much damage to the environment. Joe Sehee, the founder of the Green Burial Council, observes that each year "we bury enough embalming fluid to fill eight Olympic-sized swimming pools, enough metal to build the Golden Gate Bridge, and so much reinforced concrete in burial vaults that we could build a two-lane highway from New York to Detroit."[9] Just stop for a moment and think about it, all of this damage in just one year to bury our dead.

So, let's focus our attention on natural burial. There are many options to consider when choosing a biodegradable covering and/or casket. The Gospel of Mark pro-

vides a great picture of what this might look like: "Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God ... brought a linen shroud and taking him down, he wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock" (Mark 15:43,46). Burial shrouds are simply cloths that are wrapped or wound around a person's body. They can be as simple as choosing a favorite blanket, sheet, or quilt from your home, provided that the material is made from natural fibers like cotton, linen, silk, hemp, or wool. Purchased shrouds are another great option, many of which include a built-in carrying board for easy transportation.

A great resource for purchasing shrouds is Kinkaraco.[10] Esmerelda is the owner and producer of green funeral products. All the shrouds she sells are 100% American-made and are made with natural fibers. They can range from as low as $275 to as high as $1,200, but all are designed for natural burial. Once shrouded, a body can be laid directly in the ground.

If a shroud doesn't seem suitable for you, explore different coffin and casket options. The six-sided "two-pincher" coffin was once favored for burial because it kept the body securely in place. As with shrouds, the option you choose here needs to be biodegradable. So basically, all hardwood options currently used today for caskets are unsuitable for natural burial. Pine is an excellent choice because it is significantly more sustainable. It also grows quickly and is more plentiful in the United States. Other options include bamboo, cardboard, willow, wicker, seagrass, and similar materials. All of these options, along with many others, are sustainable and renewable, leaving a much lighter carbon footprint on God's amazing creation.

Regardless of the vehicle you select for natural burial, keep in mind that the entire concept revolves around the body decomposing as quickly as possible. In other words, returning it to the ground in which it was created. Burying a body naturally happens best when it is done at a depth of three to four feet, rather than the five to six feet that is commonly practiced today. The reason is that a higher soil stratum layer exists, which is rich in microbes and oxygen that help the body decompose rapidly.

Natural burial provides a way for us to not only care for the body of our loved one after death has occurred, but also the earth that God gave us. Natural burial also best represents the creation and re-creation story of God for His creatures. By placing the body directly in the earth without embalming or sealing it with a vault or grave liner, we minimize damage to the earth. The body does not need to be preserved in any way, because natural burial honors the body as the vessel of God, sown perishable but which will be raised imperishable (1 Corinthians 15:42). When the new creation, the new heaven and new earth, comes down to us, our bodies will be refashioned and recreated in the image of Christ into our spiritual bodies.

Clearly, there are instances when the body cannot be placed directly in the ground, as is the case for a city like New Orleans, Louisiana, which is situated below sea level. In circumstances like this, the body is actually handled much more like Christ's was in first-century Jerusalem. This offers another excellent glimpse into natural burial. In New Orleans, the bodies are placed in tombs that contain crypts where the body is laid out much like Christ was following his death. Mark 16:46b states that they "laid him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock." Inside the tomb, you will find rock-like shelves called crypts, where the body is placed for a traditional period of one year and one day. Once this time has passed, the tomb is reopened, and the remains—the bones—are moved or swept to the back of the tomb, where they will remain with all those from the past. Typically, these are family tombs, but there are many unknown tombs where a body can be interred when no family information is provided. An interesting fact is that New Orleans is a city where it will be nearly impossible to run out of burial space, as these tombs can be used for hundreds of years.

After learning about these tombs, I was struck by the fact that they are not being replicated across the United States and beyond, as this would certainly solve the problem of burial land for the future. For these types of burials, I would highly recommend a simple shroud wrapping. Another excellent option for natural burial is internment on family land. These practices had been in place for years. When you hear the phrase, "bury me in the back forty," it serves as a reminder of how family cemeteries began. Of course, you should check with your local government, but many of these still exist today as an option for burial.

Another option that many people choose is cremation, considering it a more environmentally friendly alternative to natural burial. And compared to modern burial practices, this is true. But in reality, the amount of fuel used for fire-based creation to convert solids into gases is approximately 28 gallons of fossil fuels, which emit between 250 and 500 pounds of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, with temperatures reaching 1700 degrees for up to four hours.[11] That is for each cremation.

The number of cremations has skyrocketed since their beginnings in North America, where two options are now available. The first method is the familiar fire-based cremation, while the second is less known but is starting to gain interest. It is called alkaline hydrolysis and is a water-based process that uses chemicals, heat, and pressure to dissolve the body, reducing organic matter to a liquid. This has become an alternative to fire-based methods, aiming to be more environmentally conscious.

What many people don't understand about cremation, regardless of the option chosen, is that cremation is intentionally destructive. The purpose is to incinerate or dissolve as much of the body as possible. After the process is completed, you are left with bone matter or bone fragments, usually about 25% of the human bones,

which neither burn nor dissolve. To obtain the ashes we receive after cremation, these bone fragments need to be pulverized into a gritty sand-like substance. This is done in a machine called a cremulator. What you receive back from the cremation is literally the cremains, which typically weigh between four and six pounds, depending on the person's size, shape, and age prior to cremation. Cremation may be simpler than modern burial practices or even natural burial, but it is certainly not the most environmentally friendly option, nor, in my opinion, God-pleasing.

Resurgam

Our bodies, created by the hand of the Creator, are precious in His sight. This is one reason natural burial should be considered a last will and testament, as it best respects the body shaped and molded by the hands of the "original" potter. Death is where God performs His most remarkable work. He brings life out of death, not just once in baptism, but also in our physical death. In that death, Christ will raise up a new creation. Paul reminds us of this in 2 Corinthians 4:16–18: "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So, we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

Bodily resurrection is what is unseen. We've received an unseen glimpse—one of Christ on Easter morning, the ultimate promise of the resurrection. Jesus' resurrection is not a figment of the Christian's imagination. Death will eventually overtake us, but that is not the end of the story. In fact, it's just the beginning. When Christ returns, he will raise every body, the body of those who believe Christ rose from the dead and those who do not. Everyone will be raised. Your relationship with Jesus in this world affects the relationship you will have with Him afterwards, also. In His death and resurrection, He has restored our "right" relationship with God the Father. And Christ's bodily resurrection promise holds true for everyone who trusts in Him. He alone is the resurrection and the life. "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his (Romans 6:5).

So, live today as if it were your last, die with the promised hope we have received in Christ, and lay yourself down in God's good earth and proclaiming, "*Resurgam*" RISE!

Beth Hoeltke *currently serves as an adjunct faculty for the Institute of Lutheran Theology and Jefferson College. She, along with her co-author Kent Burreson, has been teaching the practicality of natural burial for over 10 years and reminding the Christian of the hope we have in the resurrection of the body. She and Kent are the authors of* Lay Me in God's Good Earth *(InterVarsity Press) and* Death, Heaven, Resurrection and the New Creation *(Concordia Publishing House)*.

Notes

1. Obviously, if they died of a highly contagious disease, or their body fluids would still carry a contagious disease, then you would want to have a medical professional care for the body.
2. Kent Burreson and Beth Hoeltke, *Lay Me in God's Good Earth* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2024).
3. Ibid., 8.
4. Rob Moll, *The Art of Dying: Living Fully into the Life to Come* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 145.
5. Kenneth Doka, *Death and Spirituality* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993), 11.
6. There are various websites that state when formaldehyde was first invented. One article states the year 1859 by a Russian named Alexander Mikahilovich Buterov, the other states it was discovered by the German chemist August Wilhelm von Hofmann in 1869. Whether the year was 1868 or 1869, for the purposes of this article we will use the date of 1868. https://www.formacare.eu/about-formaldehyde/history-of-formaldehyde/ and https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3931544/#ref-list1. Accessed July 10, 2025.
7. Thomas Long, *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009).
8. Burreson and Hoeltke, *Lay Me in God's Good Earth*, 64–65.
9. Quoted in Elizabeth Fournier, *The Green Burial Guidebook: Everything You Need to Plan an Affordable, Environmentally Friendly Burial* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2018), 24.
10. For further information, see https://kinkaraco.com/. Accessed August 1, 2025.
11. Burreson and Hoeltke, *Lay Me in God's Good Earth*, 35.

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Looking the Right Way through the Telescope

Martin A. Christiansen

How should we as Christians rightly view our gift of life from God if we confess that we truly believe ourselves to be the products of an amazing and indeed somewhat unexplainable and unfathomable creation? Our common confession of God's sovereignty over the whole universe holds as divine miracle the forming of human existence by the creating Lord writ large across history, and that He did this creating as revealed in the language of the biblical accounts. But time and centuries since have brought with them the impacts and interests of a cognitive Renaissance and afterward an Enlightenment of consciousness which has produced in our Western society first an awareness of modern technological capability and then a postmodern mindset of infinite individuality. As a result, the demand for scientific inquiry to provide proof of anything and everything with absolute certainty in the form of empirical positivism has become ingrained in our ordinary expectations. Scientific certainty indeed provides significant value in the physical realm as it extends through chemistry and biology, to an extent such that we have made vital and excellent advances in improving the conditions of human life in many ways, and we continue to explore further possibilities for the benefit of our posterity. But for validating matters of the metaphysical, empirical proof is not to be found and as such metaphysics is not granted the luxury of any commonly accepted authority or approval in the scientific community.

