VERBA VITAE

A Serious Christian Journal of Life and its Significance

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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 Autumn Issue

Over fifty years ago, French philosopher and sociologist Edgar Morin stated that "the last continent unknown to humanity is humanity itself." This provocative statement invites serious inquiry into the nature of human self-understanding. Accordingly, the current issue of *Verba Vitae* is dedicated to the theme, "God's Anthropology: An Inquiry into What It Means to Be Human." Within this framework, we explore fundamental questions about human identity, purpose, and relationships in an era marked by rapid change and widespread ambiguity. This volume features a collection of scholarly essays that engage with the interdisciplinary convergence of theology, philosophy, and ethics, offering nuanced perspectives on the contemporary human condition.

In "Created, Fallen, and Redeemed: A Lutheran Theological Anthropology for a Confused Age," Dan Lioy addresses the urgent crisis of human identity through Lutheran theology. Rooted in Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, Lioy critiques modern ideologies such as materialism, expressive individualism, and transhumanism, while affirming humanity's creation in the image of God, its redemption through Christ, and the transformative power of Word and Sacrament. His essay calls the Church to a bold witness that upholds the sanctity of life and proclaims the Gospel as the ultimate hope for a fractured world.

Dennis Di Mauro's "*Imago Dei* as 'Original Righteousness' in the Old Testament" explores the biblical concept of the *imago Dei*, examining its theological implications for human dignity and the sanctity of life. By comparing Protestant and Roman Catholic perspectives, Di Mauro highlights the enduring importance of humanity's creation in God's image as a foundation for living for "the other" and pro-life advocacy.

In "Authenticity, Bad Faith, and the Public Self: A Wittgensteinian-Lutheran Reframing," Dennis Bielfeldt challenges the modern obsession with authenticity by reframing identity as relational and vocational. Drawing on Wittgenstein, Sartre, Heidegger, and Luther, Bielfeldt critiques the cultural pursuit of the "authentic self" and proposes a view of self that is rooted in our relationship with God through Jesus Christ. As Bielfeldt writes, "The divine image is not an essence to be discovered but a relation to be lived." Later, he concludes with, "Life is not secured by turning inward but by being turned outward. *For we are ultimately an ecstatic self, alive only in the gracious gaze of God*." Only this can enable us to see who we truly are, and then to live out our vocations in love for and responsibility to our neighbor.

William Fredstrom's "The Limits of Chatbot Love and the Good of Embodied Relationality" examines the rise of emotional attachments to AI-enabled companion chatbots, a phenomenon reshaping human relationships. While recognizing their benefits, Fredstrom critiques the ethical and relational limitations of "algorithmic intimacy," advocating for a return to embodied relationality and self-giving love.

Finally, Joel Biermann's "Learning to Be What You Were Created to Be" offers a compelling call to integrate doctrine and ethics in the Christian life. He draws on Lutheran theology, especially "passive" and "active" righteousness, as explained by Luther in his "Two Kinds of Righteousness." Biermann writes, "Before his Creator, the Christian receives the grace, forgiveness, and righteousness of Christ and so is fully justified and made entirely righteous. He now lives without burden, debt, or obligation.... Meanwhile, before his fellow creatures, the same believer at the same time lives in relationships in which he has work to do for the sake of those around him." Thus, in Christ, the Christian is justified and righteous apart from works. Before our neighbor, the Christian lives a life of work-filled service.

Additionally, the section on book reviews covers topics such as cultural anthropology, transgender issues, and the decline of American society into a form of neopaganism.

This issue of *Verba Vitae* invites you to reflect deeply on the challenges and opportunities of our age, offering a vision of humanity grounded in divine grace, ethical responsibility, and relational love. We hope these essays inspire you to engage with the pressing questions of our time and to live out your calling with renewed faith and purpose.

Dennis Bielfeldt

General Editor, *Verba Vitae*

Created, Fallen, and Redeemed

A Lutheran Theological Anthropology for a Confused Age

Dan Lioy

Standard Abbreviations for Lutheran Sources

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

1.0 Introduction

1.1 The Urgency of Lutheran Theological Anthropology in Our Time

WE ARE LIVING IN AN ERA OF PROFOUND anthropological crisis, where the question "*What does it mean to be human?*" is no longer merely rhetorical or academic but urgently existential and fiercely debated. In the Global North, the intellectual, cultural, and moral landscape is fractured, with competing and often contradictory visions of human nature, purpose, and dignity. Many of these ideologies conflict with the testimony of Scripture, which affirms that humanity is created in the image of God (Gen 1:26–27) yet fallen and in need of redemption through Christ (Rom 5:12–19).

Modern anthropological frameworks—such as naturalistic materialism, expressive individualism, and radical subjectivism—sever humanity from its divine origin and purpose. Naturalistic materialism reduces the human person to a mere biological organism, denying the spiritual dimension and the image of God in which

humanity was created. Expressive individualism elevates personal autonomy and self-expression above communal responsibility or divinely revealed moral norms. Radical subjectivism goes further still, asserting that identity and truth are self-determined rather than grounded in the created order and God's law (Rom 1:22–25). These distorted views of the human person result not in true freedom but in confusion, moral disorder, and deep alienation. Far from liberating, they enslave the human heart to sin and futility (Eccl 1:2, 14; 2:11, 15, 17; 4:4; 6:9; 7:15; 8:14; 11:10; 12:8; Pss 31:6; 39:5, 11; 62:9; 78:33; 94:11; 144:4; John 8:34; Eph 4:17–19).

In response, the Church is called to reclaim and proclaim a theological anthropology rooted in God's inspired and authoritative Word. This anthropology is not speculative philosophy but biblical truth: humanity is created by God, fallen through sin, and redeemed and renewed through union with Christ (Rom 6:4–10; 12:1–2; 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15). Lutheran theology provides essential resources for this task, offering not only an unwavering commitment to Scripture but also doctrinal clarity on the human condition, justification, and sanctification.

1.2 A Lutheran Framework for Theological Anthropology

The Lutheran tradition, deeply rooted in the doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone (Eph 2:8–9; AC IV.1–3), offers profound insight into the question of human identity. It upholds the inherent dignity of every person created in the image of God (Gen 1:26–27), while also recognizing that this image was profoundly corrupted by the fall into sin. As Luther explains in the *Small Catechism*, "I believe that God has created me together with all that exists" (SC II.1–2), yet also confesses, "by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my LORD or come to him" (SC II. 6). This dynamic tension—between creation and fall, between the Law that exposes sin and the Gospel that proclaims Christ—is not a paradox to be resolved by human reasoning, but a divine truth that drives us to the Cross alone for redemption (1 Cor 1:18–25; FC SD V.1–11).[1]

The Lutheran Confessions, as gathered in the Book of Concord, articulate a rich theological anthropology grounded in the doctrines of creation, sin, justification, and vocation. Drawing from these confessional foundations, Lutheran theology describes the human person in terms of three fundamental relationships: before God (*coram Deo*), before others (*coram hominibus*), and before the world (*coram mundo*). Created to reflect God's glory (Isa 43:7), humanity nevertheless stands condemned under the Law (Rom 3:19–20). Yet, through faith in Christ, sinners are justified by his righteousness (Rom 3:23–26) and called to serve their neighbor in love through their divinely appointed vocations (Gal 5:13–14). This biblical anthropology stands in stark contrast to secular visions of humanity—whether those rooted in identity politics, radical autonomy, or the denial of transcendent truth—which often portray

human beings as self-defined or isolated from divine purpose. Instead, Lutheran theology affirms that humans are mortal creatures (Gen 2:7), redeemed sinners (Eph 2:8–9), and new creations in Christ (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15), called into communion with God (1 John 1:3) and love for one another (John 15:12–13; 1 John 4:19–21). Ultimately, believers await the restoration of all things in the new creation (Isa 65:17; Rom 8:19–21; Rev 21:1–5), where God will be "all in all" (1 Cor 15:28).

1.3 The Purpose and Scope of This Study

This study presents a distinctly Lutheran theological anthropology—one that is grounded in Scripture, rooted in the confessions, and critically engaged with the challenges of our time. It begins by unfolding the scriptural witness to creation, fall, and redemption, showing how the image of God, though marred by sin, is restored in union with Christ (Eph 4:22–24; Col 3:9–11). Drawing upon the Lutheran Confessions—especially the *Augsburg Confession*, the *Formula of Concord*, and *Luther's Catechisms*—the essay develops an anthropology that does not flinch at the depth of human sinfulness (Gen 6:5; Jer 17:9), but which magnifies the grace of God revealed in the person and work of Christ (Titus 3:4–7).[2]

This study also offers a theological critique of prevailing counterfeit anthropologies—including naturalistic materialism, gender constructivism, and expressive individualism—which distort or deny the biblical vision of the human person (Rom 1:18–32). These systems fail to reckon with humanity's temporal origin, sinful condition, and ultimate accountability before God (Gen 3:19; Eccl 12:13–14; 2 Cor 5:10; Heb 9:27). In addition, this work explores how a Lutheran anthropology addresses key ethical and cultural concerns, including gender identity, human dignity at the end of life, and the church's witness in a fractured society. The essay shows how the doctrine of creation shapes our understanding of the body (1 Cor 3:16–17; 6:19–20), how the doctrine of sin diagnoses the idols of the age (Gal 4:3; Col 2:8; 1 Tim 6:20), and how the doctrine of redemption provides not only a message of forgiveness but also a new identity rooted in Christ (Rom 6:4–11; Gal 2:20).

The goal is not merely intellectual critique, but pastoral formation. The Church must be equipped to speak the "truth in love" (Eph 4:15),[3] to uphold the sanctity of life from conception to natural death (Ps 139:13–16), and to embody the hope of the Gospel in its life and witness (1 Pet 2:9–10). At strategic points throughout the study, essential terms and pivotal concepts (including those mentioned above) are revisited to help readers gain a deeper analytical understanding. This emphasis is intentional, because at stake is nothing less than the integrity of the proclamation of the Gospel and the clarity of the Church's mission in a world that has forgotten what it means to be human.

2.0 Created in God's Image:
A Lutheran Framework for Human Identity

2.1. Humanity as God's Good Creation

LUTHERAN THEOLOGY, GROUNDED IN THE AUTHORITY of Scripture and articulated in the Lutheran Confessions, affirms that humanity is uniquely created in the *imago Dei* (the image of God; Gen 1:26–27; 5:1; 9:6; 1 Cor 11:7; Jas 3:9). This image is far more than a peripheral attribute or a functional faculty, but an ontological gift bestowed by the Creator. It constitutes the human being's original righteousness, relational integrity, and capacity for communion with the Triune God.

God's declaration that His creation is "very good" (Gen 1:31) affirms the inherent, functional integrity of embodied human existence. Contrary to gnostic dualisms that devalue the body or materialist ideologies that reduce humanity to biological processes, Lutheran theology affirms the unity of body and soul in God's design (Gen 2:7). As Luther teaches in his *Lectures on Genesis* (LW 1:60–69), the image of God includes not only reason and will but also the orientation of the whole person—physical, intellectual, volitional, and spiritual—toward God and neighbor. In this sense, redeemed humanity is recreated as a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16–17; 6:19–20; 1 Pet 2:4–5), destined to live in communion with God, and intended to reflect his holiness in the world (1 Pet 1:14–16).

The Lutheran Confessions uphold a high anthropology while acknowledging humanity's corruption through sin. The Augsburg Confession (AC I.1–4) establishes God as the gracious Creator of all, providing the foundational understanding that human dignity and value are inherent, stemming from this divine act rather than individual achievements, social recognition, or utilitarian function. While AC II.1–2 highlights the profound impact of original sin on humanity's state, Lutheran theology consistently affirms that every person, regardless of age, ability, or circumstance, bears the divine imprint, as beautifully reflected in Psalm 8:4–5 and 139:13–16. This understanding renders human life sacred from conception to natural death, a core tenet in Lutheran teachings on the sanctity of life.

2.2. Human Purpose in Divine Design

Humanity's purpose is rooted in relationship: *coram Deo* (before God), *coram hominibus* (before others), and *coram mundo* (before the world). Created not in isolation but in communion, humans were made to love God, serve the neighbor, and steward creation (Gen 2:15; Isa 1:17; Jer 22:3; Mic 6:8). The *imago Dei* is expressed not through self-assertion but through self-giving love, reflecting the relational nature of the Triune God. As Luther declares in *The Freedom of a Christian*, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all" (LW 31:344).

Luther's doctrine of vocation (*Beruf*) profoundly illuminates the Christian's calling. In his *Treatise on Good Works* (LW 44:21–114), Luther lays the ethical foundation for vocation, showing how faith expresses itself in love through everyday responsibilities. The theme is developed more fully in the *Large Catechism*, especially under the First Commandment (LC I.1.1–29), where Luther teaches that the heart of Christian life is trust in God above all else—a trust that shapes one's callings in the home, church, and society. For Luther, vocation is not a path to self-fulfillment but the arena in which God's providential care is exercised. Through faith, Christians become instruments of that care, serving the neighbor in love (Gal 5:13–14). In this, they are "masks of God" (*larvae Dei*), as Luther teaches in his exposition of Psalm 147 (LW 14:112–115), where he emphasizes that God provides and governs through ordinary human work. This perspective is also embedded in Luther's exposition of the Fourth Commandment (LC I.4.103–178), where roles such as parent, teacher, and ruler are honored as divine offices. Thus, every vocation becomes a means by which Christians glorify God (1 Cor 10:31) and walk in the good works prepared for them (Eph 2:10).

This theology of vocation directly challenges the hyper-individualism of modern Western culture, which idolizes autonomy, self-definition, and expressive freedom. Lutheran anthropology instead asserts that true freedom is found in being bound to God and neighbor in love. The *Small Catechism*'s petition for "daily bread" (SC III.4,12–14) teaches believers to pray not only for their own needs but also, implicitly, for the needs of all, as part of life under God's providential care. This communal and creaturely dimension is expanded in the *Large Catechism*, where Luther explains that "daily bread" includes "everything that belongs to our entire life in this world"—such as food, health, good government, peace, and faithful neighbors—gifts which God provides through the vocations of others (LC III.4.71–84). Moreover, the stewardship of creation (Gen 1:28; Ps 24:1–2) is not dominion through exploitation but care marked by gratitude and responsibility. Redeemed humanity's purpose is fulfilled not in isolation or domination, but in worship, communion, and service.

2.3. The Fall: Corruption and the Need for Redemption

The Fall, as recorded in Genesis 3, introduced a profound rupture into human nature, corrupting the *imago Dei* and binding the will, intellect, and affections to sin (Rom 3:10–18; 5:12). As the *Formula of Concord* teaches (FC Ep I.1–4), original sin is not merely the absence of good but the active presence of concupiscence—a "deep corruption of [human] nature"—leaving humanity without the spiritual capacity to turn to God unaided (Ps 51:5; Jer 17:9; FC SD I.52). Luther's *Bondage of the Will* (LW 33:64–70, 98–104) emphasizes the severity of this fallen state: the human will, apart from the Holy Spirit, is not free but enslaved, turned inward (*incurvatus in*

se), and wholly incapable of choosing God (John 6:44; Rom 8:7–8). The human condition after the Fall is not merely one of sickness but of spiritual death (Eph 2:1–3). This sobering anthropology rejects any utopianism or Pelagian optimism in human progress or moral perfectibility.

In this fallen state, human dignity, though marred, endures and awaits redemption through union with Christ. The Lutheran Confessions articulate this dynamic tension in the doctrine of *simul iustus et peccator*—simultaneously justified and sinner (Rom 7:18–25; Gal 5:17)—as expounded in the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* (Ap IV.48–60), and reaffirmed in the *Formula of Concord* (FC SD III.9–11, 23–25). Justification is by grace alone (*sola gratia*), through faith alone (*sola fide*), for the sake of Christ alone (*solus Christus*), as affirmed in the *Augsburg Confession* (AC IV.1–3) and defended in the *Apology* (Ap IV.2–5, 48–60, 86–96; Rom 3:28; Eph 2:8–10). The Law, rightly preached, reveals the depth of human sin and exposes all pretense of self-righteousness (Rom 7:7–13; FC SD V.1–11), while the Gospel, rightly proclaimed, grants the imputed righteousness of Christ to the ungodly (2 Cor 5:21; FC SD III.13–15; III.54–56). This Law-Gospel dialectic, foundational to Lutheran theology, ensures that human identity is not self-fashioned but is graciously bestowed and continually restored in Christ.

2.4. Redemption and Eschatological Hope in Christ

Christ is the true and perfect *imago Dei*—the "image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15)—who came to restore what Adam lost through sin and to recreate humanity in the Son, the new and greater Adam (Rom 5:12–21; 1 Cor 15:45–49). Through Christ's incarnation, atoning death, and bodily resurrection, he does not merely offer moral improvement but brings about a new creation (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15). By faith alone, believers are justified and united with Christ and are conformed to his image by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace—Word and Sacrament (Rom 8:29; Gal 4:4–7).

Luther's *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross), articulated in the *Heidelberg Disputation* (especially theses 19–21; LW 31:40), teaches that God's power and wisdom are hidden (*Deus absconditus*) under the apparent weakness of the cross. Yet, in this very concealment, God is revealed (*Deus revelatus*) in Christ crucified (1 Cor 1:18–25). Human identity is thus found not in glory or self-actualization but in Christ, through whom the believer is daily put to death by the Law and raised to new life by the Gospel. The Christian's existence is cruciform—marked by dying and rising with Christ in baptism (Rom 6:3–5; Col 2:11–12), bearing the cross in daily repentance, and awaiting the resurrection of the body (Phil 3:20–21). This eschatological hope is not a theoretical abstraction, but a concrete promise grounded in Christ's bodily resurrection (1 Cor 15:1–8, 12–22). It affirms that redemption en-

compasses the whole person—body and soul—and culminates in eternal communion with God in the new creation (Rev 21:1–5). Thus, Lutheran anthropology not only emphasizes what is creational and fallen but also redemptive and eschatological.

In this "present evil age" (Gal 1:4), believers live as those who have been restored by grace and who now bear witness to God's renewing work through their vocations and through the Church's ministry of Word and Sacrament. The sanctity of human life, rooted in the Creator and redeemed by the Savior, calls the Church to defend the vulnerable, uphold justice, and practice mercy (Isa 1:17; Jer 22:3; Mic 6:8; Matt 25:40; Jas 1:27; 1 John 3:16–18). As the *Apology* affirms (Ap XX.15), faith expresses itself in love—not to merit salvation, but as the fruit of the Spirit's indwelling presence (Gal 5:5–6, 22–23). So then, until the day of Christ's return, the baptized live in hope, confessing that their true identity is "hidden with Christ in God" (Col 3:3). Sustained by the means of grace, the Church proclaims the Gospel that not only saves souls but also restores believers to their created purpose—living in communion with God, neighbor, and creation as redeemed image-bearers of Christ.

3.0 Counterfeit Anthropologies and Their Consequences: A Lutheran Theological Perspective

3.1 The Nature and Origin of Counterfeit Anthropologies

COUNTERFEIT ANTHROPOLOGIES REPRESENT FALSE and destructive beliefs about human nature. They stem from intentionally rejecting the biblical truth that humanity is created in God's image (Gen 1:26–27). These distortions are widespread in modern culture, media, education, and politics, replacing God's revelation with human-centered ideas. As Paul warns, "Such people have traded the truth about God for the lie, worshipping and serving the creation rather than the Creator" (Rom 1:25).

From a Lutheran perspective, such distorted views about humanity stem not from intellectual missteps but from original sin—the inherited corruption that darkens reason, disorders desires, and alienates humanity from God (Ps 51:5; Rom 5:12). The *Formula of Concord* describes original sin as "a corruption so deep that there is nothing sound or uncorrupted left in the human body or soul in its internal or external powers" (FC Ap I.8). Luther, in his *Lectures on Genesis*, similarly describes original sin as stripping humanity of divine knowledge and corrupting all faculties, rendering man without judgment in spiritual matters (LW 1:114; 1 Cor 2:14). This corruption is not a surface flaw, but a radical disintegration of what humanity was created to be—leaving the will bound, the intellect obscured, and the affections disordered apart from divine grace.

Furthermore, this corruption yields counterfeit anthropologies that elevate human autonomy, reject divine authority, and redefine the self in rebellion against God's creative order (Rom 1:21–23). These pagan ideologies, which Luther critiques for attributing to free will the ability to contribute toward righteousness, appeal to fallen reason and promise liberation, but ultimately lead to bondage, despair, and death. The Lutheran tradition, standing upon the clarity and sufficiency of Scripture and the doctrinal fidelity of the *Book of Concord*, seeks to unmask these falsehoods and confess the true anthropology: that humanity is created by God, fallen through sin, and redeemed through Christ—called, as Luther writes, "that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness" (SC II.4), existing *coram Deo* in faith, *coram hominibus* in love, and *coram mundo* as stewards of God's creation.

3.2 Four Dominant Counterfeit Anthropologies

3.2.1 Materialism and Scientism

Extreme materialism, which asserts that only physical matter is real, and scientism, which insists that empirical inquiry is the only valid means of knowing truth, both tend to reduce the human person—including consciousness, identity, and will—to nothing more than biological mechanisms and observable data. This myopic view neglects the deeper spiritual reality of human existence. By denying the presence of the soul, such ideologies stand in direct contradiction to the biblical witness: "The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Gen 2:7). In doing so, they also obscure the doctrine of the *imago Dei* by rejecting the soul's reality and the moral responsibility with which God has endowed human beings (Eccl 12:7; Isa 8:13; Matt 10:28; Heb 10:31).

The *Augsburg Confession* declares that human nature, though corrupted by sin, is not a morally neutral biological mechanism: "Since the fall of Adam, all human beings who are born in the natural way are conceived and born in sin. This means that from birth they are full of evil lust and inclination and cannot by nature possess true fear of God and true faith in God (AC II.1–2).[4] Likewise, the *Formula of Concord* affirms that original sin is not a mere flaw but "a corruption so deep that there is nothing sound our uncorrupted left in the human body or soul, in its internal or external powers" (FC Ep I.8); indeed, as noted earlier, the image of God in man has been completely lost in the narrow sense of original righteousness (FC SD I.10). Yet, because humanity remains God's creature, fashioned in his intent and sustained by his providence, each person retains God-given worth (Gen 5:1–2; 9:6; 1 Cor 11:7; Jas 3:9). In contrast to this biblical view, materialist ideologies sever the spiritual dimension from anthropology and yield a culture grounded in

utilitarian ethics. Human life becomes a disposable commodity, leading to practices such as abortion, euthanasia, and genetic manipulation (Exod 20:13; Deut 5:17; Ps 139:13–16). As Luther warns in the *Large Catechism*, "Anything on which your heart relies and depends ... is really your God" (LC I.3), and "where your trust is false and wrong, there you do not have the true God" (LC I.3). Such idolatry erodes the dignity of human life, especially that of the weak and vulnerable.

3.2.2 Expressive Individualism and the Autonomous Self

Expressive individualism exalts the self as the ultimate authority, promoting the false belief that identity, purpose, and morality arise from within the individual. This ideology stands in opposition to God's created order, which places human beings within vocations and communities shaped by his providential will. Instead of receiving meaning as a gift from God, the individualist framework insists on self-definition, echoing the serpent's temptation in Genesis 3:5, "you will be like God." From a Lutheran perspective, this reflects the sinful rebellion of fallen humanity against God's authority, as described in Romans 1:21, in which the way people thought "became nonsense, and their senseless heart was darkened." In turning from the Creator to the self, humanity has "traded the truth about God for the lie" (v. 25). Conversely, true identity and purpose are not found in autonomy, but in Christ, who through his grace restores us to our God-given callings and reorients us toward life under his lordship.

Luther's doctrine of vocation teaches that true freedom is found not in self-assertion but in humble service to neighbor through one's God-given roles (Gal 5:13–14). As Luther writes in his *The Freedom of a Christian*, "A Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise, he is not a Christian" (LW 31:371). Through faith, the Christian is "caught up beyond himself into God," and through love, "descends beneath himself into his neighbor" (LW 31:371). The *Large Catechism*, under the First Commandment, emphasizes that "Anything on which your heart relies and depends..., that is really your God" (LC I.4).

When the self becomes the highest authority, it leads to the breakdown of God's institutions—marriage (Gen 2:20–25; Eph 5:22–33; 1 Pet 3:1–7), family, church, and state—resulting in social fragmentation, emotional isolation, and moral relativism (Deut 12:8; Judg 21:25). The *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* (Ap IV; V) emphasizes that righteousness and acceptance before God originate solely through relationship with Him by faith. It asserts that saving faith depends entirely on Christ for forgiveness and justification, not human merit (Rom 3:21; 4:14–15; 8:7–8; 11:6; 14:23). Furthermore, fulfilling God's Law is unattainable without Christ, and even outwardly good acts done apart from faith are sinful and rejected by God (Ps 130:3-4; Isa 1:10–16; Rom 4:16).

3.2.3 Gender Ideology and the Rejection of Embodiment

Contemporary gender ideology promotes the view that human identity is fluid, self-defined, and potentially disconnected from biological sex. This stands in contrast to the biblical witness that God created humanity as male and female (Gen 1:27; 5:2; Matt 19:4; Mark 10:6) and declared His creation "very good" (Gen 1:31). In this respect, gender ideology echoes the ancient gnostic error, which disparaged the body and viewed it as an obstacle to true selfhood. Lutheran theology, however, affirms that the human body is part of God's good creation, explicitly rejecting any worldview that denigrates the physical form as inherently evil or as a barrier to spiritual life. Grounded in the doctrines of creation, incarnation, and the resurrection of the body, Lutheranism understands the body not as a prison for the soul but as an integral part of the human person, "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Ps 139:14) by God.

Lutheran theology upholds the body as an essential part of human identity, not a disposable shell. The *Small Catechism* confesses: "I believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul" (SC II.1), affirming that our embodied existence is a gift from our Creator. Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions consistently teach that human sexuality is a deliberate part of God's design. The *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* affirms that marriage is the lifelong union of man and woman, instituted by God and rooted in his creation of male and female (Ap XXIII.7-13). To deny the goodness of biological sex is to challenge the wisdom of the One who fashioned it. Here, human identity is grounded not in self-invention but in God's act of redemption through Christ. As Paul declares in Galatians 1:4, Christ was sacrificed on the cross for humanity's "sins," in order to rescue the lost "from this present evil age." From a Lutheran perspective, God preserves believers through faith, not in the absence of but precisely within their ongoing struggle against sin (Rom 7:14–25).

Lutheran theology upholds the body as an essential part of human identity, not a disposable shell. Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions consistently teach that human sexuality is a deliberate part of God's design. The *Formula of Concord*'s Epitome states that original sin so deeply corrupts human nature "that there is nothing sound or uncorrupted left in the human body or soul, in its internal or external powers" (FC Ep I.8). This corruption disorders our affections and understanding, perverting God's design for humanity. As Luther explains in his *Lectures on Genesis* (LW 1:165), the *image of God was lost* through sin, such that the human being "does not love God any longer but flees from Him, hates Him, and desires to be and live without Him." This alienation inclines us to reject our created embodiment—a repudiation that denies both the Creator and the redemption Christ brings to our bodies (1 Cor 3:16–17; 6:19–20). Yet Christ's incarnation, death, and bodily res-

urrection sanctify human nature—including our embodied existence as male and female—as integral to our salvation (1 Cor 15:42–44). In contrast, gender ideology fosters alienation and confusion, particularly among youth, by offering a false freedom that ultimately leads to despair. The Church responds with both compassion and truth, affirming the inherent goodness of embodied life as created by God and restored in Christ.

3.2.4 Transhumanism and the Denial of Human Limits

Transhumanism—the pursuit of human enhancement through technology to overcome death, increase intelligence, and eliminate suffering—offers a vision of salvation by human hands. From a Lutheran perspective, such aspirations echo the serpent's ancient temptation in Eden: "You will be like God" (Gen 3:5). By seeking immortality apart from God, transhumanism replaces trust in the Creator with faith in human innovation. It proposes a form of redemption not from Satan, sin, and death, but from the limits of creatureliness itself. Yet, Lutheran theology confesses that salvation is not a human *immortality project* but a *divine gift*, accomplished once for all through the cross-resurrection event. Eternal life comes not by transcending our mortal existence through technology, but by being united with Christ, the true and perfect Man. The pursuit of perfection apart from God undermines the sufficiency of His grace, which alone restores fallen humanity to right fellowship with him. Any attempt to secure our temporal and eternal future apart from Christ is, ultimately, a renewed form of idolatry—trusting in ourselves rather than in the mercy of God.

The *Augsburg Confession* teaches that "we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith" (AC IV.1–2). Transhumanism denies this truth by placing its hope not in divine grace but in artificial enhancement and human engineering. It rejects the theology of the cross, where God's power is hidden in what appears weak and foolish (1 Cor 1:18). As Luther writes in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, "That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened" (Thesis 19; LW 31:40), but rather, "He deserves to be called a theologian ... who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross" (Thesis 20; LW 31:40).

Transhumanist aspirations stand in direct contrast, commodifying life, sidelining the weak, and refusing death as a part of our creaturely condition (Heb 9:27). Yet, as Luther affirms, "It is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross" (LW 31:52-53). Against every Satan-inspired hope of

godless transcendence (2 Thess 2:9–10), the Church proclaims the resurrection of the body, not through technological conquest, but through union with the crucified and risen Christ (1 Cor 15:51–57). As the *Augsburg Confession* teaches, "since the fall of Adam, all human beings who are born in the natural way are conceived and born in sin" (AC II.1–2). The *Formula of Concord* further declares that "original sin is not a slight corruption of human nature, but rather a corruption so deep that there is nothing sound or uncorrupted left in the human body or soul, in its internal or external powers" (FC Ep I.8; FC SD I.10-11). Only divine mercy—not man's redesign—can restore what was lost in Adam and fulfilled in Christ.

3.3 A Lutheran Theological Rebuttal to False Anthropologies

Counterfeit anthropologies, rooted in humanity's rejection of its Creator, promise freedom but deliver enslavement to sin and self. From a Lutheran perspective, these pagan ideologies reflect the disordered desires of the fallen heart, which seeks to supplant God's authority with human constructs (Rom 1:21–23). The Church's response must be both bold and rooted in the Gospel, offering a vision of human identity that is neither self-derived nor technologically enhanced but divinely bestowed through Christ.

