VERBA VITAE

A Serious Christian Journal of Life and its Significance

Volume 2, Number 4

Winter 2025

Verba Vitae

A Serious Christian Journal of Life and its Significance

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.

Table of Contents

**A Serious Christian Journal of Life
and its Significance**

Annual Print Subscriptions!

Verba Vitae **will make physical hard copy issues
available beginning with the Spring 2026 issue.**

**Annual subscriptions include the entire volume year,
to be sent to the subscriber regardless of when
the subscription is placed during that volume year.**

- $50 for 1-year subscription
- $95 for 2-year subscription
- $45/year continuous subscription
  (3-year minimum: $135)
- $100/year institutional/library

Annual subscriptions do not auto-renew

Subscribe at
library.ilt.edu/verba-vitae/

Volumes 1 & 2 free online at
https://verba-vitae.org

Any questions or communication should be directed to
verba-vitae@ilt.edu

Welcome to the Winter 2025 Issue

In a world wrestling with profound questions of meaning, mortality, and moral responsibility, this issue gathers voices that speak courageously and creatively into the heart of our contemporary "culture of death." Each essay, rooted in deep theological reflection and cultural analysis, invites readers to consider how Christian faith and language can offer hope, clarity, and transformation in the face of existential challenges.

We begin with Dan Lioy's "Victory Over the Vapor," which employs a distinctively Lutheran framework to diagnose the pervasive sense of futility and mortality in modern life. Lioy's essay journeys through key biblical texts, revealing how the Law exposes the limits of human self-sufficiency and how the Gospel proclaims a radical hope: victory over death through Christ's resurrection. Readers are invited to discover how this Law/Gospel dialectic not only diagnoses our cultural malaise but also offers a transformative cure, empowering believers to engage the world with both realism and confidence.

Dennis Bielfeldt's "Speaking Life: Luther's *Nova Lingua* against the Grammar of Death" explores how our culture's very language has become ill-equipped to speak of life and death truthfully. Drawing on Luther's insights and recent philosophical work, Bielfeldt argues that only a theological language—liberated from the constraints of autonomy and grounded in the Spirit's creative word—can name death honestly and proclaim life as divine gift. This essay challenges us to recover a grammar in which life is received, not invented, and where hope is spoken even in the face of negation.

Martin A. Christiansen's "Inward? – or Upward and Outward? The Problem of Self-Primacy" critically examines the modern prioritization of self-interest and autonomy. Through dialogue with philosophers and theologians, Christiansen explores the tension between self-driven interpretation and the call to love God and neighbor. The essay contends that authentic Christian autonomy is realized not in self-primacy, but in humble, ethical relationship with God and others—a vision that points beyond the culture of death toward a more life-affirming existence.

Finally, M. Anthony Seel's "Promoting a Culture of Life in America" contrasts the threats of the culture of death with the church's calling to foster a culture of life. Drawing on the legacy of Pope John Paul II and contemporary thinkers, Seel advocates for a "faithful presence" that seeks the flourishing of all people. Through

historical examples and practical strategies, this essay offers a hopeful vision for how the church can engage society, cultivate shalom, and bear witness to the sanctity of life.

This issue features four engaging book reviews. The first is an in-depth essay by Douglas V. Morton on Klaus Detlev Schulz's *Theological Anthropology and Sin*, the latest addition to the Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics series published by the Luther Academy. Patrick Steckbeck's review of J. Brian Bransfield's *The Human Person According to John Paul II* is the fourth in a thought-provoking series he has written for the journal on books dealing with the Theology of the Body, featuring voices from Evangelical, Lutheran, Orthodox, and now Roman Catholic scholars. Nils I. Borquist offers an insightful review of Eric Metaxas' prophetic *Letter to the American Church*, in which Metaxas draws on Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the German Church crises of the 1930s to challenge Christians and Christian churches in America to reflect on the perils of "Cheap Grace" and complacency. The dangers have far-reaching consequences. The final review, by Nicholas Hopman, unpacks Dennis Ngien's assessment of select sermons by Martin Luther from 1522, highlighted in his *Paragon of Excellence: Luther's Sermons on 1 Peter*. It's a compelling collection that invites thoughtful engagement.