So humanity has found other ways to describe God's role in the "making" of the world: approaches that align with a more recognizable scientific sensibility of "design" and thus feel more credible. But can we simply equate intelligent design as proof of the divine creating Godhead? Does this not imply that the creature seeks and demands proof of its own creator? How can any creature truly "prove" or validate its own creator? Yet humanity insists upon the expectation and demand of verifiable proof for everything. So with time, science has positioned itself as the final authority on all matters related to fact, truth, and reality. Unfortunately, we all too easily fall into simply living and thinking with this mindset because it is what everyone else around us is doing; it is what the world as we know it tells us is "re-

ality." And this is the problem: when we give empirical positivistic proof the final say and the ultimate authority to *define truth*, we renege on the basic conviction of our confession of faith and betray our genuine acceptance of the sovereign creating God. We're looking the wrong way through the telescope.

Therefore, I propose an audacious idea: that our intellectual approach to scientific and philosophical discourse should shift its foundational framework by altering how it understands all existence. Rather than determining the truth of our ontological reality from the standpoint of science, we must begin with *the assumption that God is indeed very real* and that all matters of earthly design and scientific understanding should be ultimately explored via a position of *faithful inquiry*. For the past few centuries, we have based what we call "truth" and "reality" on the criteria of scientific definition, on evidence that *we humans* define as authoritative as we find it in *this* world, and solely on that which we consider reliably verifiable. While certain hard evidence is indeed valuable for those matters of physical and tangible determination, scientific inquiry has not succeeded in establishing any verifiability for matters metaphysical—and thereby of its own self-appointed autonomous authority has errantly assumed that faith in a God who cannot be seen is useless. But such an assumption is, as John Lennox describes, a "category mistake."[1] Even as the realm of faith has comforted humanity across the millennia, the past 400 years or so have seen the human conviction of such a metaphysical truth gradually disintegrate into a spiritual illusion that only serves in lieu of any solidity of absolute assurance.

In order then for Christians to rightly conduct a discussion of faith with a scientific community that seeks a clear understanding of the physical world which it can allow as real, we must grasp our own existence in faithful and biblical terms while still acknowledging the vast and valuable intricacies of the scientific cosmos around us. All of reality is the product of the divine creating Lord formed into a cosmos which is well beyond our comprehension, yet one given and continuously sustained to enrich and feed us through a myriad of complexities with diverse interests and satisfactions. Our response and task here then is to defend the Christian truth, and in so doing not only convince the scientific community to accept our position of faith on the intellectual plain, but in fact also endeavor to persuade it to join us. I posit that any Christian dialectic of philosophical exploration with the scientific community on matters both physical and metaphysical ought to operate from the initial position of a complete assumption that the creating Lord is in fact *fully real* beyond any human proof and acts as the continuous Divine Sustainer via his ever-present theophysical causation in this world.

Let us consider what this means and how it should be articulated in order to be a valid assertion as our thesis. Indeed, how we establish a framework of functional meta-language for understanding such a miracle as creation will require a frank confrontation with the common assumptions readily available in our scientific

world. One may easily posit that the origin of life as we know it in all its complexity cannot be fully explained with any finite and verifiable certainty, even as quantum cosmology has come to represent the structure of our universe by the theoretical options of an open, flat or closed structure, and traces the beginning of time to an initial singularity of T=0.[2] Nonetheless, I am disputing the practice of explaining our existence and seeking proof of God from the starting point of scientific and empirical certainty; instead, I am positing the absolute reality of the biblical God of theophysical causation that we can and should simply assume has produced and governs both the physical and metaphysical realms. Consider how in the Gospel of Matthew the Pharisees come to Jesus and demand from him a "miraculous sign" (Matt 12:38-42); but later Jesus chides them for knowing the evidence as found in the meaning of a red sky in the evening and yet still being unwilling to believe and recognize "the signs of the times" (Matt 16:3b-4) concerning his own dwelling among them. This admonishment also indicts the modern Enlightened community for normalizing the demand for a "sign" which provides proof of God and for its tacit assumption of the authority of science as the starting point in determining the truth of all things. However, once we identify God as proactive in the theophysical causation of the world and the origin of our faith, the evidence and authority of a creating and designing Lord become logically apparent and explicative of our amazing universe, where he is the fully-engaged and divinely-governing Sovereign. Such a position of faith makes both a much more effective use of the design argument and places science in a role that productively systematizes and validates the intricacies of the physical universe.

The Playing Field

My outrageous assertion here is hardly new. In fact, the concept it describes is of course quite old and has served as the basis of the Judeo-Christian understanding of sovereignty in the world for centuries before the modern Enlightenment co-opted its own understanding to be the authoritative one which alone is capable enough to approve or dismiss any and all other theories. In the wake of the Enlightenment, an array of ensuing worldviews variously explaining the origins of life has emerged in the thinking of our modern era. These perspectives may be placed into three basic explanatory categories that we can use for evaluative assessment: *theism* (the case for theophysical creation by the divine creating Lord), *deism* (an argument from design, like a watchmaker who completes his creative task and then is done and walks away), and *atheism* (as seen in Darwin's process of evolution and the natural selection that is responsible for the myriad mutations growing and developing within it). In two of these three, the reference to God as an all-powerful Maker remains in some way central to the discussion. Similarly, the order and chaos that resemble an

intelligent schema surrounding human life and the environment continue to grow and evolve over time.

Nineteenth-century Princeton theologian Charles Hodge used the unusual term "contrivance" to discuss how we understand nature in our physical existence. He critically responded to Darwin's notion of an evolutionary process completely bound by the physical limitations of a naturalistic and atheistic existence that recognizes nothing metaphysical at all. His descriptions of these contrivances in nature as potential choices for the explanation of our existence easily demonstrate the common options that most people still consider today (except perhaps those who imagine an alien intervention with the delivery of humans from a distant planet). Hodge elaborates on and laments Darwin's position:

> There are in the animal and vegetable worlds innumerable instances of at least apparent contrivance, which have excited the admiration of men in all ages. There are three ways of accounting for them. The first is the Scriptural doctrine, namely, that God is a Spirit, a personal, self-conscious, intelligent agent; that He is is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being and perfections; that He is ever present; that this presence is a presence of knowledge and power. In the external world there is always and everywhere indisputable evidence of the activity of two kinds of force: the one physical, the other mental. The physical belongs to matter, and is due to the properties with which it has been endowed; the other is the everywhere present and ever acting mind of God. To the latter are to be referred all the manifestations of design in nature, and the ordering of events in Providence.[3]
>
> The second method of accounting for contrivances in nature admits that they were foreseen and purposed by God, and that He endowed matter with forces which He foresaw and intended should produce such results. But here his agency stops. He never interferes to guide the operation of physical causes.[4]
>
> The third method of accounting for the contrivances manifested in the organs of plants and animals, is that which refers them to the blind operation of natural causes. They are not due to the continued cooperation and control of the divine mind, nor to the original purpose of God in the constitution of the universe. This is the doctrine of the Materialists, and to this doctrine, we are sorry to say, Mr. Darwin, although himself a theist, has given in his adhesion.[5]

Hodge's three contrivances as perspectives for our existence effectively set the stage upon which we can evaluate the reasonability of our thesis assertion. How plausible is any theory behind the origin and maintenance of the universe if it is based on faith in a metaphysical being? Faith as such precludes the need to "prove" the ontological validity of the universe. But other markers can also give us assurance: "Rational intelligibility is one of the main considerations that have led

thinkers of all generations to conclude that the universe itself must be a product of intelligence."[6] And as Keith Ward states in his book *God, Chance, and Necessity*, "Almost all the great classical philosophers—certainly Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Locke, Berkeley—saw the origin of the universe as lying in a transcendent reality."[7]

The sensible logic found in the presence of a divine originator for this contrivance of nature and how it assures our survival despite the actions of humanity gives rise to a confidence in a rational intelligibility that is responsible for our ontological status with both its physical and intellectual capabilities. Clearly in the good company of historical philosophers, we can have no other explanation than to favor a worldview contrivance that acknowledges God, or at the very least recognizes the presence of a higher intelligence capable of design, functioning on its own accord as a first cause from the outside, and determining the meaning and purpose of our human life: our destined *telos*.

Let us consider if we might support the argument for a divine Watchmaker who upon completion of his creation leaves the world with a design to be found strictly in natural laws which act as the causes of life itself, working out its own future. This deism still professes (as we require) an assumption of faith in a God who is providentially divine and powerful enough to be the origin of all things, suggesting "God's there, but he just lets us do our own thing." Such distanciation lacks the ongoing assurance of a daily-present God and relinquishes a fullness of confidence that can be found in a healthy, proactive faith which acknowledges the divine actor of theophysical causation. Still, one might argue that the validity of the case for deistic design remains a plausible contender among philosophers today because "they really are better arguments than most philosophical critics concede… [and because the specific] design intuitions do not rest upon *inferences* at all…. We are so constructed that in certain normally-realized experiential circumstances we simply *find* that we in fact have involuntary convictions about such a world, about other minds, and so forth."[8] However, the inability of natural science to explain the origin of the universe via a deist physical rationale plainly reveals "why historical philosophical attempts to *reconstruct* the arguments by which such beliefs either arose or were justified were such notorious failures."[9] This is still looking the wrong way through the telescope.

Similarly we must indict the atheistic worldview where such a creator and the glory of his design do not exist at all and the entire scope of reality is limited to only what can be naturally verified by human cognizance. Although this viewpoint is still prevalent today, it once suffered a philosophical fate similar to that of seventeenth-century British natural theology. For our purposes, an atheism of Darwinian evolutionary rationale drops out of the discussion because it immediately forsakes the

primary supposition to be considered: that we *must assume* the existence, presence, and identity of a divine, all-creating, all-sustaining God in order to fully understand the universe in which we find ourselves.