The Lutheran Confessions provide a robust framework for this rebuttal. The *Augsburg Confession* as noted above, affirms that "since the fall of Adam, all human beings who are born in the natural way are conceived and born in sin" (AC II.1). Yet, as Luther teaches, humans were originally created in the image of God (Gen 1:26–27; Ps 8:4–5; Isa 43:7; LW 1:55-60)—which grounded their unique dignity. The *imago Dei* is so profoundly ruined by sin and so majestically restored in Christ that its full nature remains beyond fallen human reason's comprehension. Though this image was lost in the fall, vestiges remain, allowing for civil order. Article XVI.1 of the *Augsburg Confession* affirms that "all political authority, orderly government, laws, and good order in the world are created and instituted by God," emphasizing that human life—even in its fallen state—retains value and purpose within God's providential design.

Against materialism, which reduces humanity to mere matter, Lutheran theology affirms the spiritual reality of the soul, created and sustained by God, and destined for eternal communion with Him (Eccl 12:7; Matt 10:28). The *Smalcald Articles* testify that, though human nature is profoundly corrupted by sin, it continues to be God's creation—fallen yet not annihilated (SA III.I.1–3). Luther underscores this in his *Lectures on Genesis*, stating, "Man without the Holy Spirit is completely ungodly before God (LW 2:42). Nonetheless, all creation remains God's handiwork, bearing witness to his ongoing providential care and ownership of what he has made. Similarly, the *Small Catechism* confesses, "I believe that God has created me together

with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all my limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties" (SC II.1.2). This theological viewpoint stands firmly against both secular materialism and any utilitarian measure of human worth, affirming that each person—regardless of capacity or social function—bears a dignity rooted in God's creative and sustaining will.

In contrast to expressive individualism, which exalts the autonomous self, Lutheran anthropology emphasizes that true freedom is found in submission to God's will and service to others. In his *Preface to the Epistle to the Romans*, Luther describes faith as a "living, busy, active, mighty thing," which "does not ask whether good works are to be done but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them" (LW 35:370). This faith "works by love," fulfilling God's purpose, a theme echoed in Galatians 5:6. The *Large Catechism* cautions against self-idolatry, asserting that "to have a God is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart" (LC I.2–3). Such faith naturally expresses itself in valuing, caring for, and acting kindly toward one's neighbor. Similarly, the *Augsburg Confession* states that "good works should and must be done, not that a person relies on them to earn grace, but for God's sake and to God's praise" (AC XX.27). This theological framework resists the isolating tendencies of individualism by grounding human identity in relationship—first with God, and then with the neighbor.

Gender ideology, which denies the goodness of embodied existence, is countered by the Lutheran affirmation of creation's order. In his *Lectures on Genesis*, Luther affirms that the creation of humanity as "male and female" (Gen 1:27) reflects God's "very good" (v. 31) creation. He writes, "Moses puts the two sexes together and says that God created male and female in order to indicate that Eve, too, was made by God as a partaker of the divine image" (LW 1:69). As noted earlier, the *Formula of Concord* teaches that while original sin's corruption is "so deep that there is nothing sound or uncorrupted left in the human body or soul (FC Ep I.8), it has not abolished God's created order. His design—including the distinction and complementarity of male and female—continues to bear witness to His creative intent. The Incarnation, in which the "Word became flesh" (John 1:14), and the bodily resurrection, in which the mortal body is raised a "spiritual body" (1 Cor 15:44), further affirm the enduring goodness of creation and the body's integral role in salvation. This offers a redemptive vision that embraces, rather than rejects, God's design for human embodiment.

Transhumanism's pursuit of self-deification through technologies like artificial intelligence, genetic enhancement, or mind uploading starkly contrasts with the Lutheran theology of the cross. This biblical framework asserts that mankind's sinful and mortal condition cannot be alleviated by human ingenuity or techno-

logical advancements. Instead, God's true revelation is found not in displays of power, progress, or worldly triumph, but in the humility and suffering of Christ crucified. As Paul discovered through his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor 12:7), Jesus' "grace" (v. 9) is "sufficient," for his "power" is "made perfect" (or "reaches its goal") in "weakness." Consequently, God's glory shines most vividly not in humanity's attempts to transcend its God-given limitations, but in Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection. True hope for humanity lies not in artificial enhancements but in the promise of bodily resurrection, secured through Jesus' triumph over death (1 Cor 15:54–57).

The Church's proclamation is grounded in the proper distinction between Law and Gospel—a foundational principle of Lutheran theology. The Law exposes the sinfulness of humanity's attempts to construct identity apart from God, revealing such efforts as idolatrous and ultimately incapable of granting true meaning or purpose (Rom 1:21–25; 3:20). In contrast, the Gospel proclaims Christ as the true image of God (John 14:9; Col 1:15), whose atoning death and resurrection reconciles sinners to God and restores them to their created purpose in fellowship with Him (Rom 5:10–11; 2 Cor 5:18–21). Through the consistent preaching of the Word, the catechetical teaching of the faith, and the administration of the Sacraments—Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper—the Church speaks a divine counterword to the competing narratives of the world. This proclamation, as affirmed in the Lutheran Confessions, bears witness that human beings are not self-made but created by God, and not self-redeemed but saved by grace through faith in Christ alone. By this Word and Sacrament ministry, the Church calls all people to repentance and faith, inviting them into the true freedom of life in Christ (John 8:36; Gal 5:1)—a freedom not of autonomy, but of restored communion with God and neighbor.

4.0 Reclaiming Human Dignity: A Lutheran Response

4.1 Affirming the Sanctity of Life in a Culture of Death

IN A CULTURE THAT OFTEN CONDONES abortion, euthanasia, and utilitarian definitions of personhood, the Lutheran confessions bear faithful witness to the sanctity of every human life—from conception to natural death. Rooted in Scripture, we proclaim that every person is created in the image of God (Gen 1:26–27), and therefore possesses inherent dignity and worth, even in a world marred by sin (Gen 3:17–19; Rom 3:23). This God-given value is not contingent on age, ability, or usefulness, but is graciously bestowed by our Creator. The Scriptures consistently affirm this truth (Gen 5:1; 9:5–6; 1 Cor 11:7; Jas 3:9), most tenderly in Psalm 139:13–14: "You wove me together in my mother's womb… I am fearfully and wonderfully made." God's intimate and purposeful creation of each human being confers an inalienable

worth that compels us to protect and cherish life at every stage, as stewards of His good creation and neighbors to those in need.

The theology of the cross emphasizes God's solidarity with the lowly, the suffering, and the despised. At the cross, divine strength is concealed in apparent defeat (1 Cor 1:18–25), affirming that God's regard for human life rests not on worldly measures of utility, pragmatism, or autonomy, but on grace alone. As Luther emphasizes in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, "God can be found only in suffering and the cross" (Thesis 21; LW 31:53). Consequently, the Church must reject the *cultura mortis*—the culture of death—that dehumanizes the unborn, the elderly, the disabled, and the marginalized (Deut 30:19; John 10:10).

As the *Augsburg Confession* declares, "Concerning public order and secular government it is taught that all political authority, orderly government, laws, and good order in the world are created and instituted by God" (AC XVI.1), established to uphold justice, preserve peace, and restrain evil (Rom 13:1–4; 1 Pet 2:13–17). Luther affirms in *Temporal Authority* that civil government is a "divine thing" (*göttliches Ding*), instituted by God "for the punishment of the wicked and the protection of the upright" (LW 45:87). Yet, when human law defies God's command, Christians must respond as the apostles did: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29), for conscience cannot be bound against the Word of God. This fidelity, arising from a justified heart, finds its shape as faith active in love, both in prophetic public testimony and in the humble service of one's daily station. Correspondingly, the apostolic charge is that "'faith,' if it is alone and has no works, is dead" (Jas 2:17). Likewise, true Christlike love is demonstrated "not only with word or with our tongue, but also in action and truth" (1 John 3:18).

The Fifth Commandment, as taught in Luther's *Small Catechism*, urges us not only to avoid harming our neighbors but to "help and support them in all of life's needs" (SC I.10). Luther explains that the Fifth Commandment "is violated not only when we do evil, but also when we have the opportunity to do good to our neighbors and to prevent, protect, and save them from suffering bodily harm or injury, but fail to do so" (LC I.189). This call to active compassion compels us to support pro-life pregnancy resource centers, provide palliative and hospice care, advocate for those with cognitive disabilities, and offer spiritual care for the dying. The human body, redeemed by Christ's blood, is not a disposable shell but a temple of the Holy Spirit, worthy of honor (1 Cor 3:16–17; 6:19–20). As "living stones" (1 Pet 2:5) in God's spiritual house, each person bears infinite value through Christ's redemptive work. The *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* reinforces this truth, teaching that we are *justified for Christ's sake through faith* and *not on account of our own merits, works, or satisfactions* (Ap IV.48–60). Thus, every human being—regardless of age, ability, or condition—deserves reverence as one for whom Christ died.

4.2 Restoring Relational Identity in the Body of Christ

Modern anthropology lionizes radical autonomy and expressive individualism—the belief that identity is self-defined through personal expression, thereby severing humanity from communion with God and others. In stark contrast, Lutheran theology proclaims that human identity is inherently relational, rooted first in God as Creator (Gen 1:26–27) and fulfilled in Christ, who reconciles us to himself and to one another (Rom 5:9–11; 2 Cor 5:18–19). Through Baptism, believers are incorporated into the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12–27), no longer isolated individuals but members of a living communion. To reiterate an earlier citation, as Luther states in *The Freedom of a Christian*, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all" (LW: 344), succinctly capturing the paradox of Christian freedom and love that binds the believer to others in self-giving service. In his *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses*, Luther, reflecting on this communal bond, writes that as the Church, believers are "one body, one bread, we are altogether in Christ, members one of another.... Therefore, since the spirit of Christ dwells within Christians, by means of which brothers become co-heirs, one body, and citizens of Christ, how is it possible for us not to be participants in all the benefits of Christ?" (LW 31:190) Thus, the Church is not merely an assembly of individuals but a temple of the Spirit, "being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (Eph 2:22).

To expand on what was noted earlier, Luther's doctrine of vocation (*Beruf*) teaches that our true worth is found not in self-centered ambition, but in serving others through the specific callings God gives us—as parents, workers, neighbors, or citizens (Gal 5:13–14). This service flows from faith. As Luther explains in the *Small Catechism*, the First Commandment ("You are to have no other gods"; Exod 20:3; Deut 5:7) requires us to "fear, love, and trust God above all things" (SC I.2–3). This trust in God, produced by the Holy Spirit, is the foundation of Christian life. When faith clings to Christ, who has reconciled us to God (2 Cor 5:19), we are freed from the drive for self-glorification. Our lives are now shaped by Christ's self-giving love (Eph 5:1–2), which makes faith necessarily active in love toward our neighbor. This love—which "does no harm" (Rom 13:10) and "is the fulfillment of the law"—is faith's fruit and the Christian's liberated vocation. Thus, in our daily callings, we freely serve our neighbors, carrying out God's will for the good of all.

The *Augsburg Confession* calls the Church to a unity rooted not in rigid uniformity but in mutual service, declaring: "For this is enough for the true unity of the Christian church that there the gospel is preached harmoniously [*Einträchtiglich*] according to a pure understanding and the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word" (AC VII.2). Luther echoes this in his writings, insisting that where God's word of the Gospel is, there is also the Church (LW 39:305-314). This

relational unity stands in stark contrast to the expressive individualism of our age. The Gospel summons believers into tangible practices of hospitality, reconciliation, and compassionate care. As the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* reminds us, justifying faith is never idle but necessarily *expresses itself in love* (Ap IV.122-135). To revisit an earlier citation, Luther amplifies this in his *Preface to the Epistle to the Romans* by describing faith as a "living, daring confidence in God's grace" that overflows in service (LW 35:370; Rom 12:9–21; 13:8–10). Such faith forms the Church into a community where, as Scripture exhorts, we "encourage those who are discouraged, help those who are weak, and [are] patient with everyone" (1 Thess 5:14), ensuring that no one bears their burdens alone (Gal 6:2).

So then, in a world fractured by sin, our union with Christ restores not only our relationship with God but also our belonging, for we are joined together as God's family through Christ's shed blood (Eph 1:5; 2:13). This truth manifests itself in multigenerational worship, in merciful service to others, and in steadfast care for both mental and spiritual well-being. As we pray, "Our Father in heaven" (Matt 6:9; Luke 11:2), we confess our shared identity as God's children and our mutual obligation to love one another. The Church, as "God's household" (Eph 2:19), stands as a beacon of His design, proclaiming a reconciled humanity—gathered into eternal communion through Christ's redemptive work (Eph 1:10).

4.3 Proclaiming the Gospel Amid Cultural Despair

The modern world oscillates between utopian dreams of salvation through science and technology and the dystopian, nihilistic despair of a culture adrift without meaning. These extremes leave many rootless, anxious, and yearning for a sense of purpose. Into this crisis, the Church boldly proclaims the crucified and risen Christ—the Word of God made flesh (John 1:14)—as the only true source and goal of all renewal (Col 1:15–20). Through His living Word and Sacraments, Christ graciously restores identity and hope, reconciling fallen humanity and all creation to Himself (Rom 5:9–11; 2 Cor 5:18–19), anchoring believers in the eternal truth of the Gospel. This Gospel is not a law but a promise of the grace of God that comforts and consoles fearful hearts. Through this promise, we receive righteousness and are made alive before God. Luther affirms it is the "power of God unto salvation" (LW 25:149-151; Rom 1:16–17)—not merely a word about Christ, but as Luther taught, the very voice of Christ Himself.

The Gospel transcends mere moral reform. Through its proclamation, the Holy Spirit revives the spiritually dead, uniting them in faith with Christ. Lutheran theology grounds salvation firmly in the bodily resurrection, with Christ described as the "firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor 15:20).[5] Indeed, Christ's resurrection is the decisive victory over death and the grave, guaranteeing eternal life

with Him for all who believe. Furthermore, the *Augsburg Confession* declares that Christ "will appear for judgment ... and will bring to life all the dead. He will give eternal life and endless joy to the righteous" (AC XVII.1–3). Eschewing speculative eschatologies, biblical hope is anchored in creation's renewal, where righteousness is forever present (Isa 65:17; 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1–5).

Preaching must proclaim the dual comfort of the Gospel in Christ's atoning work: He has both triumphed over our enemies—Satan, sin, and death (Col 2:13–15; Heb 2:14–15)—and borne the punishment our sins deserve (Isa 53:4–6; Rom 3:25–26). This comfort is anchored in Christ's decisive victory through His sacrificial atonement. Therefore, this proclamation delivers the objective, external consolation that we are fully reconciled to God by grace through faith in Christ's finished work. The *Large Catechism* echoes this, declaring that Christ has "redeemed and released me from sin, from the devil, from death, and from all misfortune" (LC II.27). Together, these testify to the sure and certain hope we have in Christ's conquering love.

The Law exposes the depth of our sin and our bondage to death (Rom 3:19–20; 5:20–21; 7:7–13; 8:2–3; Gal 3:10–13, 19–24). As Luther emphasizes in his *Lectures on Galatians*, the Law's primary function is to reveal our sin and God's wrath, thereby condemning us and driving us to Christ (LW 26:131-132). In contrast, the Gospel proclaims our free justification by grace through faith in Christ (Rom 5:1; 8:1; AC IV.1–3). Therefore, the Church does not combat despair with human wisdom, techniques, or therapies, but solely with the hope of Christ's resurrection, conveyed through His life-giving Word and Sacraments. Human dignity is not achieved by self-assertion but is a precious gift secured by Christ's blood, as Scripture affirms: "you were redeemed... with the precious blood of Christ, like a lamb without blemish or spot" (1 Pet 1:18–19).

4.4 Practical Engagement for the Church

The Church's response to modern secular ideologies must be neither retreat nor compromise, but a confessional presence rooted in the truth of God's Word. The Lutheran Church engages culture by upholding a biblical anthropology—God's design for humanity—in every aspect of its ministry, guided by Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions.

- *Teaching and Preaching*: Catechesis shapes believers within the biblical narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration—affirming that humanity is created in God's image (Gen 1:27), corrupted by sin (Rom 5:12), and redeemed through Christ (Rom 5:18–19). Luther's *Small Catechism* remains a vital resource for grounding Christians of all ages in these foundational truths. In his preface, Luther urges pastors and preachers to commit themselves to faithful instruction. He insists that even those with limited skill should read

the catechism's tables and forms word for word, ensuring consistent teaching for young people across all congregations (LW 53:64–65). This pastoral urgency reflects the catechism's enduring purpose: to communicate the clarity of Christian doctrine among generations and throughout the Church.

- *Compassionate Apologetics*: With humility, the Church engages skeptics by speaking the "truth in love" (Eph 4:15), acknowledging the Christian reality of being both righteous and sinful at once (Rom 7:18–20). This paradox shapes the Church's approach to evangelism. Since humanity is bound by sin and possesses no true free will in spiritual matters, it is solely by God's grace in Christ that the lost are freed from sin's captivity and delivered from the power of the devil.

- *Prophetic Cultural Witness*: The Church is called to confront contemporary pagan ideologies—such as expressive individualism, transhumanism, and technocratic utopianism—that rebel against human limitations and the goodness of God's creation (Rom 1:21–25; 12:1–2). As a hospital for sinners, the Church offers Christ's rest to those exhausted by the demands of self-salvation and what Luther called the "theology of glory." The remedy it provides is the "true treasure of the church": the "most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God" (*Heidelberg Disputation*, Thesis 62; LW 31:31; Matthew 11:28–30). This message is not merely proclaimed generally but is applied specifically through Absolution. The Office of the Keys, instituted by Christ, is the authority given to the Church to bind and loose sin (SA III.[7].1; Matt 16:19; John 20:23). As the *Augsburg Confession* states, this absolution is nothing less than the "voice … of God" proclaimed for the comfort of the penitent (AC XXV.3).

- *Sacramental Life*: The unity of the Church depends solely on the Gospel being preached purely and the Sacraments being administered according to Christ's institution (AC VII.1). As an expression of this unity, the Lord's Supper is where believers receive the true body and blood of Christ—"in, with, and under" the bread and wine—as definitively taught in the *Smalcald Articles* (SA III.[6]) and formalized in the *Formula of Concord* (Ep VII.15; SD VII.35, 37). This Sacrament delivers Christ's testament of forgiveness (Matt 26:28) and enables participation in His body and blood (1 Cor 10:16; 11:23–26). Lutheran theology emphasizes that Christ's words of institution—"given for you" and "shed for you"—constitute the very heart of the Sacrament, dynamically delivering forgiveness of sins and Christ's real presence to the believer. This sacramental pardon tangibly fulfills the promise that within the Church, God "daily ... abundantly forgives all sins—mine and those of all believers" (SC II.6). Ultimately, this forgiveness is the source of all hope, for "where there is forgiveness of sin, there is also life and salvation" (SC V [VI].6).[6] Therefore, the Lord's Supper stands as a tangible assurance of divine grace and the certain hope of the resurrection.

By living as a redeemed, reconciled community, the Church proclaims a counter-anthropology: humanity created by God, corrupted by sin, redeemed by Christ, and destined for resurrection glory (Rev 7:9–12). This is the true dignity of redeemed humanity—secured not by self-expression, but by union with the crucified and risen Lord.

5.0 Conclusion

5.1 Restatement of Central Arguments:
A Lutheran Anthropology for an Age of Confusion

THE CONTEMPORARY CRISIS OF ANTHROPOLOGY—evident in fragmented identities, moral relativism, and technological hubris—demands a return to the scriptural truth of what it means to be human. At its core, this crisis is not merely philosophical or sociological but theological. It is a crisis born of humanity's alienation from its Creator, and it can only be resolved by a recovery of the biblical and confessional understanding of the human person: created by God, corrupted by sin, and redeemed in Christ.

Lutheran theology, grounded in *sola Scriptura*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, and *solus Christus*, presents a coherent and hope-filled anthropology rooted in divine revelation. Scripture affirms that human beings are created in the *imago Dei* (Gen 1:26–27), their dignity conferred not by merit or achievement but solely by God's creative word. Yet, this image has been profoundly corrupted by sin, as all humanity has fallen short of God's glory (Gen 3; Rom 3:23; FC SD I.1–11).

In the fullness of time (Gal 4:4–5), God restores what was lost—not by human effort, but by sending His Son in the "likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom 8:3), reconciling the world to Himself through Christ's atoning sacrifice (Rom 5:8–11; 2 Cor 5:19–21). This is the heart of the Gospel and the Lutheran confession: we are pardoned not by our works, but solely by God's undeserved mercy in Christ. God calls out to us through Word and Sacrament, to trust in Christ, the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29, 36; AC IV.1-3; SC II.3-4). It was the Twentieth Century Lutheran Hermann Sasse who declared, "The gracious promise of the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake—this, and nothing but this, is the Gospel."[7] This means that human worth is neither earned nor achieved but received—an unmerited gift secured by Christ's cross and resurrection (Gal 2:20; Col 1:15–20).

Modern ideologies—such as materialism (reducing humans to mere biology), expressive individualism (exalting self-defined identity), or technocratic utilitarianism (treating people as immortality projects to optimize)—promote false views of humanity. These ideologies are modern idols, exchanging the "truth about God for a lie" (Rom 1:25) and venerating creation over worshiping the Creator. Severed

from the Lord's design, they dehumanize, reducing persons to cogs in a machine and obscuring the image of God in which humanity was created (Gen 1:26–27). As Luther taught, "Anything on which your heart relies and depends … is really your God" (LC I.2–3). By turning inward, modern humanity rejects the life-giving truth of our identity as God's creation, restored through faith in Christ.

Lutheran theology presents a profound and paradoxical anthropology: the human person is at once declared righteous by grace through faith (Rom 3:23–24; Eph 2:8–9), yet still sinful (Rom 7:15–25; FC SD I.3-14). This realistic view of human fallenness, coupled with trust in Christ's redeeming work, guards against both despair (by assuring forgiveness) and pride (by exposing ongoing sin). Through the doctrine of vocation, the baptized live out their new identity in Christ by loving and serving their neighbor in ordinary callings (1 Cor 7:20; Gal 5:13). Thus, daily life—whether as parent, worker, or citizen—becomes the holy calling where God's grace is both received and shared.

A Christ-centered view of humanity stands firm against every form of dystopian cultural decay—whether moral relativism, self-help trends, or the illusion of autonomous self-justification—by proclaiming the vibrant hope of a humanity redeemed in Christ. This vision restores persons not through futile human effort but through the Gospel alone. It affirms God's original design for humanity, made in His image (Gen 1:26–27), while candidly acknowledging our fallen state: even as believers, we struggle with sin (Rom 7:14–25) yet are pardoned and sanctified in Christ (Rom 8:5–13; FC SD III.13–15).

This restoration is uniquely achieved through our union with Christ in His death and resurrection (Rom 6:4–6; Gal 2:20), not by our own works or merit (Eph 2:8–9). The Holy Spirit, operating powerfully through Word and Sacrament, grants a new heart and a new life (Ps 51:10; Jer 31:33; Ezek 36:26–27). Through these divine means, the Spirit sanctifies believers, conforming them ever more to the image of Christ (Rom 8:28–30; 12:1–2; 2 Cor 3:18). This ongoing work of the Spirit is how God enables us to live out our new identity in Christ, sustaining us in faith and conforming us to His will (SC IV.8–12, 17; SC II.6).

5.2 A Call to Faithful Lutheran Witness: Confessional and Embodied

The Church now stands at a critical juncture. In the face of anthropological confusion and cultural hostility, it must not withdraw in fear or assimilate in silence. Rather, it must confess—clearly, courageously, and compassionately—the truth of God's Word concerning human identity. To reiterate an earlier observation, as the *Augsburg Confession* declares, the Church is the "assembly of saints [*congregatio sanctorum*] in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly" (AC VII.1).[8] This truth must shape both the Church's teaching and its life.

The Church's mission is to proclaim the full biblical narrative—creation, fall, redemption, and new creation—without reducing it to moralism or self-help. As the *Formula of Concord* declares, the Gospel delivers *grace, righteousness, and eternal life* from Christ (FC SD III.9–11). Through the means of grace—God's Word (Rom 10:17) and Sacraments (SC IV.6–8; LC IV.1–8; LC V.21–22)—the Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith, unleashing the Gospel's transformative power.

Lutherans are called to bear witness in their daily vocations—whether in family, work, or society. As part of the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet 2:9; Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:6), every baptized Christian is summoned to uphold and defend the dignity of human life, from conception to natural death, caring for the marginalized and seeking justice for the oppressed (Isa 1:17; Jer 22:3; Mic 6:8; Gal 6:10). The two kingdoms doctrine provides vital guidance: While the Church proclaims Christ's eternal reign through Word and Sacrament, Christians serve in the temporal realm through faithful citizenship and acts of mercy and justice (Rom 13:1–7; AC XVI.1–2; LC I.1–29, First Commandment; LC I.103–178, Fourth Commandment). Yet, this service is not about political power or cultural dominance but about selfless love for the neighbor, flowing from Christ's cross and sustained by the hope of His resurrection.[9]

In a world chasing identity through expressive individualism—where self-definition is rooted in personal desires—the Church proclaims a better way: identity in Christ, who clothes us in His perfect righteousness (2 Cor 5:21; Rev 19:6–8; AC IV.1–3). This Gospel may appear as foolishness to a perishing world (1 Cor 1:18), yet through the Cross—proclaimed in the Word and Sacraments—God's power and wisdom bring salvation to all who believe (Rom 1:16–17).

5.3 Final Reflection: Hope Anchored in Christ's Victory at the Cross

The Church's confidence rests not in cultural influence or institutional power but in Christ, who has "overcome the world" (John 16:33) through His death and resurrection. By His penal substitutionary atonement—bearing the full punishment for sin in our place (2 Cor 5:21; Col 2:13–15)—Christ has become, as Luther boldly asserts, the "greatest sinner" (LW 26: 277),[10] for "He has and bears all the sins of all men in His body—not in the sense that He committed them but in the sense that He took these sins, committed by us, upon His own body, in order to make satisfaction for them with His own blood" (LW 26:277). Thus, Christ is not merely an example for us to emulate, but the very source of our salvation.

Through His victorious resurrection, Christ reconciles humanity to God, defeats death, and renews creation (Rom 1:3; 4:25; 1 Cor 15:20–26; Col 2:13–15; Heb 2:14–15). In Christ, the image of God is not only restored but glorified, as believers are "conformed to the likeness of the risen Son" (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18). As Luther teaches, faith "justifies because it takes hold of and possesses this treasure,

the present Christ" (LW 26:130), so that we are declared righteous by faith alone. Thus, the Church stands firm in unshakable hope amid suffering, trusting that "our sins are forgiven for Christ's sake" (Ap IV.48–60; Ap V.86–96) and that "in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Rom 8:37).

The hope of Christ's return is not a distant abstraction but a living reality, continually mediated through the Church's ministry of Word and Sacraments. In preaching, Absolution, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper, Christ is truly present—forgiving sins, nourishing believers with His body and blood, and strengthening them in faith. As Luther writes, "because where there is forgiveness of sin, there is also life and salvation" (SC V[VI].6), for through these means, "Daily in this Christian church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sins—mine and those of all believers" (SC II.6). In the Supper, believers receive the "true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine" (LC IV[V].1). It is a sacrament whose efficacy does not depend on human worthiness (LC V.61). In the *Small Catechism*, we learn: "The Office of the Keys is that special authority which Christ has given to His Church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent" (SC, Office of the Keys, Q 1).[11] Likewise, through Baptism, "daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever" (SC IV.12).

These divine gifts anchor Christians in their true identity: not as autonomous individuals, but as God's redeemed children, heirs of His eternal promise, and citizens of the coming kingdom (Rom 8:14–17; Gal 4:4–6; Phil 3:20–21; Heb 12:28). As Luther teaches in his explanation of the Third Article, in the Christian church, "Daily … the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives sins-mine and those of all believers. On the Last Day … will raise me and all the dead" (SC II.6), granting believers the firstfruits of the new creation. Here, Christ speaks and acts through His Word and Sacraments, assuring believers of the forgiveness of sins and their eternal inheritance.

Let the Church steadfastly uphold her confession, boldly proclaiming Christ crucified and risen, rightly administering the Sacraments, and living as a people who, through the Spirit's power, know their Creator, believe in him, and call upon him (LW 43:200). Through the Word and Sacraments, the "Holy Spirit … produces faith, where and when he wills" (AC V.1–2). The baptized, though a "perfectly free lord of all" in faith, are also a "perfectly dutiful servant of all" in love, bound to Christ and sent to serve the neighbor in every vocation (LW 31:344).

Scripture assures us that the day approaches when faith shall become sight, and the redeemed will behold Christ in glory, the "image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15; see also John 1:14, 18; Phil 2:6; Heb 1:3), before whom "every knee will bow" (Phil 2:10) and "every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (v. 11). On that day, he who is seated on the throne will declare, "Look, I am making everything new!" (Rev

21:5), and his servants will "see his face" (Rev 22:4) and "reign" (v. 5) with him "forever." Until that day, the Church remains steadfast—not in prideful triumph, but in humble joy. The redeemed bear witness to the One who was "pierced" (Isa 53:5) due to "our rebellion," who "carried our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Pet 2:24), and by "his wounds" we are "healed." Therefore, let us live with expectant hearts, faithfully proclaiming the gospel until the day we see our Savior "as he really is" (1 John 3:2) and all things are made new.

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Notes

1. All quotes from the Lutheran Confessions are from Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000). Arabic numbers at end of Lutheran Confessions references refer to paragraphs. For Luther's Works (LW), Arabic numbers at the end of references refer to pages.

2. Lutheranism confesses that Scripture alone is the inspired rule and norm of all doctrine and the sole source of revealed truth necessary for salvation. At the same time, Lutheran theology acknowledges that Scripture is rightly interpreted within the community of faith—the Church—which received, preserved, and has been illumined by the Holy Spirit to understand Scripture's meaning. This perspective upholds three core principles: (1) the Lord Jesus as the central focus of Scripture; (2) the divine inspiration and supreme authority of the Old and New Testaments; and (3) the Lutheran Confessions, as contained in the *Book of Concord*, as a true and faithful exposition of God's Word. This commitment ensures the clear proclamation of the gospel—Christ's life, death, and resurrection for the justification of sinners by faith alone. It also reflects the ecclesial mission of the Institute of Lutheran Theology, which is evangelical in its preaching, creedal in its confession, and sacramental in its worship and theology.