As you turn each page of this Winter issue, I invite you to enter into dialogue with the voices gathered here. Let these essays and reviews challenge your assumptions, spark new questions, and deepen your understanding of what it means to speak and live faithfully in our time. Whether you are seeking clarity, inspiration, or a renewed sense of purpose, may you find in these writings not only answers but also companions for the journey. Engage boldly, reflect deeply, and discover how the language of life can transform both heart and culture. Welcome to the conversation.

Dennis Bielfeldt

General Editor, *Verba Vitae*

Victory over the Vapor

How the Cross Alone Annihilates the Culture of Death

Dan Lioy

Key Words

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

Standard Abbreviations for Lutheran Sources used in Essay

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

1.0 Introduction: Confronting the Culture of Death with Lutheran Theology

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

1.1 Defining the "Culture of Death"

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

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

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

1.2 The Lutheran Theological Lens

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.1 *Hebel* as an Existential Reality

Kohelet's foundational declaration in Ecclesiastes 1:2 establishes the relentless cadence of his discourse.[7] Far surpassing the mere notion of "vanity," *hebel* evokes

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

2.2 Exposing the Fall's Consequences

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

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

2.3 Ecclesiastes in Lutheran Theology

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4.1 Suffering and Glory

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

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

4.2 The Spirit's Ministry

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

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

4.3 Living by *Sola Fide*

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

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

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

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

5.1 Christ's Resurrection: The Decisive Victory

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

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

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

5.2 Resurrection as *Sola Gratia*

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

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

5.3 Impact on the Christian Life

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

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

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

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

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

6.1 The Unified Biblical Witness Against Death's Dominion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6.2 Lutheran Theological Balance: The Proper Distinction

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

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

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

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

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

6.2.3 Theological Safeguards: Rejecting False Alternatives

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

6.3 Pastoral Application: A Distinctively Lutheran Engagement

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

6.3.1 Honest Acknowledgment: Embracing the Law's Diagnosis

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

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

6.3.2 Transformative Proclamation: Applying the Gospel's Power

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

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

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

6.3.3 Pastoral Care amid Euthanasia and Suicide Ideation

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

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

6.3.4 Addressing Societal Narratives of Death-Denial

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

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

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

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

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

7.1 The Paradoxical Christian Existence

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

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

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

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

7.2 Faithful Cultural Engagement

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

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

7.3 The Ultimate Hope

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

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

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

Notes

1. In this essay, "culture" refers to the set of beliefs, values, practices, customs, and behaviors that are learned, shared, and passed down from one generation to another within a particular group, community, or society. Culture encompasses the dynamic ways people interact, communicate, and express themselves through their traditions, art, language, and ethical norms. Culture also plays a fundamental role in shaping the identity and collective consciousness of a group, especially by providing a framework for how individuals within that group understand the world and their place in it. For an anthology that surveys Christian perspectives on culture, see Matthew Steven Bracey and Christopher Talbot, eds., *Christians in Culture: Cultivating a Christian Worldview for All of Life* (Gallatin, TN: Welch College Press, 2023). This multi-author volume offers a series of biblically and theologically grounded essays exploring how Christians understand, engage with, and influence broader culture.

2. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Evangelical Heritage Version, © 2019 Wartburg Project, Inc. All rights reserved. In Ecclesiastes, the phrase, "under the sun," defines the scope of the narrator's inquiry, referring to all human activity and experience within the earthly, temporal realm, apart from direct divine intervention or revelation. Also, the phrase signifies a human-centered, secular perspective—the view of life as seen through pagan eyes alone, limited to what can be observed, achieved, and understood by worldly means. Furthermore, the phrase suggests a closed system where the cycles of nature and human endeavors seem endless, repetitive, and ultimately futile when pursued solely for their own sake, without any eternal significance.