Competing Paradigms

Any argument for the existence and function of either a theistic or deistic intelligent designer must provide the human tendency for proof with some necessary recourse to science. As such we can recognize intelligent design as engaging in a *dialogue* with both science and religion, perhaps even leaning toward some kind of cooperative (albeit underdeveloped) form of *integration* with it.[10] Considering the design argument as being in *conflict* with or completely *independent* from religion or science undervalues the significance of design, despite any ongoing debates or conflicts and clear distinctions. Yet we must assume that an intelligent Maker of the universe would certainly be capable of coordinating the current state of human perception to successfully integrate design within and under the scientific natural world. And likewise with religion; but that issue points to human free will: our personal choice to hold differing religious views is subjective. In contrast, when we verify design within a scientific realm, the validation of evidence typically pertains to factual substance and is not a matter of choosing something that is subjective or based on faith. Science demonstrates reliable patterns and requires only a basic functionality of faith in how things operate, whereas religion perceives the metaphysical in a way that no science or theory of design can ever validate.

Twentieth-century philosopher Thomas Kuhn's paradigm[11] identification readily illustrates some key distinctions within our modern thinking and is instructive in a couple of ways. To begin, my thesis position regarding the telescope is clear: rather than seeing our existence from the Creator's viewpoint as designed *for* us, we have been looking through the big eye of science (the larger lens at the wrong end of the telescope) and attempting to verify God's existence as if we can and should be able to discern him entirely on our own (the tiny speck at the far end of our reversed sight in the lens). Since previous scientific inquiries about God have been unsuccessful and are lacking in such verifiability, we have concluded that God must then not exist. This conclusion is in keeping with the scientific process that has emerged with the ongoing Enlightenment which insists upon having proof as it alone comprehends, claiming to hold the authority to declare full knowledge of its own reality. Thus the idea of a paradigmatic conflict marks well a competitive distinction between the theist viewpoint (Judeo-Christianity at large) and the variety of scientific and deist design mindsets capable of relegating God to a vague abstraction or perhaps some nice, benevolent Santa Claus. On one side, the lack of "provability" presses the general assumption that we should instead assert our own human autonomy as

authority for empirical verification. But the position of a confident believer in the theophysical causality of the triune Christian God which willingly allows that there is in fact a *real being* who cannot be seen or verified represents the other paradigm (what would be looking the *right* way through the telescope). Likewise it is the much older paradigm, one that has actually become an underdog contender within much of our modern intellectual mindset, due largely to the successes of materialist technology and the progress of scientific knowledge in general.

This scope of paradigmatic perspective can be illustrated in another valuable classical example. Samuel Clarke's (1675-1729) discussion of causation in his *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* logically substantiates the possibility of a God who can create *ex nihilo* and is an original, self-existent intelligent being.[12] Clarke here makes my case by demonstrating the same paradigmatic distinction as regards the question of the first cause. Paul Russell and Anders Kraal note that for Clarke and others,

> The causal adequacy principle … maintained that it is demonstratively certain that matter and motion cannot produce thought and intelligence. Therefore, the original, self-existent being must be an intelligent, immaterial being. To suppose the contrary … would be a plain contradiction.[13]

For Clarke,

> It is evident that the foundations of this argument rest with the related causal principles that everything must have a cause or ground for its existence and that no effect can have any perfection that is not also in its cause. To deny either of these causal principles is … to reject the more general principle that "nothing can come from nothing."[14]

He writes in his *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*:

> Now that the self-existent being is not such a blind and unintelligent necessity, but in the most proper sense an understanding and really active being, does not indeed so obviously and directly appear to us by considerations *a priori*, because through the imperfection of our faculties we know not wherein intelligence consists, nor can [we] see the immediate and necessary connection of it with self-existence, as we can that of eternity, infinity, unity, etc. But *a posteriori*, almost every thing in the world demonstrates to us this great truth and upholds undeniable arguments to prove that the world and all things therein are the effects of an intelligent and knowing cause.
>
> And first, since in general there are manifestly in things various kinds of powers and very different excellencies and degrees of perfection, it must needs be that in the order of causes and effects the cause must always be more excellent than the effect. And consequently, the self-existent being,

> whatever that be supposed to be, must of necessity (being the original of all things) contain in itself the sum and highest degree of all the perfections of all things. Not because that which is self-existent must therefore have all possible perfections (for this, though most certainly true in itself, yet cannot be so easily demonstrated *a priori*), but because it is impossible that any effect should have any perfection which was not in the cause. For if it had, then that perfection would be caused by nothing, which is a plain contradiction. Now an unintelligent being, it is evident, cannot be endowed with the perfections of all things in the world because intelligence is one of those perfections. All things, therefore, cannot arise from an unintelligent original, and consequently the self-existent being must of necessity be intelligent.[15]

Skeptic David Hume, however, disputed Samuel Clarke's position. In his *Treatise on Human Nature*,

> Hume develops an account of causation that directly contradicts these causal principles. Contrary to the causal maxim, Hume maintains, it is entirely possible for us to conceive of something beginning to exist without any cause. To deny this implies no contradiction and, therefore, this principle is neither intuitively nor demonstratively certain.… Granting that whatever is conceivable or non-contradictory is possible, it follows that it is possible that there exists a causal series that came into existence uncreated or has always existed without any further cause or ground for its existence.[16]

Hume writes that "we shall find upon examination, that every demonstration, which has been produc'd for the necessity of a cause, is fallacious and sophistical."[17] Hume believes that the necessity of God being the one who brings everything into existence cannot be proven true. On the other hand, however, for someone holding Hume's position, it would also seem they need to admit that neither can the necessity of a cause for everything be proven untrue. Hume's skepticism here, and in other places, actually frees the modern intellect from the rule of a single mindset that requires positivistic empirical proof alone. William Dembski also indicts Hume:

> In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, David Hume raised two main criticisms against design. One criticism is that design at best constitutes a weak argument from analogy. The other criticism is that design fails as an inductive generalization since there is no prior sample on which to base it. Both Hume's criticisms miss the mark. Inferring design is neither an argument from analogy nor an inductive generalization but an inference to the best explanation. Inference to the best explanation ... remains a valid mode of scientific reasoning. Hume's refutation of design therefore attacks a straw man.[18]

So it seems, then, that in order to break away from being limited by the big eye of science, we need only move to the other end of the telescope.

Other Problems

It's not as simple as I would like to make it sound. Various problems arise in the connection between the creation event of religion and a world-order design fitted in and under Darwin's evolutionary process. David Hume had sharply objected to the lack of verification for the metaphysical and insisted on the empirical certainty of natural causes. Over time, numerous instances of miscommunication and misunderstanding have occurred, along with the dismissal of many presuppositions and differing viewpoints, all leading to a common yet formidable stalemate in the paradigmatic debate. But scientific authority has come to be expressed in a rather common assumption: if we cannot understand it on our own terms, then it must not be real. Humans often exhibit a tendency to believe they should be able to grasp all reality in an exhaustive definition and thus attain full knowledge and certain confirmation of everything, much like Adam and Eve desired in the Garden.

So how difficult is it to simply commit to believing in a God we cannot see or verify? The problem here is the question we are asking: how can we know what we are saying, how can we describe our conundrum, or how can we even have topics that prompt us to ask such questions? All these things are the products of a God who created us in the first place. John Lennox effectively illustrates the philosophical and perceptual category error made by deist naturalism, which persists in the current scientific worldview: *the notion that the creature is its own creator*. Lennox's clever story tells of a man who supposed that a Mr. Ford must be inside a Ford car, making it operate. When the man examined the internal functions of the Ford engine, he realized that Mr. Ford could not be found within it because the engine's inner workings showed no evidence of the actual Mr. Ford as the man had expected to find. As a result, he completely denies the existence of Mr. Ford because of Mr. Ford's complete absence from those internal operations. At this point Lennox indicts the errant man's misunderstanding of the ontological situation for assuming Mr. Ford to be only within the creation of the mechanisms of the car itself and not its actual creator. Lennox therefore identifies the indictment:

> In philosophical terminology [the man is] committing a category mistake. Had there never been a Mr. Ford to design the mechanisms, none would exist for him to understand. It is likewise a category mistake to suppose that our understanding of the impersonal principles according to which the universe works makes it either unnecessary or impossible to believe in the existence of a personal Creator who designed, made, and upholds the universe. In other words, we should not confuse the mechanisms by which the universe works either with its cause or its upholder.[19]

This logical fallacy sharply illustrates the thinking prevalent in modern science, demonstrating what routinely occurs in our unbelieving world, so much so that even

the confusion it causes has also become blurred. The questions surrounding the existence of an intelligent God behind the design of the world and the evidence of that God within the natural artifacts of physical and empirical observation each create havoc when the baseline for acceptance and truth becomes misplaced. What science provides for our earthly understandings and what religion promises for our spiritual care are easily confused for each other. Our discussion is strongly polarized; even the variety of interpretation within the Christian community is often overlooked and stereotyped into a strict creationism that dismisses any empirical values. The vital distinction between recognizing the intelligence of the design itself and identifying the Designer behind it becomes much obscured.[20]

A vivid and striking example of this global perceptual rift particularly within the academic community is evident in a rather lop-sided academic article on "Creationism." Its simplistic comparison of intelligent design theory and what it refers to as traditional creationism demonstrates an arrogant self-authority in a dismissive characterization of intelligent design theory and its community as "creationism-lite." It does so by calling out a prominent creationist member's request for funding, even as he is "a strong believer in the eschatological significance of Israel," and complaining as well that "they are always quoting the first chapter of John" and that "they share the same concern about the moral values of the creationists—anti-abortion, anti-homosexuality, pro-capital punishment, pro-Israel (for eschatological reasons) and so forth."[21] This prejudicial lack of class and its misguided pejorative critique of Christians who seek to understand God's design in the real world around them are neither helpful nor professional and tarnishes the reputation of the philosophical academy.