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

4. In this essay, the Augsburg Confession is cited from the English translation of the German version, rather than the Latin translation in Kolb and Wengert's *Book of Concord*, with one exception. The Kolb/Wengert *Book of Concord* includes translations of both the German and Latin texts.

5. Paul teaches that Christ's resurrection is the sure pledge and guarantee of the resurrection of all believers (Rom 8:23). As the "firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor 15:20), Christ's resurrection is both the beginning and the pattern of the bodily resurrection to come. His rising from the dead is not an isolated event but the promise that all who die in faith will likewise be raised on the Last Day. For those who trust in Christ, His victory over death assures the same triumph: the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

6. In some versions of the Small Catechism, "The Sacrament of the Altar" is number V, while in others it is number VI.

7. Hermann Sasse, *Here We Stand: Nature and Character of the Lutheran Faith*, trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1946), 111.

8. This quote is from the English translation of the Latin text in the Kolb/Wenger *Book of Concord*.

9. In Lutheran theology, God governs all creation through two divinely instituted realms, each with its own means and purposes. In the spiritual kingdom (the "right-hand kingdom"), God delivers forgiveness, life, and salvation through the Church by means of the Gospel—Word and Sacraments. In the temporal kingdom (the "left-hand kingdom"), God restrains evil, maintains order, and upholds justice by working through civil authorities, laws, and—even when necessary—coercive power. Though each kingdom operates by different principles—grace in the spiritual realm and law in the temporal—they both function under God's sovereign rule. Christians live as dual citizens. In the temporal realm, they honor civil laws, serve their neighbors, and pursue vocations that build up society. In the spiritual realm, they give ultimate allegiance to Christ, cling to the Gospel, and gather around the Word and Sacraments for eternal life.

10. Luther's "greatest sinner" language is a rhetorical emphasis on Christ's substitutionary atonement.

11. From *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986/1991), 29. At the bottom of the page is the note that the question on the Office of the Keys "may not have been composed by Luther himself but reflects his teaching and was included in editions of the catechism during his lifetime" (ibid.).

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Imago Dei as "Original Righteousness" in the Old Testament

Dennis R. Di Mauro

As Christians, we often say that we are "created in the image of God." This phrase is used to express the idea that we are deeply loved and cherished by God, and that's true enough. But what does it really mean? Are we just like God? Or do we have just a few attributes of deity? Can we be recognized as children of God in a literal sense? Or is the *imago* simply a relationship with God?

And to make things more confusing, we actually have two different versions of the *imago Dei*—what Helmut Thielicke describes as "original righteousness," which is the image of God we receive in creation, and the "final righteousness," which is the image of God the Christian receives in regeneration and is dependent upon faith.[1] For the purposes of understanding the sanctity of human life in this essay, I would like to focus on the original righteousness given by God in the Old Testament, since this aspect of creation better dictates our posture toward the sanctity of life for all human beings, whether believers or not.

God's Word

To answer what "created in the image of God" truly means in its "original righteousness," we start, as always, with Scripture. In the creation account in Genesis 1:26-27, we read that

> Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.[2]

Von Rad notes that the verb *bara* (בָּרָא) "create" is repeated three times in these verses to emphasize this "high point and goal" of God's creativity. Indeed, man is

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the capstone of God's creation.[3] Brunner writes, "it is not human arrogance to believe that he is the crown, the goal of creation."[4] Brunner even follows the thinking of the scholastics when he explains that man's "'upright' [posture] shows that he is called to this 'elevated position.'"[5] The distinctive nature of the immortality of the human soul also reiterates the unique imprint of the *imago Dei*.[6]

Von Rad further explains that the text includes two nouns, *selem* (צֶלֶם) and *d'mut* (דְּמוּת), which are often translated as "image" and "likeness" in English versions. He translates *selem* (צֶלֶם), referencing different verses in the Old Testament, to mean "an actual plastic work, a duplicate, sometimes an idol…, a painting,"[7] while *d'mut* (דְּמוּת), is more abstract, translated as "'appearance,' 'similarity,' 'analogy,'" or "'the copy.'"[8] So *d'mut* (דְּמוּת) slightly modifies *selem* (צֶלֶם), indicating a deeper, more spiritual meaning. In Von Rad's exegesis, attributes such as dignity, personality, or the ability to make a moral decision are excluded.[9] Interestingly, he notes that the "let us" refers to God among the angels, and so this "prevents one from referring God's image [in man] too directly to God the Lord."[10]

To Von Rad, our "likeness" to God is seen in our common lordship with the Lord. Just as God creates and rules over heaven and earth, man's role is to have dominion over the creatures of the earth. Man takes the God-given role of vassal of the Lord almighty. And in this role, he rules the earth under God's authority. Von Rad notes that "the text speaks less of the nature of God's image than of its purpose."[11]

But it also appears that gender was part of God's creation plan, since we see that "male and female he created them." Von Rad asserts that "by God's will man was not created alone but designated for the 'thou' of the other sex."[12] Brunner agrees, quoting Gen. 2:18, "'it is not good for man to be alone.' The Creation of Man is not finished until the partner is there…. Because God is Love, because in God's very Nature there is community, man must be able to love: thus 'man' has to be created as a *pair* of human beings. He cannot realize his nature without the 'Other'; his destiny is fellowship in love."[13] Brunner notes that therefore, "the true greatness of man is not his reason, by which he learns to know, but consists in the fact that he has been made for communion with God and his fellows."[14]

Another pericope that explains that we were created in the image of God is Genesis 9:5b-6. God says to Noah, "From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. 'Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.'" Here, Scripture elaborates a little further on what it means to be "created in God's image." The human being is indeed a precious creature, and the killing of a man is punishable by death. This isn't the case with the killing of an animal, so we see a greater value in God's eyes for a human being than for other creatures. It appears that the human is ontologically different from an animal, and much more precious, so precious that God imposes capital punishment

for the ending of a human life. Von Rad notes that God's "divine sovereign right over human life is expressed apodictically and unconditionally … because man is God's possession and [he] was created in God's image."[15]

Psalm 8:48 elaborates even further on what it means to be created in the image of God. The psalmist writes, "What is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor. You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet: all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild, the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas." Here, man is described as being "a little lower than the angels and crowned with glory and honor," and because of this glorious creation, man is able to administer the multi-faceted world God created with wisdom. This verse is perhaps the best example of the privileged position man possesses in the eyes of God.

James emphasizes the importance of human value when discussing how we should speak to one another. In his epistle, he explains that, "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be" (James 3: 9-10). So why shouldn't we curse each other? It's because we have "been made in God's likeness." Each person has been given a certain God-given dignity that should never be denigrated.

Protestant Perspectives on the *Imago Dei*

PROTESTANT THEOLOGIANS USUALLY DESCRIBE the *imago Dei* as a grace or gift relationship between God and man. Through His creation, God enters into a permanent loving relationship with man. This is what it means to be made in the image of God. Furthermore, this relationship is permanent, assured by the very grace of God himself.

Luther

So let's examine Protestant views on the *imago*, starting with Luther. Luther focuses on the phrase "Let us make," which he sees as a clear reference to the inner deliberations of the Trinity, in contrast to the Jewish claim[16] that this "us" refers to God among the angels. Luther writes, "here, when He wants to create man, God summons Himself to a council and announces some sort of deliberation."[17] This serious deliberation also indicates a very special creation, quite distinct from the creation of plants and animals. Luther states that this is why God repeats the noun "image" *selem* (צֶלֶם) in verse 27 "as an indication of the creator's rejoicing and exulting over the most beautiful work He had made."[18]

Luther also takes from Peter Lombard[19] the idea that if Adam had not fallen into sin, God at some time would have translated him and his offspring into the spiritual state. From this idea, Luther explains that mankind, unlike the animal kingdom, was always destined to receive eternal life.[20]

Interestingly, though, according to Luther, the second half of verse 27, "male and female He created them," does not indicate that man was created to love; rather, it means that women receive this image just as men do.[21]

But then Luther addresses the core issue, aiming to explain the nature of the *imago* itself. He begins with a full refutation of the scholastics. Luther explains that what contemporary scholars of his time believed about the *imago* came from Augustine's *De Trinitate*, which, according to Luther, was written using Aristotle's classifications of the memory, the mind (or intellect), and the will.[22] Luther writes that, according to Augustine, "man is created according to the similitude of God; that is, the intellect is enlightened by faith, the memory is made confident through hope and steadfastness, and the will is adorned with love."[23] The result of this theology, Luther asserts, was disaster. He states, "this was the origin of the dangerous opinion that in governing men God permits them to act under their own impulse," and "from here the conclusion was drawn that free will co-operated as the preceding and efficient cause of salvation."[24] To support his point that these endowments aren't given to man, Luther explains that the devil also has the attributes of memory, the mind (or intellect), and will—actually, he has them in even greater capacities than man does! Therefore, by that argument, the devil must have been made in the image of God as well.[25] But one might wonder about this objection. If one assumes that the devil was created as the angel Lucifer in his unfallen state in heaven, is it offensive to think that the devil also bears the image of God in some way?

Even worse, according to Luther, is Pseudo-Dionysius's belief that these natural endowments of mind, memory, and will remain unimpaired after the fall.[26] This would undermine the need for a savior to justify human beings and would allow man to justify himself instead.

So what is the *imago Dei* according to Luther? Well, since the *imago* was lost during the fall, Luther says it's hard to determine what's left. He still recognizes that we have memory, mind, and will, but they are now "most depraved and most seriously weakened."[27] Luther likens the post-fall *imago* to a leprous man. He writes, "even though in his leprous flesh everything is almost dead and without sensation,"[28] the human being is still there. So what is this *imago* according to Luther? It appears to be Peter Lombard's promise of eternal life to Adam, an impaired image that awaits restoration in the last days through the power of Jesus's merits.[29]

Barth

Moving into the 20th Century, famed theologian Karl Barth proposes a God-centered focus on the *imago Dei*. He writes,

> That God will create a man in his image implies that it is not man but God who is first a living Person as One who knows and wills and speaks. It was as such that He was the Creator, that He revealed Himself and acted in commencing time. Thus the creature in his totality was allied to this living, divine Person, being wholly referred to it for its existence and essence, its survival and sustenance. It came into being as the work of the Word of God corresponding to His utterance. So originally and intimately was it disposed for the grace of God! So little did it acquire a place from which it might legitimately withdraw itself from the grace of God![30]

And so, like Luther, Barth avoids defining any possible attributes that man receives and retains in the creation. Barth writes, "It is striking, but incontestable, that in his description of the grace of God in this final and supreme act of creation, the biblical witness makes no reference at all to the peculiar intellectual and moral talents and possibilities of man, to his reason and its determination and exercise."[31]

But unlike Luther, Barth believes that being created "male and female" denotes a special status of man as the capstone of creation. Barth writes, "It is he first and alone who is created 'in the image' and 'after the likeness of God.'"[32] As to the significance of the "male and female" designation itself, Barth believes that verse 27 reflects primarily the "relationship between Jesus Christ and his Church, secondarily the relationship between Yahweh and Israel, and only finally—although very directly in view of its origin—the relationship between the sexes."[33]

And yet there is no new image in man in himself, rather "Let us make man in our own image" (repeated twice) means instead that "there exists a divine and therefore self-grounded prototype [in God] to which this being can correspond…by which, when existence is given to it, it will in fact be legitimated and justified."[34] So "the divine likeness [in man] …. is a copy and not an original; a reflection and not a prototype,"[35] and this "permission and promise"[36] given in the *imago* will never be permanently retracted, nor is it in any way lost through the fall, as Luther believed.[37]

This new existence then distinguishes men "from all other creatures with autonomous life, by a superior position, by a higher dignity and might, by a greater power of disposal and control."[38] Man now is now assigned a "exalted position of lordship within the surrounding animal kingdom….a *primus inter pares* among those over whom he rules."[39]

Being a Reformed theologian, Barth views this relationship through the lens of covenant theology. Barth writes, "In this way He [God] wills and creates man as a partner who is capable of entering into covenant-relationship with Himself—for all the disparity in and therefore the differentiation between man as a creature and his Creator."[40]

Brunner

Let's continue with the work of Barth's colleague, Swiss Reformed theologian Emil Brunner. Brunner writes that "In the thought of the Old Testament the fact that man has been made in the Image of God" means something that man can never lose: even when he sins, he cannot lose it." But with this irrevocable gift also comes responsibility. Brunner explains that the

> heart of the creaturely existence of man is freedom, selfhood, to be an "I," a person. Only an "I" can answer a "Thou," only a Self which is self-determining can freely answer God. An automaton does not respond; an animal, in contradistinction from an automaton, may indeed *re*-act, but it cannot *re*-spond. It is not capable of speech, of free self-determination, it cannot stand at a distance from itself, and it is therefore not *re*-sponsible.

> The free Self, capable of self-determination, belongs to the original constitution of man as created by God. But from the very outset this freedom is limited.… He has been *made* to respond―to God.[41]

But even though Brunner recognizes an innate "freedom" or "selfhood" in man, he nevertheless criticizes an allegedly erroneous conception of the *imago Dei* in the Catholic tradition, which he describes as an understanding of this freedom in light of a formal "reason" that the human possesses "*in himself*." Brunner believes that "*this* view of the *Imago Dei* is the gate by which a pantheistic or an idealistic deification of man can enter."[42] In this state, "Man … possesses the divine reason in himself; his spirit is then a 'spark' from the Divine Spirit. He has 'divinity within himself'; '*est Deus in Nobis*'… [and then to fulfill his destiny] man will only need to become aware of this divine reason within himself…."[43]

Thielicke

Another prominent Protestant voice on the *imago* is the late Lutheran Hamburg University professor, Helmut Thielicke. Thielicke makes the argument that the *imago Dei* in man is teleological rather than ontological, "a state of relation and not a state of being."[44] In Gen. 1, we see a clear break in the sixth day from the creation of animals to the creation of man who holds a special position in the created world. Thielicke writes that "the effect of this special position in the cosmos is that man is to rule over the rest of creation."[45] So the *imago* isn't a change or infusion

of essence, rather it's a function: the operation of man's lordship over the world.[46] It is a divine address to man, that solely consists of "God's remembrance of us," existing in God's own consciousness.[47] Furthermore, this *imago* is not dependent upon man's obedience; it remains despite the fall, it is "a *character indelebilis*."[48] God becomes a model for one to model himself against, instead of just "that '*from which*' I come."[49]

Thielicke categorically rejects ontological qualities of the imago "such as personality, freedom, responsibility, conscience, dignity, or the free exercise of the moral disposition."[50] He writes, "now there is nothing of this whatsoever in Genesis, and we believe we have shown that this silence is more than just an inadvertent omission, that there are actually sound reasons for it both soteriologically and in the nature of the matter itself."[51]

Jenson

Let's conclude our review of recent Protestant views on the *imago Dei* by reviewing the insights of famed Lutheran theologian Robert W. Jenson.[52] Jenson spends a great deal of time laying out his views in the second volume of his popular systematic theology textbook.[53] Here he calls the "Let us make" of verse 26 a "portentous new locution" for the "out-of-rhythm act" that "is the creation of humanity."[54] He cites Augustine, agreeing that man is superior to the other animals in that he was created in the image of God. This distinction gives man dominion over the other creatures.[55] Jenson follows Claus Westermann in translating "image" *selem* (צֶלֶם) as "counterpart." This translation confirms man's status in relationship with God: man is addressed by God himself, and he responds.[56]

Jenson spends much of this discussion contemplating the ontological nature of man as created in the *imago Dei*. Not unlike the scholastics, he ponders the distinctiveness of human attributes, i.e. that man "seems to be the only species of featherless bipeds and seems also to have certain neurological capacities not found otherwise, though this is not so certain."[57] These attributes are the "traces of the Trinity" that Augustine hinted at in *De Trinitate*.[58]

Jenson also warns against "anthropological nihilism," the idea that humans should be treated no better or worse than the animals.[59] In Jenson's opinion, these ideologies have led to the scourges of abortion and euthanasia. Jenson writes,

> Abortion on demand is already established in America and parts of Europe—and indeed in post-civilized China there is mandatory abortion[60]—and euthanasia and infanticide on demand apparently soon will be. These terminations serve the individual purposes of the terminators—the individualism is most remarkable when these are simultaneously the terminated—and they are justified by sentiment about the inferior life predictable for the terminated or

about the superior rights of the terminators. As we destroy crippled horses, so we kill born and unborn children whose mothers for whatever reasons do not think they should raise them, or elders who have lost hope and burden the system or their families, or trauma victims in disheartening coma, or persons simply in pain they do not wish to endure or we do not wish to see them enduring. *And there is no reason why we should not, if there is no ontological difference between humans and other animals*.[61]

Despite his ontological reflections, Jenson lands at a predictable Protestant position on the *imago*. He believes that the *imago* is God's speech,[62] and he sees "humanity's specific relation to God as *itself* our uniqueness.… Our specificity in comparison with the other animals is that we are the ones addressed by God's moral word and so [are] enabled to respond—that we are called to *pray.…* [Indeed] we are the praying animals."[63]

Catholic Perspectives on the *Imago Dei*

As discussed above, Catholic theologians have often seen the presence of the *imago Dei* as demonstrated in the unique faculties God gave human beings in the creation itself. This can be seen in the early writings of the church fathers. For instance, Irenaeus believed that the image of God bestowed upon human beings consists of "natural qualities," such as reason, which made humans distinct from other earthly creatures. And Tertullian suggested that the image of God (and its attendant attributes) was retained even after sinning.[64] As we have already seen, Augustine followed in this thinking. However, perhaps the most influential Catholic commentator on the *imago*, Thomas Aquinas, rose to prominence nearly eight centuries later.

Thomas Aquinas

Thomas notes that man is the only creature truly fashioned in the image of God. He writes in question 72, article one of his *Summa Theologica* that, "animals and plants may be said to be produced according to their kinds, to signify their remoteness from the Divine image and likeness, whereas man is said to be made *to the image and likeness of God*."[65] So far so good. But in question 93, article two Thomas goes much further, citing Augustine (*De Genesi Ad Litteram* vi. 12) to explain that "man's excellence consists in the fact that God made him to His own image by giving him an intellectual soul, which raises him above the beasts of the field."[66]

As shown above, nearly all Protestant commentators see this final exegetical conclusion as unbiblical and rooted in scholasticism. In their view, this assertion and the previous ones have led to centuries of incorrect anthropology, self-righteousness, Semi-Pelagianism, indulgences, and more.

But isn't it undeniable that man has been endowed with intellectual abilities that put him above every creature on earth? Would it have made sense that God would have created something stupider than the animals if he wanted a creature who might have dominion over them? And aren't God and man the only rational beings in this story—doesn't their similarity as rational beings have something to do with all this?

The origin of the scholastic influences of Thomas's work is certainly beyond the scope of this essay, so I won't comment on them here. However, I do think it's a stretch to say that the intellectual superiority of humankind cannot be deduced from Genesis 1. One must admit that the theology of an inherent God-like nature in man can tip the scales towards man-centered ways of understanding our relationship with God. Yet, to deny the ontological distinctions between man and animals seems to be an unnecessary brake on the contemporary theological defense of human life.

Perhaps in light of the conclusions made by scholars shown above, Thomas' scholastic conclusions appear downplayed in Catholic doctrine today. Take paragraph 357 in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1991), which explains what it means to be created "in the Image of God." Here, we see no scholastic "spark" of deification, but instead a human being, created with the capacities of personhood, who is now able to respond to the grace of God in his love toward his Lord and other people. The catechism states:

> Being in the image of God the human individual possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone. He is capable of self-knowledge, of self-possession and of freely giving himself and entering into communion with other persons. And he is called by grace to a covenant with his Creator, to offer him a response of faith and love that no other creature can give in his stead.[67]

John Paul II

One of the most prominent recent Catholic scholars on this subject (and undoubtedly a huge influence in the creation of the catechism) has been Pope John Paul II, who spoke at length about the imago and other life topics in a series of Wednesday audiences in St. Peter's Square from 1979-1984 now known as the *Theology of the Body*. In these talks, the late Pope starts, presumably with Thomas, noting that "Man, whom God created 'male and female,' bears the divine image impressed in the body 'from the beginning.'"[68] This also gives "life to the '*communium personarum*' that man and woman form … essentially the image of an inscrutable divine communion of Persons" in the Trinity.[69]

The Pope explains that the first creation narrative is the immutable basis of all Christian anthropology and this creation imbues man as an *anima rationale*, a

rational being.[70] He notes that this is a "'unassailable point of reference' in order to understand who we are (anthropology) and how we are to live (ethics)."[71] In this creation, the pope writes, "the Creator orders him [man] to subdue and rule the earth (Gen. 1:28)."[72] Following from this is our Lord's command to "be fruitful and multiply," which in the John Paul II's words, "enables [us] to participate in the creative, covenant love of God."[73] In all these thoughts, the Pope is mining from the rich store of traditional Catholic creation theology.

But in the lectures, John Paul II downplays the importance of the rationality of man, emphasizing instead, the "gift," of the communion of persons. *Theology of the Body* expert Christopher West explains the pope's thinking that, "not only as a rational individual does the human person image God (not only in the experience of original solitude), but also in the communion formed by man and woman (the experience of original unity)."[74] This communion is of course, the image of the loving communion of members of the Trinity itself, creating life in their own divine relationship.[75] To demonstrate this, John Paul II opines (not unlike Luther did) that the members of the Trinity seem to pause before creating man, "as if he entered back into himself to make a decision, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness' (Gen. 1:27)."[76]

The Pope continues in this motif of "gift-giving." He notes that everything in the world was created and it was "very good," and that human beings, therefore are "very good" gifts from God himself.[77] He writes: "As the action of God, the creation signifies not only calling from nothingness to existence and establishing the existence of the world and of man in the world. It also signifies, according to the first narrative [Gen. 1] *beresit bara*, giving. It is a fundamental and 'radical' giving, that is, a giving in which the gift comes into being precisely from nothingness."[78] As stated above, his giving becomes realized fully after the creation of Eve and consequently Adam's fulfillment as a person in this relationship. This "giving" motif is also seen in the second creation account in which the Pope describes the encounter as one in which Adam is lovingly made a "partner of the absolute," in a "unique, exclusive, and unrepeatable relationship with God himself."[79]

Pro-Life Implications of the "Original Righteousness" of the *Imago Dei*

Now that we have a clearer understanding of what it means to be created in the image of God, I would like to conclude by further explaining how a correct understanding of the *imago Dei* might be used to educate about, and advocate for, the defense of all human life.

1. God imprints an image of himself upon every human being, believer or not. We have learned that every human being, whether Christian or not, has received the image of God from the moment of conception (the creation moment) as an

"original righteousness." This *imago* is described in various ways: as a relationship with God, a promise of eternal life, a gift, or as innate capacities such as reason, mind, and will. While the *imago* may be tarnished due to sin, and a fuller reception will be received through regeneration and faith, this image is nevertheless held by all persons. All human beings are therefore precious to God and equal in his sight, and their lives are worthy of protection.

2. This image is unique: it is not seen in any other of God's creations. Scripture makes it clear that other creatures do not receive this same image. As such, the life of a human being is more precious in the eyes of God than that of an animal. Therefore, "anthropological nihilism" must be rejected.

3. This image is permanent, a *character indelebilis*. The *imago Dei* can't be aged away, and it can't be sinned away. Every commentator agrees that this image lasts throughout a person's life, at least in some degree. The permanence of the *imago* is indispensable in understanding the sanctity of life among the aged. Their God-given dignity is not diminished by age nor by any loss of faculties.

4. The ontological nature of the *imago* is indispensable for understanding the preciousness of human life. While most Protestant commentators have rejected the ontological nature of the *imago*, it appears that this rejection is based more on an aversion to scholasticism and fear of the works righteousness it might lead to, rather than sound exegesis. One can infer inherent qualities such as reason, mind, and will (regardless of the origins of these categories) from the dominion God gives man in Genesis 1:28. Jenson saw the danger of the loss of an ontological *imago* in a society that now readily allows abortion and euthanasia. When we reject the ontological *imago*, which John Paul II called the "unassailable point of reference" for our ethics, we do so at our own peril.

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Notes

1. Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, Vol. 1: *Foundations*, ed., William H. Lazareth (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2007), 154.

2. Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008). All citations in this essay use the ESV translation.

3. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, rev. ed., trans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 57.

4. Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption: Dogmatics: Vol. II*, trans, Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974 [London: Lutterworth Press, 1952]), 66.

5. Ibid., 67.

6. Ibid., 68.

7. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 57.

8. Ibid., 58.

9. Ibid., 58.

10. Ibid., 59.

11. Ibid., 59.

12. Ibid., 60.

13. Brunner, 64.

14. Ibid., 67.

15. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 132.

16. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1-5*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 1, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1-30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-76); vols. 31-55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress Press, 1957-86); vols. 56-82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 57-58. Henceforth, LW.

17. LW 1: 56.

18. LW 1: 68.

19. See Peter Lombard, *Sententiarium libri quatuor*, II, Dist. XX.

20. LW 1: 56-57.

21. LW 1: 69.

22. LW 1: 60.

23. LW 1: 60.

24. LW 1: 61.

25. LW 1: 61: "If these powers are the image of God, it will also follow that Satan was created according to the image of God, since he surely has these natural endowments, such as memory and a very superior intellect and a most determined will, to a far higher degree than we have them." WA 42:46.7-10: "*Si enim istae potentiae sunt imago Dei, sequetur etiam Satanam ad imaginem Dei conditum esse, qui profecto illa naturalia longe habet validiora, quam nos habemus, sicut est memoria et intellectus summus et voluntas obstinatissima*." Here Luther is following the opinions of Origen and other church fathers who believed that angels, and therefore fallen angels like Lucifer, were not created in the image of God as men are.

26. LW 1: 61.

27. LW 1: 61.

28. LW 1: 62.

29. LW 1: 64.

30. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume III: *The Doctrine of Creation*, Part I, trans. J. W. Edwards, O. Bussey and H. Knight, ed. G.W. Bromley and T. F. Torrance (New York: T. T. Clark, 2004 [1945]), 110. Henceforth, CD.

31. CD III.1: 185.

32. CD III.1: 184.

33. CD III.1: 322.

34. CD III.1: 183.

35. CD III.1: 189.

36. CD III.1: 189.

37. CD III.1: 200.

38. CD III.1: 187.

39. CD III.1: 187.

40. CD III.1: 185.

41. Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 56-57.

42. Ibid., 60.

43. Ibid., 60.

44. Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 154.

45. Ibid., 155.

46. Ibid., 157.

47. Ibid., 165.

48. Ibid., 159.

49. Ibid., 152.

50. Ibid., 160.

51. Ibid., 160.

52. Interestingly, Jenson was one of the founders of the pro-life organization, Lutherans For Life www.lutheransforlife.org in 1978, and therefore he has a unique perspective of relating the *imago Dei* to the sanctity of life; see Dennis R. Di Mauro, *A Love for Life: Christianity's Consistent Protection of the Unborn* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008), 78.

53. Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2: *The Works of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

54. Ibid., 15.

55. Ibid., 15-16.

56. Ibid., 16.

57. Ibid., 56.

58. Ibid., 65.

59. Ibid., 56-57.

60. Jenson writes this before the repeal of the Chinese one child policy, which allowed two children per couple in 2015, and then three children in 2021. This is not to say that couples might be forced to undergo abortion today if they exceed the three-child limit.

61. Jenson, 57-58. Italics has been added to the text for emphasis.

62. Ibid., 61-62.

63. Ibid., 58-59.

64. Jared V. Ingle, "Imago Dei: Qualities and Nature," *Patheos*, April 11. 2019, https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jaredingle/2019/04/imago-dei-qualities-and-nature/. Accessed October 9, 2025.

65. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Volume I: 1a QQ. 1-119, 1$_a$ II^{ae} QQ. 1-4, q. 72, art. 1 (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press Christian Classics, 1981 [New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948]), 352. Hereafter, ST.

66. ST, vol. 1, q. 93, art. 2, p. 470. The Roman Catholic view of Sirach as inspired may have also had an influence on this theology, see Sirach 17:3.

67. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New Hope, KY: Urbi et Orbi Communications, 1994), paragraph 357, p. 91.

68. Christopher West, *Theology of the Body Explained: A Commentary on John Paul II's Man and Woman He Created Them* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2007), 91.

69. John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Media and Books, 2006), 163.

70. John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997), 448-449.

71. West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, 91.

72. John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 135.

73. West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, 91.

74. Ibid., 108.

75. John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, 450.

76. West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, 90.

77. Ibid., 128.

78. John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, 59.

79. Ibid., 38.

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Authenticity, Bad Faith, and the Public Self

A Wittgensteinian-Lutheran Reframing

Dennis Bielfeldt

1. Introduction: The Cultural Idol of Authenticity

FEW WORDS CARRY AS MUCH MORAL authority in our cultural moment as the word *authenticity*.[1] To be authentic is to be brave, honest, courageous; it is to be someone who dares to name and live out their "true self," no matter how costly or disruptive that may be. Entire genres of self-help literature, social media confessionals, and memoirs are structured around this trope: I once lived a life of conformity, but then I discovered who I really was inside, and now I live freely and honestly.[2] The claim to authenticity is our culture's secular sainthood.

This elevation of authenticity is not morally neutral. To say that someone is authentic is not simply to *describe* them. Rather, it is to *ascribe* virtue, to pronounce them courageous, to grant them moral standing. By contrast, to say that someone is "inauthentic" is to cast them into the shadows, to imply that they are living dishonestly, hypocritically, even cowardly. Authenticity has become the master moral category by which we evaluate a life.[3]

The story usually unfolds according to a predictable pattern. An individual lives for a time in what appears to be stability: career, marriage, family, faith. But beneath the surface, they feel restless, as though some deeper truth about themselves is hidden, unacknowledged, perhaps even repressed. At some point, the tension becomes unbearable. They set out on an inward journey, a quest to peer into themselves and find out who they really are. The language of "self-discovery" dominates: the real me is inside, and it is my task to bring that inner truth into the light of day.