3. Original sin is the inherited condition of spiritual corruption that affects all humanity as a consequence of Adam and Eve's disobedience in the Garden of Eden. This corruption is not simply the tendency to imitate Adam's transgression, but rather a fundamental state of alienation from God that renders humans naturally incapable of fearing, loving, and

trusting the Creator above all things. Original sin is the source from which all actual sins flow and leaves humanity utterly dependent upon the Lord's unmerited grace, received through faith in Christ alone, for salvation and reconciliation with God.

4. On this point, see Luther's affirmation in his *Word and Sacrament III,* LW 37:372, "I believe in the resurrection of all the dead at the Last Day, both the godly and the wicked, that each may receive in his body his reward according to his merits." Here, "merits" does not imply works-righteousness or human contribution to justification. Rather, Luther speaks descriptively about the eschatological judgment in which the fruits of faith—produced by the Holy Spirit—are acknowledged, while divine condemnation falls upon unbelief. Justification remains grounded solely in Christ's righteousness, received by grace alone through faith alone.

5. At strategic points throughout the essay, essential terms and pivotal concepts (including those mentioned above) are revisited to help readers gain a deeper analytical understanding. This emphasis is intentional, because at stake is nothing less than the integrity of the proclamation of the Gospel and the clarity of the Church's mission in a world that has embraced a "Culture of Death."

6. *Hebel* appears as a central motif throughout Ecclesiastes: see 1:2; 1:14; 2:1; 2:11; 2:15; 2:17; 2:19; 2:21; 2:23; 2:26; 3:19; 4:4; 4:7; 4:8; 4:16; 5:7; 5:10; 6:2; 6:4; 6:9; 6:11; 7:6; 7:15; 8:10; 8:14; 9:9; 11:8; 11:10; 12:8.

7. The term "Kohelet" (or "Qoheleth") is not a personal name but a title, meaning "one who assembles" or "the preacher," referring to a wise teacher or philosopher addressing an assembly. Ecclesiastes identifies this figure as "David's son, king in Jerusalem" (1:1), which has traditionally been understood as King Solomon. The content of the treatise originates from Solomon's teachings and sayings, though it may have been compiled and arranged by scribes after his death rather than written directly by Solomon. If so, then this compilation serves as a literary framework to explore themes about wisdom, futility, and the meaning of temporal existence on earth. Thus, scholars use "Kohelet" to designate the book's sagacious narrator, while affirming the divine inspiration and authority of the text as God's Word.

8. Admittedly, there is no scholarly consensus regarding the meaning of *hebel*. For a detailed examination and synthesis of the academic literature dealing with the concept in Kohelet's treatise, see Kimmo Huovila, *The Contribution of the Theme of Divine Judgment in the Argument of the Book of Ecclesiastes*. PhD diss., South African Theological Seminary, 2018, https://sats.ac.za/theses/thesis-phd-2018-huovilak/. Accessed November 28, 2025.

9. Total depravity is the doctrine that, due to the Fall, sin has corrupted every aspect of human nature, including the intellect, will, and emotions. This does not mean humans are as evil as possible, but that no part of them is untouched by sin and thus they are spiritually dead and incapable of any good works toward salvation or of turning to God through their own reason or strength. Therefore, salvation is entirely the work of God's grace through Christ, delivered through the Word and Sacraments, and received through faith, which is itself a gift created by the Holy Spirit. *The Bondage of the Will* by Martin Luther (Orlando, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2025) remains the most influential primary text for understanding total depravity in the Lutheran tradition.

10. For a comparative analysis between Genesis 1–11 and Ecclesiastes, see Dan Lioy, "What Has Ecclesiastes to Do with Genesis 1–11?" in *What Has Ecclesiastes to Do With…? Navigating Life's Unexpected Challenges in Disruptive Times*, ed. Johnson T. K. Lim,

155–62 (Singapore: Word N Works, 2022). Hereafter, *Ecclesiastes*. Specifically, "Like Genesis 1–11, Ecclesiastes deals with the stark reality of death. This observation is especially evident in the first chapter. Indeed, it introduces major themes that are more fully deliberated in the remainder of the treatise articulated by its author" (158).

11. Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 29. All quotes in this essay from the Lutheran Confessions are from the Tappert edition.

12. "Anthropogenic" refers to something that is caused by or resulting from human activity.

13. On this point, see Luther's comment in his *Lectures on Galatians*, LW 26:310: "Therefore the proper and absolute use of the Law is to terrify with lightning (as on Mt. Sinai), thunder, and the blare of the trumpet, with a thunderbolt to burn and crush that brute which is called the presumption of righteousness."

14. Luther captures this dynamic when he notes in his *Lectures on Galatians*, LW 26:315, that after the Law terrifies and humbles the lost, it drives them to faith in Christ (Gal 3:19–25).

15. As noted in Lioy, *Ecclesiastes*, 157–58, "Genesis 5 records the efforts of humanity to flourish and be successful as God's vice-regents over the planet. The biblical account reports a succession of generations from Adam to Noah. Because of God's blessing in their lives, they gave birth to children and enjoyed incredibly long lifespans. Humans also strove to populate the world and bring it under their control. The preceding circumstance is an outworking of the creation mandate recorded in Genesis 1:28. Yet, the somber refrain appearing throughout chapter 5 is that, while people are born and live, they also eventually die (2 Bar 7:2–3; Sir 40:1; Tob 8:6). Expressed differently, regardless of the herculean attempts people make to exert their control over the created realm, it is sabotaged by death. Even more to the point, the presence of sin and death within humanity undercut the efforts of each successive generation to fulfill what the Creator originally intended. Regardless of the era in which people exist, not even their continued and vigorous attempts to thrive can forestall the termination of their lives."

16. Though only a few Old Testament passages explicitly speak about the resurrection (e.g., Job 19:26–27; Isa 26:19; Dan 12:1–2), these promises are brought to full clarity and fulfillment in Christ as revealed in the New Testament.

17. Monergism is the doctrine that salvation is accomplished solely by God's grace through Christ, without any human cooperation or merit. This is grounded in the belief that, due to humanity's total spiritual corruption from original sin, fallen people cannot contribute to, cooperate in, or prepare for their own conversion. Therefore, saving faith itself is not a human work or decision but is created and given by the Holy Spirit working through the means of grace—the Word (Gospel) of God and the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion.

18. Paul portrays the created order as a woman experiencing the anguishing "pains" (Rom 8:22) of childbirth. This groaning for deliverance is ever present. Believers sigh alongside "creation" (v. 23), even as God bestows on them the Spirit as a foretaste and guarantee of their future glory (2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; Eph 1:13–14; 4:30). This concept of "firstfruits" draws a parallel to ancient Israelite harvest practices, where farmers offer the first and finest portions of their crops to the Lord (Lev 2:12; 23:10; Deut 18:4).

19. In Lutheran theology, the "already" is the present reality of salvation, where through faith alone (*sola fide*) a believer is fully justified and declared righteous before God solely by Christ's atoning work. The "not yet" refers to the Christian's ongoing sanctification and the

awaited eschatological fulfillment—while the believer is simultaneously saint and sinner (*simul justus et peccator*), they continue to struggle against sin in this life and await the final resurrection and glorification. This dynamic tension between the present possession of salvation and its future consummation is sustained through the means of grace—Word and Sacraments—which continuously deliver Christ's forgiveness and strengthen faith until His second coming establishes the fullness of God's eternal kingdom.

20. This view stands in contrast to recent proposals that redefine faith primarily as "allegiance" or "embodied loyalty," which—whatever their authors' intentions—risk obscuring the Reformation insight that faith is fundamentally receptive rather than meritorious, and that justification rests on Christ's work alone, not on the quality or comprehensiveness of human allegiance. See, for example, the following publications, where this perspective is lionized: Matthew W. Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017); Matthew W. Bates, *Beyond the Salvation Wars: Why Both Protestants and Catholics Must Reimagine How We Are Saved* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2025); Brandon D. Crowe, *Allegiance: Redefined Faith for the Real World* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2021); Scot McKnight, The King Jesus Gospel (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016).