Nonetheless, I stand my ground and hold to the outrageous suggestion that we truly return to what once *was* the normal assumption: the simple and genuine acceptance of the reality of a theophysical causality from an all-powerful and life-determining God who acts within us and sustains all life in accordance with his divine and yet unknowable will. This means submission to that which we cannot prove; it means letting go of the empirical umbilical cord that scientific certainty clings to for safety; it means magnifying the perspective of our world telescopically in order for us to see it as intended by the designing and creating God. However, to achieve this, we must take one final critical step in clarifying our position: we must split deism in half. We need to acknowledge the intelligence of intrinsic design by the biblical God of faith and its evidence in the physical world, but we must jettison the crude "watchmaker naturalism" that has previously explained the argument for design as being of a God who can and must be found only within the natural creation itself.

William Dembski agrees, even as he recognizes the ongoing misunderstandings that accompany the leftover assumptions and terminology of naturalism: "Design arguments are old hat. Indeed design arguments continue to be a staple of philosophy and religion courses."[22] Likewise, his terminology of natural and intelligent causes

for God's design of the world helps clarify the difference between the creature and the Creator: "Whether an intelligent cause operates within or outside nature (i.e., is respectively natural or supernatural) is a separate question entirely from whether an intelligent cause *has* operated."[23] This distinction in truly understanding the bigger picture also illustrates the same category mistake mentioned by John Lennox and is likely the best argument to be made for the simple assumption of *faithful inquiry* as the automatic starting point for any discussion: scientific, design-oriented, or spiritual.

Theophysical Causality as Reality

Let us consider anew how to *think with the assumption* of theophysical causality and examine all aspects of life through the scope of a *faithful inquiry* that perceives God's creation as it is intended for us by His blessing, allowing us to utilize our free will in order to serve and bear witness to Him. What then does it truly mean to believe this simple yet staggering assumption that God *actually is* real? But the assumption has been with us all along! For is this not simply a restatement of the full and literal understanding of what it means to say "I believe in God"? Yet we have been ensnared by the human comfort of empirical certainty and have been told since Socrates and before that we should seek certain autonomous proof. Even as the details of the ancient Hebrew biblical account of the theophysical causation of all creation provide a rather specific form and description to the way it happened *at that time* in the moment it occurred, evidence of intelligent design within God's creation is also something observed *after the fact*, and as something which holds an irreducible complexity[24] grasped only in hindsight, and then seen as a product of such creation. Therefore, each must be understood within its own individual context, just as both are intended by God in the form—whether physical or metaphysical—by which they present themselves and are seen as *evidence of reality* because they are *of God*, just as we assume in our *faithful inquiry*.

I am arguing that the kind of *faithful inquiry* I describe does not imply a simple naïveté that might be assumed; it should be understood that a Pauline mindset of mature Christianity employs a stewardship of thought that will prevent simplistic or wildly deductive conclusions about spiritual meaningfulness or even just basic metaphysical concepts. My thesis is not a blind defense that naïvely accepts anything and everything that appears remotely religious without a critical sense of scrutiny or wise understanding. Nor does it wish to discard the worth of scientific inquiry and validation. At the same time, the identifiable presence of design can and should be simply recognized as evidence of God's creative work in the world and be used wisely and productively. Yet in all this, we must still insist that the acceptance of this *truth of reality* concerning the divine creating God is a matter of faith—*child-like faith*—and is something that by its very nature does not require any scientific

empirical proof. This very concept is what the teaching of our Lord Jesus calls us to embrace: "Blessed are those who have *not seen* and yet have believed" (John 20:29b, emphasis added). These words were spoken to Thomas, who had refused to believe the witness of his fellow companions after they had seen the resurrected Jesus.

The authors of the New Testament were highly concerned about evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. In other words, the writers of the New Testament note that reliable witnesses could attest to having seen, touched, and heard the resurrected Jesus. They did not have "faith" in the resurrection of Jesus. They had actually witnessed the living, bodily resurrected Jesus, who had been dead. What they had "faith" in was the promise of what this real resurrection did *for them*. It demonstrated that Jesus was indeed who he claimed to be, that his death was truly for the forgiveness of *their* sins. This resurrected Jesus had the power to actually give them life, *eternal life*.

Writing some twenty-five years after the event of the resurrection, the Apostle Paul could still give the names of the people who witnessed the bodily resurrected Jesus. He writes to the Christians in the city of Corinth, some of whom were having doubts about the resurrection:

> For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received:
> that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures,
> that he was buried,
> that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,
> and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve.
> After that he appeared to over five hundred brothers at the same time, most of whom are still alive, but some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, and then to all the apostles. Last of all, he appeared also to me (1 Cor 15:3-8a; EHV).

Paul had such confidence in the bodily resurrection of Jesus that he lists the evidence: those people who had actually seen him. Not just one or two, but as many as five hundred, and most of these people were still alive after twenty-five years. At the time of the writing of this article, the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, is close to being twenty-five years in the past. After all of those years, I can still remember it quite well. If someone who had not lived at that time asked me about it now, I could give an honest, true, and accurate description of it. By listing people who were still alive at the time of his writing to the Corinthians, Paul is saying that the resurrection of Jesus is based on actual evidence.

Philosopher, theologian, and apologist John Warwick Montgomery notes the following in his book *Faith Founded on Fact: Essays in Evidential Apologetics*:

> Christian faith is not blind faith or credulity; it is grounded in fact. To talk about a real but unprovable resurrection is as foolish as to talk about

> supra-historical or spiritual resurrections. They are all cop-outs—sincere, certainly, but terribly harmful in an age longing to hear the meaningful affirmation, "He is risen!" ... [Jesus] rose in the very history in which we are embedded.[25]

A reliable witness is what gives valid evidence to the proof of the resurrection. In the case of the existence of God as divine Creator, it is the universe itself that gives testimony to the reality of this creating God. "The heavens tell about the glory of God," writes the Psalmist. "The expanse of the sky proclaims the work of his hands. Day after day, they pour out their speech. Night after night, they display knowledge" (Psalm 19:1-2; EHV). Just as a skyscraper is evidence of a designer and builder, so the universe itself bears witness to its designer and builder.

To be alive as a creation of God also means we still live in and grapple with the empirical world which surrounds us, where the evidence of intelligent design is in fact found in the form of reasonable and sound scientific logic. This evidence possesses a uniquely irreducible complexity that seems to satisfy the demand of inquiry found in humanity's need for proof in and for itself. But since that inquiry must be satisfied on its own terms, it contradicts the straightforward and simple acceptance of a "childlike faith," which does not need *to see* any human evidence, but simply relies on the testimony of the existence of the universe itself, and so believes like a child. Nonetheless, we remain aware how "childlike" can also imply a naïveté that leads to ignorance and undermines a more effective engagement of Christian intellect in our modern and postmodern world.

But the real case to be made here is for a faith assured by the theophysical causality of a divine creating God who is *unmoved* by the scientific proof of human definition in any way: this very same mindset of faith still advises us that the ultimate *need* for such proof is irrelevant. We can never fully know God's ways or see the future because it is "prolepsed" and is still in the process of being revealed in anticipation of Christ's final return and our salvation, as it was begun in Christ's resurrection—and thus the reason for our acceptance by faith of that which we cannot verify. Twentieth-century theologian and philosopher Wolfhart Pannenberg provides the crucial support for my thesis assertion with this "prolepsed" revelatory connection in the Maker's ongoing and sustaining intelligence and the theophysical causality of God's divine sovereignty over the autonomy of the natural human world as its divine creating Lord. Pannenberg identifies God as the "All-Determining Reality"[26] who becomes accessible to us by acting in our present human world as he integrates his loving power and salvation into *our reality*.

And what can it mean for us that God is "all-determining" of reality? If we truly grasp this idea in earnest, we discover that we continually remain in contact with God's loving and powerful presence. This realization aligns with St. Paul's encour-

agement to "pray unceasingly" (1 Thess 5:17) as if God truly is "right there" with us at all times. Is this not what we should believe about our God, who is omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient? What we should also believe is that this God possesses *real* power in the present world, and thus is our present reality and the basis of our Christian faith. This *real* God reveals his wise and determining will for us through an ongoing revelation of love which began with the creation of our existence and continues for us through both "the now and the not yet" in a prolepsis with Christ's resurrection and its currently-unfinished-but-certain-to-be-fulfilled completion on the day of his return in final victory. His *real* historical resurrection guarantees this.

Our faithful response must be to recognize him as the only saving reality by whom we are moved to serve throughout our lives, using his gifts and blessings to respond in grateful thanksgiving. A wise and productive Christian perspective of *faithful inquiry* does just this; and since assuming God *is real* directs us to see all the world from the initial viewpoint of God's divine sovereignty, science must also reset its parameters and re-orient its method of inquiry toward the objective natural world to be one of a *faithful inquiry* that recognizes the cosmos first from the position of a "creature" who knows its *real* Creator, as well as the faith that his love engenders. Scientific inquiry can still be commonly observed as it always has been, and it may be even further blessed through its *faithful inquiry*, expanding and developing into capacities we cannot currently imagine, provided by a divine Maker who is in fact responsible for *all* natural and intelligent worldly causes and effects. Furthermore, such a dramatic shift in the method of inquiry, away from the big eye of science and the need for certain evidence of metaphysicality, will not cause us to lose out on the benefits of the valuable artifacts placed here by God and found in the incomprehensible yet reassuring design of specified and irreducible complexity; all of these wonders remain within the scope of the natural world.