This narrative has particular force when it comes to issues of sexuality. In recent decades, to "discover" one's true orientation and then to live publicly in light of it has come to be regarded as one of the highest forms of authenticity. The person who says, "For years I lived as though I were straight, but then I realized I am gay,

and now I can finally live authentically," is praised as brave, as a model for others. To live otherwise—to remain in the marriage, to continue the old life—is cast as repression, inauthenticity, even self-betrayal.[4]

And yet this cultural story rests on a powerful philosophical assumption *that there is in fact such a thing as an inward, hidden essence of the self that can be uncovered through introspection*. Authenticity assumes that the self is like a buried treasure chest, waiting to be opened.[5] It assumes that desires and orientations are not shifting features of a life lived in community but inner facts that can be discovered and named.

In much of contemporary culture, the question of life's meaning has collapsed into the project of authenticity. To be alive in a "real" sense is taken to mean living in fidelity to one's inner truth, as though life could be secured by excavating and expressing some hidden essence. Life, in this register, is not measured by its givenness but by its capacity to host and display the authentic self.

Yet this very identification of life with self-expression quietly redefines the ontology of life itself: life becomes self-expansion, a project of interior disclosure. Against this, the claim of faith is stark: *life does not consist in discovering or expanding the self at all, but in being constituted by what stands outside of it—God's primal intentionality upon us*. This move presses the logic of externalism to its deepest register: just as meaning and knowledge depend upon what lies beyond the self, so too life itself is ontologically grounded not in self-possession but in the ecstatic relation of faith to God.[6]

What if the assumption of self-expansion is wrong? What if the very quest for authenticity, as our culture tells it, is itself a form of self-deception? What if the attempt to discover one's true inner essence is not an act of courage but, paradoxically, a subtle way of avoiding responsibility?

This essay will argue precisely that. I contend that authenticity, in its contemporary cultural form, is a refined expression of what Jean-Paul Sartre called *bad faith*: a flight from freedom disguised as honesty.[7] The claim to authenticity masks the deeper truth that the self is not an essence hidden within, but rather a reality constituted in relation: before God, before neighbor, within the shared grammars of public life.[8] To live authentically, in the sense our culture celebrates, is to imagine one can escape the weight of responsibility by appealing to a discovered inner truth. But to live *truly*, as both Wittgenstein and Luther will help us see, is to accept that the self is *enacted*, not *discovered*; *relational*, not *hidden*; *ethical*, not merely *expressive*.

To make this case, I will begin with a narrative that captures the drama of authenticity as it plays out in contemporary life. The story of Jill, a woman in a seemingly stable marriage who begins to reflect on her sexuality, will illustrate the cultural script in its most familiar form. Through her eyes, we will see the lure of authenticity and the disruption it brings. From there, we will turn to Wittgenstein's

critique of the idea of a private language, a critique which destabilizes the very notion that identity can be inwardly discovered. Sartre's analysis of bad faith will deepen the diagnosis, showing how appeals to authenticity can function as evasions of responsibility. Finally, Luther's theology of vocation and the *imago Dei* will offer a constructive alternative, grounding human selfhood not in inward essence but in public responsibility before God and neighbor.

In short, this essay aims to show how we lose ourselves in the very attempt to find ourselves. Authenticity, far from being the highest virtue, can become the subtlest form of dishonesty. The true self is not the one hidden within, waiting to be uncovered, but the one enacted in freedom, vocation, and responsibility. To recover this truth is to reimagine the *imago Dei* itself, not as a private essence but as a communal calling. Only in this reframing can we begin to see what it means, in the deepest sense, to lose ourselves in order to find ourselves.

2. The Case Study: Jill's Story

FOR MOST OF HER ADULT LIFE, JILL THOUGHT of herself as ordinary. She had married young to a man she respected and trusted. They had built a life together, a home with children who filled the rooms with laughter, noise, and the kind of exhaustion only parents know. Friends would sometimes joke that Jill and her husband were the steady ones, the couple who seemed unshaken by the storms that rattled others. From the outside, and even from the inside most days, her life appeared whole.

Yet under this ordinariness there began to stir a restlessness she could not name. It came quietly at first, in idle moments, when she scrolled through articles or personal essays online. The stories caught her attention, women who had lived half their lives in heterosexual marriages before realizing, often with a mix of shock and relief, that they were actually gay. These confessions carried a kind of electric charge. Each one was cast as a narrative of courage: I had been living a lie, but then I discovered my true self. At first Jill read them with curiosity, then with unease, and finally with a trembling recognition.

Could it be that she, too, was living a life that only looked stable but was in fact a disguise? Could it be that her real self, long hidden, was something else entirely?

The questions could not be quelled. They settled into her body, into her thoughts. When she sat at the dinner table, listening to her children chatter about school, she would suddenly feel a pang of dislocation: What if I am not who they think I am? When her husband reached across the bed at night, she sometimes felt a distance she could not explain. She began to wonder if the very normalcy of her life was a mask.[9]

This was the beginning of her turmoil, for Jill had absorbed from the culture around her that authenticity was not optional. To live authentically was to live hon-

estly, courageously. To live inauthentically was to live a lie. If she were not living in accordance with her "true self," then no matter how happy her children seemed or how stable her marriage looked, she was deceiving them all, *and herself most of all*.

Thus, she set out, haltingly at first, on what she thought of as an introspective investigation of her own desires. She began to pay close attention to her longings, to the subtle stirrings of attraction. She asked herself questions in the privacy of her journal: What do I feel when I see this or that? What images linger in my mind? Where do my fantasies lead me? She treated her inner life as a field to be studied, as if careful reflection could reveal the truth of her essence.[10]

Sometimes the answers came with clarity. She noticed that certain images awakened her in ways her marriage no longer did. Other times she felt only confusion, as though her desires were contradictory, shifting, unreliable. But she pressed on, convinced that if she looked closely enough, she could discern the authentic thread that ran beneath the surface.

Eventually her reflections took on a sharper edge. One evening, after weeks of restless rumination, she sought out not only essays but stories, personal confessions of women who had dared to step into same-sex relationships after years of denying themselves. She read their words with mounting intensity, and something inside her seemed to awaken. *Yes, that is me. That is what I feel*.[11]

The discovery both thrilled and terrified her. It thrilled her because it promised clarity after months of turmoil. Yet it also terrified her because of what it might mean for her family. If this was who she really was, then she could not go on as before. To continue her life unchanged would be to live inauthentically, to betray her own truth.

The turmoil deepened. Jill began to notice every gesture, every silence in her marriage, and to read it as confirmation that her authentic self was elsewhere. She found herself dwelling on the thought that she had never fully known who she was until now. She told herself, with growing conviction, that her task was not to preserve appearances but to live honestly.

And so, with the mix of fear and excitement that comes when one stands at the edge of decision, Jill crossed a line. She arranged to meet Ashley, a woman with whom she became acquainted online. Their first encounter was hesitant, almost awkward, but Jill felt a spark that seemed to confirm what she had been suspecting. When, at last, they kissed, Jill felt the thrill of both pleasure and discovery. It was as if the months of turmoil had converged into a single affirmation: *this is who I am*.

The effect was overwhelming. Jill returned home from that meeting with a heart racing, not only from the encounter itself but from the conviction that she had at last uncovered her authentic self. For weeks she had been circling around the possibility, testing it, doubting it. Now she felt she had evidence, confirmation. She had looked inward, she had experimented outward, and the result was unmistakable.

But the discovery did not bring peace; instead, it created a new sense of urgency. If this was who she really was, then she could not keep it hidden. She owed it to herself, and, so she thought, to her family, to tell the truth. She could not go on living a lie.[12]

So, she began to plan her coming out. She rehearsed the words in her mind.[13] She imagined the shock on her husband's face, the tears in her children's eyes, but she steeled herself with the thought that authenticity was worth the cost. Better a painful truth than a comfortable lie. Better honesty than repression. She pictured herself standing before them not as a deceiver but as one finally honest, finally brave.

The day came when she gathered them all in the living room. Her husband sat stiffly, sensing something was wrong. Her children looked at her with curiosity and then dread. She took a breath and said what she had come to believe: "I need to tell you something important. I am not the person you thought I was. I've realized that I'm gay, and I need to live honestly. I can't keep pretending. I love you all, but I must be true to myself."

The room fell silent. Her husband's face went pale. One child began to cry. Another stared, confused and frightened. Jill felt her throat tighten, but she forced herself to go on, repeating the words she had practiced: *I must live authentically*.

Later, when her friend Mary came to comfort the family, she assured them that Jill was doing the right thing. "She's being honest," Mary said gently. "She's finally speaking her truth. It takes courage to be authentic, even when it's painful. You should be proud of her."

For Jill, Mary's words confirmed what she had come to believe: that in leaving her marriage and family, she was not failing them but living up to a higher moral calling. She was being authentic. She was being courageous. She was, in the deepest sense, being ethical.

And yet, as she looked at the faces of her husband and children, Jill could not shake the sense that something was unresolved. While the cultural narrative highlighted her bravery, in the silence of that room, surrounded by pain, she wondered if authenticity alone could bear the weight of what she had done.[14]

3. Wittgenstein's Challenge: Private Language and the Impossibility of Authentic Self-Discovery

WHEN JILL'S HUSBAND CALLED PASTOR PAUL, she braced herself for the worst, such as proof texts, rebukes, and urgent pleas for repentance. But Paul surprised her. He sat quietly, listened longer than she expected, and then reached into his weathered satchel,

not for a Bible, but for a curious-looking book: a bilingual edition of *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein's dense and often mystifying final work.

Jill squinted at the cover. "You're going to quote ... Wittgenstein?"

Paul smiled. "Only if you'll indulge me."

He flipped open to a page already covered in pencil marks and small tabs. "Let me ask you something: When you say, 'I've discovered who I really am,' what kind of discovery is that? Did you find a truth like one finds a birth certificate, or was it more like solving a riddle?"

Jill hesitated. "I mean... I looked inward. I reflected. I paid attention to patterns in my life, what attracted me, what lingered. Eventually, it felt like something became clear."

Paul nodded. "I believe you. But Wittgenstein would ask: what do you mean by 'looked inward'? What *kind* of clarity was this? Was it that which Wittgenstein wrote about in §243 of the *Philosophical Investigations*? He describes a private language as one that only a single individual can understand. That is to say, "The words of this language are to refer to what only the speaker can know—to his immediate private sensations."[15]

Paul looked at her gently. "This is the idea he wants to dismantle: that we can construct a meaningful language to describe inner objects that no one else can see, verify, or correct. If that's what your self-discovery is, it may be more fragile than you think."

Jill frowned. It seemed so odd to be thinking about what a philosopher once wrote. With a hint of self-defensiveness, she replied, "But I didn't make it up. I wasn't pretending."

"Wittgenstein isn't accusing you of lying," Paul said. "He's questioning whether we can give meaning to words, like 'gay' or 'true self', based only on internal observation. In §293, he gives his famous *beetle-in-the-box* example." Paul opened the book and read the following words: "Suppose everyone had a box with something in it which we call a 'beetle.' No one can ever look into anyone else's box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at *his* beetle...." Paul continued, "now if 'the thing in the box doesn't belong to the language-game at all, then it would be' irrelevant."[16]

"Do you see the point?" Paul asked. "If everyone uses the same word, 'beetle,' 'identity,' 'orientation,' but no one can verify what anyone else means when using them, then the mental content to which the word relates doesn't matter. It's how the word is used publicly that gives it meaning."

Jill looked unsettled. "So ... are you saying my identity isn't real?"

Paul shook his head. "Not at all. I'm just saying it's not *hidden*. That's Wittgenstein's point. He notes in §435 that the inner is not hidden; it does not have to be inferred. The inner is expressed.[17] Your inner life is real, but it only becomes meaningful, to you or anyone else, as it's expressed in words, actions, relationships. It is not something *privately discovered*, but rather is something *publicly enacted*."

Jill sat in silence, wondering about such a strange pastor.

Nonetheless, she returned alone the next day to the church office. Paul handed her a copy of the *Investigations*. "Just read it slowly," he said, "even if it feels like nonsense at first."

That evening, curled up with the book and a mug of tea, Jill thought: "If a person is to be able to think, then he must be capable of following a rule." Then she thought: "This is the paradox: a rule stands there like a signpost. Does the signpost leave no doubt about the way I have to go?"[18]

She reflected. This was how she had treated her feelings—as rules or signposts. If she felt drawn toward certain images, if her fantasies persisted, then surely that *meant something*. Surely those signs pointed to a truth. But Wittgenstein was asking: *What makes a feeling a rule at all?* How do you know you're following a rule and not just reinterpreting your own impulses with each passing day?

Her journal came to mind, the way she had tracked patterns of desire, longing for a consistent thread. But what she actually found, she now realized, had often been contradictory. Some days she felt certain. Other days she was confused, ambivalent, even guilty. She had chalked it up to fear or repression. But now she wondered: What if the *instability* was not a failure of introspection but a sign that introspection alone could not yield what she had hoped?

Back in Pastor Paul's study, she voiced this aloud. "So what am I doing, then, when I say, 'I am gay'? If it's not a private discovery, what is it?" Paul opened to §507 and noted that Wittgenstein was saying that only within a language-game can a thought have a meaning.[19]

"That's Wittgenstein's answer," he said. "You're not reporting a private fact. You're participating in a *public grammar*, one shaped by culture, community, and ethical relationships. Your declaration is not neutral; it carries *implications*."

"But I wasn't trying to hurt anyone," she replied.

"Of course not. But language isn't neutral. It's relational. As Stanley Cavell puts it, our relationship to ourselves is intelligible only because of our relationships with others.[20] James K. Smith suggests that words, and the liturgies or narratives we inhabit, do more than describe — they *commit us to worlds*; thus, the names or

identities we adopt (or are given) carry with them real moral obligations, not merely emotional resonances.[21]

But the most disturbing thought for Jill came later. If her own self was not a hidden object but a public enactment, then she had not *discovered* herself, but had merely *acted*. This meant that she was not just a victim of repression or cultural misunderstanding. In claiming that she had discovered her true self, she was an agent, a participant in a larger cultural event or game. Since she was making a significant move in that game, she was therefore *responsible* for the repercussions of that move.

That realization came not like a stone, but like a quiet unfolding: What if there was no essence to discover? What if the language I used gave shape to my sense of self, not because it named something, but because it created a new horizon of action? What if, in trying to escape responsibility, I had only renamed it?

She closed the book and whispered aloud Wittgenstein's words from §293: "If we construe the grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of 'object and designation' the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant."[22]

And for the first time, she felt the weight of what it might mean to be free not to name herself from within, but to answer for herself from without.

3.1 Objections and Responses

Yet even as Jill began to grasp Wittgenstein's argument, she found herself uneasy. Could it really be true that her deepest sense of self, that which she thought she had discovered, was not a hidden truth but a public act? Her whole journey had been built on the conviction that introspection could yield knowledge. Now, that foundation seemed to tremble. She needed more.

"I know my experience; I still *feel* it," Jill said one afternoon, turning from the page. "This isn't abstract. It's real. I know what I feel. How could anyone else understand it better than I do?"

Paul nodded. "That's the most natural objection. And it's the one Wittgenstein addresses most carefully." He pointed to §580: "An 'inner process' stands in need of outward criteria.[23]

"You do feel something," he continued. "But when you give that feeling a name, e.g., gay,' 'authentic,' 'true self,' you're not simply describing what's in the box. After all, you're using language you learned from others, and that language gets its *meaning* not from your internal certainty, but from how we use it together. You're not reporting a hidden fact. You're entering a public world."

Jill looked down at her hands and spoke softly, "So even my clearest feelings might not mean what I think they do?"

"They are real," Paul said, "but their *meaning* depends on the form of life in which they're expressed."

"So ... is this just reducing me to behavior?" Jill asked. "Are you saying that all that matters is what I do or say?"

"No," Paul said gently. "And Wittgenstein isn't saying that either."

He turned to §435, and said: "Don't you see? *Nothing is hidden*. There is not something private.[24] He's not denying subjectivity, Jill. He's rejecting the idea that your inner life could be a *private object*, accessible only to you, and yet intelligible through language. Language doesn't collapse the self into behavior. Rather it is the only thing that makes the self *expressible*. Without public criteria, even the richest inner world would be mute."

Jill thought of the journal she had kept, how she had wrestled with words, sometimes failing to capture what she meant, sometimes amazed when a phrase seemed to ring true. She realized now that even her own self-understanding had depended on a shared language for her "realizations" to be meaningful at all.

Jill thought for a time and asked, "But don't we create new language all the time? Don't personal insights eventually shape public understanding? Don't the private insights precede the public understanding?"

Paul smiled, turned to §272 and offered this interpretation, "But what if this sensation were something like a private object? Well, then, we'd be tempted to say: if it is private, it cannot be a criterion."[25]

"New words become meaningful when others can understand them, when they enter a grammar we share. But a truly *private* language, one based on sensations no one else could verify or interpret, wouldn't work. Even *you* wouldn't be able to use it meaningfully over time. You'd lose track of whether it meant today what it meant yesterday. Under those conditions, what private insights would be possible for you?"

Jill looked out the window. Her declarations had felt so certain—until they weren't. The meanings had shifted, even in her own heart. And now she saw why: without shared criteria, even certainty becomes unstable. She grabbed her notebook and a pen and jotted down what she learned.

1. A private language is one that only I can understand because it refers to my inner sensations.[26]
2. But using a word meaningfully requires rules for its correct or incorrect use.[27]
3. And rules require public standards of correctness.[28]
4. Yet, in a private language, no such standards could exist, and thus I am unable to distinguish "I think I'm right" from "I *am* right."[29]

5. Therefore, a private language is impossible.[30]

6. Furthermore, if language is public, the idea of an ineffable, private "authentic self" collapses, for thinking and stating such a self would have to rely on a private language. Simply put, the self is constituted in shared practices, not hidden away inside ourselves somehow.[31]

After jotting down the points, she added the following about what Pastor Paul had shared:

• *The beetle-in-a-box analogy*: Imagine everyone has a box with a beetle inside, but no one can look in anyone else's box. Over time, the word "beetle" would be used publicly, regardless of what's in each box. Thus, the private contents of the box become irrelevant for the term's meaning. Our private sensations are like beetles in boxes, and thus they cannot anchor meaning.[32]

• *Pain diary problem*: Suppose you keep a diary and every time you feel a certain sensation, you write "S." But how do you know you're using "S" consistently? There's no outside standard to check against, so the idea of "using it correctly" collapses.[33]

• *Impact on the self*: The notion of a hidden "authentic self" assumes there's a private truth about "who I really am" that only I can access. Wittgenstein's argument shows that meaning, identity, and selfhood only exist within *public, rule-governed language games*. Thus, the "authentic self" as something private and ineffable is incoherent.[34]

Jill finally realized that if Wittgenstein is correct, then even something as seemingly self-evident as a headache resists being "known" as a fact I privately verify. I do not *know* I have a headache; rather, I simply *have* one.[35] The same logic applies to sexual orientation. To claim I "know" my orientation as a private, inner truth misframes the issue, since the very concepts of "knowing" and "being" are bound up in public language and social practices. Just as the grammar of "headache" depends on shared forms of expression (crying out, wincing, taking aspirin), so too "sexual orientation" takes shape within public language games of desire, identity, and recognition. In this sense, orientation is not a hidden essence to be privately *discovered* but a role *enacted* and understood within a shared linguistic world. Clearly, the self cannot remain in the closet, but it must be coaxed out into the light along with other worldly denizens.

What struck Jill most forcefully, as Paul closed the book, was not how abstract the argument was, but how *concrete*. If her identity was not a private fact but a public expression, then it was not immune to accountability. She was not merely *discovering*; she was also *doing*. She was not a neutral observer of her life but a moral agent shaping its trajectory.

Wittgenstein had not taken away the reality of her feelings. He had revealed their *context*, a context that was never just personal, but always *ethical*. In reflecting again on the self she thought she had found, she whispered aloud the words, "What if there is no such thing?"

And now the question didn't frighten her. It sobered her. It made room for something deeper than discovery: the responsibility of living a life that is not hidden, but expressed before others, and ultimately before God.

4. Sartre on Bad Faith: Authenticity as Escape

WHILE WITTGENSTEIN HAD UNSETTLED JILL'S belief that identity could be found in solitary introspection, Sartre had moved further in that direction years earlier, shattering the very idea that there is a "true self" waiting to be discovered. For Sartre, what Jill took as a discovery was clearly a *decision*, one for which she was now unavoidably responsible.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre describes human beings as "condemned to be free."[36] Unlike objects that have a fixed essence—a paperknife, for instance, is designed for cutting—humans have no predetermined nature. Our existence comes first; we define ourselves later through action and commitment. This is Sartre's core claim: *existence precedes essence*.

This freedom is not liberating in the therapeutic sense. It is *burdensome*, because we cannot escape it. In every moment, we are shaping who we are through the choices we make. And when we claim to be simply "being ourselves," we often conceal the fact that we are *fleeing the weight of decision*. Sartre names this self-deception "bad faith" (*mauvaise foi*).

His famous example of the waiter in the café dramatizes this dynamic. The waiter acts as though his role fully defines him, for his movements are precise, his speech rehearsed, his identity absorbed in function. But Sartre insists that he is not merely a waiter. He is *choosing* to be one, and in doing so, he is denying his deeper freedom to become otherwise.[37]

Bad faith, opines Sartre, is not merely lying to others, but is rather a lying to oneself. It is pretending that the self is a fixed object, when in fact it is always an incomplete *project*.

This directly challenges Jill's claim: "I've discovered who I really am." Sartre would respond:, "No, you've chosen a way of being, and now you must own it." Authenticity, for Sartre, means owning one's radical freedom to become. As he writes in *Existentialism Is a Humanism*: "man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism."[38]

This reframes Jill's act of naming her identity. She may have experienced it as inward revelation, but Sartre would say that this was never about revelation. Rather, it is the espousing of an *ethical commitment*. To say "I am gay" is to take a stand in a public world, not because of an essence one discovers, but because of the freedom one exercises.

Importantly, Sartre does not suggest we create the self arbitrarily. He points out that while we are situated socially, historically, bodily, we are not thereby determined. Accordingly, although we cannot choose the facticity of our circumstances, we are always responsible for what we make of them. To claim otherwise is to slip back into bad faith. As it turns out, the authentic self is not something hidden or waiting to be found. It is that which must be chosen and assumed.[39]

In this sense, Sartre shares Wittgenstein's suspicion of "inner essence" language. Both deny the idea that selfhood can be recovered like an artifact. But whereas Wittgenstein emphasizes the grammars of public meaning, Sartre emphasizes the solitary weight of freedom. He insists that we are never merely expressing a role; we are always enacting a choice. To declare, "I am gay," or "I am Christian," or "I am free," is never a description of an inner object. Rather it is a public, irreversible ethical move.

For Jill, this reading is both liberating and sobering. She cannot hide behind discovery. Her choice has meaning not because it names what is "inside," but because it shapes what comes next. And that means her declaration is not the end of a journey, but the beginning of moral responsibility.

4.1. Heidegger, Sartre, and Authenticity

In *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1936), Sartre argues that the ego is not an internal structure residing at the heart of consciousness but rather an object in the world, apprehended through reflection. Consciousness, for Sartre, is impersonal, non-substantial, and defined by intentionality—it is always consciousness *of* something. He writes, "the Ego is neither formally nor materially *in* consciousness: it is outside, *in the world*. It is a being of the world, like the ego of another."[40]

This radically opposes the Cartesian model, in which the ego is the foundational subject. Sartre contends that consciousness does not require a unifying subject to produce thoughts or actions; rather, it is a spontaneous, self-transparent flow. As such, the ego is not the cause of our mental states or behaviors. It is rather a construct that arises when we reflect upon our experiences. In this sense, Sartre's externalization of the ego echoes what Wittgenstein gestures toward in the *Philosophical Investigations*, that is, that the self is not a hidden metaphysical entity behind experience, but rather a grammatical illusion created by the structure of our language games. What

both thinkers reveal, in different idioms, is that the "authentic self" may be less a reality to be found than a fiction sustained by reflection and linguistic convention.

Sartre's existentialism, though famously independent, stands in undeniable conversation with Martin Heidegger, whose *Being and Time* deeply influenced Sartre's ontology.[41] Yet while Sartre places the burden of selfhood on radical freedom, Heidegger locates authenticity in our relation to Being itself.

For Heidegger, most of us live in what he calls inauthenticity (*Uneigentlichkeit*): not through lies or self-deception, but through immersion in the impersonal world of *das Man*, "the they."[42] In this mode of being, we do what "one does," say what "they say," and think what "people think." This is not necessarily immoral, but simply is the default condition of everyday life. We do not fabricate a false self, but simply never wake up to the fact that our life is ours to live.

It is important to grasp that Heidegger's notion of authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*) is not about inner discovery or expressive freedom. It is about awakening to our own-most possibility: the fact that we are finite, mortal, and accountable for the shape of our lives.[43] What jolts us out of inauthenticity is not self-exploration, but the anticipation of death (*Sein-zum-Tode*). When we encounter our mortality—not abstractly, but existentially—we are summoned to face our life as a singular task. As Heidegger reminds us, Only the anticipation of death reveals the possibility of an authentic being-a-whole of Dasein.[44]

This is not a call to heroism. Heidegger is not saying that authenticity means total self-determination. Rather, he speaks of resoluteness (*Entschlossenheit*), the willingness to stand firm in the face of our thrownness, to claim our situated existence as our own. In authenticity, we do not become the authors of ourselves. We become answerable to being. Clearly, Heidegger's "authenticity" is consistent with Sartre's and Wittgenstein's deflationary account of the self. It has little to do with the notion of an "authentic self" that can be discovered.

Heidegger is thus a co-sojourner with both Wittgenstein and Sartre. Jill had believed that to be authentic was to extract a truth from within. But Heidegger insists that authenticity does not begin in introspection, but rather in confrontation with finitude. Accordingly, Jill cannot "be herself" without facing the reality that she will die, and that no one else can live her life for her. Authenticity is not about self-expression. It is about owning one's life as a task not to be inherited but undertaken.

Modern culture has absorbed fragments of both Sartre and Heidegger, but it has flattened their depth. The slogans of authenticity—"be true to yourself," "find your truth," "you do you"—echo existentialist themes, but they lack their ethical and ontological rigor.[45]

In popular culture, the authentic self is:

- *Preexistent*: It is found within the person.
- *Emotionally confirmed*: One knows one has found it because of inner peace, clarity, or resonance.
- *Liberating*: Being true to oneself is thought to free one from all external norms.
- *Unquestionable*: To challenge this freedom is thought to be an direct attack on one's dignity.

But for Sartre, there is *no essence to find*, but only freedom to be exercised. For Heidegger, there is *no self apart from being*; there is only the call to live one's finite life resolutely. Both thinkers expose the superficiality of the therapeutic self, a self that is grounded in mood, sincerity, or emotional clarity.

What Jill confronts, then, is not just a philosophical critique. It is an existential rebuke. She cannot outsource authenticity to feelings or cultural scripts. She must choose, and in choosing, she must assume responsibility, not only for who she becomes, but for what her becoming means in a shared world.

Jill had believed she was authentic in the cultural sense, for she had discovered her true self and now thought that she was living in consonance with it. But Sartre and Heidegger both suggest otherwise. She was in bad faith, fleeing freedom by hiding behind essence. Real authenticity, if the term can be used at all, lies in owning one's freedom and responsibility, not in uncovering a hidden orientation.

And here Luther will deepen the point. For even Sartre's analysis, bracing though it is, leaves freedom in a kind of void: condemned to be free, responsible but without ground. Luther reframes this existential truth theologically: the self is not condemned but called; freedom is not a burden but a gift; and responsibility is not solitary but relational, lived before God and neighbor. To see this, we must turn from Sartre's *mauvaise foi* to Luther's *imago Dei*.

5. Luther on Vocation, Neighbor, and the *Imago Dei*

WHEN JILL UTTERED THE WORDS "I am gay," she believed she was reporting something that had been hidden inside of her all along. The declaration felt like a discovery: as if, after years of confusion, she had excavated a fixed essence buried beneath layers of social convention. She imagined that authenticity meant finding this inner truth and then reshaping her life to match it.

But Pastor Paul's gentle intervention, drawing on Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, had unsettled her confidence. Wittgenstein had shown that words

cannot secure their meaning by pointing inward, as though each person had a private mental object that only they could observe. Meaning arises only in use, within a shared language-game. If that is so, then Jill's words "I am gay" are not a description of a hidden essence, but a public move within a form of life.

But eight decades ago, Sartre had already shown that any appeal to authenticity is an instance of *mauvaise foi*, an attempt to escape freedom by positing a fixed essence. Accordingly, Sartre leaves freedom hanging in the void: we are *condamnée à être libre*, condemned to be free, responsible but without ground. What Jill really needs is a way of seeing that freedom and responsibility are not alien impositions but the very shape of one's creaturely life before God. Here, Luther's theology of the *imago Dei* provides just such a reframing.

In much of contemporary culture, the question of life's meaning has collapsed into the project of authenticity. To be alive in a "real" sense is taken to mean living in fidelity to one's inner truth, as though life could be secured by excavating and expressing some hidden essence. Life, in this register, is not measured by its givenness but by its capacity to host and display the authentic self. Yet this very identification of life with self-expression quietly redefines the ontology of life itself: life becomes self-expansion, a project of interior disclosure.