21. Luther echoes these observations in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 15, LW 28:109, "No, we must view [Christ] in this light, that this dying and rising again were for your benefit and mine. As He died and lay under the sod as you and I must die and be buried, thus He also rose again for our sakes and made an exchange with us; as He was brought into death through us, we shall be restored from death to life through Him. For by His death He has devoured our death, so that we all will also arise and live as He arose and lives."

22. Semi-Pelagianism maintains that humans can take the initial step toward faith through their own free will, independent of divine grace. This mindset is evident in slogans like "You do your best and God will do the rest" and "God helps those who help themselves." From the Lutheran standpoint, semi-Pelagianism constitutes a denial of monergism and the doctrine of total depravity, for it erroneously ascribes to fallen humanity an inherent ability to begin or participate in their own salvation. Lutherans maintain unwaveringly that salvation is exclusively God's work (*sola gratia*), and that even faith is a gift bestowed by the Holy Spirit (through the means of grace), not an act of human cooperation.

23. The Greek adjective rendered "vain" (*kenos*; 1 Cor 15:58) denotes what is vacuous and devoid of any advantage or benefit. The similarly rendered adverb in verse 2 ("vain"; *eikē*) means "to no purpose," "for no reason," or "to no end."

24. In Lutheran theology, the Law and the Gospel are two distinct ways in which God deals with humanity. The Law reveals human sin and sets forth God's righteous demands, while the Gospel announces God's grace and forgiveness in Christ. These two must be carefully distinguished (*distinctio*) so that each fulfills its proper role without distortion. Yet, they must not be separated (*separatio*), for both come from the same God and work together in the life of faith. Holding this balance requires discernment: the Law is applied to expose and convict of sin, while the Gospel is applied to console with pardon and new life. Together, they remain inseparable, complementary dimensions of God's revelation.

25. In this regard, Luther explains in his *Lectures on Galatians*, LW 26:309, that the "true function and the chief and proper use of the Law is to reveal to man his sin, blindness, misery, wickedness, ignorance, hate and contempt of God, death, hell, judgment, and the well-deserved wrath of God."

26. In *Career of the Reformer IV* (LW 34:337–338), Luther describes a decisive theological breakthrough. Formerly, he recoiled at the phrase, "a righteousness from God" (Rom 1:17), interpreting it as the Creator's strict justice by which he punishes sinners. Yet, through study and struggle, Luther came to cherish the phrase. He discovered that this righteousness is not God's active, condemning justice, but his gracious gift—the righteousness by which God, for Christ's sake, declares the sinner to be not guilty or pardoned through faith. This insight brought Luther peace, for it revealed the Gospel as sheer mercy rather than demand. Later, Luther found confirmation in Augustine, who likewise understood the "righteousness from God," not as the attribute by which the Lord is righteous, but as the gift of forgiveness bestowed upon believers in justification.

27. On this point, see Luther's comment in his *Lectures on Galatians*, LW 26:232, "On His [Christ's] account God overlooks all sins and wants them to be covered as though they were not sins. He says, 'Because you believe in My Son, even though you have sins, they shall be forgiven, until you are completely absolved from them by death.'"

28. With respect to this truth, see Luther's comment in his *Epistle for Christmas Day*, LW 75:200, "Thus our eyes are closed to the worldly and visible things, and we hope instead for the eternal and invisible things. Grace does all of this through the cross, which brings us the godly life which is intolerable to the world."

Select Bibliography for Further In-Depth Study

Arand, Charles P., Robert Kolb, and James A. Nestingen. *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of the Book of Concord*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012.

Augsburg Confession. In *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000.

Augustine. *The Confessions*. Translated by R. S. Pine-Coffin. London, UK: Penguin Books, 1961.

Bates, Matthew W. *Beyond the Salvation Wars: Why Both Protestants and Catholics Must Reimagine How We Are Saved*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2025.

Bates, Matthew W. *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017.

Bayer, Oswald. *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*. Translated by Thomas H. Trapp. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008.

Berlin, Adele. *Psalms I*. JPS Bible Commentary. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 2023.