We must acknowledge that the question at hand ultimately revolves around whether one truly believes God is the *real* Lord and Sovereign of all existence. When reduced to its most basic epistemological tenet, this is the bottom-line issue. By starting from the intended end of the telescope, I posit 1) that science will reveal to us the genuine fruits of the Lord's creation and blessings upon the physical natural world, and 2) that design in all its complexity makes perfectly logical sense when viewed as coming from a loving God who is the all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-present theophysical causation that is all-determining of the everyday epistemological and ontological expressions of our reality. Our human make-up reflects the very same design as the *Imago Dei*, the image of Christ, who is that same creating Lord and who came to us and became one of us to fulfill his promise of our all-determined reality with him. A *faithful inquiry* in response can do naught else but serve him with our lives, even as he strengthens our own faith

with a power that is internalized into all of our intended being as loved creatures of a divine Creator. We will gain a more profound understanding of this amazingly complex, divine creation and all-determining reality when we truly take the leap of faith and *acknowledge the actual reality* of the divine, creating Lord. In so doing, we will observe and understand through the larger lens of God's wisdom, for that is looking in the *right* way through the telescope.

Martin A. Christiansen *is a PhD Fellow at the Institute of Lutheran Theology and now serves as Managing Editor for ILT Media. Additionally, he is an Adjunct Assistant Professor teaching English, Philosophy, and Religion courses in both the State University of New York system and at Hartwick College in upstate New York.*

Notes

1. John C. Lennox, *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (Oxford, UK: Lion Hudson, 2009), 45.
2. Ian Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues* (Harper San Francisco, 1997), 195ff.
3. Charles Hodge, *What is Darwinism?* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, and Company, 1874), 43.
4. Hodge, *What is Darwinism?*, 44.
5. Hodge, *What is Darwinism?*, 47-48.
6. Lennox, *God's Undertaker*, 60.
7. Keith Ward, *God, Chance, and Necessity* (Oxford, UK: One World Publications, 1996), 7.
8. Del Ratzsch and Jeffrey Koperski, "Teleological Arguments for God's Existence," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2023/entries/teleological-arguments/ [italics in original]. Accessed April 25, 2025.
9. Ratzsch and Koperski, "Teleological Arguments for God's Existence."
10. Barbour, *Religion and Science*, 77-105, is a very helpful chapter on four typologies for describing the relationships and interactions between science and religion. "Ways of Relating Science and Religion" provides a nomenclature of evaluative proximity between the two, showing how each characteristic of a relationship might assist (or not) in discussion. Barbour's four types include 1) conflict, 2) independence, 3) dialogue and 4) integration; my current thesis assumes God's presence in the first place and thus would seek through dialogue to realize design and bring science into a state of integration that productively communicates and reveals the universe as intended by its divine Maker.
11. Barbour, *Religion and Science*, 125ff., likewise describes 20th-century philosopher Thomas Kuhn's process of paradigm recognition in shifting historical eras of thinking with varying and ever-developing theories, worldview mindsets, etc.; it is also an essential assessment tool for any discussion of the relationships between science and religion.

12. See Timothy Yenter and Ezio Vailati, "Samuel Clarke," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2024 Edition) Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/clarke/. Accessed June 14, 2025.

13. Paul Russell & Anders Kraal, "Hume on Religion," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2024 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume-religion/. Accessed April 25, 2025.

14. Russell & Kraal, "Hume on Religion."

15. Samuel Clarke, *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God and Other Writings*, ed. Ezio Vailati (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 38-39. Philosopher Richard Swinburne writes that in his "view the two most persuasive and interesting versions of the cosmological argument are that given by Leibniz in his paper 'On the Ultimate Origination of Things,' and that given by his contemporary Samuel Clarke in his Boyle Lectures for 1704 and published under the title *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*." Swinburne notes that Leibniz's argument "seems to be" the one "criticized by Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason*" and Clarke's argument "is criticized by Hume in the *Dialogues*." Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, UK: The Clarendon Press, 2004), 136.

16. Paul Russell and Anders Kraal, "Hume on Religion."

17. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, UK: The Clarendon Press, 1888), 80.

18. William Dembski, *Intelligent Design: The Bridge between Science and Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 271

19. Lennox, *God's Undertaker*, 45.

20. Lennox, *God's Undertaker*, 11.

21. Michael Ruse, "Creationism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/creationism/. Accessed April 26, 2025.

22. Dembski, *Intelligent Design*, 105.

23. Dembski, *Intelligent Design*, 105 [italics mine].

24. Dembski, *Intelligent Design*, 146ff., provides a thorough discussion of Michael Behe's "irreducible complexity," demonstrating how remarkable and unfathomable an autonomous human design of any such system can be, let alone attributing it to the divine Designer. Earlier, Dembski, on 127ff., discusses "specified complexity" as the primary process by which any creative intelligent causes may function. Both sections provide a glimpse at what anyone might yet be convinced is evidence of God's divine providence and all-powerful creating omniscience in the real world.

25. John Warwick Montgomery, *Faith Founded on Fact: Essays in Evidential Apologetics* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1978), 79.

26. cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, trans. Francis McDonagh (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1969), 296.

Book Review

Douglas J. Moo & Jonathan A. Moo, *Creation Care: A Biblical Theology of the Natural World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2018), 250 pp. $24.99

Review by Robert Henry

It is all too common in modern Christianity to regard creation merely as a backdrop to the theater of humanity, as some floor upon which the jewels of God's handiwork live, move, and have their being. However, in contrast to this vision of the natural world and its bizarre, yet dazzling host of creatures and living beings, is the perspective put forth by scholars Douglas and Johnathan Moo in their work *Creation Care: A Biblical Theology of the Natural World*. One of the main goals of this book is to challenge the mistaken idea that we are to be saved from this earth, rather than embracing the perspective for which the authors argue, which is that the true eschatological goal is to be saved with the Earth (1). Creation is not merely some additional appendage of God's creative act, namely Man. It should be understood as the aggregated entirety of God's design. This review will focus on the authors' discussion of creation care, their challenge to both modern and traditional views of creation, as well as their prescriptive theses for the Church, along with a comprehensive theological analysis of creation and our responsibilities as members of the created order.

First, it is essential to understand what this father-and-son team means by creation care. In the first part of the text, "Queuing the Questions," certain terms are investigated, and the topics to be explored are clarified. For instance, the term creation care as used in this text refers to the "ethical responsibilities for the nonhuman world" (24). The authors focus on the for and about care for creation. The former refers to a general attitude of *a priori* care for creation that excludes human concerns. The latter highlights why we should care for God's nonhuman creation. The authors chose the term creation over nature or environment for several reasons. First, there is a tendency to deify nature rather than recognize its created status. Second, nature is too often viewed as a mechanistic series of events separate from God rather than flowing from Him. Finally, the environment places too much of an emphasis on the subject to whom it refers, rather than the *ding an sich* (thing-in-itself). As such, humanity is a part of, not a foreground to, the cosmos.

In the section "Why Are We Talking About It?," the authors address the challenges and complex relationship Christianity has had with pollution and ecological issues. All too often, there is a common perception that the faith is indifferent to

such issues due to its soteriology and eschatology. They explain that the terms nature and environment, all too often, have multiple meanings which reflect these challenges and that complex relationship. More specifically, nature can refer to a mechanistic system that can be manipulated by humans in contrast to a created order. Likewise, environment can refer to human-centric surroundings rather than God's creative setting.

These themes of humanity and creation are further developed through considerations of scriptural hermeneutics. The authors discuss biblical interpretation as a way of supporting the claims of caring for creation. They cite "the first part of the 2010 book *Greening Paul* by David Horrell, Cherryl Hunt, and Christopher Southgate" (31). Through this interpretive lens, Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate suggest that there are two approaches to scripture regarding creation. The first is resistance to ecology since so much of scripture, especially the writings of Paul, is almost exclusively focused on human concerns. The second approach, they suggest, is to read the text ecologically or to revise what the text states rather than resist or recover these earlier themes of nonhuman, ecological emphasis that had been overlooked due to cultural or thematic concerns. These revisions do not contradict the meanings of the text but align with them, as Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate argue. These considerations include descriptive, prescriptive, inclusive, and canonical aspects of scripture (31).

The authors suggest our biblical interpretation is interactive, from application to text, as well as text to application (41). They identify these as historical and systematic theology. These particular historical or systematic theological systems inform how we interpret scripture. This can be what is meant by embedded theology as concerns certain denominations and traditions. Then there is culture. Cultural values can affect the way we interpret a passage. For instance, someone's acceptance of homosexuality can influence how certain passages in scripture are read to support same sex practices. The third is science. Certain scientific discoveries can affect how we see and interpret passages. For instance, the gap theory in Genesis may be used by some to integrate the theory of evolution into the creation and development of species and humanity.

The second section, "Arriving at Answers," aims to offer solutions to these problems. In Chapter Three, the authors explain how order and chaos, as expressed in earlier mythologies and culminating in the clear and perfected descriptions of God's creative purposes formed in his creativity, demonstrates creation's intrinsic value. This intrinsic value, as the authors remind their readers, is found in God's declaration of creation's goodness, as explained in Genesis 1:31. As such, humankind's presence is not the singularity of creation but a feature of it. The two authors speak of creation's abundance and diversity, rather than a singular focal point to which all other created phenomena are merely processes leading to humanity.