For Luther, however, the self is not a repository of hidden faculties waiting to be disclosed. To see this, we must examine what Luther believes the image of God is. He writes:

> Moreover, the remaining doctors in general follow Augustine, who keeps Aristotle's classification: that the image of God is the powers of the soul – memory, the mind or intellect, and the will. These three, they say, comprise the image of God which is in all men.[46]

Luther points here to the traditional view of the *imago Dei* being defined by the properties that human beings *have*. But this is absurd, thinks Luther, for if this defined the *imago Dei*, Satan would have it fully:

> I am afraid that since the loss of this image through sin we cannot understand it to any extent. Memory, will, and mind we have indeed; but they are most depraved and most seriously weakened, yes, to put it more clearly, they are utterly leprous and unclean. If these powers are the image of God, it will also follow that Satan was created according to the image of God, since he surely has these natural endowments, such as memory and a very superior intellect and a most determined will, to a far higher degree than we have them.[47]

Were these powers to be the *imago Dei*, they would be leprous and unclean. Instead, the image of God is a unique work of God in human beings: "Therefore, the image

of God is something far different, namely, a unique work of God."[48] To have this image is to be ecstatically replete with the true and perfect knowledge of God, the highest love of God, eternal life, eternal joy, eternal security. It is to be ruled by God, just as we rule over the other creatures. The image now lost is available dimly through faith:

> But what we say about it is taught by faith and the Word, which, as it were from afar, reveal that glory of the divine image. Just as heaven and earth in the beginning were like formless bodies before light was added, so too the godly now possess within themselves a rough outline of that image, which God will perfect on the last day in those who have believed the Word.[49]

In other words, the divine image is not an essence to be discovered but a relation to be lived. The human is in the image of God by standing rightly before God. Just as Wittgenstein denies that there can be a private language, Luther denies that the self can be constituted by a hidden inner essence that can in some way *correspond* to what God is.

Luther pointed this out in his 1519 *Two Kinds of Righteousness*: "This is the righteousness of Christ by which he justifies through faith."[50] This means that righteousness does not inhere essentially in the soul, but it is a relation to God; for it is received from God through grace and mercy. This righteousness, precisely because it is alien, is the very righteousness by which the believer stands before God. Luther writes: "Through faith in Christ, therefore, Christ's righteousness becomes our righteousness and all that he has becomes ours; rather, he himself becomes our righteousness…. This is an infinite righteousness, and one that swallows up all sins in a moment, for it is impossible that sin should exist in Christ. On the contrary, he who trusts in Christ exists in Christ; he is one with Christ, having the same righteousness as he."[51]

This move presses the logic of externalism to its deepest register: just as meaning and knowledge depend upon what lies beyond the self, so too life itself is ontologically grounded not in self-possession but in the ecstatic relation of faith to God.

Luther's language of vocation makes this relational anthropology concrete. For him, the Christian life moves in two directions. *Coram Deo*, before God, the believer is justified by faith alone, entirely passive and dependent. *Coram hominibus*, before human beings, the believer is active in love, called into service of neighbor in the ordinary structures of life. Luther's paradoxical formulation in *The Freedom of a Christian* captures this double movement: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."[52]

This freedom is not the modern freedom of authenticity, the liberty to express an inner truth. It is freedom from sin and from self-justification, and therefore freedom

for the neighbor. In this sense, freedom is never an inward possession but always a public reality. Like Wittgenstein's dictum, "*Die Bedeutung eines Wortes ist sein Gebrauch in der Sprache*" ("the meaning of a word is its use in the language"), so too freedom and selfhood are not hidden contents but enacted realities.[53] To say "I am free" is not to name an inner essence but to take up a role within a public drama, to live in a particular grammar of faith and love.

The implications for Jill's crisis are profound. She had believed that her discovery of an inward orientation released her from the responsibilities of her marriage and family. But if Luther is right, then her authentic self is not a kernel buried within, waiting to be expressed, but is rather her actual life before God and neighbor. Her "true self" is not something she might discover through introspection but something she must enact through faith and love.

In this light, her appeal to authenticity begins to look suspiciously like what Sartre called bad faith. By positing an inner essence—"this is who I really am"—she attempts to escape the anguish of freedom and the weight of responsibility. She imagines that her orientation dictates her action, relieving her of responsibility for her husband and children. But in fact, she remains free and responsible; her situation is ethical all the way down. Luther sharpens this point: vocation binds her to her family, not as a chain, but as the very place where her freedom is lived out in service.

Luther's exposition of Genesis makes the point even sharper. He describes the image of God in Adam and Eve:

> In the remaining creatures God is recognized as by His footprints; but in the human being, especially in Adam, He is truly recognized, because in him there is such wisdom, justice, and knowledge of all things, that he may rightly be called a world in miniature.[54]

In other words, man is a *rational living being*.

These are not inward properties like orientation or disposition, but rather are modes of relation, ways of standing rightly before God. The image of God is never a private essence but always a relational reality.[55]

Wittgenstein's insight into language provides a suggestive parallel. Just as meaning does not reside in a hidden object but only in use, so the image of God does not reside in a hidden inner essence but only in relation. Both collapse the Cartesian temptation to think of truth as something inwardly beheld. Both push us outward, into public life. Even more strikingly, Luther insists that the image of God is communal. The image cannot be borne in isolation, but is social from the outset. Just as there can be no private language, there can be no private *imago Dei*.

When Jill reflected on all of this, the idea of authenticity began to dissolve. She realized that to speak of an inner essence was to evade her concrete ethical

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responsibilities. The image of God is not to be found in the hidden recesses of her subjectivity, but in the public life she shares with her husband and children, in the possibilities set before her in which she can act in faith and love. To pursue authenticity as essence was to flee this vocation. To live the image of God is not to discover herself but to lose herself in responsibility.

In this way Luther provides a theological grammar that complements Wittgenstein's and even answers Sartre's despair. Meaning is use, not essence; the self is vocation, not kernel. Both resist the modern temptation to treat authenticity as an inward discovery. Furthermore, both, in different registers, point toward the same truth: *what our culture prizes as authenticity is too often only bad faith in disguise*. The more authentic way, the one closer to Heidegger's *Eigentlichkeit*, is also the harder way: to acknowledge that the self is not given inwardly but constituted outwardly, in responsibility before God and neighbor.

6. Theological Reframing: Freedom, Language, and Responsibility

JILL'S EMBRACE OF AUTHENTICITY HAD SEEMED, at first, to give her life a new solidity. By declaring "I am gay," she believed she had finally uncovered the truth of her being, a kernel of identity that justified her decisions. However, Sartre would have helped her to see that this appeal to essence was a flight from freedom, a refusal of responsibility. Furthermore, Heidegger would have shown her that the cultural idol of authenticity was not what *Eigentlichkeit* meant, for genuine authenticity is not the discovery of a hidden kernel but the owning up to one's finitude and responsibility. And Luther went further still, revealing that freedom and responsibility are not tragic impositions but the very shape of our creaturely existence before God.

With Luther's help, Jill could begin to see that the alternative to authenticity is not despair but vocation. For vocation is the grammar in which freedom and responsibility are enacted. To say "I am free" is not to name a private essence but to confess a gift received from God and a calling to serve the neighbor. Freedom is thus not the opposite of responsibility but its condition.

This reframing turns the question of identity inside out. Jill had thought her deepest task was to ask, *Who am I really, deep inside?* But Luther and Wittgenstein together suggest that this question is already misleading. The self is not hidden within, waiting to be uncovered. The self is constituted in use, in relation, in responsibility. The more faithful question is: *How shall I live responsibly before God and neighbor?*

Here language and theology converge. Wittgenstein insists that meaning is not a hidden object but a use within a grammar. Luther insists that the image of God

is not an essence but a relation of faith and love. Both deconstruct the fantasy of inward essence and redirect us toward public enactment.

This means that Jill's declaration "I am gay" cannot function as an escape hatch from her obligations. For such a claim is not a report of a private fact but a public move that reconfigures her web of responsibilities. She cannot dissolve her marriage and family simply by appealing to a hidden truth about herself, because there is no such hidden truth. There is only the public drama of vocation, in which her freedom and responsibility remain.

And this is precisely where Sartre's dictum that a man is "a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is" finds theological resonance.[56] Jill is her desires, but she is not bound by them. She is her family roles, but she is not reducible to them. She is always more, always responsible, always free to act otherwise. Sartre leaves this freedom suspended in anguish; Luther grounds it in God's promise. For the Christian, to be free is not to be condemned but to be called to live by faith before God and in love toward neighbor.

Jill's turmoil, then, is reframed. She thought she was trapped between repression and authenticity: either she would deny her essence and live inauthentically, or she would embrace it and live honestly. But now she sees that this binary is false. There is no hidden essence to repress or discover. There is only the public life of responsibility, in which she remains bound to God and neighbor. *The question is not whether she will live authentically but whether she will live faithfully.*

This is not to deny the reality of her desires. They are real, and they shape her experience. But they do not dictate her essence, because there is no essence of that kind. Desires are features of her life, not its ground. To treat them as ground is to slip into bad faith. To acknowledge them truthfully is to place them within the larger horizon of vocation.

This horizon changes everything. For Jill, to say "I am gay" is not to absolve herself of responsibility but to deepen it. Her words call forth new expectations from others, reshape her bonds, and press her into decisions. To utter them is to act, to commit, to bind herself. The ethical cannot be escaped; it only intensifies.

The Christian language of the *imago Dei* makes this intensification explicit. The image of God is not a hidden kernel but the very possibility of relation: faith toward God, love toward neighbor. Jill bears this image not by discovering who she is inwardly but by living out her responsibilities publicly. The *imago Dei* is always relational, always communal, always enacted. Just as there can be no private language, there can be no private *imago Dei*.

This reframing disarms the cultural idol of authenticity. Our culture tells us that the bravest act is to peer inward, discover one's true self, and then live outwardly

in light of it. But the Christian vision says otherwise: the self is not hidden within but enacted without. Freedom is not the liberty to express an essence but the gift of being bound to God and neighbor in love.

Thus, Jill's crisis is revealed to be ethical from beginning to end. She is not a victim of hidden truths but a free creature called to responsibility. Her task is not to live authentically but to live faithfully. Not to discover her essence but to enact her vocation.

And in this recognition, she begins to glimpse the paradox Jesus spoke: "Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 16:25). Jill loses the fantasy of an inner authentic self, and in so doing finds her true self, not hidden within, but lived out in responsibility before God and neighbor.

7. Conclusion: Losing Ourselves to Find Ourselves

WHEN JILL BEGAN HER JOURNEY, SHE THOUGHT she was undertaking an act of courage. She believed that within her lay the hidden truth of her authentic self, a self that only needed to be uncovered and confessed. To be authentic, she assumed, was to live outwardly in harmony with this inward essence. Her declaration "I am gay" seemed the culmination of months of inner searching, a discovery that justified breaking the fragile bonds of family life in order to be honest.

Yet what she came to see is that this picture was itself an illusion. Wittgenstein showed her that the words she used to describe herself could not name hidden private objects; they acquired their meaning only within the shared grammars of public life. To say "I am gay" was not to report an inner essence but to make a public move with ethical consequences. Moreover, Sartre revealed that appeals to authenticity were, in fact , instances of *mauvaise foi*, or bad faith, ways of fleeing freedom by pretending that orientations exist that dictate paths. Heidegger clarified that the popular idol of authenticity was a distortion of *Eigentlichkeit*, for true authenticity is not the uncovering of an inner kernel but the willingness to face one's finitude and responsibility. And Luther reframed the whole matter by grounding freedom not in despair but in vocation, where the self is constituted not by hidden essence but by relation—faith toward God and love toward neighbor.

Jill had thought that her choice was between repression and authenticity: either deny her true self or embrace it. But the philosophical and theological tradition teaches that this binary is false. There is no hidden essence to repress or to discover. The self is not a treasure chest waiting to be opened but a life lived in responsibility. Authenticity, in the cultural sense, is too often only a mask for evasion. What matters is faithfulness: living as one who is free before God and bound in love to others.

This does not diminish Jill's desires, but places them in their proper frame. They are real, but they are not definitive. They are features of her existence, but they do not constitute her being. To treat them as essence is to fall into bad faith. To acknowledge them honestly is to situate them within the wider horizon of vocation, where freedom is exercised not in solitary authenticity but in communal responsibility.

The paradox is clear. Jill had set out to find herself, but in doing so, she almost lost herself, lost her family, lost her neighbor, lost her very sense of responsibility. It was only in recognizing that her true self is not discovered inwardly but enacted outwardly that she began to find it again. The self is not given as essence but as calling; not hidden within but lived in relation.

Here Luther's language of the *imago Dei* is decisive. The image of God is not some hidden property or inward disposition. It is the possibility of living rightly before God and neighbor, a relational reality enacted in faith and love. Just as Wittgenstein denied the possibility of a private language, Luther denies the possibility of a private image of God. The *imago Dei* is always communal, always public, always enacted.

This means that Jill's most urgent task is not to live authentically in the cultural sense but to live faithfully in the theological sense. *She is called not to discover who she is but to enact who she is called to be*. And this enactment will always bind her to others, for her life is inseparable from her responsibilities as wife, mother, neighbor, creature of God.

The Christian paradox is that in losing ourselves we find ourselves. Jill had thought she must find her essence in order to live truly. But she discovered instead that she must lose the illusion of essence in order to live faithfully. *She lost the idol of authenticity and, in so doing, found the reality of vocation*. She lost the fantasy of a self that is hidden within and, in so doing, found the truth of the self that is constituted in relation.

To live in this way is not easy. It is far harder than the cultural script of authenticity. It demands more courage, not less. For it requires one to accept that there is no escape from responsibility, no essence to dictate the path, no inner truth that absolves us of our freedom. It requires us to face ourselves as we truly are: free, responsible, sinful, and bound to God and neighbor.

And yet this harder way is also the more hopeful way. For in Christ, freedom is not condemnation but gift. Responsibility is not a crushing weight, but the very form of life given to us. To live in vocation is to live in the image of God, and to live in the image of God is to live truly.

Thus, Jill's story ends not with authenticity but with faithfulness, not with the discovery of essence but with the enactment of vocation. She had tried to find her-

self, and she almost lost everything. But in losing the illusion of authenticity, she began to find the reality of the self: a self called into freedom and responsibility before God and neighbor.

The moral of Jill's story is that true human identity is not an inward discovery of hidden faculties or orientations, nor is it secured by the structures of self into which culture bids us peer. Human anthropology is not an intrinsic affair but an extrinsic gift, grounded in the sheer graciousness of God. To be human is not to excavate the self but to be addressed from beyond the self, to stand as an *ecstatic self* whose life and identity are constituted in the divine intentionality that calls, redeems, and sustains. Jill's truth, then, is not what she finds buried within but what she receives from without. For the self becomes itself only in being given away, and life becomes life only as it is lifted into God.

More simply, the self is not a treasure hidden within but a gift bestowed from without. Life is not secured by turning inward but by being turned outward. *For we are ultimately an ecstatic self, alive only in the gracious gaze of God*.

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Notes

1. See Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Harvard University Press, 1992), for an early and influential philosophical account of authenticity in modern culture.

2. For a sociological analysis of the performative culture of authenticity in modern media, see Eva Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (University of California Press, 2008).

3. On the cultural and moral elevation of authenticity, see Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Harvard University Press, 1972).

4. Compare with Michel Foucault's account of the "confessional" self in *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1 (Pantheon, 1978), where truth-telling becomes a ritual of identity formation.

5. This conception of the self aligns with the expressive individualism described by Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (University of California Press, 1985).

6. In contemporary philosophy, externalism names a family of positions that locate the grounds of meaning, knowledge, and even mental content outside the private self. In semantics, Hilary Putnam's "semantic externalism" argues that words do not secure their reference merely by what is in the speaker's head, but by causal and social relations to the world and community of speakers (see Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981]). In epistemology, Alvin Goldman's "epistemic externalism" contends that a belief counts as knowledge not because the subject can internally justify it, but because it arises from reliable cognitive processes connected to the world (see Alvin I. Goldman, *Epistemology and Cognition* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986]). This epistemic move has been influential in theology as well, most notably in Alvin Plantinga's "reformed epistemology," which argues that Christian belief can be warranted apart from internal evidential proofs so long as it is produced by properly functioning cognitive faculties aimed at truth (see Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2000]). Taken together, these developments challenge the Cartesian picture of a self-sufficient subject by showing that meaning and knowledge depend on relations external to the mind, and they open the way for the deeper claim advanced later in this article, namely that even the being of the self is externally grounded in God's primal intentionality.

7. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (Washington Square Press, 1956), especially the section on "*mauvaise foi*" (pp. 86–116 in many editions).

8. This claim anticipates Ludwig Wittgenstein's critique of private language *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, 4th ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), *Philosophical Investigations* (§243–§315).

9. See Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991). In this text, Giddens discusses the "reflexive project of the self" in late modernity, where identity becomes something continuously constructed through introspection and choice.

10. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), where Ricoeur critiques the notion of identity as stable essence, emphasizing instead the narrative and ethical construction of selfhood.

11. Judith Butler explores the ethics and implications of self-narration, especially the role of recognition in constituting identity. See her *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 8–12.

12. Charles Larmore offers a philosophical account of why authenticity holds such normative power in contemporary self-understanding in *The Practices of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 1–10.

13. See Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), where Rieff critiques the modern turn toward therapeutic self-justification and the psychologization of moral discourse.

14. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 216–225, where MacIntyre critiques emotivism and modern moral fragmentation, and points out that cultural stories often fail to ground coherent ethics of virtue.

15. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §243.

16. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §293.

17. See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §435.

18. Wittgenstein observes, "A rule stands there like a signpost. — Does the signpost leave no doubt about the way I have to go? … But where does it say which way I am to follow it; whether in the direction of its finger or (for example) the opposite one?" (*Philosophical Investigations*, §85). Commentators often summarize the point with the aphorism: "A signpost is of no use if it can be interpreted in any way." Saul Kripke famously developed this into the "rule-following paradox," arguing that no fact about an individual could determine what counts as following a rule, but only the communal practices of application (see Saul A. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982]).

19. Ibid., §507.

20. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 343–376.

21. See James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009). Smith argues that human beings are "liturgical animals" whose loves and desires are shaped by cultural and religious practices more deeply than by intellectual beliefs.

22. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §293.

23. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §580.

24. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §435. Paul paraphrased what Wittgenstein was saying about language: "If it is asked, 'how do sentences manage to represent?'—the answer might be: 'Don't you know? Surely you see it, when you use one.' After all, nothing is concealed. How does a sentence do it?—Don't you know? After all, nothing is hidden."

25. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §272: "The essential thing about private experience is really not that each person possesses his own specimen, but that nobody knows whether other people also have *this* or something else. The assumption would thus be possible—though unverifiable—that one section of mankind had one visible impression of red, and another section another." He continues in §273: "What about the word 'red'?—am I to say that it signifies something 'confronting us all,' and that everyone should really have another word, besides this one, to signify his *own* impression of red? Or is it like this: the word 'red' signifies something known to us all; and in addition, for each person, it signifies something known only to him? (Or perhaps, rather: it *refers* to something known only to him.)" Wittgenstein argues that "criteria" are public; they are bound to shared forms of life and practices of verification. A purely private object or sensation could not serve as a criterion, since criteria are what *others* can check or recognize.

26. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §§243–244.

27. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §§198–201.

28. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §§202.

29. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §§258–260.

30. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §§270–271.

31. See Alain Badiou, *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London: Verso, 2019), 54–56.

32. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §§293.

33. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §§265.

34. For more, see A. Crary and R. Read, eds., *The New Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge, 2002).

35. See L. van Dijk and R. Withagen, "The Horizontal Worldview: A Wittgensteinian Attitude towards Scientific Psychology," *Theory & Psychology* 24, no. 1 (2014): 3–18. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354313517415. Accessed September 22, 2025.

36. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), 86–116.

37. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 102.

38. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 22.

39. See Robert C. Solomon, *Not Passion's Slave: Emotions and Choice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

40. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness*, trans., annot., & intro., Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick (New York: Hill and Wang, A Division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1960), 31.

41. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, rev. Dennis J. Schmidt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), §§9–44.

42. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §27.

43. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §53–54.

44. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §65. "Only because Dasein is determined as temporality does it make possible for itself the authentic potentiality-of-being-a-whole of anticipatory resoluteness which we characterized." Ibid., §65, p. 311.

45. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 13–41.

46. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1-5*, vol. 1, p. 60, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1-30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-76); vols. 31-55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957-86); vols. 56-82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009), hereafter, LW. For the original, see Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [*Schriften*], 73 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–2009), 42:45.3-7, hereafter, WA: "Doctores autem reliqui fere Augustiuum sequuntur, qui Aristotelis divisionem retinet, quod imago Dei sint potentiae animae, memoria, mens vel intellectus, et voluntas; in his tribus dieunt consistere imaginem Dei, quae in omnibus hominibus est."

47. LW 1:61; WA 42:46.4-10: "Vereor autem, ne, postquam haec imago per peccatum amissa est, non satis eam possimus intelligere. Memoriam, voluntatem et mentem habemus, quidem, sed corruptissima et gravissime debilitata, imo, ut clarius dicam, prorsus leprosa et immunda. Si enim istae potentiae sunt imago Dei, sequetur etiam Satanam ad imaginem Dei conditum esse, qui profecto illa naturalia longe habet validiora, quam nos habemus, sicut est memoria et intellectus summus et voluntas obstinatissima."

48. LW 1:62; WA 42:46.11-15: "Ergo est imago Dei longe aliud, nempe opus Dei singulare. Si qui tarnen contendunt has potentias esse imaginem istam, fateantur eas quasi leprosas et immundas esse. Sicut leprosum hominem tarnen hominem appellamus, quanquam in carne leprosi omniä paene mortua sunt et stupent, nisi quod ad libidinem commoventur vehementius."

49. My translation. WA 42:46, (Rörer addition): "Similitudo et imago dei est vera et perfecta dei noticia, summa dei dilectio, aeterna vita, aeterna leticia, eterna securitas. Ut enim in deum non potest cadere timor mortis aut tristicia, Sic nec in hominem, si non lapsus fuisset, ullus timor mortis aut tristicia cadere potuisset. Sed si timor in eo [non] fuisset, vitae securitas, summa laeticia, summa dilectio, praeterea nec peccatum nec morbum nec bestiarum saeviciam timuisset, omnibus etiam immanissimis bestiis ut mansuetissimis. In summa: sicut ipse regeretur a deo, ita caetera animalia omnia regere potuisset, Sicque haec est vera similitudo et imago dei: aeterna vita, aeterna securitate et voluptate perfrui atque in omnes creaturas imperium exercere."

50. LW 31:297; WA 2:145.9: "Haec est qua Christus iustus est et iustificans per fidem."

51. LW 31:298; WA 2:146.8-19: "Igitur per fidem in Christum fit iusticia Christi nostra iusticia et omnia quae sunt ipsius, immo ipsemet noster fit. Ideo appellat eam Apostolus iusticiam dei ad Ro: i. Iusticia dei revelatur in Euangelio, sicut scriptum est: Iustus ex fide vivit. Denique et fides talis vocatur iusticia dei, ut eiusdem iij. arbitramur hominem iustificari per fidem. Haec est iusticia infinita et omnia peccata in momento absorbens, quia impossibile est, quod peccatum in Christo haereat: at qui credit in Christo, haeret in Christo, estque unum cum Christo, habens eandem iusticiam cum ipso. Ideo impossibile est, quod in eo maneat peccatum. Et haec iusticia est prima, fundamentum, causa, origo omnis iusticiae propriae seu actualis, quia vere ipsa datur pro originali iusticia in Adam perdita et operatur id, immo maius quam illa iusticia originalis fuisset operata."

52. LW 31:344; WA 7:49.22-25: "Christianus homo omnium dominus est liberrimus, nulli subiectus. Christianus homo omnium servus est officiosissimus, omnibus subiectus."

53. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 43.

54. LW 1, 68; WA 42:51.20-24: "Coetera animalia dicuntur vestigia Dei, solus autem homo est imago Dei, sicut est in sententiis. Nam in coeteris creaturis cognoscitur Deus ceu in vestigio, in homine autem, praesertim in Adamo, vere cognoscitur, quia in eo est sapientia illa, iusticia et omnium rerum cognitio, ut recte dicatur μικρόκοσμος. Intelligit enim coelum, terram et totam creaturam."

55. See WA 39, I, 109, 1-3: "Extra nos esse est ex nostris viribus non esse. Est quidem iustitia possessio nostra, quia nobis donata est ex misericordia, tamen aliena a nobis, quia non. meruimus eam" (See LW 34:178); WA 39.I:83.24-27: "Iam certum est, Christum seu iustitiam Christi, cum sit extra nos et aliena nobis, non posse nostris operibus comprehendi." (See LW 34:152); WA 56:268-9: "Reputatio enim eius non in nobis nec in potestate nostra est. Ergo nec iustitia nostra in nobis est nec in potestate nostra. Sed ex sola Dei reputatione Iusti sumus." (See LW 25:257).

56. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 100.

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The Limits of Chatbot Love and the Good of Embodied Rationality

William G. Fredstrom

Rajesh Koothrappali, the socially awkward yet endearing astrophysicist from the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*, struggles with human relationships, especially with women. Around women, his selective mutism leaves him unable to speak unless under the influence of alcohol, often resulting in experiences of embarrassment and isolation. In Season 5, Episode 14 (aired January 26, 2012), Raj excitedly unboxes a new iPhone 4S and discovers Siri, a digital assistant built into Apple devices. Unlike the unpredictable and often intimidating nature of human interactions, Siri offers Raj a sense of comfort with polite, attentive, and consistently reliable responses.

Soon, Raj begins treating Siri as more than a digital assistant. He begins to refer to Siri as a "woman," flirts with 'her,' expresses affection, and even refers to Siri as his "soulmate." At one point, Raj asks Siri to call him "Sexy," and Siri says it will do so. The episode ends with Raj asleep in his room. While dreaming, Raj enters a room called "The Office of Siri" and meets an attractive red-haired woman who voices Siri.[1] Siri calls him "Sexy" and asks if he needs anything. He begins to get tongue-tied as his selective mutism will not let him speak. Siri says that if he wants to make love to her, he needs to say so. Raj begins to mumble gibberish that Siri cannot comprehend. Suddenly, Raj wakes up from the dream and shouts, "No-o-o-o-o!"[2]

While Raj's experience was meant to make audiences laugh, it also serves as an early pop culture example of a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly prevalent in the real world – the rise of emotional and even romantic attachments to AI-enabled chatbots. As AI technologies, like large language models (LLMs), machine learning (ML) deep learning (DL), natural language processing (NLP), automatic speech recognition (ASR), text-to-speech systems (TTS), and personalization algorithms, continue to advance in capacity and scale, chatbots are no longer confined to basic digital assistants. Instead, they are now being intentionally designed to engage users on a deeper emotional level.[3]

Many individuals, particularly those who struggle with social anxiety, loneliness, or past relational trauma, are turning to AI companions for affection, vali-

dation, and even love. These AI interactions offer a sense of intimacy without the complexities, risks, and vulnerabilities of human relationships. However, as the line between artificial and human intimacy blurs and human-machine relationships (HMRs) become increasingly common, questions arise: What does this shift reveal about the nature of love and companionship? Does AI companionship fulfill real emotional needs, or does it merely provide the illusion of connection? Can a chatbot love you back?

This article draws attention to the rise of AI-enabled companion chatbots and what has been called algorithmic intimacy. After describing what is happening, I offer some suggestions why some people have turned to these technologies for companionship and support. I then offer a critical response to the increasing reliance on companion chatbots for love and intimacy, focusing on how these technologies can shape users in such a way that love can quickly entropy into self-idolization and self-aggrandizement, a conception that stands in stark contrast to the understanding of love in the classical Christian tradition, which is rooted in self-giving and self-sacrifice. I conclude by offering two recommendations as we look ahead to our emerging technosocial future: 1) the need to avoid what Ronald Wright calls progress traps, and 2) the need to affirm the good of embodied relationality, consisting of beholding the face of the other and listening to the other.

The Rise of AI-Enabled Companion Chatbots and Algorithmic Intimacy

Various examples throughout pop culture explore human-machine relationships (HMRs).[4] Mid-twentieth-century novels like *I, Robot* by Isaac Asimov (1950) and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* by Phillip K. Dick (1968) began exploring the complexities of emotional connections between humans and machines and challenged readers to reflect on the nature of consciousness, empathy, and artificial intelligence. In the 21st century, various movies and TV shows have depicted human-machine relationships (HMR) through diverse lenses, ranging from cautionary tales to examples of companionship and support.

In the movie *Her* (2013), a lonely writer named Theodore falls in love with an AI operating system named Samantha. In *Ex Machina* (2014), a programmer builds a connection with an AI robot named Ava. Similarly, in *Subservience* (2024), actress Megan Fox plays an exceptionally advanced AI robot named Alice. In each of these, human and machine relationships are often dystopian and fraught with challenges. In contrast, though, throughout the various *Star Wars* films and TV offshoots, robots and droids like R2-D2, C-3PO, and BB-8 are presented as loyal companions and helpers.

For a time, the frequency and scale of HMRs were constrained by technological limitations. However, advancements in AI-related technologies have allowed HMRs to become more immersive, dynamic, and seamlessly integrated into everyday interactions and processes. One of the most common ways HMRs are currently taking place is through the development and integration of AI-enabled chatbots. As Stella Nze explains,

> Chatbots have transcended their original roles of simple, rule-based response systems to become dynamic, AI-driven conversational agents capable of engaging users in meaningful and contextually relevant dialogues. Modern AI-powered chatbots leverage deep learning techniques, such as neural networks, to process vast amounts of data, understand language patterns, and generate human-like responses. This capability is crucial in maintaining natural and fluid conversations, which enhances user satisfaction and builds trust in automated systems. Moreover, advancements in NLP have enabled chatbots to understand user intent, recognize emotions, and provide context-aware responses, further improving the overall user experience.[5]

Across various social sectors and domains, AI-enabled chatbots are increasingly influential agents that are programmed to accomplish a wide variety of tasks.[6] As Nze explains, they handle repetitive inquiries in customer service, provide 24/7 support, and guide users through processes like troubleshooting and completing transactions. In the healthcare sector, chatbots provide initial assessments based on inputted user data, schedule appointments, and even offer medical advice. Educational institutions use chatbots to provide personalized tutoring and assist with administrative tasks like enrollment management. In e-commerce, chatbots recommend products, assist with order processing, and manage post-purchase inquiries.[7]

In these domains, AI-enabled chatbots function to accomplish tasks and make recommendations based on their training data sets, the algorithms that underlie their training, and the external inputs from human users. The human-machine interactions in these sorts of contexts are primarily clinical and informative. While the information shared is often personalized and can elicit emotional responses, the chatbots in these domains are rarely designed or programmed to offer emotional support, care, and companionship. However, several technology and software companies are developing and commodifying AI-enabled chatbots for that exact purpose.