Biermann, Joel D. *A Case for Character: Towards a Lutheran Virtue Ethics*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014.

Bollhagen, James. *Ecclesiastes*. Edited by Dean O. Wenthe. Concordia Commentary. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2011.

Bracey, Matthew Steven, and Christopher Talbot, eds. *Christians in Culture: Cultivating a Christian Worldview for All of Life*. Gallatin, TN: Welch College Press, 2023.

Brown, William P. *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

Brug, John F. *A Commentary on Psalms 1–72*. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2004.

Craigie, Peter C., and Marvin E. Tate. *Psalms 1–50*. 2nd ed. Word Biblical Commentary. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004.

Cranfield, C. E. B. *Romans*. 2 vols. International Critical Commentary. Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1975–1979.

Crowe, Brandon D. *Allegiance: Redefined Faith for the Real World*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2021.

Eastman, Susan Grove. *Romans*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2025.

Elert, Werner. *The Christian Ethos*. Translated by Carl J. Schindler. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1957.

Elert, Werner. *The Structure of Lutheranism*. Translated by Walter A. Hansen. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1962.

Fee, Gordon D. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014.

Fitzmyer, Joseph A. *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. The Anchor Yale Bible. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008.

Formula of Concord. In *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.

Forde, Gerhard O. *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997.

Fox, Michael V. *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999.

Garland, David E. *1 Corinthians*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003.

Gaventa, Beverly Roberts. *Romans*. New Testament Library. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2024.

Gerhard, Johann. *Theological Commonplaces*. Translated by Richard J. Dinda. Edited by Benjamin T. G. Mayes. 18 vols. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–.

Goldingay, John. *Psalms*. 3 vols. Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006–2008.

Gritsch, Eric W. *A History of Lutheranism*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002.

Harrison, R. K. *Introduction to the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969.

The Holy Bible: Evangelical Heritage Version. Madison, WI: Wartburg Project, 2019.

Huovila, Kimmo. *The Contribution of the Theme of Divine Judgment in the Argument of the Book of Ecclesiastes*. PhD diss., South African Theological Seminary, 2018.

John Paul II. *Evangelium Vitae* (*The Gospel of Life*). Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995.

Kidner, Derek. *Psalms*. 2 vols. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981.

Kolb, Robert. *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method: From Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005.

Kolb, Robert, and Charles P. Arand. *The Genius of Luther's Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008.

Kolb, Robert, and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000.

Large Catechism. In *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000.

Lioy, Dan. *The Divine Sabotage: An Expositional Journey through Ecclesiastes*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008.

Lioy, Dan. "What Has Ecclesiastes to Do with Genesis 1–11?" In *What Has Ecclesiastes to Do With…? Navigating Life's Unexpected Challenges in Disruptive Times*. Edited by Johnson T. K. Lim, 155–62. Singapore: Word N Works, 2022.

Lockwood, Gregory J. *1 Corinthians*. Concordia Commentary. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2000.

Longman III, Tremper. *The Book of Ecclesiastes*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998.

Luther, Martin. *The Bondage of the Will*. 500th Anniversary Edition. Orlando, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2025.

Luther, Martin. *The Freedom of a Christian, 1520: The Annotated Luther Study Edition*. Translated by Timothy J. Wengert. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016.

Luther, Martin. *The Heidelberg Disputation*. In *Luther's Works*, vol. 31, *Career of the Reformer I*, edited by Harold J. Grimm, 39–70. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1957.

Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works, American Edition*. Vols. 1-30, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-76. Vols. 31-55, edited by Helmut Lehmann. Philadelphia/Minneapolis, MN: Muhlenberg Press/Fortress Press, 1957-86. Vols. 56-82, edited by Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes. 82 vols. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009-.

Mattes, Mark C. *The Role of Justification in Contemporary Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004.

McKnight, Scot. *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016.

Melanchthon, Philip. *Loci Communes Theologici*. In *Melanchthon and Bucer*. Edited by Wilhelm Pauck. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1969.