In Chapter Four, it is suggested that while creatures by their nature fulfill their role in creation, it is our responsibility to choose to participate in this role. Thus, we are called to take dominion over creation as stewards, not as elevated species transcending their natural environments. This idea is further explained through Old Testament themes of Hebraic responsibilities to the land promised to and given to Israel, which is reiterated in Chapter Five. Chapters Six through Nine progress through this covenant to its fulfillment in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, whose gospel message speaks of the renewal of all things, including creation.

In the third and final part, "Reflecting on Relevance," the authors examine how creation care is connected to humanity's salvation. They highlight the broader plan of redemption, which includes more than the salvation of humanity and isn't merely founded on it. Ultimately, the gospel, or the good news, is predicated on a Christological premise of restoration and the importance of Christ's presence in creation, which has been cursed. In Chapter Eleven, the authors situate their arguments for human stewardship of creation within the context of how this role should be elevated in the hearts and minds of a collectively narcissistic humanity. In the following chapters, we are introduced to a perspective on the wisdom literature in scripture that emphasizes how intelligibility and design are woven into the fabric of creation itself. This infusion of intentionality is not merely a spill-over from humanity but an integral part of the nonhuman array of design. Furthermore, it is through creation that God's glory is displayed. The authors argue that humanity's response in worshipping God through this display demands stewardship of the created. order. All of this culminates in recommendations for sustainable living, environmental justice, and cultivating attentiveness to creation through practices such as Sabbath rest, simplicity, and spiritual disciplines.

While their work in this text not only draws attention to the failures of Christians regarding creation care, establishing an ancient tradition in scripture and early Church perspectives on creation care, as well as their theological and practical solutions to this issue, some questions remain unanswered. For example, the authors affirm that creation is in bondage to decay but do not adequately explain why animals suffer in ways that seem unrelated to human sin, particularly in pre-human evolutionary history. Theodicy is sidestepped.

Likewise, one could argue that the authors hold a subtle, yet nonetheless present, anthropocentric bias. Much of their ethic is framed in terms of how creation care benefits humans (e.g., future generations, global justice), rather than developing a theocentric or biocentric ethic grounded in the intrinsic worth of nonhuman life, particularly in relation to human sin, especially in pre-human evolutionary history. Additionally, by ignoring deep time and the suffering encoded into evolutionary processes, they avoid hard questions about God's goodness in a world where predation, disease, and extinction long predated human action.

Overall, Douglas and Johnathan Moo provide a comprehensive and engaging narrative about the origin, history, status, and ultimate destiny of creation, including humanity. Focusing on the whole of creation, including nonhuman entities, helps contextualize the scriptural narrative of the Fall and the restoration of all things. Moreover, recognizing that the gospel and the incarnation are events predicated on a holistic view of creation is foundational. Christ came to make all things new, not just to redeem humanity. Furthermore, imbuing all of creation, including nonhuman members, with value presents humanity with an especially important task of stewardship given our rationality, intelligence, and agency. In short, the book *Creation Care: A Biblical Theology of the Natural World*, challenges the Christian community to reevaluate how we view creation, our understanding of it within God's plan, his future kingdom, and our responsibility now—not just in the "sweet by and by"—for maintaining and restoring it as we wait for Christ's renewal of all things.

Robert Henry *is Adjunct Professor at Gateway Community Technical College (KCTCS), Northern Kentucky University, and Assistant Editor of* Verba Vitae.

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Horrell, David, Cherryl Hunt, and Christopher Southgate, *Greening Paul: Reading the Apostle in a Time of Ecological Crisis* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).

Book Review

Dennis P. Hollinger, *Creation and Christian Ethics: Understanding God's Designs for Humanity and the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023), 296 pp. $29.99

Reviewed by Nils Borquist

The Case for Divine Ethical Inheritance: *Creation and Christian Ethics*

The opening sentence of Dennis Hollinger's *Creation and Christian Ethics* asks, "What has creation to do with ethics" (1), a question he states he will answer by arguing that in the acts of creation, God purposefully constructed a schema of ethical principles directly meant for humans to recognize and apply in their own lives and interactions. Throughout his book, a main theme repeatedly emerges: the principal role of each individual is to act in a caring manner, serving as a steward for the self, the other, and the natural world within which life exists now and into the future. Hollinger not only utilizes the initial creation but also scripturally relevant accounts throughout the Bible that highlight parallel themes and expand on ideas found in Genesis to demonstrate the interconnectivity of the overall text as well as the teaching of ethics therein, which are valuable to both contemporary Christians and non-believers.

Taking on such an enormous task may seem daunting, but Hollinger offers five fundamental and grounding points that serve to maintain and support his purpose. He argues that the Bible's meta-narrative would be insufficient without creation. Creation exists as a thread throughout the Bible and provides an overall ethics that refers to the doctrine of the Trinity. Hollinger notes that there is a fluid connection from Creation to the End Times and that Creation delivers prominent ethical themes to readers. As such, the orderly effect of God's creating leads to the laws as delivered by Moses, as well as the grace, glory, and teachings of Jesus Christ that follow.

God's design and creative acts involve substantially more than planning, structuring, and the setting in motion of time and space as the modes of being. Continuity and perpetuity reside as ingrained aspects of the all-encompassing divine narrative. For Hollinger, this idea of the narrative as a living and moving story stands out as a key part of his argument. He believes that God creates out of love, that God considers the interlocking elements of existence, and that the speech act in the beginning resoundingly relates to revelation and supreme understanding of how humans are meant to live and sustain life. The revealing nature of the scriptures as they unfold, allows readers to see and process the stages of creation and the interconnectivity with the intricate aspects of life, as well as the human role of earthly stewardship.

Regarding love, Hollinger offers an interesting perspective, stating that the recognizable implications of God's care taken through the act of creation move us to reciprocate God's love and seek His glory; in turn, this prompts us to care for and about the entities and places made by God.

Hollinger addresses three specific categories that are often seen as ethically problematic for people: sex, money, and power. With each act of creation in Genesis, God declares the goodness of the outcome, and Hollinger concludes that God's judgment also indicates the symbiosis of the interconnected developments. While this may seem obvious to the author, he also recognizes that many people focus on the finitude of existence. Human awareness of physical death and decay can lead to a belief in the expendability of overall being, causing confusion regarding the ongoing human role in perpetuating the responsibility given through God's creative powers and gifts. With an impending end of life, pursuing sex, money, and power in nefarious ways easily sidetracks people from their ethical/stewarding duties.

To address these concerns, Hollinger first references St. Augustine's affirmations of "marriage and sex as gifts of God from creation, to which Jesus himself gives confirmation" (52). God provides humans with the understanding of the beauty and responsibilities of the sexual relationship. Ultimately, sex's role centers on procreation, and bringing into existence new life, fosters greater care for the personal community and society at large in which the child must live. Money offers opportunities for reduced stress and greater comforts, but the accumulation of wealth also enables individuals to make a positive impact on the Earth through caring actions. "Families are cared for, the poor are fed, educational institutions are built...missionaries go to the unreached, churches are established, the gospel is preached, and people...participate in God's sufficiency for all humanity" (60). Although focusing on power as employed in a negative or damaging context seems easy, Hollinger points out that power also resides in the authority, willingness, and capability to "exert influence" in a positive way (65). From the words people choose to the thoughts they focus on and the actions they undertake, humans are gifted with the will to care, love, and do good works—all of which come from the traits given by God, yet require personal intent and action.

Hollinger believes that recognizing and valuing the inherent dignity of humans, which comes from being made in God's image, should prompt people to treat others and the world in which they exist with respect and care. In fact, he includes scientific evidence that shows the genetic connections humans share with each other, various animals, and even plants, all demonstrating the consistent links that connect all living beings. Naturally, the relationship between dignity and stewardship is strongly built and reinforced, and Hollinger introduces various contemporary issues that involve ethical considerations about acceptance or exclusion. These include cultural, racial, and social sex concerns, along with discussions about euthanasia and abortion rights.

Hollinger stays within bounds by addressing these issues as ongoing focal points of ethical dialogues over the past few decades.

The author further emphasizes stewardship in the latter half of the text, reinforcing this idea as the crux of his argument. Once again, since people are created in *imago Dei*, existence is described as having a "theocentric foundation" (105), with God as the focal point of reality. As a result, "creation care" (105) emerges as a theme for Hollinger regarding human ethics. Creation care essentially refers wholly to stewardship, and the deliberate attention to the Earth and its myriad creatures should be among the highest priorities for those fortunate enough to exist. The idea of dominion taken from Genesis is also part of the conversation, but Hollinger notes that there is a difference in how "dominion" is interpreted—as domination" rather than "subduing," which is the author's preferred translation. The former suggests the subservience of non-human beings, while the latter implies a carefully managed interaction. Hollinger recommends several actions to steward the Earth in productive and positive ways, including fostering quality personal habits, churches responding to crises, and philanthropic public policies (118-119).