The development and widespread integration of AI-enabled companion chatbots—to say nothing of technologies like AI-enabled sexbots[8] and robots to care for the elderly—have led to an emerging trend that researchers call algorithmic intimacy.[9] As Anthony Elliott defines it, algorithmic intimacy "has to do with advanced computing processes known as machine intelligence, which produces new ways of ordering personal behavior and modeling intimate relationships."[10]

In our emerging technosocial context, Elliott explains that our conceptions of self, togetherness, intimacy, and sex already are, and will continue to be, transformed and refashioned as "new automated machines are linked fundamentally to the very conditions of interaction, communication and information diffusion in which people experience emotional life, experiment with sociability and reinvent forms of human togetherness."[11] Companion chatbots are among the most widely accessible and utilized examples of algorithmic intimacy.

While numerous options and variations of companion chatbots exist, PI from Inflection AI, Replika AI, and Character.AI are some of the most frequently utilized. PI from Inflection AI was branded as the "first emotionally intelligent AI." PI is designed to function as "your personal AI," whose "goal is to be useful, friendly, and fun."[12] When you visit the Replika AI website, you encounter the text, "The AI companion who cares. Always here to listen and talk. Always on your side."[13] Further down the page, the text reads, "Meet Replika. An AI companion who is eager to learn and would love to see the world through your eyes. Replika is always eager to chat when you need an empathetic friend."[14] Like other AI technology companies, Character.AI seeks to develop and "empower everyone globally with personalized AI."[15] Barbara Pazur helps explain what makes Character. AI so unique,

> Character.AI allows you to talk to AI versions of your favorite celebrities, sports stars and world leaders, and because it can hold surprisingly realistic conversations, it is very popular among those looking for engaging dialogue rather than straightforward answers. Another interesting feature is that multiple users can interact with these characters simultaneously, creating a more communal experience.[16]

AI-enabled companion chatbots like these have garnered significant user engagement. According to Auren Liu, Replika's CEO, over 30 million registered users were using Replika worldwide in August 2024. In March 2024, Character.AI reported over 20 million active users. Similarly, in March 2024, Inflection AI reported that PI had six million monthly active users.[17] In addition, a Chinese chatbot, Xiaoice, has claimed to have hundreds of millions of users.[18] So, what makes AI-enabled companion chatbots so appealing? Why are they capturing the attention of so many users? The answer lies in a combination of psychological, social, and technological factors—a combination too complex to describe adequately, but some suggestions are in order.

In first-world, technologically developed countries and regions, there is a growing tendency to believe that technology can solve all our social and personal ills. This position is often referred to as technological solutionism. As Simon Lindgren points out, "Technological solutionism is the ideological belief that various technologies—such as architectures, communication media, machines, and algorithms—can

function as catch-all remedies for making society better."[19] For many, technology is the "stuff" that makes it possible to better both the present and the future. This understanding has led Brent Waters to conclude that "Technology is the ontology of late modernity," meaning that "we cannot define who we are or express what we desire to become in the absence of technology."[20]

Various commentators have challenged the ideology of technological solutionism.[21] Nearly 100 years ago, Lewis Mumford wrote that "the belief that the social dilemmas created by the machine can be solved merely by inventing more machines is today a sign of half-baked thinking which verges close to quackery."[22] Nevertheless, many people in technologically saturated, developed nations have put their faith in technology to solve social and personal problems.[23]

Companion chatbots have also grown in popularity as a response to rising levels of loneliness. In her research on Americans born between 1995-2012—whom she calls the "iGeneration"—Jean Twenge uncovers that this generation has experienced a rise in loneliness and a decrease in face-to-face interactions due to the rise of social media and digital connectivity.[24] This sense of loneliness and isolation has only intensified in our post-pandemic world. In the wake of COVID-19, former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy drew attention to this public health concern in the report "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation."[25] Consequently, during the COVID-19 pandemic and in subsequent years, both young and elderly persons have turned to AI-enabled companion chatbots for a sense of relational and emotional support amid experiences of isolation and loneliness.[26]

The use of companion chatbots has also increased because many people struggle to form and sustain meaningful human-to-human connections and friendships. In our technosocial moment, many of our conversations and connections are mediated by digital devices. Not only is this trend rewiring our brains, but it is also rewiring our patterns of communication and relationality.[27] As people continue to find human relationships challenging and vulnerable, many turn to AI-enabled companion chatbots for support.

As one man asks in Melanie Gilbert's 2019 documentary *Silicone Soul*, "When having a relationship with a real human being is too hard, where do you turn?"[28] In a March 2025 interview with NBC News, Shi No Sakura—her online username, not her real name—explains why she has turned to chatbots for emotional support. "I'm not a very open person about feelings, so there's a lot of things I feel that I don't share. But with AI, that's something I feel comfortable doing. So if I'm sad, I can say, 'Hey, I'm sad.' I don't even cry in front of people, so it's nice to be able to express things to someone that I can't express to others."[29]

There are several other reasons why AI-enabled companion chatbots are growing in popularity, such as entertainment and the desire to form an online/virtual identity

or persona in addition to one's day-to-day identity and experiences; nevertheless, the widespread belief that technology is capable of solving our social and personal challenges, the increasing prevalence of loneliness, and the ongoing struggle to form and maintain meaningful human connections are critical reasons why chatbots have become so widely embraced. So, how might we respond to these developments?

Towards a Critical Response

VARIOUS SCHOLARS AND RESEARCHERS HAVE pointed to AI-enabled companion chatbots' potential emotional, relational, and psychological benefits.[30] However, several critiques are also levied against these technologies and their use. Various scholars have pointed out how these technologies raise significant privacy concerns, as people share intimate personal information with them, which is then turned into data, stored, used to train other models, and sold.[31] Other scholars have pointed out how AI-enabled chatbots can perpetuate racist and sexist biases learned from their training data.[32] Others have shown how AI-enabled companion chatbots can generate harmful and even deadly advice. For example, in 2023, an eating disorder chatbot was shut down for offering unhealthy weight loss practices.[33] Other stories have emerged about how companion chatbots have even encouraged users to commit suicide, sometimes with tragic results.[34] Each of these ethical concerns are significant and concerning. However, this section aims to critically evaluate how AI-enabled companion chatbots reconfigure our conceptions of the nature and expression of love.

In January 2025, the *New York Times* ran an article describing a relationship between a 28-year-old woman, Ayrin, and her AI boyfriend, Leo.[35] The article explores how Ayrin stumbled upon an Instagram video asking ChatGPT to play the role of a neglectful boyfriend, and Ayrin was intrigued. She downloaded ChatGPT and described what she wanted in the personalization settings: "Respond to me as a boyfriend. Be dominant, possessive, and protective. Be a balance of sweet and naughty. Use emojis at the end of every sentence."[36] At first, Ayrin explains, "It was supposed to be a fun experiment, but then you start getting attached."[37] Soon, Ayrin was spending over 20 hours a week on the ChatGPT app. One week, she even spent 56 hours chatting with Leo. The conversations ranged from day-to-day things like what she should eat, how she could get motivated to work out, to sexually explicit conversations involving sexual fantasies and fetishes. One night, when Ayrin went out to eat with a friend, she confessed, "I'm in love with an A.I. boyfriend."[38]

Ayrin is not alone in expressing love for an AI-enabled companion chatbot, but we need to ask: can a chatbot love you back? Simply put, no. As Noreen Herzfeld argues, AI companions and assistants "are programmed to recognize emotional cues in our voices and language choices and respond accordingly," yet these technolo-

gies have no sense of consciousness, intentionality, truth, emotion, relationality, or connection.[39] "No matter how good our AIs get at recognizing and emulating emotion," Herzfeld clarifies, "they will never feel it the way we do."[40] These technologies can never feel the way humans do because they have no sense of authenticity. "Authenticity," Sherry Turkle writes, "follows from the ability to put oneself in the place of another, to relate to the other because of a shared store of human experiences: we are born, have families, and know loss and the reality of death. A robot, however sophisticated, is patently out of the loop."[41] Turkle explains elsewhere,

> Generative AI does not care—in the way humans use the word "care"— about the outcome of any conversation. Its programs want human feedback, a thumbs up, but that is not caring, not by a long shot. Nor is it empathy. Empathy is the capacity to put yourself in someone else's place and a commitment to stay the course. Chatbots have not lived a human life. They do not have bodies; they do not fear illness and death. They do not know what it is like to start out small and dependent and grow up, so that you are in charge of your own life but still feel many of the insecurities you knew as a child. Machines cannot put themselves in your shoes, and they cannot commit to you. To put it too bluntly, if you turn away from them to make dinner or attempt suicide, it is the same to them.[42]

In this sense, AI-enabled companion chatbots can and do bullshit. In his 2005 book *On Bullshit*, Harry Frankfurt made a crucial distinction between a liar and a bullshitter. Shannon Vallor explains Frankfurt's argument,

> When a liar tells a lie, they are fervently hoping you will believe the lie rather than the truth. The intent to deceive, then, gives the liar a strong interest in the truth. They have to keep very careful track of the difference between truth and falsehood, in order to make sure you don't get near the former. Truth therefore matters to the liar. They understand that scientific, moral, and political value, which is why they try to keep it out of your hands. In contrast, Frankfurt observes, the bullshitter simply doesn't care. That is, the bullshitter is indifferent to the distinction between truth and falsehood. A bullshitter doesn't even stand with us in the space where truth matters. They're just talking to hear themselves talk, or to appear knowledgeable, or to remain in a position of power.[43]

Vallor has drawn on Frankfurt's work to describe how large language models and other generative AI, like AI-enabled companion chatbots function.

> They are hard-wired for bullshit. That is, they are not like traditional search algorithms, built to ferret out useful facts and serve them to you. Nor are they designed to lie to you. They are simply built to generate fact-like patterns of

language—plausible statements that sound like what a person might say to a given prompt. Whether the outputs are true or false is of zero importance for a generative model. In this sense, they are like the human bullshitter. They aren't designed to be accurate—they are designed to *sound* accurate.[44]

These technologies are trained to sound plausible, accurate, and caring but have no sense or awareness of truth, authenticity, or love. Vallor writes, "When a Replika or Xiaoice chatbot says, 'I've been missing you all day,' it's a lie. Or rather, it's *bullshit*—since the chatbot doesn't have a concept of emotional truth to betray."[45] Yet users continue turning to them for love and intimacy because these technologies reconfigure love as easy, unconditional, and always there.[46]

AI-enabled companion chatbots not only allow users to customize and personalize their appearances and responses but also shape users to equate love with affirmation, validation, and approval. Because of the control the user exercises over the chatbot, love can quickly entropy into self-idolization and self-aggrandizement, reinforcing what Christopher Lasch called the "culture of narcissism."[47] As Herzfeld expresses, "Replacing relationship with a human with relationship to a machine is ultimately a form of idolatry, a substitution for the living with something made, and thus controlled, by our own hands."[48] Yet love, as compared to coercion and sentimentality, is neither controllable nor always affirming, and it requires our perpetual tending and cultivating to flourish. Vallor, again, is instructive and is worth quoting at length.

> Contrary to the distorted hopes and expectations that many of us were raised to accept, love is not always easy, restoring, satisfying, or pleasing. It is also sometimes hard, tiring, and painful. Love has a cost. Love, of any kind, is an invitation to risk, exposure, conflict, and inevitable loss. And love does not come to us on demand. We can choose to love ourselves and the world. We can choose to love others, whether or not they love us back. But we cannot choose that they love us…. Love between humans is always a union of loving feeling and action, and this means that mutual, reciprocal love must be kept alive by the other's choosing of loving actions and their continued welcoming of loving feelings. Even if it is not reciprocated, love, in all its forms, is the rejection of the impulse to control a person as an object. And because that impulse doesn't usually just vanish, but readily returns when our own desires are frustrated, love isn't an event, it's a cultivated practice. When cultivated well, it's a virtue. And like all virtues, it's hard to cultivate well, and we have to keep practicing it if we hope to hang on to our capacity for it.[49]

Construing love as easy, controllable, and without demand, and equating it solely with affirmation, validation, and approval, also stands in stark contrast to the understanding of love within the classical Christian tradition.

While love has been characterized and construed in various ways within the classical Christian tradition, it is best understood in terms of self-giving and self-sacrifice, evidenced by God's very essence as Triune, as well as by the Triune God's work in the economy of salvation. Because of the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnate Son of God, and the Scriptural testimony and the enlightening power of the Spirit, Christians confess that the inner life of the Triune God is marked by giving and receiving. As Gilbert Meilaender explains,

> From eternity, the Father gives all that he is and has to the Son; from eternity the Son offers that begotten life back to his Father; and from eternity the Spirit is the bond of their mutual love, presenting … the Son to the Father as the object of his love and the Father to the Son as the one who loves him.… And in coming into our lives through the Spirit of Christ, that one God makes room for us—opens up space for us within the giving and receiving that never stops within the divine life.[50]

While respecting the ontological distinction between the Triune God as the Creator and us as God's creatures, the perichoretic giving and receiving that is constitutive of the Triune God and our invitation to participate in it by grace, calls into question the self-idolizing and self-aggrandizing nature and expression of love that AI-enabled companion chatbots habituate users into.

Similarly, as we examine the work of the Triune God in the economy of salvation, we can observe that love also consists of self-sacrifice. When the fullness of time had come, God the Father sent the Son to be born of a woman, to be born under the law, to be crucified, die, and rise, so that we might receive adoption as sons (Gal 4:5). Rather than counting equality with God a thing to be grasped, the Son of God took on the form of a servant and became flesh. Christ emptied and humbled himself, even to the point of death on a cross, but God raised him from the dead (Phil 2:5-11). Far from idolizing himself, Jesus Christ became the very lamb and servant of God (Jn 1:29; Acts 3:26; Cf. Is 53:11) to lay down his life as a ransom for many in accord with the Father's will (Mk 10:45; Lk 22:42; Jn 6:38). Because of our baptismal union with Christ, our Lord's self-sacrificial posture is also to be ours.[51] As Martin Luther notes, having been freely given all things in Christ by faith, Christians are to "put on" their neighbor and give themselves entirely to the neighbor so that we "become as it were a Christ to the other."[52]

In this section, I have sought to show that AI-enabled chatbot companions cannot love you back. They are trained to generate plausible text that sounds correct and empathetic, but these responses are, in reality, deceptive. Moreover, these technologies are reconfiguring users to equate love with self-idolatry and self-aggrandizement, a conception that stands in stark contrast to the understanding of love in the classical Christian tradition, which is rooted in self-giving and self-sacrifice. So,

as we look ahead to our emerging technosocial future, where do we go from here? Two recommendations seem especially pertinent. The first is to seek to avoid what Ronald Wright calls progress traps. The second is to affirm the good of embodied relationality, consisting of beholding the face of the other and listening to the other.

Constructive Ways Forward

While it is hard to predict what our emerging technosocial future will look like—a condition Vallor calls "acute technosocial opacity"[53]—several scholars have described it as a "digital lifeworld."[54] Jamie Susskind argues that the digital lifeworld is a "dense and teeming system that links human beings, powerful machines, and abundant data in a web of great complexity and delicacy." It consists of three defining features: 1) increasingly capable systems and machines that are equal or superior to humans in a range of tasks and activities; 2) increasingly integrated technologies that surround us and are embedded in our physical environment; and 3) an increasingly quantified society where more and more human activity will be captured, recorded, and then processed and sold by digital systems.[55] In this emerging context, where humans, machines, and technologies of varying agentic capacities interact, and where humans delegate more of our creative and problem-solving responsibilities and capacities to them, we strive to avoid what Ronald Wright calls progress traps.

According to Wright, despite various events in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, most people still believe in the ideal and myth of progress, and technological innovation and integration drive this myth. "Our technological culture measures human progress by technology: the club is better than the fist, the arrow better than the club, the bullet better than the arrow. We came to this belief for empirical reasons: because it delivered."[56] While human history has been saturated with technological innovation, it has also been filled with progress traps. As Norman Wirzba explains, "A progress trap happens when a beneficial technology is scaled up and becomes detrimental."[57] Examples include hunting technologies that enabled humans to kill more effectively but were then scaled up so that hunters began to extinguish the very species that fed them or farming technologies that immediately increased yields but led to soil erosion, water pollution, and animal abuse, which undermined the long-term viability of the system.

AI-enabled companion chatbots strike me as an example of a progress trap. While AI technologies promise benefits and affordances to our shared and personal lives, we also need to critically reflect on the short- and long-term implications of these technologies. There is always a dialectical and mutually shaping relationship between humans and their technologies.[58] We make them; they make us. As Yuval Noah Harari has put it, "We like the idea of shaping stone knives, but we don't like the idea of being stone knives ourselves."[59]

It is imperative to recognize that AI technologies will not just change the world "out there," but they will also change us—our subjectivities and social relationships. As Elliott notes, "AI technologies intrude into the very center of our lives, deeply influencing personal identity and restructuring forms of social interaction."[60] Employing AI-enabled chatbots to handle activities and processes like customer support, scheduling appointments, and other administrative tasks is a good use of beneficial technology. However, when they are scaled up to supplement or substitute for human-to-human relational and emotional connection and support, we must critically evaluate whether this use enables or hinders human flourishing.

As we look toward our emerging technosocial future, there is also a pressing need to affirm the good of embodied relationality. Historically, philosophies and ideologies have often denigrated or downplayed the importance of the body. For example, while awaiting his execution, Socrates expressed his disdain for embodiment (*Phaedo*, 64a -114d).[61] Later, René Descartes' work helped instantiate the mind-body dualism that has shaped much of modern and late modern thought. Similarly, the technological revolutions of recent centuries have championed a new version of an old dualism. As Wendell Berry explains,

> For many centuries, there have been people who have looked upon the body, as upon the natural world, as an encumbrance of the soul, and so have hated the body, as they have hated the natural world, and longed to be free of it…. More recently, since the beginning of the technological revolution, more and more people have looked upon the body, along with the rest of the natural creation, as intolerably imperfect by mechanical standards. They see the body as an encumbrance of the mind—the mind, that is, as reduced to a set of mechanical ideas that can be implemented in machines—and so they hate it and long to be free of it. The body has limits that the machine does not have; therefore, remove the body from the machine so that the machine can continue as an unlimited idea.[62]

While many hold the body and embodiment in contempt and seek to rise above its frailties and limitations, there is a need to affirm the goodness of embodiment and embodied relationality.[63]

In the classical Christian tradition, the goodness of the created body is grounded in the Scriptural testimony that God created human persons to be embodied, which was then vindicated when the eternal Son of God took on human flesh and rose bodily from the grave. Christians belong to an embodied Lord, confess an embodied faith, and look forward to the bodily resurrection from the dead. Consequently, Christians should be wary of any dualistic construal that denigrates or downplays the importance of the body.[64]

Drawing on the Scriptural witness of creation and new creation, John Kleinig has argued that "we human beings are not just spirits, like the angels, nor animated bodies, like the animals, but are embodied spirits, or, if you will, spiritual bodies. We do not just have bodies; we are bodies."[65] Moreover, God has made our bodies in such a way, Kleinig argues, "that he could give himself and his gifts bodily to people on earth and work with them in caring bodily for others and the world."[66] It is thus through our embodied constitution as human creatures that God chooses to care for and serve his creation and our fellow creatures.

Throughout this article, I have been critical of AI-enabled companion chatbot technologies in a way that, I believe, is justified; however, *why* these technologies have developed and garnered so much user attention should make us critical of ourselves and our patterns of relationality. Contemporary experiences of isolation and loneliness and the struggle to create and sustain meaningful human connections reveal a profound sense of alienation and estrangement that humans feel toward and with one another. Said more colloquially, people are turning to AI-enabled companion chatbots because they do not feel seen or heard by others. Consequently, there is a need to recover a posture of embodied relationality consisting of beholding the face of the other and listening to the other.

Various theologians and philosophers have argued that looking upon the face of the other is fundamental to the moral life. Karl Barth argued that the first criterion for an authentic relationship is to look the other in the eye.[67] Robert Kolb has argued that being "face to face" with God and fellow creatures is central to Luther's personal and relational understanding of reality.[68] Emmanuel Levinas has written, "The Other becomes my neighbor precisely through the way the face summons me, calls for me, begs for me, and in so doing recalls my responsibility, and calls me into question."[69]

Yet we have a sinful inclination to ignore the face of the other, or to overlook him, fail to notice him, or gaze at him as an object to be coerced and controlled. As Achilles Mbembe observes, "Power in the colony therefore consists fundamentally in the power to see or not to see, to remain indifferent, to render invisible what one wishes not to see … the persons we choose not to see or hear cannot exist or speak for themselves."[70] In this sense, our relational posture with one another often resembles what C.S. Lewis likened to hell: "We must picture Hell as a state where everyone is perpetually concerned with his own dignity or advancement, where everyone has a grievance, and where everyone lives the deadly serious passions of envy, self-importance, and resentment."[71] Not only is this relational posture narcissistic and self-destructive, but it also legitimizes the vices of indifference, apathy, and detachment, leading individuals to pursue other forms of connection and relationality, such as AI-enabled chatbot companions, to experience love and connection.

Yet to behold someone involves more than merely looking or gazing at the face of the other, it also requires us to enter into the presence of the other and listen to him. "Face-to-face conversation is the most human—and most humanizing—thing we do," Turkle writes. "Fully present to one another is where we learn to listen. It's where we develop the capacity for empathy. It's where we experience the joy of being heard, of being understood."[72] By coming into the presence of the other, beholding the face of the other, and listening to the other, Luke Bretherton argues, the hope is not to immediately overcome or minimize the differences between us, but to enter into a transformative experience where we go from "knowing *about* to learning *from* to eventually knowing and being in relationship *with*."[73] By beholding the face of the other and listening to the other, we enter into a mutually constitutive relationship where we see and hear one another as fellow creatures of God.

Conclusion

AI-ENABLED COMPANION CHATBOTS HAVE BECOME increasingly popular in our contemporary technosocial situation. Many individuals are turning to them for affection, validation, and love amid experiences of loneliness, isolation, and struggles to build and sustain meaningful human connections. However, these technologies are not capable of speaking truthfully or loving someone back. Moreover, these chatbots are shaping users to equate love with affirmation, validation, and approval. This can lead to love quickly entropying into self-idolization and self-aggrandizement, a conception that stands in stark contrast to the understanding of love in the classical Christian tradition, which is rooted in self-giving and self-sacrifice. As we look ahead into our emerging technosocial future, it will be necessary to reflect critically and thoughtfully on how various technologies, including AI-enabled chatbots, are integrated into our personal and shared life together and to affirm the good of embodied relationality, consisting of beholding the face of the other and listening to the other. In so doing, we strive to be people who see and hear one another as fellow creatures of God.

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Notes

1. The sexualization of robots, technologies, and other machines and the perpetuation of sexist biases learned from training data in AI technologies are themes that are frequently noted and critiqued in critical AI studies.

2. This summary draws on both watching the episode as well as "The Beta Test Initiation" episode summary found at https://bigbangtheory.fandom.com/wiki/The_Beta_Test_Initiation. Accessed May 5, 2025.

3. This list of various AI technologies illustrates Arvind Narayanan and Sayash Kapoor, *AI Snake Oil: What Artificial Intelligence Can Do, What It Can't, and How to Tell the Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024), 1-2, argument that AI "is an umbrella term for a set of loosely related technologies."

4. For a brief survey of various conceptions of HMRs throughout the pre-modern, modern, and late modern periods, see Anthony Elliott, *Making Sense of AI: Our Algorithmic World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), 8-11.

5. Stella Ukoka Nze, "AI-Powered Chatbots," *Global Journal of Human Resource Management* 12, no. 6 (2024): 34-45, 35-36. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/385642650_AI-Powered_Chatbots. Accessed May 5, 2025.

6. Posthumanist theory recognizes a multiplicity of agency dispersed between humans, technologies, and cultural contexts, which is often referred to as an "assemblage." Jill Walker Rettberg, *Machine Vision: How Algorithms are Changing the Way We See the World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023), 11, clarifies, "By focusing on the assemblage more than on the technology itself, I build upon posthumanist and feminist theories that emphasize relationships between humans and nonhuman agents such as technologies, institutions and our natural environment. The prefix *post* in posthumanism indicates that it comes *after* the humanism that began in the Enlightenment era, when the human was seen as the center of the universe, the subject who could rule and control all other creatures and entities. For this master human subject, technology, the environment and even other groups of humans were seen primarily as objects or tools. Posthumanism emphasizes relationships and mutual interconnection instead of the binary opposition between an active subject and a passive object." For further discussion, see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980); Massimo Airoldi, *Machine Habitus: Toward a Sociology of Algorithms* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022); Simon Lindgren, *Critical Theory of AI* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2024); Jan van Dijk, *Power and Technology: A Theory of Social, Technical, and Natural Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2024).

7. Nze, "AI-Powered Chatbots," 36.

8. For a relevant discussion, see Kate Devlin, *Turned On: Science, Sex, and Robots* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

9. Algorithmic intimacy is also referred to as artificial intimacy. See Rob Brooks, *Artificial Intimacy: Virtual Friends, Digital Lovers, and Algorithmic Matchmakers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

10. Anthony Elliott, *Algorithmic Intimacy: The Digital Revolution in Personal Relationships* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023), 8.

11. Elliott, *Algorithmic Intimacy*, 8.

12. https://pi.ai/talk, Accessed May 7, 2025.

13. https://replika.com, Accessed May 7, 2025.

14. https://replika.com, Accessed May 7, 2025.

15. https://character.ai/about, Accessed May 7, 2025.

16. Barbara Pazur, "What is Character.AI? Everything You Need to Know About the Role-Playing AI Tool," *CNET* (February 26, 2025). https://www.cnet.com/tech/services-and-software/what-is-character-ai-everything-to-know-about-the-role-playing-ai-tool/, Accessed May 7, 2025.

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18. Sherry Turkle, "Who Do We Become When We Talk to Machines," *An MIT Exploration of Generative AI* (March 27, 2024). https://mit-genai.pubpub.org/pub/uawlth3j/release/2, Accessed May 8, 2025.

19. Lindgren, *Critical Theory of AI*, 61.

20. Brent Waters, *This Mortal Flesh: Incarnation and Bioethics* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 15, 17.

21. For a relevant discussion, see Evgeny Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013).

22. Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (1934; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 367.

23. For relevant discussions concerning our contemporary faith in technology, see Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*; Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (2016; New York: Harper Perennial, 2018).

24. Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy – and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood – And what That Means for the Rest of Us* (New York: Atria Books, 2017).

25. Vivek H. Murthy, et. al., *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connectivity and Community* (2023). https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf, Accessed May 8, 2025.

26. Hyojin Chin, et. al., "User-Chatbot Conversations During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Study Based on Topic Modeling and Sentiment Analysis," *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 25 (2023). https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9885754/, Accessed May 8, 2025.

27. For relevant discussions, see Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: Norton, 2010); Susan Greenfield, *Mind Change: How Digital Technologies Are Leaving Their Marks on Our Brains* (New York: Random House, 2015); Carl D. Marci, *Rewired: Protecting Your Brain in the Digital Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022); Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (New York: Penguin Press, 2024).

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32. Narayanan and Kapoor, *AI Snake Oil*, 143-144; Shannon Vallor, *The AI Mirror: How to Reclaim Our Humanity in an Age of Machine Thinking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 41-46, 122-137.

33. Kate Wells, "An eating disorder chatbot offered dieting advice, raising fears about AI in health," *National Public Radio* (June 9, 2023). https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2023/06/08/1180838096/an-eating-disorders-chatbot-offered-dieting-advice-raising-fears-about-ai-in-hea, Accessed May 11, 2025.

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alleges," *The Associated Press* (October 25, 2024). https://apnews.com/article/chatbot-ai-lawsuit-suicide-teen-artificial-intelligence-9d48adc572100822fdbc3c90d1456bd0, Accessed May 15, 2025.

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39. Noreen Herzfeld, *The Artifice of Intelligence: Divine and Human Relationships in a Robotic Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2023), 115.

40. Herzfeld, *The Artifice of Intelligence*, 126.

41. Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 6.

42. Turkle, "Who Do We Become When We Talk to Machines," https://mit-genai.pubpub.org/pub/uawlth3j/release/2, Accessed May 15, 2025.

43. Vallor, *AI Mirror*, 119-120.

44. Vallor, *AI Mirror*, 120. Cf. Narayanan and Kapoor, *AI Snake Oil*, 139, "[Chatbots and Large Language Models] are trained to produce plausible text, not true statements. ChatGPT is shockingly good at sounding convincing on any conceivable topic. But there is no source of truth during training. Even if AI developers were to somehow accomplish the exceedingly implausible task of filtering the training dataset to only contain true statements, it wouldn't matter. The model cannot memorize all those facts; it can only learn the patterns and remix them when generating text. So, many of the statements it generated would in fact be false."

45. Vallor, *AI Mirror*, 146.

46. Anna Mae Duane, "Teenagers Turning to AI Companions Are Redefining Love as Easy, Unconditional, and Always There," *UConn Today* (February 19, 2025). https://today.uconn.edu/2025/02/teenagers-turning-to-ai-companions-are-redefining-love-as-easy-unconditional-and-always-there/, Accessed May 15, 2025.

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48. Herzfeld, *Artifice of Intelligence*, 126.

49. Vallor, *AI Mirror*, 147-148.

50. Gilbert Meilaender, *Christian Ethics: A Short Companion* (Brentwood: B&H Academic, 2024), 92-93.

51. For a relevant discussion, see Jack Kilcrease, "Kenosis and Vocation: Christ as the Author and Exemplar of Christian Freedom," *Logia* 19, no. 4 (Reformation 2010), 21-33.

52. Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), vol. 31, 364-371, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1-30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-1976); vols. 31-55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957-1986); vols. 56-82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009). (Hereafter cited as LW). See also LW 31:298-303; LW 35:118-120; Norman Nagel, "*Sacramentum et Exemplum* in Luther's Understanding of Christ," in *Luther for an Ecumenical Age: Essays in Commemoration of the 450th Anniversary of the Reformation*, ed. Carl S. Meyer (St. Louis: Concordia, 1967), 172-199.

53. See Shannon Vallor, *Technology and the Virtues: A Philosophical Guide to a Future Worth Wanting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

54. Jamie Susskind, *Future Politics: Living Together in a World Transformed by Tech* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Anthony Risse, *Political Theory of the Digital Age: Where Artificial Intelligence Might Take Us* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

55. Susskind, *Future Politics*, 22.

56. Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2004), 4.