Middendorf, Michael P. *Romans 1–8*. Edited by Dean O. Wenthe and Curtis P. Giese. Concordia Commentary. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2013.

Moo, Douglas J. *The Letter to the Romans*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018.

Murphy, Roland E. *Ecclesiastes*. Word Biblical Commentary 23A. Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1992.

Nestingen, James A. *Martin Luther: A Life*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 2003.

Paulson, Steven D. *Lutheran Theology*. London, UK: T&T Clark, 2011.

Pieper, Francis. *Christian Dogmatics*. 4 vols. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1950–1957.

Pless, John T. *Handling the Word of Truth: Law and Gospel in the Church Today*. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2004.

Preus, Robert D. *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*. 2 vols. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1970–72.

Saleska, Timothy E. *Psalms 1–50*. Edited by Christopher W. Mitchell. Concordia Commentary. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2020.

Sasse, Hermann. *Here We Stand: Nature and Character of the Lutheran Faith*. Translated by Theodore G. Tappert. Minneapolis, MO: Augsburg Publishing House, 1938.

Sasse, Hermann. *We Confess Jesus Christ*. Translated by Norman E. Nagel. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1984.

Schlink, Edmund. *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*. Translated by Paul F. Koehnek and Herbert J. A. Bouman. Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg Press, 1961.

Schreiner, Thomas R. *Romans*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018.

Seitz, Christopher R. *The Character of Christian Scripture: The Significance of a Two-Testament Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011.

Small Catechism. In *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.

Tappert, Theodore G., ed. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959.

Thielman, Frank. *Romans*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018.

Thiselton, Anthony C. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000.

Veith, Gene Edward, Jr. *The Spirituality of the Cross: The Way of the First Evangelicals*. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1999.

Walther, C. F. W. *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*. Translated by W.H.T. Dau. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928.

Whybray, R. N. *Ecclesiastes*. Old Testament Guides. Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1989.

Wright, N. T. *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003.

Ziegler, Philip G. *Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic Turn and the Future of Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018.

Luther's *Nova Lingua* against the Grammar of Death

Dennis Bielfeldt

1. Introduction: The Culture of Death as a Linguistic Crisis

THE CONTEMPORARY WEST OFTEN IMAGINES that its deepest disagreements concern matters of ethics. It interprets disputes about abortion, euthanasia, transhumanist enhancement, and the management of dying as arguments that call for clearer reasoning or more coherent moral frameworks.[1] I contend that these controversies arise not because we lack moral clarity but because we inhabit a linguistic world in which the grammar required to receive our creaturely limits as gift has largely disappeared. A culture that no longer possesses the forms of speech by which birth and death may be welcomed as revelatory events will inevitably treat these events as intrusions upon autonomy, as occasions for management rather than occasions for reception.[2]

The problem, therefore, is not first moral but grammatical.[3] Our prevailing grammar takes reality to be structured by possibility. Accordingly, obligation is thought to imply ability, and even divine or transcendental agency is expected to conform to the conceptual forms through which we understand ourselves.[4] A society governed by such assumptions will be unable to speak of death truthfully, for death will appear only as negation, and life will be construed merely as the arena for the expansion or contraction of human projects. To speak of life as a divine gift requires more than a revision of moral premises; it requires a different *form* of speech.[5] The *nova lingua* of faith does not supplement the grammar of autonomy but contradicts is at its root,[6] for it arises not from the agent who calculates possibilities but from the God who speaks realities. In Luther's terms, theology must learn to speak "outside every sphere,"[7] not because it abandons reason but because the act that grants meaning here is not human predication but divine address. Only this new speech—this language formed by promise rather than project—can disclose the creature as received, dependent, and beloved. Within such a linguistic universe, abortion and

euthanasia cannot even appear as moral aberrations; they emerge instead as the predictable outcomes of the conceptual structures that govern public discourse.[8]