Expanding on positive stewardship, Hollinger emphasizes that when he discusses ethical human interactions, he begins highlighting marriage and family as the foundation of community and the backbone of the formation of law and its enforcement. Marriage carries a significant responsibility for couples to have and raise children within a state of matrimony, with the most important aspects of this union and structure being the formation of trust, modeling of behavior, and proper teaching. Although such beliefs were widely accepted until recent times, contemporary views on sexuality, friendship, social justice, and acceptable daily person-to-person interactions have produced substantial confusion regarding ethical norms and expectations, especially for Christians who must live by a standard of principles and laws that remain stable in the face of consistent social malleability. To counter this fracturing of society, Hollinger refines his view by asserting that cultivating productive habits, involving congregations in crisis management and intervention, and having the government develop helpful policies can be effective through three additional approaches: deeply exploring and fully adhering to Christian ethics, increasing the amount and value of pastoral care, and considering Christian values when devising public policies (127). Much like the marriage between a man and a woman and the familial household that follows, the bonds formed between citizens, clergy, and government also foster greater trust, better behavior, and higher-quality instruction, which leads to overall improved stewardship.

In the latter half of the book, Hollinger broadens his focus, specifically scrutinizing societal institutions, the idea and application of working life, and the potential long-term existence of life, along with its inevitable end. He concentrates on five key institutions: government, economy, education, religion, and the family. While each

operates independently, their connections and mutual influences are clear. A crucial aspect of people's lives is the consideration of overall public opinion regarding the institutions and their positive impact on citizens; Hollinger provides an alarming graphic indicating that public approval for all five institutions has declined over time. Only one notable institution, the military, shows an increase in approval. This is problematic, especially since the role of a quality government principally involves making and enforcing laws. A biblical parallel seems relevant here, as God's inherent order, established during creation and continued in perpetuity, similarly concerns the implementation of laws and the consequences when they are ignored. A third element, though directly related to the law, involves protecting freedom (168); this also fits into the creation narrative and further connects humans with practices of stewardship.

Hollinger states that humankind's undertaking of the responsibilities of work runs through the early books of the Old Testament, including Genesis, and the theme of labor persists throughout the text. God creates and then rests, and his blueprint applies directly to proper stewardship of one's environment, which includes the self, family, and community, in terms of overall well-being. As in general life, work involves dignity and respect, and ethical principles such as integrity, justice, honesty, empathy, and social responsibility assist in maintaining both one's personal sense of worth as well as holding others in high regard. According to Hollinger, the very act of creation and the work innately connected with that act epitomize the ethical life and pursuits. Order, reliance on the other, reliance on nature, and investing in work form a quality, synergetic relationship that requires consistent cultivation and reflection to conserve and grow. The human willingness to treat the other as the self factors into nearly all aspects of a cohesive and empathetic being.

Humans completely rely on nature for their limited survival on Earth. Caring for nature and all aspects of life not only helps people live healthy and content lives—such ethical care is an absolute necessity. In order to address their own physical limits, people care for the self; their dependence on others and vice versa means they must care for the community; and their reliance on God means they must show care for their Heavenly Father. Since Hollinger firmly believes that an ethical life is deeply connected to the earliest periods of life on Earth, he ultimately employs the metaphors of salt, light, and leaven in the final pages of the book to represent preservation, illumination, and transformation (271-273). These metaphors combine the ideas of the human effort to sustain life through faith, ethical actions, and continuous learning in order to positively influence society.

Nils Borquist, PhD *is an ILT PhD student and English teacher a Neville High School in Monroe, Louisiana. He attained a BA from Tabor College, an MA from the University of Louisiana at Monroe, an MAT from the University of Mississippi, and a PhD from Liberty University.*

Book Review

Jean-Claude Larchet, *Theology of the Body* (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2017), 107 pp. $19.00

Reviewed by Patrick Steckbeck

Overview

Jean-Claude Larchet's purpose in *Theology of the Body* is to set forth a Christian view of the human body in systematic fashion, drawing from the Scriptures and the church fathers. He focuses on the Greek fathers, being a Patristic scholar in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. He accomplishes this end in a concise yet substantial way; his book is packed with depth, yet it is only 97 pages long. His understanding of classical philosophy and theology is evident from the multitude and quality of his citations and his ability to summarize the views of those from whom he draws his views. This book is worth reading, especially for those interested in a Theology of the Body. More broadly, it will appeal to anyone looking to understand the method, doctrine, and emphases of Eastern Orthodoxy in a precise and concise manner, without any excess.

Summary

The book is divided into six chapters that begin with man in his created state and end with man in his resurrected state. For Larchet, man is a tripartite being composed of body, soul, and spirit. Being made in God's image, the spirit is how he exercises self-determination (15-17). This self-determination is key for man to attain "likeness" to God through participation in God's energies given to him as a gift of grace. By freely participating in God's energies, man attains "god" status. This is the purpose of man: to become a partaker of the divine nature by grace. Man participates in this divinization with the whole of his nature, including his body.

The Fall, however, resulted in ancestral sin that affected both man's body and his spirit. Through ancestral sin, the body becomes "…the favored instrument of this fleshly pleasure that from now on replaces the spiritual pleasure Adam and Eve had begun to know in paradise…" (34-35). Instead of ascending by grace to become a god, mankind descends to become more like beasts. The body, meant to become deified, becomes the center of the passion of self-love, which is an "egotistical, passionate love of oneself" (35). Through sin, man is set against himself and oth-

ers. He has desires in a thousand contradictory directions. His body has acquired a "materiality, a thickness, and an opacity that it did not originally possess" (38). He is subject to death, having lost the grace whereby he could attain the "likeness of God."

Larchet then presents the incarnation of Christ as bringing salvation to mankind, even mankind's body. The Son of God assumed true human nature, including a human body. Christ, being God, is filled with the divine energies, even in the body. This is most apparent in the transfiguration where the "eyes of those apostles present were suddenly opened by the Holy Spirit so that they were able to see his body become transparent to the divine energies; and when, through his body, Christ's human nature was shown to be bathed in them, filled, enveloped, and totally permeated by them" (46). In filling human nature with the divine energies and in voluntarily taking upon himself non-culpable passions (hunger, suffering, etc.) and triumphing over them and the Devil in the cross, resurrection, and ascension, He opens up a way of salvation for mankind through participation in him.

This participation is the focus of the fourth chapter, and this participatory salvation occurs through the Christian church, the body of Christ on earth. The salvation of Christ is conveyed through the sacraments, which are participated in through the body. Furthermore, through grace and the will, man can lead a virtuous life, controlling his body through grace and asceticism so that he can devote himself to prayer and worship. This spiritual transformation has a positive effect on man's body as well as his soul. This grace makes the body "young" and "radiant" (87). This is manifest in the example of the saints and even in relics (87-91). Importantly, in man's final, resurrected state, Christians will not experience "limitation, constraint, or restriction, but will be freed from the laws of nature as we now know them … we shall experience perfect bodily health, total and definitive, so that we shall be able to receive in body as in soul the fullness of grace…" (96). Man, through the salvation of Christ, can attain the "likeness" of the divine nature for which he was made.

Evaluation

This book accomplishes more than it initially appears. It certainly presents a Theology of the Body, but it does so in such a manner that clearly articulates many of the distinctives of Orthodox Christianity (icons, Eastern liturgy, prayers for the dead, the centrality of theosis, etc.). If the reader has a basic understanding of the emphases, style, and distinctives of Orthodox theology, this book will help order in his or her mind the various parts (icons, asceticism, sacramentology) to the broader structural whole (participation in God vis-à-vis the divine energies through the will participating in grace) of that theological tradition.

Furthermore, the book proves to be exceedingly practical. The longest chapter, spanning pages 51-86, offers an exposition of the body in a person's spiritual life, covering the roles of sacraments, dietary practices, sexual conduct, prayer, and worship in detail. Most of these aspects of practical theology are readily applicable to the average reader. In this manner, the book, while not being extensively polemical, serves as a forceful challenge to the ungodly gluttony and sloth that characterizes much of contemporary American culture.

This book does not focus on contentious cultural and political issues like other Theologies of the Body. While there are some references to his disagreements with Western theology, one won't find extensive arguments engaging with issues like transgenderism, abortion, euthanasia and homosexuality (though abortion is mentioned). However, this is a positive because these polemics relative to the body can be found elsewhere and would interrupt the orderly and concise flow of the book.

Notably absent from the book is a section on the afterlife for the damned. While the book provides ample material regarding the resurrected state for the righteous, it does not explain the nature of hell for the wicked. What is the nature of the body for the damned? Do the unrighteous experience bodily torment?

The largest stumbling blocks for many will stem from Larchet's views of pleasure in general and the sexual nature of man in particular. For Larchet, not all pleasure is evil; indeed, man is to pursue pleasure in God. However, bodily pleasure is something that Larchet discusses with a high degree of suspicion (though without denouncing it entirely). Further, he expresses the view that sexual reproduction is a result of the Fall. When sanctified by marriage, sex is not evil, but it is still a consequence of the Fall. The book would have been better if he made an argument for this position (yet, keeping with his method, an appeal to the fathers is sufficient grounds of belief for Larchet).

Christians of the Lutheran confession will likely receive this book with mixed feelings. All Lutherans—inasmuch as they are truly Lutheran—will view Larchet's emphasis on the freedom of the will with considerable suspicion, though, one hopes, with charity and theological nuance. Moreover, the book lacks any clear emphasis on the forensic or legal aspects of justification.

That said, Lutherans who value and seek to live out Article VI of the Augsburg Confession ("Of the New Obedience") and Article V of the Apology ("Of Love and the Fulfilling of the Law") will find much that is practically useful in Larchet's treatment of the body and Christian obedience. These sections can serve as a helpful resource for living faithfully in a manner consistent with the spirit of the Book of Concord.

Conclusion

This book accomplishes what it sets out to accomplish and more. For anyone who is looking for an in-depth and concise introduction to the Theology of the Body, this book is well worth the read. Further, for those interested in Patristic theology and Eastern Orthodox theology, this book is a worthwhile introduction to that theological tradition. Finally, this book is worthwhile for any Christian who desires to grow in bodily discipline and virtue. Its practicality, conciseness, and precision set it apart from other books on the Theology of the Body.