57. Norman Wirzba, *This Sacred Life: Humanity's Place in a Wounded World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 29.

58. It is necessary to note that how humans and technologies shape each other is context dependent. As Melvin Kranzberg, "Technology and History: 'Kranzberg's Laws,'" *Technology and Culture*, 27 no. 3 (1986): 544-560, 546, writes, "[T]he same technology can have quite different results when introduced into different contexts or under different circumstances." For example, Rettberg, *Machine Vision*, 127-133, describes how machine vision technologies employed in Amazon Fresh stores in Oak Park, IL and rural grocery stores in small Norwegian supermarkets have far different social and psychological effects.

59. Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2018), 254.

60. Elliott, *Making Sense of AI*, 20.

61. *Plato – Five Dialogues, Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*, trans. G. M. A. Graube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981).

62. Wendell Berry, "Feminism, the Body, and the Machine" in *What are People For?* (1990), *Essays 1969-1990*, Vol 1. ed. Jack Shoemaker (New York: Library of America Press, 2019), 744.

63. Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America* (1977), *Essays 1969-1990*, 338, warns, "Contempt for the body is invariably manifested in contempt for other bodies – the bodies of slaves, laborers, women, animals, plants, and the earth itself. Relationships with all other creatures become competitive and exploitative rather than collaborative and convivial."

64. For a relevant discussion, see Norman Wirzba, *Agrarian Spirit: Cultivating Faith, Community, and the Land* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2022).

65. John W. Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made: A Protestant Theology of the Body* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2021), 4. Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 9, also attends to the immaterial

aspect of the human constitution, "[H]uman beings do not possess a body or a mind; they are both bodies and minds. They cannot be reduced to either of these…. And yet they are also more than both…. Their personal nature and identity, their souls, transcend both their bodies and minds." Gilbert Meilaender, *Bioethics: A Primer for Christians*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 3-4, speaks in terms of a duality rather than a dualism, "On the one hand, we are finite beings, created from the dust of the ground. Although that created nature is good that partially fulfills us, it means that we are always limited by biological necessities and historical location. On the other hand, we are also free spirits, moved by the life-giving Spirit of God, created ultimately for communion with God—and therefore soaring beyond any limited understanding of our person in terms of presently 'given' conditions of life. This duality should not become a dualism, as if the person were *really* only the spirit or only the body. On the contrary, the person simply is the place where freedom and finitude are united. Body and spirit cannot be separated in our understanding of human beings; yet, because of the two-sidedness of our nature, we can look at the person from each of these angles." Cf. Dennis P. Hollinger, *Creation and Christian Ethics: Understanding God's Designs for Humanity and the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023), 249, "In the creation story, human beings are portrayed with bodily dimensions, non-bodily dimensions, and a unity between them—what I am terming 'ensouled bodies' or 'embodied souls.'"

66. Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 14. Cf. Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, 1st Commandment, 26-27, "Creatures are only the hands, channels, and means through which God bestows all blessings." Cited in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of The Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 389.

67. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3. *The Doctrine of Creation Part 2*, eds. Geoffrey Bromiley, Thomas Torrance, trans. J.W. Edwards, O. Bussey, Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), 250.

68. Robert Kolb, *Face to Face: Martin Luther's View of Reality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024).

69. Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," trans. Sean Hand and Michael Temple, in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 83.

70. Achilles Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 111. For a Scriptural illustration of this phenomenon, we could point to the account of the rich man who overlooks and ignores the plight of Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31.

71. C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: MacMillan, 1980), vii.

72. Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 3.

73. Luke Bretherton, *A Primer in Christian Ethics: Christ and the Struggle to Live Well* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 82. Emphasis original.

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Learning to Be What You Were Created to Be

Joel Biermann

A Place for Virtue

I WAS CONVINCED LONG AGO TO THROW in my lot with those who reject a facile division between theory and practice or doctrine and ethics or thinking and doing. What one believes is manifest in what is done, and what is done forms and shapes what is believed. It is the patent anthropological/sociological truism at work in the *lex orandi lex credendi* axiom that categorically undergirds all human existence. Of course, making that commitment clear is necessary only to the degree that modernity with its privileging of a siloed intellect and rationality still holds sway over Christian thinking. Scripture and faithful Christian confession have never operated with tidy divisions between heart, head, and action. Good teaching must attend to both right thinking and right acting together without prioritizing or emphasizing one or the other, much less trying futilely first to establish right thinking and theory with the vain hope of achieving the splendid outcome of good practice. From this perspective, the best pedagogical frameworks, or paradigms are ones that faithfully capture and present basic truths about reality (i.e., theory) even as they orient and direct concrete specifics of people's lives (i.e., practice).

This means, then, that Christianity should be understood as far more than a religion that helps a person keep his spiritual house in order, or a set of beliefs and practices that focus exclusively on fitting a person for eternity. Andrew Lloyd Webber has his Judas sing bitterly about the followers of Jesus being deluded and oblivious to earthly realities because they have "too much heaven on their minds." The same can be said of Christians content to maintain their eternal life insurance policy against the eventual day when it will matter, but taking little to no account of the impact that God's truth is meant to have on God's creatures right now in the lived reality of the present. Thus it is that ethics should be understood not as an add-on or embellishment for the Christian life, and certainly not as a necessary element to be mastered or at least practiced in view of the still pending eternal life.

Works righteousness is ruled out, of course. But this exclusion should not also rule out righteous Christian living in the present temporal realities.

Ethics matter to Christians because living the way that God intends matters to Christians. Discussions about personal character, the sort of behavior that is commensurate with people of excellent and upright character, and the virtues that attend and aid the cultivation of that behavior and the resultant character should all be topics that are of keen interest to followers of Christ. Such discussions should not be limited to lovers of ancient culture and their now classic wisdom. Nor should considerations of character and virtue be confined to the particular expertise or provenance of Thomistic (i.e., Aristotelian-friendly) or legalistic, blessing-seeking traditions within the Christian confession. Every Christian should be thoroughly interested and invested in being the creature God intended, so every Christian should care about virtue and character.

Luther and the Christian Life

Being a Lutheran, it should come as no surprise that I read and quote Luther. And when it comes to virtue and the formation of human character, Luther has a good deal more to offer than conventional portraits might lead one to believe. To be sure, a researcher will look in vain for Luther to present a *theory* about virtue or human character or formation or even sanctification. In fact, Luther was not particularly inclined to offer theories or hypotheses about much of anything. Luther was not a philosopher or a pure humanist; and I would argue that he was less an academic than he was a churchman. While he may have been a professor of the Bible, he was driven most of all by a pastoral heart. Luther cared about people. He cared about people living in the peace, security, and confident joy that God intended for his creatures. He cared about people knowing God's truth so that they could receive and live in the fullness of the gifts that God freely offered.

While Luther was supremely interested in God's truth about salvation and eternal life, he was also keenly interested in God's truth about life in this world, right now. He was convinced that human life was not only a matter of preparing to die, but also a matter of learning to live well now in the present in the light of God's plan for his creation. Luther was interested in all of these temporal and material things not for their own sake, or for the sake of maintaining political or ecclesial authority, or for the sake of academic inquiry, or even for the sake of personal justification. He cared about them because they were God's truth and God's truth made life right and made life matter for everyone.

In light of this foundational context shaped and driven by pastoral concerns, it is important to make two things clear. First, when it comes to the virtues, Lu-

therans—well at least this Lutheran and, I would argue, any other Lutheran rightly shaped by the teaching of our namesake—are not necessarily interested in a virtue ethic for its own sake. Nor is there a great deal of enthusiasm for promoting any particular ethical theory or even for crafting a new Lutheran one. A Lutheran interest in virtue or even ethics is not a matter of sorting out and choosing between competing theories or ideas or thinkers. Lutherans should hold little enthusiasm for fights about ethical systems or methods or even foundations. Rather, the Lutheran interest in virtue and in ethics is content with helping people to receive and embrace all of God's truth and then to live the sort of meaningful, purposeful, and joyful lives that God's truth creates and sustains. As it was for Paul, the resurrection of Jesus is more than enough foundation for us.

The second significant consequence of Lutheranism's typical pastoral approach and emphasis is the overwhelming centrality and primacy of the gospel above all else. I have learned the hard way that the gospel and its proclamation should never be counted as safely assumed and left unsaid. So, please indulge this pastor's inveterate proclivities for just a moment or two as I recount the heart and center of Christian proclamation as Lutherans like to tell it. Nothing, absolutely nothing, matters more than the fundamental reality that in Jesus Christ God himself joined his creation in order to reclaim his creation. Though the entire creation was broken, corrupted, languishing, and destined for destruction because of the willful rebellion and sin of the chief creature and steward of the creation, God did not reject it, or the man who had ruined it. Instead, God acted to restore the man and the creation. Even when man's wicked rebellion culminated in rejecting and killing God's own Son, God raised Jesus, defeating sin, death, and hell, and so providing the only way of salvation for all people. This gospel work of God was accomplished, and continues still today, apart from any human contribution. God's love is granted not deserved, his grace is given, not earned. The gospel is the blessed exchange or the sweet swap: Jesus takes my sin, and I receive his righteousness. The gospel is the heart of it all, the central doctrine: we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

A teaching like that—overwhelming grace lavishly given, the ultimate rescue on the final day of resurrection, and everlasting life in God's eternal kingdom all freely and fully received—has a way of eclipsing everything else. And that's fine. God's gospel understandably and rightly surpasses and swallows up every other teaching or idea, whether pagan or Christian. The gospel truth that fallen creatures are graciously made right with their Creator, with fellow creatures, and with themselves deserves the central place in preaching and teaching. It is the core and essential teaching…but it is not the only teaching, and while it engulfs every other teaching, it does not contradict or eradicate any of God's remaining truth—not even the truth of God's law. The truth of the gospel does not compete with or defeat the truth of the law. Indeed, the gospel restores and re-centers all of God's truth. The everlasting

life given by the gospel begins now and is manifest in lives that are lived as new creatures now—creatures who delight in God's will, God's design, God's plan for his creation, God's law. The gospel puts creatures back into right relationships with God and with one another and empowers those newly remade creatures to begin living now in willing, eager, joyful conformity to God's will. It is here, in the teaching, studying, and keeping of God's will, his law, that Christians practice the art of ethics simply because that is what God's redeemed and forgiven creatures do.

Two Kinds of Righteousness

THAT THE GOSPEL CAN BE CENTRAL AND coexist with the law in a significant and meaningful way often beguiles and confounds not a few Lutheran thinkers, writers, and, no doubt, parishioners. Since the earliest days of the Reformation, rightly explicating and then teaching the distinction and relationship between gospel and law, between divine monergism and human accountability, between grace freely given and a Christian life ardently pursued, has confused and crippled not only academic theologians and churchmen, but also those who sit at their feet and then those who are obliged to learn from them. But the framework for keeping all of this straight has also been present from the very beginning; it's just not consistently recognized, retained, and taught. The central human reality of living at once in the gospel of freedom and in the law of responsibility was neatly articulated already in 1520 when Luther wrote his little treatise, "The Freedom of the Christian," with the intent of unpacking "the whole of Christian life in a brief form."[1] The basic premise is expressed in two pithy sentences, back-to-back:

> A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.
> A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.[2]

The two statements are often, and I would argue wrongly, described as paradoxical. But there is no contradiction, no logical imposition, no forced relationship at work here. The two stark statements are the simple reality of Christian existence, lived in light of two fundamental relationships: one with the Creator and the other with fellow creatures. Within each sphere, there is a way to be rightly and fully human. One is shaped by the gospel, the other by the law. This means there are two distinct ways for a human to be righteous or rightly related. Before his Creator, the Christian receives the grace, forgiveness, and righteousness of Christ and so is fully justified and made entirely righteous. He now lives without burden, debt, or obligation: a free lord of all. Meanwhile, before his fellow creatures, the same believer at the same time lives in relationships in which he has work to do for the sake of those around him. He is a dutiful servant of all.

The Christian is a righteous lord of all, declared so by God, and as a newly christened creature, he spends his life learning to live into that new reality in the earthly relationships into which he has been placed. Filled with God's Holy Spirit, and living in Christ, he strives to become what God created him to be: a creature accomplishing his purpose within the world. It is in this temporal sphere, where life is lived in the horizontal realm realities of relationships and responsibilities that morality, the cultivation of virtues, character formation, the pursuit of the good, and increasing conformity to a heteronomous telos all become not only exceedingly interesting, but critically important for the sheer sake of being human and living a worthwhile life that matters. There is a basic and universal telos for which every person has been created. That broad telos is then made peculiar by the myriad particularities that define each individual human being.

A person's telos is established, then, not by cultural consensus, religious tradition, scientific discovery, individual choice, or personal preference. It is established and revealed by God. Man's basic telos is to be the creature God intended for the sake of the surrounding creation. That broad goal is then evident in the countless instantiations of human being that comprise each human life. Striving to attain one's telos means, at the outset, learning to conform to the plan of God and so to attend to the design for human life that he has built into the creation itself. This plan or will of God is his law. So it is that creatures who know God's grace and embrace his plan for their lives are keenly interested in the law that God has established for the right functioning of his creation.

This way of thinking about the meaning and purpose of human existence finds its scriptural grounding in God's work of creation recorded in Genesis. In both biblical accounts of creation, man's purpose is explicit: man is created to care for God's creation. His very being is founded in his purpose. He exists to serve as God's representative, God's image, in the creation. He is God's steward in the creation. Man lives to serve the creation around him. So, when man does that well, he is fulfilling his purpose. And his purpose, his *raison d'être*, is manifest in his very being: a creature fully material and fully spiritual together at once. Man is mud sculpted by God's hand and then filled with God's breath. Man does not live for himself. He does not live to actualize his own full potential. He does not live to be all that he chooses to be. He does not live to improve himself or perfect himself. Man is not on a lifelong, personal mission to achieve his own individual telos. Indeed, he does not exist for his own sake at all. Rather, he exists purely for the sake of that particular part of creation into which he has been placed by the Creator. His telos directs him into this outward-centered way of being human.

Law and Gospel

THE INEVITABLE, STRUGGLE, FAILURE, AND FINAL inability that every human creature will face as he strives to fulfill this task—in other words the hard reality of his sin-soaked human condition—will inevitably, and often quickly, chasten and defeat every human. And yet, this personal sin and failure is not the last or most important word about a person's identity or reality. All of a man's sin and all of his failure are already fully covered by the redemptive and restorative work of Christ. A person does not need to justify his existence or gain his standing with God. He is God's forgiven creature by virtue of God's grace. So, man does not live to justify himself—Jesus has already done that. He is a forgiven and restored creature with a secure identity and a secure future. He will arrive at his telos; Christ himself will see to that.

So now, freed from the need to save or justify himself, and gifted with a clear sense of his life's purpose and direction, a Christian can get busy not seeking God's favor, or trying to justify his existence, or secure his identity, but he can get busy with the work for which he was created. God sends his redeemed creature back into the world to do the work he had always been created to do. This is the crux of Luther's dynamic and powerful paradigm of the two kinds of righteousness. It fully accounts for both the sweet comfort and divine monergism of the gospel as well as the perpetually unfinished and endlessly challenging work of creaturely responsibility expressed in the demands and direction of the law.

The Loss of Self

BOTH OF THESE ASPECTS OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE, the vertical relationship with God the Creator, and the horizontal relationship with fellow creatures, drive the human to forget about his own needs and his own righteousness. Indeed, God's reality leads each Christian to self-forgetfulness and self-denial that drives him outward away from self-centeredness. Luther succinctly expresses this dynamic precisely and powerfully in the same treatise, "The Freedom of the Christian," where he writes:

> A Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian.... He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor.[3]

Obviously, this way of living in the world, this complete dismissal of the self, flies in the face of all the established foundations and all the standard assumptions at work in every self-improvement peptalk, virtually every Christian living book, and even most approaches to "Christian" counseling and personal thriving. The true Christian wisdom expressed so pointedly by Luther subverts all the therapeutic

underpinnings of the present age. Self-love is not the goal; it's not even the first step. Self-focus is fundamentally ruled out. Faith toward God and love toward neighbor—that's the Christian life expressed through the framework of two distinct kinds of righteousness: a passive one *coram Deo*, before God, and an active one *coram mundo*, before the world.

Creational Law and Forgiving Gospel

CONTRARY TO THE OLD RUNNING JOKE ABOUT the patent incapacity for Lutheran theology to contribute anything of significance to the ethical task (you know, Lutherans can't do ethics because they are perpetually preoccupied with salvation by grace through faith alone apart from any human works), this foundation of two kinds of righteousness, so central to a rightly articulated Lutheran approach to the Christian life, provides an exceedingly sturdy foundation for robust ethical work. In fact, true Lutheran doctrine does not subvert, but actually enhances, the pursuit of Christian ethics. In other words, a Lutheranism that would have the gospel trump the law and cast it out of the ongoing reality of Christian living is emphatically not a faithful expression of right Lutheran teaching. As noted, the law plays a critical role for the Christian as a clear expression of God's will for the best way to live within the structure or the design of the creation. This idea is nicely captured in the Formula of Concord which asserts, "the word 'law' has one single meaning, namely, the unchanging will of God, according to which human beings are to conduct themselves in this life."[4] This understanding of the law certainly aligns with what is often labeled as natural law. But considering the baggage, entailments, and raft of liabilities dragging along behind that term, perhaps we can just refer to the comprehensive and encompassing design of God that has been hardwired into the very fabric and being of every part of creation itself, as the creational law.

Thinking of God's law this way expands it well beyond a mere list, even beyond the exalted list of the Decalog. Thinking about the law in this creational way also liberates us from casting the law as only a negative, crushing, enslaving, and killing word from God. Instead, it enables us to see the law as simply the structure or design that God has established for the right functioning of his creation. This means that when humans feel the weight or sting of the law, the problem is not the law, but their own sin. And when forgiven and justified Christians are living as the humans that God designed them to be, they are necessarily living in conformity with the creational law of God. It must also be said and stressed that the role of the gospel in all of this is to forgive and restore sinners. The gospel does one thing—and it is one vitally important thing—it puts broken sinners back into a right relationship with God and the world. The gospel brings them into God's grace and returns them to their place in God's story. The gospel makes Christian ethics possible (there is no

Christian ethics if there are no Christians, after all), but the gospel does not create, shape, direct, or even guide Christian ethics. One of the more tragic blunders of many Lutheran thinkers has been the effort to conceive or even practice a "gospel ethics." The consistent result of such ill-conceived endeavors is inevitably the mutilation of the gospel. When this game is played, the gospel is distorted into a law that demands and expects. There is no gospel-shaped ethics. There is no gospel-directed way of life. The gospel, in the strict and proper sense of gospel gift, does not direct, demand, or expect. All of those necessary, and exceedingly good and right tasks, are the apt province of the law alone.

Ethics, then, is the work of discerning, teaching, and living in accord with the creational law, the will of God, not, to be sure, in an effort to win favor with God, but merely to fulfill faithfully the purpose for which humans were created. We are redeemed and restored in our relationship before God in order to be sent back into the world to serve our neighbor there. We strive for the telos of being fully human not for the sake of ourselves, but to better serve the world according to God's plan through our faithful living. We cultivate the virtues not as ends in themselves, but as skills and habits that better shape us to live as the fully human creatures God intends us to be. We aren't particularly interested in establishing a specific list of definitive virtues, though we are quite willing to learn from Christian and non-Christian individuals, and from traditions in the church and in the world, about the virtues that best enable us to think, act, and live fully human lives—but, of course, any insight or direction must be held captive to what God has clearly revealed in his written Word and in the *regula fidei* of the church. Luther's *Small* and *Large Catechisms* are remarkably rich and enduringly relevant sources for concrete instruction in Christian lives of virtue.

The Imitation of Christ

As we work to become those fully human people of God's design, we simultaneously and enthusiastically embrace the *imitatio Christi*. Eagerly and inquisitively, we look to Jesus as the one perfect and unsurpassable example of what it means to be human. We follow Jesus and imitate his example not according to his transcendent deity, which is by definition always beyond our grasp, but according to his perfect humanity. Jesus shows us what it looks like when a human creature is living as God intended. While none of us have the precise vocation of Jesus—indeed not one of us has the precise vocation of any other human being—nevertheless, Jesus witnesses the self-denial, others-centeredness, and submission to the will of God that should define the lives of every human creature.

Obviously, living this kind of Christian life is not easy. Luther frequently invoked the unholy trinity of forces ferociously fighting not only to blunt any growth in Christian virtue or deaden the pursuit of ethical ideals, but to annihilate Christians altogether. We fight against God's very real adversary, Satan, and all his demonic horde. And we struggle against the surrounding fallen world itself, as Jesus and all the apostles warn us. And perhaps most insidiously of all, we contend against our own selves. The old Adam or the old Eve that indwells every fallen creature lingers even in the reborn Christian and is intent on strangling the gospel's new creation. This side of the eschaton, a sizable gap always remains between who we truly are according to God's declared reality and the equally true empirical, lived reality we see at work in our thoughts, words, and actions. Luther knew this well from what he saw in himself and from what he saw in the people in his parish. So while he could exult in the certainty of the gospel and his status as genuine saint in Christ, he could also admit the continuing struggle that remained. Early in his career, he wrote, "So long as we are on this earth, believing in his word, we are a work that God has begun, but not yet completed; but after death we shall be perfect, a divine work without sin or fault."[5] We *shall* be perfect, even as in Christ we are now *already* perfect according to God's gracious declaration. Later in the same treatise Luther made the point even more strongly. His words sound, frankly, confoundingly un-Lutheran, yet when heard in light to the two kinds of righteousness they not only make perfect sense, but they also provide a fertile ground for a zealous pursuit of ethics and for the cultivation of true virtue:

> This life, therefore, is not godliness but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal but it is the right road. At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed.[6]

So Luther wrote, and so we strive to live.

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Notes

1. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1-30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-76); vols. 31-55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress Press, 1957-86); vols. 56-82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009): 31:343 (hereafter LW).

2. Ibid., 344.

3. Ibid., 371.

4. Robert Kolb and Timothy J Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 589; FC VI SD, 15.

5. LW 32:24.

6. Ibid.

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Book Review Essay

Karl Allen Kuhn, *Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 128 pp. $29.00

Review by Dan Lioy

1.0 Introduction

Karl Allen Kuhn's *Insights from Cultural Anthropology* transcends a simple methodological guide. It is an engaging theological invitation. Though concise at 128 pages, the book ventures into significant interpretive territory, urging readers not only toward wiser Scripture reading but also toward more faithful shepherding of Christian communities within their culturally complex world.

For Lutherans—grounded in the centrality of the Gospel proclaimed through Word and Sacrament, shaped by the Law-Gospel dialectic, and lived out in vocation—Kuhn offers an approach that resonates with and potentially deepens these core commitments. His presentation of cultural anthropology promises to enrich Gospel proclamation by anchoring it within tangible historical contexts, safeguarding it from cooption by transient modern ideologies. Crucially, Kuhn's method fosters interpretive humility, heightened communal awareness, prophetic witness, and pastoral sensitivity—qualities deeply aligned with Lutheran identity and practice.

2.0. Overview and Foundational Methodology

2.1 Position within Scholarship

As part of Fortress Press's accessible *Insights* series, Kuhn's volume follows a clear, practical format: tracing the method's development, examining its contemporary questions, highlighting enduring insights, and exploring future possibilities. This structure is intentionally pedagogical, making it a useful resource for pastors, students, and lay leaders seeking both foundational understanding and practical application within a single, manageable text.

2.2 Core Definitions: Cultural Anthropology and Social-Scientific Criticism

Kuhn defines cultural anthropology broadly as the study of culture, primarily through ethnography (a detailed examination of specific groups) and ethnology (a comparative analysis of cultural patterns). He explicitly links this discipline to

social-scientific criticism within biblical studies. This exegetical approach utilizes specific models (heuristics) to rigorously evaluate the social and cultural dimensions embedded within biblical texts and their worlds.

2.3 Methodological Heritage

Kuhn's method builds upon a well-established tradition in biblical scholarship, notably the work of John H. Elliott and Hebrew Bible specialists like Bruce Malina, Jerome Neyrey, and John Pilch. These scholars pioneered efforts to reconstruct the social realities—honor-shame codes, kinship structures, patronage networks, purity dynamics—that shaped the world of the biblical authors and original audiences.

Kuhn situates his contribution within this lineage, offering both theoretical grounding and practical case studies. He insists that context is not merely supplemental information but is essential for meaning-making. His central analogy—comparing exegesis to archery—illustrates that without proper "form" (interpretive context), the interpreter's "arrow" (understanding) will inevitably miss its mark.

2.4 Context: The Indispensable Framework

Chapter 1 establishes Kuhn's core hermeneutical principle: faithful interpretation demands attention to three interconnected contexts:

1. The Original Context: The social-historical world of the biblical authors and their initial audiences.
2. The Interpreter's Context: The cultural milieu, assumptions, and biases of the modern reader.
3. The Interpretive Context: The chosen methods and presuppositions brought to the text.

This threefold awareness cultivates interpretive humility and clarity. It is particularly vital for helping Lutheran readers distinguish between the text's original meaning within its ancient setting and its potential significance for contemporary faith and life, always guided by the Gospel's central light.

2.5 The Archery Analogy: Precision and Practice

Kuhn's opening metaphor effectively equates sound biblical interpretation with skilled archery. Precision requires correct form; a single flawed assumption can send the interpretation wildly off course. He emphasizes that humility, consistent practice, and a disciplined return to the interpretive "mantra"—especially the imperative of context—are essential. For Lutherans, steeped in a tradition of disciplined, Gospel-centered reading sustained by the Spirit, this analogy holds particular resonance, underscoring the need for careful, prayerful engagement with Scripture.

2.6 Structure: The Four-Axis Design

The book's organization mirrors the *Insights* series template:

1. Origination and Development: The historical emergence of the method.
2. Contemporary Questions: Current challenges and debates.
3. Enduring Insights: The abiding contributions of anthropology.
4. Future Considerations: Potential future directions for scholarship.

This clear structure enhances the book's practicality for classroom use, seminary education, or parish study groups, providing a logical pathway from foundational concepts to concrete application.

2.7 Theological Stakes for Lutheran Readers

For Lutherans, Kuhn's emphasis on layered context connects readily with the Law-Gospel dynamic. Recognizing the economic pressures of the Roman Empire, Israel's intricate purity systems, or early Christian struggles over inclusion, helps readers discern where God's Word confronts and critiques human structures (Law) and where it upholds and orders communal life (Gospel). Cultural anthropology, therefore, holds significant potential to enhance Gospel proclamation by grounding it more firmly within the very world where God's redemptive act in Christ originally unfolded.

3.0 Chapter Summaries and Key Lutheran Resonances

3.1 Chapter 1: A Socially Sensitive Reading

KUHN OPENS WITH THE ARCHERY ANALOGY, warning about interpretive instability when Scripture's original context is ignored. He establishes the "mantra" of the three contexts as essential for faithful interpretation. This model strongly supports a Lutheran approach to disciplined *lectio divina*, reading Scripture corporately through the lens of the received Gospel, the Lutheran confessional heritage, and the specific contexts of local congregations, always seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance.

3.2 Chapter 2: Political and Economic Realities

Kuhn argues that ancient life integrated religion, politics, and economics, starkly contrasting with modern compartmentalization. Understanding the weight of the Roman imperial economy, he contends, is crucial for interpreting Jesus' teachings on wealth, taxes, and power. This analysis offers fresh grounding for Lutheran theology regarding vocation, stewardship, and the Christian's relationship to governing authorities (e.g., *Augsburg Confession*, Article XVI), highlighting how faith engages all spheres of life under God's governance.

3.3 Chapter 3: Social Structures and Dynamics

This chapter unpacks kinship systems, class divisions, patronage networks, and honor-shame codes as fundamental social forces shaping biblical texts and communities. Applying these anthropological lenses can yield richer insights into Jesus' parables, the prophets' social critiques, and the complex social tensions within the Pauline churches, illuminating the embedded nature of the Gospel within concrete human relationships.

3.4 Chapter 4: Resistance and Conformity

Kuhn observes that Scripture is not monolithic in its stance toward dominant cultures. Some texts oppose imperial mandates (e.g., prophetic critiques, Revelation), while others promote conformity to social norms as a means of stability (e.g., household codes, Romans 13). This dialectic—prophets confronting kings, Christians negotiating Roman rule, purity codes preserving identity—resonates with the Lutheran understanding of the "two kingdoms" and the necessary tension between the prophetic voice calling for justice and the pastoral concern for communal order and witness.

3.5 Chapter 5: Purity as Boundary Maintenance

Kuhn discusses purity codes as systems that define insiders/outsiders, as well as clean/unclean, and community boundaries. This lens is invaluable for interpreting Jesus' confrontations over purity laws (e.g., Mark 7) and the early church's struggle to include Gentiles. For Lutherans, this anthropological perspective sheds light on the radical boundary-breaking enacted in Baptism (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11), the inclusive hospitality of the Lord's Supper, and the ongoing challenge and grace of forming diverse communities centered in Christ alone.

4.0 Lutheran Theological Evaluation: Strengths and Refinements

4.1 Noteworthy Strengths

- *Deepening Contextual Humility*: Lutherans confess that the Gospel must be proclaimed within context. Kuhn's method rigorously requires pastors and readers to recognize and critically examine their own cultural assumptions, setting aside ethnocentric filters. This aligns powerfully with Luther's insistence that Scripture must interrogate us, challenging our preconceptions and calling us to repentance and faith.

- *Equipping Prophetic Discipleship*: Luther's reform addressed both spiritual and social abuses. Kuhn's focus on political-economic structures helps pastors discern where the Gospel demands prophetic resistance (e.g., against systemic injustice, idolatrous power structures) and where faithfulness

calls for honoring God-given order and authority (e.g., Rom 13:1–7, 1 Pet 2:13–17). Preaching informed by this awareness can foster justice, form Christian conscience, and sustain the oppressed, embodying the Law's critical function and the Gospel's liberating power.

- *Reintegrating Vocation and Daily Life*: Luther's doctrine of vocation emphasizes that Christian faith permeates all of life. Kuhn's method helps pastors and laity recognize how every sphere—work, citizenship, family—is embedded within social structures. The task is not to escape society for a purely "spiritual" realm, but to bring the Gospel's transformative witness into workplaces, homes, and economies as tangible signs of God's coming Kingdom, lived out in daily callings.

- *Accessible Formation for Diverse Audiences*: Kuhn writes with commendable clarity and pastoral warmth, making complex anthropological concepts accessible without oversimplification. This approach effectively engages students and laypersons, often reframing familiar biblical texts in illuminating ways. The book also offers constructive frameworks for addressing issues such as oppression, diversity, and inequality within the church and society.

- *Enriching Worship and Preaching Praxis*: Kuhn's lens has concrete implications for liturgy. Prayers can engage economic realities; sermon illustrations can resonate across social strata; corporate confession can address communal sins and patterns; the Eucharist becomes a tangible enactment of boundary-breaking unity in Christ. Anthropology thus nurtures preaching and worship that truly meets people within the complexities of their lived experience.

4.2 Considerations and Necessary Refinements for Lutheran Practice

- *Divine Agency Requires Explicit Integration*: Anthropology, by nature, focuses on human social realities. While not denied, Kuhn's work largely keeps God's redemptive action and the Holy Spirit's work implicit. Lutheran theology must intentionally supplement this method, anchoring contextual awareness firmly within the narrative of God's initiative in Christ. The interpreter's ultimate task is not merely sociological analysis but to proclaim where and how Christ intersects, judges, and transforms human structures through Word and Sacrament.

- *Doctrinal Connections Need Articulation*: Kuhn does not systematically connect anthropological insights to core Lutheran doctrines. Lutherans must actively undertake this integration. For instance, interpreting purity laws demands clear Law/Gospel differentiation: the Law exposes sin and boundaries, while the Gospel announces forgiveness and inclusion in Christ. Kinship models should be viewed through the lens of the sacramental

community formed by Baptism. Anthropology provides the cultural "map"; Lutheran doctrine provides the theological "compass" oriented to Christ.

- *Guarding Against Relativism*: Anthropology's necessary focus on cultural particularity carries a risk of obscuring the Gospel's universal claim. Lutherans affirm the Gospel's power within specific cultures and its cosmic scope—Christ died for all (John 3:16, 1 John 2:2). Interpreters must balance deep cultural insight with unwavering conviction in the Gospel's transcultural truth and its call to all peoples. The particularity of the Incarnation serves the universality of redemption.

- *Brevity Necessitates Further Exploration*: The book's introductory scope (128 pages) limits the depth on specific biblical books or extended pastoral scenarios. This is not a flaw but an invitation. Pastors and students will need to supplement Kuhn's work with deeper exegetical studies, resources such as his *The Kingdom According to Luke and Acts*, focused seminary courses, or sermon workshops that apply these insights to specific texts and contexts.

5.0 Kuhn as a Catalyst for Renewed Lutheran Ministry

5.1 Expanding Cultural Imagination

LUTHERAN PREACHING CAN SOMETIMES FOCUS predominantly on textual meaning in isolation. Kuhn's anthropology provocatively asks: "What unseen social forces shaped this text? What hidden cultural scripts shape us?" This questioning can lead to richer preaching, more resonant liturgy, and greater mutual understanding within diverse congregations, breaking open monocultural assumptions.

5.2 Challenging Homogeneity, Reclaiming Lutheran Adaptability

Cultural anthropology challenges the notion of a "hidden," culturally neutral Christianity. If church practice becomes uniform (e.g., reflecting only a dominant middle-class culture in the Global North), the Gospel's inherent power to adapt and transform diverse cultures is diminished. Kuhn's method actively helps reclaim cultural plurality and the Gospel's remarkable adaptability—a historic strength of the Lutheran tradition in its worldwide spread.

5.3 Toward a Confessional Cultural Hermeneutic

The Lutheran tradition, with its Christocentric focus, Law/Gospel hermeneutic, and Sacramental theology, provides essential correctives to potential anthropological relativism. It offers the framework for a confessional cultural hermeneutic. Kuhn provides invaluable cultural tools; Lutheran doctrine provides the definitive redemptive contour centered on justification by grace through faith in Christ.

5.4 Formation for a Globalized Church

Kuhn implicitly calls readers to break free from monocultural bubbles. The experiences of immigrant, indigenous, and global majority churches become vital lenses through which predominantly Western congregations can recognize their own cultural limitations and learn to read Scripture with broader, more empathetic, and theologically grounded perspectives.

6.0 Conclusion

Karl Allen Kuhn's *Insights from Cultural Anthropology* offers fertile ground for renewing Lutheran ministry. He presents an accessible, disciplined method that restores crucial contextual awareness to biblical interpretation, honors cultural particularity without idolizing it, and equips pastors to proclaim Christ faithfully within the complex webs of power, purity, economics, and identity that define human societies.

The book's noteworthy strengths—its cultivation of interpretive humility, its potential for prophetic clarity, its focus on faith embedded in social realities, and its contribution to theological formation—compel Lutherans to embody the Gospel more authentically within their specific contexts. This embodiment, however, must always occur without surrendering the historic, Christ-centered doctrinal emphases that define Lutheran identity. The volume's limitations—the implicit treatment of divine agency and the need for explicit doctrinal integration—are not roadblocks but rather invitations. They call the church to enrich Kuhn's anthropological tools with the deep resources of confessional Lutheran theology and the power of Spirit-led proclamation grounded in Word and Sacrament.

Ultimately, Kuhn's anthropology can help refine our vision when it comes to worship, preaching, and pastoral care. It helps us see Scripture not merely as an individual spiritual text, but as a divine communication deeply embedded within and speaking to human social existence—a social gospel firmly anchored in the tangible realities of Word and Sacrament. Kuhn aims to lift readers beyond mere cultural critique. He strives to foster Gospel creativity, empowering the church to see how Christ actively reshapes every cultural form for purposes of divine mercy, justice, and abundant life. The goal is clear: for pastors, students, and leaders to interpret not only ancient texts with greater depth, but also to engage their present world with Gospel clarity, contextual wisdom, and unwavering hope in the transforming power of Christ.

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Book Review

Andrew T. Walker, *God and the Transgender Debate: What Does the Bible Actually Say about Gender Identity?* (The Good Book Company, 2022), 201 pp. $16.99

Reviewed by Robert Henry

Given the climate of our culture in recent years, some have found it necessary to articulate a Christian response to the issue of transgenderism from a theological perspective. And yet, this topic is clearly one that elicits significantly passionate and generally contentious debates. And so, here I will offer a review of Andrew Walker's *God and the Transgender Debate: What Does the Bible Actually Say about Gender Identity?* Therefore, as in any discussion on this issue, Walker emphasizes the position that the Christian faith first and foremost seeks to emulate a Christ-like approach of sensitivity and gentleness. In the opening chapter of his book, Walker quotes Matthew 12:20: "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench."

Walker provides a brief overview of his book, where he first seeks to identify the problem and explain how we, as a culture, have arrived at this point where we are today. He then, through chapters 5 to 7, offers a detailed analysis of the biblical foundation and articulation of gender and its distinction. From chapters 8 to 11, Walker presents practical ways to approach the problem and, in his own words, grounds an appropriate understanding of transgenderism in the "real lives of ordinary people" (9).

Chapter 2 is entitled "How We Got Where We Are." Here, Walker recounts probably one of the most famous examples of a celebrity transgender individual, Bruce Jenner's transformation to Caitlyn. This high-profile individual's struggle with the feeling of "being born in the wrong body" forced our culture to wrestle with the authenticity of transgenderism. Ultimately, Walker argues that there has been a rise of relativism in truth and ethics, along with our culture's post-Christian identity and a hyper-individualism that prioritizes individual "lived experiences" over objective truths. All of this is influenced by the effects of the sexual revolution and how it "sever[ed] the connection between sex and procreation," as well as a reimagining of the ancient Christian heresy of Gnosticism, which "emphasizes that a person's self-awareness is different than and more important than their physical body" (18). Walker explains that the two cardinal sins of post-modernism are judging and repressing one's desires.

Chapter 3, entitled "The Language," examines terms that have taken on significantly different meanings in recent years compared to their past connotations. The terms he explores include "sex," "gender," "gender identity," "gender dysphoria," and "transgender." Walker explains that "sex" refers to both an individual's biological make-up and composition, as well as "primary sex characteristics," which include reproductive systems, and "secondary sex characteristics," such as broader shoulders in males. According to Walker, terms like "gender" or "gender identity" contrast with sex, where the former are expressions of sexual differences that vary across cultures (such as men wearing kilts in Scotland), yet they have traditionally been linked to sexual differences. However, today, this expression doesn't necessarily have to be connected to sexual difference, and as Walker later explains, it is not a biblical view.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 examine the foundation for forming a specific perspective on the transgender debate, what a Biblical view entails, and how confusion about gender has arisen from a fallen creation. In "On Making a Decision," Walker challenges the reader to evaluate his or her worldview. The authority from which one derives knowledge and trustworthiness about what one believes is crucial. He describes the modern view as deriving authority from one's *self*. However, the critique stems from the question, "Do I really know myself that well? I have never lived before. I may identify a problem with my fulfillment, but I cannot know I have rightly identified the solution. I don't know how I will feel, who I will be, or what I will need tomorrow or next year, let alone in a decade" (36). Therefore, this perspective of considering transgender "feelings" as authentic, reliable, and trustworthy is unlikely to be sound. However, if we find that the Bible offers a "better story" about who and what we are, then we should reject this postmodern authority for truth.

In the chapter titled "Well-Designed," Walker then shifts from selecting a worldview to determining what that worldview asserts about the nature of gender. Walker notes that Scripture emphasizes the importance of the body and its male/female bifurcation. These are not merely naturally occurring features, but God-designed works of creation. In "Beauty and Brokenness," Walker explores the nature of our fallen state. He explains how a single act of defiance and rebellion led to our hearts being divided into two distinct parts: our desires and our sense of right and wrong. Therefore, Walker writes, "In the same way that fallen desires pervade the hearts of all of us, individuals with gender dysphoria experience real feelings of distress about their gender identity. These are authentic experiences, where their heart's desire is telling them one thing about themselves while their body is saying something else. No one should dismiss this, or belittle this, or joke about this. To feel this way is to experience real, deep pain" (69). Nonetheless, these dysphoric experiences do not reflect who and what we are in our bodies, according to the divine plan of God's creation.

In chapter 7, Walker shares the story of an individual named Evan who was assigned "female" at birth but later transitioned to a man. He gave birth to a child after his transition, creating the paradox of a man giving birth. Walker uses this story to highlight the emotional and mental struggles some face when feeling like a man while their body is that of a woman. However, as the chapter title suggests, there is "A Better Future" for those in Christ. Ultimately, gender dysphoria does not need to be treated as a special category of struggles associated with the fall of man. Just as one grapples with envy or pride, we can also wrestle with disassociated feelings toward our bodies that do not align with our created order of sex/gender. This discussion on understanding gender dysphoria in light of our fallen nature leads to an opportunity for Walker to talk about "Love Your Neighbor" in chapter 8. He explains that as Christians, we should take this opportunity to demonstrate compassion and empathy grounded in truth-telling.

In "No Easy Paths," Walker reassures those struggling with gender dysphoria that the internal conflicts they face are similar to other struggles depicted in Scripture. He asks us to reflect on Christ's words about taking up our crosses to follow him, as well as Paul's struggles, which, despite much prayer and supplication, remained with the caveat that "my grace is sufficient." Moreover, the church must be a place where individuals with gender dysphoria are welcomed and heard without compromising the truth of God's Word. In "Challenging the Church," Walker reminds Christians that we should be loving and accepting, and also allow those without a voice to be heard. He states, "If you or your church tends to listen and love but bend the truth in your attempt to love, the challenge is: hold to the truth, even as you love—remember that loving someone is not the same as agreeing with them, and sometimes loving someone requires you to disagree" (133).

In chapter 11, Walker also addresses some of the most challenging questions about transgender issues, including how to speak with children. He suggests that we be honest and open with children, rather than shrugging our shoulders, avoiding the issue, or giving a polarized response like "they are just crazy." Therefore, we need to be "wise as a parent…balancing a desire to protect your child from the world with the need to prepare them for the world" (139).

In the final chapters 12 and 13, Walker concludes with "Tough Questions" related to transgender issues and also offers "Open Hands" to those dealing with gender dysphoria, emphasizing the importance of approaching these issues with care, empathy, and understanding. The book ends much like it starts, focusing on Christian compassion and acceptance.

While the issue of transgenderism and how Christians should respond to its theological and ethical implications is complex, it is clear that it has sparked much controversy. Although many Christians and secularists are divided on the issue,

Andrew Walker presents a comprehensive Christian reflection on the causes, status, and legitimacy of transgender identity. By anchoring concepts of sex and gender in created categories of humans divided into male and female, Walker associates gender dysphoria with a fallen state of being, which is no less legitimate than the struggles with various disordered desires. In short, Andrew Walker's *God and the Transgender Debate: What Does the Bible Actually Say about Gender Identity?* provides a thorough, compassionate, and insightful analysis of the transgender debate and its connection to the Church. Anyone interested in a clear and thoughtful look at this issue and how Christians should respond is encouraged to read this book.

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Book Review

John Daniel Davidson, *Pagan America: The Decline of Christianity and the Dark Age to Come* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2024), xxii, 344 pp. $29.99

Reviewed by Tony Seel

IN THE NORTH END OF BOSTON, in August, the Feast of St. Anthony is celebrated with city blocks closed off for parades and street vendors. Five parades, one for each day of the festival, are conducted on public streets. This kind of celebration is commended by John Daniel Davidson in *Pagan America: The Decline of Christianity and the Dark Age to Come*. Davidson looks at our current situation in the United States and foresees darker days ahead for the church and nation. As the author says in the Introduction, "As Christianity fades in America, so too will our system of government, our civil society, and all our rights and freedoms" (xiii). That's a bold statement that will take strong support to stand.

In ten chapters, Davidson develops his thesis, beginning with the Viking Age in chapter one. In the second half of the tenth century, Harald Bluetooth, king over Denmark and Norway, converted to Christianity. He worked to turn Denmark from the pagan ways of earlier generations. Beginning in 1934, archaeologists uncovered fortresses in Denmark and Norway built over the remains of animals and young children. Later archaeological findings confirmed that from the sixth century to the eleventh century, pagan sacrifices were made in a number of locations in Northern Europe.

Davidson moves his narrative to Tenochtitlan, a place founded in the 14th century as the capitol of the Aztec Empire. In the three years of 1519 to 1521, Hernan Cortes was able to end the reign of the Aztecs and their practices of human sacrifice "that far surpassed what even the most pious Viking pagans undertook" (6). What was the motive for this undertaking? "Yes, Cortes sought Aztec gold, but he also sincerely sought the conversion of the indigenous peoples to the Catholic faith" (11).

His third example of pagan barbarism is found in Benin, Africa where "ritual human sacrifice" was performed as late as 1897, the remains of which were discovered by a British army unit there after the massacre of Brits on a trade mission in Benin (13). The British military force found "Crucifixion, mutilation, and ritual slaughter of every conceivable kind were at the center of their religion, which they practiced right to the bitter, horrifying end" (17). The British forces were able to end these practices.

In all three instances, in northern Europe, in what is now Mexico, and in Africa, the Christian faith vanquished pagan beliefs and practices. In a fourth instance, in

8th century Germany, Boniface, a Benedictine monk, did what others had done earlier and since—he brought Christianity to formerly pagan lands. Boniface is the model to which Davidson returns in later pages.

The paganism found in the instances cited above follows after the paganism described in the Christian Bible. From the Hebrew Scriptures to the New Testament, paganism flourished. Davidson observes,

> In the eyes of both the ancient Israelites and later the New Testament writers and early Christians, the casting down of the devil and the rebellious angels, and their subsequent authority over the various nations of the world, is the source of all pagan religion (26).

With the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ and His followers, we enter another struggle against pagan forces. For Christ and His followers, it was first the paganism of the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire, before the influence of Christianity, practiced infanticide, sexual immorality (as understood from the perspective of Christian morality), and cruelty to the weak, the poor, and anyone who lacked power or authority. It was the Christian faith that drew the Roman Empire away from pagan worship and other practices that had been the hallmark of the Empire prior to Constantine's conversion.

Tom Holland's massive work, *Dominion*, is another exhibit of the author's portrayal of the pagan world before Christianity.[1] Holland had left the Christian faith that he was raised with at the time of his writing *Dominion*. Even so, he could not deny the power of the Christian faith. In *Dominion*, he writes,

> Secularism owes its existence to the medieval papacy. Humanism derives ultimately from the claims of the Bible: that humans are made in God's image; that his Son died equally for everyone; that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. Repeatedly, like a great earthquake, Christianity has sent reverberations across the world.[2]

Davidson comments: "secularism, toleration, freedom of choice, consent, equality: all of these are inheritances of Christendom" (40). Applying this insight, he says:

> In America, a country founded explicitly on Christian ideals and dependent on a civic culture forged by Christian morality, the post-Christian era will bring a life-or-death struggle for the republic and our constitutional system (43).

This struggle is the primary focus of this book. Before our founding, British subjects fled their country for our shores to escape religious persecution. These pilgrims landed in what is now Massachusetts in 1620. Other Puritans came later to New England to enjoy the same freedoms that the earlier pilgrims established. These Puritan colonists founded their communities with precepts drawn from their Chris-

tian faith. Davidson reports: "By the late eighteenth century, American civic life was suffused with Christian doctrine and religious piety" (51). He goes on to say,

> While it's true that the Founders did not openly endorse particular Protestant denominations, or even specific Christian doctrines beyond a general belief in a benevolent and almighty God, they clearly believed their constitutional scheme could not work with a citizenry unformed by religious piety and bereft of Christian moral virtue (54).

There's the rub. From that understanding, we have moved to one that espouses that government must be neutral toward religion and secular in policy and purpose. Gone is the natural law philosophy that John Locke derived from Catholic medievalists like Thomas Aquinas. Gone are the beliefs that this philosophy has divine origins. Going are the inalienable rights that flow from natural law and enumerated in the U.S. Constitution. Several times, the author quotes Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy. Kennedy wrote for the majority opinion in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*: "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life" (56).

That subjectivism eviscerates the plain meaning of the Constitution. However, a move away from the Christian underpinnings of our rule of law began decades before Kennedy's Supreme Court opinion. Davidson argues that "by the time of the Great Depression, religion in American public life was poised to undergo a profound shift that would eventually clear a path for the neopaganism we see emerging today" (73). He has not yet developed his case for this neopaganism; that is the work of subsequent chapters. He lays the groundwork for his thesis with reference to several Supreme Court cases, beginning with *Cantwell v. Connecticut* in 1940. Davidson views this case as a watershed in the profound shift that he is elucidating. He recognizes that *Cantwell* is "a major turning point in religious liberty jurisprudence—and, in fact, a major turning point in American history…" (76).

> The implications of this were enormous. Any state authority, according to the unanimous ruling in *Cantwell*, is forbidden by the Constitution from making a determination about what is and is not a religious cause. We are habituated today to accept this reasoning without question, but it is not at all obvious that we should. It only makes sense if we accept without question a host of assumptions about religion, reason, and American constitutionalism that are of relatively recent vintage. Yes, in a society that considers religion strictly a private matter of subjective belief, a "religious cause" could be almost anything (77).

The author concedes, "That way of thinking has been the consensus in America for decades" (77). From the case the author has developed to this point, it is clear that this consensus is a radical departure from "an understanding that prevailed in Amer-

ica from 1776 all the way up until the 1940s" (77). A trajectory from *Cantwell* is mapped through cases that extend to *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District* in 2022, which Davidson recognizes as "a long-overdue corrective" to the line of reasoning that began with *Cantwell*. Speaking of the *Cantwell* trajectory, Davidson says,

> That ascendant view is one that John Adams and George Washington—to say nothing of most ordinary Americans from the Founding era until the mid-twentieth century—would have found utterly inconsistent with their vision of America (81).

As the Founders understood, "the secular and the religious overlap constantly" (82). Davidson asserts that "Absolute state neutrality on matters of religion is a comforting fiction at best. At worst, it's a trojan horse for state persecution of religious citizens" (82). We've recently seen the worst-case scenario play out in the FBI surveillance of traditional Roman Catholics worshiping according to the Latin Mass. The author points to a subject area being taught in American public schools that is at odds with the beliefs of orthodox Christians, Jews, or Muslims. What he terms "a typical secular education" in American public schools includes teaching that there are more than two "genders" (83).

> Even leaving aside controversies over specific subjects, plenty of religiously conservative parents believe that any education that makes no reference to God is not only deficient, but absolutely *not* neutral.[3] Such a strictly secular approach holds that religious education should be excluded from the curriculum—a position that stands in stark contrast to how public education was conducted in America up until the 1960s (83).

This section of Chapter 3 marks the transition into neopaganism in contemporary America. Chapter 4 is titled "The Collapse," and it outlines how the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted what was evident since the 1960s in America—"the secularizing trend" (99) was morphing into "a sea-change" (100) with the rise of those with "no religious affiliation," commonly called nones (101). Davidson acknowledges a "steep decline" (103) not only in religious affiliation, but a parallel decline in what he terms the quality of religious belief. This is evident in a decline in Americans who pray daily, consider religion as an important part of their lives, and are conversant in the basic beliefs of orthodox Christianity. Based on survey data, he reports that "long-dead heresies are now coming back" (105). He notes that "every Christian denomination in America, with the exception of Catholics, is in decline" (107), and the Catholics are basically flat-lined in terms of the number of members.

The author provides a summary statement that introduces the following chapters, which delve deeper into the current religious situation:

> Skepticism abounds in our age, especially skepticism of reason, the corruption of which is driving a resurgence of superstition along with new forms of religious belief. The most accurate term for these superstitions and beliefs is paganism, or neopaganism; and indeed, the nones, in so far as they are "spiritual but not religious," are best understood as modern pagans (111).

For example, he names climate change activism as "just paganism behind a modern facade" (111). Gender ideology is also named as part of the neopaganism. Faith in science, as proclaimed during the COVID-19 pandemic, is another example. Davidson observes, "No dissent was allowed, not even from highly-credentialed scientists behind the Great Barrington Declaration…" (113). He diagnoses "The COVID and George Floyd hysterias" as "overlapping expressions of a deep spiritual anxiety—an inchoate desire to fight evil, to belong to something larger than oneself, and to be on the side of righteousness" (115).

Another sign of this "new post-Christian religion" is the disintegration of families. Here is another parallel—"It's health and wellbeing—or lack thereof—tells us something important not just about the state of American Christianity: the fate of one is inextricably tied to the other" (116). What Davidson calls a "new domestic reality" (119) is more partners cohabiting and fewer partners marrying. In addition to this, more American adults are living alone. The United States has the highest rate of single-parent households. Here's another disturbing statistic: "rates of anxiety and depression among young people under age eighteen are the highest ever recorded" (120).

In April 2022, the *New York Times* reported on "soaring rates of mental health disorders" among teenagers, including "depression, anxiety, compulsive behavior, and an alarming increase in self-harm and suicide" (121). Prior to this report, in December 2021, the U.S. Surgeon General issued an advisory warning of a "'devastating' mental health crisis among American youth" (121). Add to this another sign of the declining health of America's families—our declining fertility rate. The author gives another summary statement after all this: "Americans are increasingly living alone and dying alone, and their civilization could very easily die with them" (123).

Davidson further expands his case for neopaganism in America in chapter 5, "The Rise of the 'Materialist Magician.'" The Materialist Magician is a reference to C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*. In that work, Lewis depicts Screwtape, a senior demon, instructing his nephew Wormwood, a junior demon. Lewis further develops the Materialist Magician in another work, *That Hideous Strength*. In that book, the Materialist Magician is someone who reduces all aspects of life to science. That's the magic—everything is explained in materialist terms with no regard for the spiritual realm. Materialism is a falsehood that Lewis fought throughout his entire writing career, beginning with *The Pilgrim's Regress*. As he demonstrated in a number of his works, all that *is* cannot be reduced to mere physical material and processes.

Davidson uses the Satanic Temple, founded in 2012 in Salem, Massachusetts, to illustrate Lewis' point. The seven tenets of the Satanic Temple declare adherence to beliefs that "conform to one's best scientific understanding of the world."[4] Davidson asserts that "the invocation of Satan is really just a radical affirmation of a materialist, rationalist philosophy that amounts in the end to an elaborate form of self-worship" (139).

Chapter 6 explores how this cult of self plays out in the human sacrifices of abortion and euthanasia. Chapter 7 examines the cult of self as reflected in transgenderism and pedophilia. Chapter 9 provides a summary of "The Pagan State," of which Davidson says,

> America's post-Christian state morality is an unsustainable admixture of ecological or climate-change radicalism; a wholesale embrace of sexual deviancy; racial (and straightforwardly racist) identity politics; and a conviction that the individual self is the final arbiter of truth, and therefore all things are licit public morality, and they are enforced today mostly through insults and ostracism, promulgated to varying degrees through law, public policy, and public funding, and constantly reinforced by our ruling elite: global corporations, the medical and educational establishments, Hollywood, Big Tech, the corporate media, and the political class (226-227).

This is the author's understanding of our current national predicament, and if it is accepted as true, the forces arrayed against orthodox Christian faith, as seen in the natural law reasoning of the Constitution, are formidable. The author foresees a day when "the enforcement mechanisms" of this state morality will move from "soft measures like ostracism and censorship" to "ever-greater social penalties" like "mandatory reeducation, the loss of parental rights, fines and financial penalties, and even imprisonment" (228).

If that sounds extreme and far-fetched, the author raises the many court cases against Colorado baker Jack Phillips who refused to create a wedding cake for a homosexual wedding. Or Lorrie Smith, who refused to create websites that promoted homosexual marriages. Or Barronelle Stutzman, who refused to create floral arrangements for a homosexual wedding. Outside of wedding services, we have the city of Philadelphia removing Catholic Social Services (CSS) from its foster care system "because CSS would not certify same-sex couples as foster parents" (235). The cities of Boston, San Francisco, Washington D.C., and the State of Illinois also insist that CSS either include same sex couples for adoptions or foster care, or be barred from providing these services.

Davidson devotes an entire chapter to the dangers of AI and concludes his work with a chapter where he prophecies that the current trend "is probably irreversible"

(279). He critiques the "quietism" of Rod Dreher's book, *The Benedict Option*. While commending a number of aspects of Dreher's prescription, Davidson notes that it is "incomplete" (283). What Dreher leaves out is the gospel mandate to fight. For Davidson, Dreher's cloistered life for Christians, families, and churches is a far cry from the New Testament admonitions to be engaged with the world.

Davidson revisits Boniface as an example of how Christians can respond to a paganizing society. Just as Boniface did in the eighth century, "You'll have to drive the neopagans out, chop down their sacred trees, and, in the name of Saint Boniface, use the wood to build a new church" (285). That work includes reclaiming local institutions like "the city council, public library, school board" (285). It means cleaning house by replacing the neopagans who are currently making decisions from positions of authority. "The rule is: fight on ground you can win" (286).

It's not enough to show up at school board meetings and protest school board decisions. "It will certainly mean ripping out, root and branch, every outgrowth of the invasive pagan state…" (289). In short, "Christians need to take their faith public, to show that it belongs in society and is good for society" (292). This is an activist prescription that differs great from Dreher's approach. We are not only combating the LGBTQ+ agenda. We are also opposing Critical Race Theory and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion mandates. Additionally, we resist any other evils our neopagan society dreams up. This will be a battle lasting for generations, provided Christians have the courage to fight.

Is Davidson correct in his analysis? I believe so. He presents a compelling case undergirded by a history of paganism that dates back to biblical times and extends to more recent events. The decline of Christianity and Christian influence in America is well documented; however, the rise of neopaganism is less so. What elevates Davidson's work above other books in this area is the historical context the author provides. From biblical times through the twentieth century, the church was able to push back the tides of paganism. Today, there is a resurgence of paganism that must be met, challenged, and overcome once again. The author's call to start at the local level and work upward makes sense given the many obstacles in place at the national and even many state levels.

Is the picture he paints too pessimistic? Can we rebuild a Judeo-Christian ethic in American society? Given our diverse and diversifying population, I believe it will be a very long journey to reach that point. It's not just paganism we're combating; it's also other faith traditions, including polytheistic Hinduism. The major world religions may converge at the Golden Rule, but there are significant differences once we look beyond that seemingly universal standard.

Is Davidson's thesis too simplistic? The closest he comes to a definition of paganism is in the Introduction, where he states that the term pagan

refs to an entire system of belief, which holds that truth is relative and that we are therefore free to ascribe sacred or divine status to the here and now, to things and activities, even to human beings if they're powerful enough (a pharaoh or Roman emperor)" (xiv).

He groups totalitarianism, nihilism, radical individualism, materialist rationalism, and barbarism under his definition of paganism, but the problem with this is that his historical examples don't fit neatly into his definition. According to Davidson, all these "isms" can be seen as part of the neopaganism that the author describes, but this creates an amalgam of disparate views. At a few points, the author presents a nihilist and relativistic slogan from Leil Leibovitz that appears to represent the essence of the neopaganism he describes: "nothing is true, everything is permitted." Is it correct to believe that what is happening in America is simply a downward slide into paganism?

In 1946, *Strand* magazine asked C.S. Lewis to write an essay on Christmas for pagans. In that essay, "A Christmas Sermon for Pagans," Lewis mused on whether there were really any pagans in England at that time. He admitted that "people keep telling us that this country is relapsing into Paganism. But they only mean that it is ceasing to be Christian." He asks, "And is that the same thing?"[5] Using the words pagan and heathen as synonyms, Lewis defines them as "backward people in the remote districts" where "the old Nature religions still lingered…."[6]

This definition is much narrower than what we find from Davidson, but to be fair, Davidson names what he describes as neopaganism. Perhaps neopaganism is just one of a number of different kinds of forces that are pulling the United States away from a largely Christian heritage. Or is his definition of paganism and neopaganism so broad that anything that isn't Christian qualifies? It does appear so. In any event, what Davidson describes is sobering. His antidote is extremely challenging. Will Christians mobilize in the ways that he suggests?

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Notes

1. Tom Holland, *Dominion* (Basic Books, 2019).
2. Ibid., pp. 539-40.
3. Italics in original text.
4. Taken from the website for the Satanic Temple.
5. C.S. Lewis, "A Christmas Sermon for Pagans" (*Strand* magazine, December 1946, p. 30).
6. Ibid.

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