Patrick Steckbeck *is a Ph.D. student at Christ School of Theology, Institute of Lutheran Theology, and Headmaster at Grace Lutheran Academy in Naples, Florida.*

Book Review

Aaron M. Renn, *Life in the Negative World: Confronting Challenges in an Anti-Christian Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2024), xviii + 248 pp. $26.99

Reviewed by Tony Seel

The seeds for his book, *Life in the Negative World: Confronting Challenges in an Anti-Christian Culture*, were sown in a *First Things* magazine essay in 2022. In that essay, author Aaron M. Renn laid out what he terms the three stages of secularization in America. According to Renn, prior to 1994, Christianity was seen as a positive for American culture. Between the years 1994 and 2014, Christianity was viewed as an acceptable lifestyle choice among many others. This neutral stance was upended in 2014 when the Christian faith increasingly became understood as a threat to the secular moral order.

Welcome to the negative world. In the Introduction to the book, Renn reports that he started developing his premise of a negative world in 2014. The *First Things* essay in 2022, entitled "The Three Worlds of Evangelicalism,"[1] introduced his three worlds schematic to a wider audience. His book-length treatment of this subject was published in 2024.[2]

In March 2025, the *Lutheran Witness* magazine published an article by Renn titled "The Negative World – Facing a New Social Reality as Christians." In the *Lutheran Witness* article, Renn states that "As late as the 1950s, half of all U.S. adults attended church each week."[3] From the 1960s onward, church attendance and cultural influence declined. The three phases of his premise articulate the decline of the church's cultural influence.

Accompanying this decline are three strategies that evangelical Christians and churches have adopted to counteract the trend militating against the church and Christians. One strategy is identified with Pastor Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority organization he founded in 1979. The Moral Majority sought to unite the Christian right, consisting of fundamentalists, evangelicals, and Christian traditionalists, into a movement to influence American politics. As a strategy that developed in the positive world, Renn views this culture warrior approach as less effective in the negative world.

Yet, while evangelicals are divided on President Donald Trump, significant numbers of them coalesced around his candidacies in the last three presidential

election cycles and were an important part of his winning coalition in two of them. Perhaps, there is more life in the culture war modality than Renn is willing to concede. He does identify the Christian Right with lower status and being "unpopular with society's elites" (42). This ties in with his critique, along the lines of Mark Noll's book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, that there is a dearth of evangelicals in leadership positions at "major conservative think tanks and publications" (66). The late pastor Tim Keller is also cited concerning evangelicalism's "strongly anti-intellectual cast" (65).

My critique of his critique on this point pertains to walking and chewing gum at the same time. Could it be possible that evangelicals can work to raise up worthy intellectuals while a larger segment remains engaged in the culture war front of politics and law? Renn seems to favor the intellectual side while expressing disdain for the culture war side. He views culture war engagement as creating divisions that are "ripping churches and other evangelical institutions apart" (38). He appeals to David Brooks, who identifies a small portion of the "Roughly 80 percent of white evangelicals [who] supported Trump in 2020, as a divisive element within evangelicalism.[4]

That supports Renn's point, but consider what Brooks also says: "It would certainly be a vast improvement if evangelicals were better equipped to separate truth from propaganda, if they had more refined criteria for what a responsible leader looks like, if they had better training for how to be involved in their communities."[5]

Couldn't we say that about any group? Even intellectuals aren't immune from accepting propaganda as bona fide truth. Second, a host of social elites have shown less than "a refined criteria for what a responsible leader looks like," if they agree with her or his policies. For example, historian Timothy Stanley writes,

> Because Bill Clinton used his presidential authority to defend abortion rights, accusations made against him were ignored or dismissed by supporters. The feminist writer Anne Roiphe said at the time: "It will be a great pity if the Democratic Party is damaged by this.… I just wanted to close my eyes, and wished it would go away."[6]

A second strategy for evangelicals was also first deployed in the positive world. It is on display at megachurches such as Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago, and Saddleback Church in Orange County, California. This approach, often called seeker sensitive, seeks to make the Sunday experience more palatable to the otherwise non-churched. Renn notes that this approach had an appeal to baby boomers.

However, with the "resurgence" of America's large cities, a third strategy came to the fore. This strategy is called "cultural engagement." With this third strategy,

evangelicals play up values they hold in common with the wider population, and downplay "flashpoint social issues" like abortion and human sexuality (27). The weakness of this approach is a perception of "bait and switch." Secularists are drawn in and then discover that the packaging misrepresents the product. The evangelical engagers hope to influence without giving offense. That's a very tall order for a moral framework that differs greatly from the secular moral order of the negative world.

Renn acknowledges that in the negative world, the church has entered "unfamiliar territory" (43). He asserts that "finding a path in this fundamentally unknown world will require a different approach from the strategies of the past" (44). What is that path?

Renn admits that the seeker-sensitive approach is "still applicable in many situations today" (44). He also understands that "a one-size-fits-all model" will not work in our diverse nation (46). In other words, what works in suburbs does not necessarily work in urban areas. This ignores the seeker sensitive churches that thrive in urban settings, such as the Hillsong campuses in Los Angeles, New York City, and Boston.[7]

Renn doesn't offer any easy answers. However, there are some mindset shifts that he deems essential. The first is recognizing that we are now a moral minority. Because of this, the Christian mindset must be countercultural since our values are at odds with the wider culture. The question then becomes: how can we engage with culture while acknowledging that we are a minority that is viewed overall as a negative force?

Renn identifies "three key domains" for engagement: personal, institutional, and missional (49). He concludes his book with three chapters on each of these domains. Personally, we are called to live the Gospel in both easy and difficult times in obedience to Christ, by integrating our faith into every area of our lives. Institutionally, the Gospel is to be proclaimed in our churches and other church institutions such as schools and nursing homes, with integrity and competence, building communities of faith that support and strengthen the faith and resilience of members. Missionally, the church is to love our neighbors through verbal witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and through acts of mercy and compassion.

One question that Renn's work raises is whether he is reading our times correctly. Certainly, we can find markers in earlier times that militate against clean demarcations, like the Supreme Court decision in 1962 to remove public prayer from our public schools during the period that he deems the positive world. That we can find instances like this doesn't negate his framework, in my estimation. Even if he is wrong about the positive and neutral worlds, and overall, I don't think he is, surely he has made a sound case for the negative world in which we presently live.

Even though he discusses new approaches and strategies, his prescriptions for our time are based on models from earlier eras. One example he cites is Roman Catholics who created their own schools in response to public schools that didn't support their values. Another example is black communities that have supported black-owned businesses. In a culture where major corporations support anti-Christian endeavors, creating Christian-owned and operated businesses is a viable way to provide jobs for Christians as a bulwark against employment that requires subscription to anti-Christian values. Author Rod Dreher predicts that we are heading toward a time when what "has happened to Christian bakers, florists, and wedding photographers will be much more widespread."[8] All that Renn says about the negative world points in that direction.

In his *Lutheran Witness* article, Renn states that the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod "is far ahead of much of the rest of Protestant America in adjusting to the Negative World, because it has been structured… [with] denominational schools, universities and the like. It has a rooted theology, historic liturgy and a rich collection of hymns."[9] Is that enough? With 800 LCMS elementary schools and 78,000 students, that isn't much of a dent in a society of over 340 million. With an average Sunday morning attendance of less than 500,000; again, not much of a dent.

The LCMS wrestles with how to address an aging membership, declining churches and schools. Recruiting younger men and women for service to the church is one initiative. Another is revitalizing older congregations, particularly small churches. A third initiative is church planting. The broader Lutheran community in America would be wise to embrace these initiatives in their own denominations.

The challenge for Christians, churches, and denominations in the negative world is daunting. However, Jesus Christ does speak about how something small can grow into something large. Evangelical Christians in our negative world have not yet been silenced completely, even with employee codes that discourage personal witness. Evangelical churches have not been prevented from proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ, even during the Covid crisis when federal and state governments decreed that they be shuttered. God still gives Christians and churches opportunities to share with others what Jesus Christ has given to us, the words of God's grace, mercy, and love. How we do that is a challenge in every circumstance where the Church finds herself. God's promise given through the prophet Isaiah is still true—God's Word will not return empty (Isa 55:11).

Tony Seel *is Pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Chenango Bridge, New York.*

Notes

1. Aaron M. Renn, "The Three Worlds of Evangelicalism," *First Things*, February 1, 2022, https://firstthings.com/the-three-worlds-of-evangelicalism/. Accessed July 10, 2025.
2. Aaron M. Renn, *Life in the Negative World: Confronting Challenges in an Anti-Christian Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2024).
3. Aaron M. Renn, "The Negative World: Facing a New Social Reality as Christians," *Lutheran Witness* 144, no. 3 (March 2025): 8-10.
4. David Brooks, "The Dissenters Trying to Save Evangelicalism From Itself," *New York Times*, February 4, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/04/opinion/evangelicalism-division-renewal.html. Accessed July 10, 2025.
5. Ibid.
6. Timothy Stanley, "The Problem with Bill Clinton," *CNN*, March 1, 2016, https://www.cnn.com/2016/01/04/opinions/stanley-bill-clinton/index.html. Accessed July 31, 2025.
7. For more information, see https://hillsong.com/usa/. Accessed July 10, 2025.
8. Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017, 2018), 63.
9. Renn, "The Negative World," *Lutheran Witness*, 10.

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