Luther recognized the difficulty of speaking meaningfully under such conditions. In *De servo arbitrio*, he discerned that the structures of reasoning that shaped Erasmus's claims were not merely mistaken in their conclusions but were themselves incapable of sustaining theological speech.[9] Luther's response did not consist in adjusting Erasmus's position or supplying a more nuanced account of human power. Instead, he identified the grammar that rendered Erasmus' argument plausible and exposed it as a grammar that cannot accommodate divine agency. In doing so, he inaugurated what later writers have called the *nova lingua*, a form of speech grounded not in the conceptual possibilities of autonomous reason but in the divine act that both reveals and gives what it signifies.[10]

Andrea Vestrucci has recently shown, by formal reconstruction, that this break is not rhetorical but structural. The old grammar is governed by modal and deontic conditions that determine how concepts may be combined and what counts as a meaningful assertion. Luther does not refine this grammar but replaces it with one in which freedom is not possibility but promise, in which obligation does not imply ability, and in which divine action determines the meaning of language rather than being determined by it. The result is a linguistic world in which the gospel is not an exception to an already stable conceptual order but the act that establishes the very order within which theological concepts can be spoken at all.[11]

If this is correct, then the contemporary culture of death is best understood as the cultural embodiment of a grammar that Luther dismantled in the sixteenth century. The problem is not merely that modern culture rejects Christian morality but that it *cannot speak* in ways adequate to the realities that morality presupposes.[12] Having absorbed the post-Enlightenment conviction—now axiomatic in much analytic philosophy after Sellars—that experience itself is shaped by the concepts we possess, our culture inhabits a grammar in which birth and death can appear only within the horizon of self-sovereignty. A grammar ordered to autonomy cannot receive birth or death except as threats to self-possession; it cannot sustain a world in which life is received as gift and death entrusted to God. It can sustain only a world in which both life and death must be managed, because they can be spoken only within the conceptual space that autonomy permits.

The church's pro-life witness must therefore be understood not as a moral intervention within public dispute but as the enactment of another grammar. It is the speech of a community whose language is grounded in the divine act by which the Word gives reality and whose linguistic world is ordered by promise rather than possibility. Such a language can speak *pulvis es* ("you are dust") without resignation, can receive natality and mortality as occasions of divine disclosure, and can confess

the resurrection of the body without reducing it to metaphor or moral aspiration. In speaking thus, the church not only proclaims life but also exposes the inadequacy of the grammar by which the surrounding culture attempts to speak of life and death.

II. Luther's *Nova Lingua* and the Formal Break with the Old Grammar

READERS OF *DE SERVO ARBITRIO* OFTEN TREAT the work as a polemical exchange with Erasmus, yet its deeper significance lies in the way Luther identifies a prior difficulty concerning the conditions under which theological language may be spoken at all. Erasmus articulates his position within a conceptual universe governed by the priority of possibility, by the claim that obligation is meaningful only when ability is present, and by the assumption that divine action must conform to the categories through which human agency is ordinarily grasped. These assumptions do not merely inform particular judgments; they shape the entire space in which theological reasoning takes place. Luther therefore does not challenge isolated conclusions within this conceptual field. He challenges the intelligibility of the field itself.[13]

The logic that governs Erasmus's reasoning is discursive. It presupposes that concepts possess a structure independent of divine action and that theological meaning is achieved by locating revelatory claims within a pre-existing conceptual order. Luther's central insight is that revelation does not enter such an order as one datum among others. Revelation creates the linguistic and conceptual world in which its own meaning may be received. The old grammar is governed by the entailments of autonomy; the new grammar arises from the divine act that addresses and constitutes the creature. In this new grammar, meaning is secured not by the coherence of concepts but by the divine speech that gives what it declares.[14]

Vestrucci has argued that this shift must be understood formally. Luther does not adjust the modal or deontic structures inherited from the older grammar. He replaces them with a grammar that cannot be generated from the old by conceptual extension. It is not an enrichment of what preceded it but a different order of language grounded in a different order of causality. In the old grammar, divine action must be conceptualized according to human categories. In the new, divine action establishes the categories within which the creature may understand itself and speak truthfully about God.[15]

This new language does not negate the old in the sense of abolishing it. It presupposes the old as the material through which it is formed. Luther is unequivocal that the gospel does not unfold from the law, yet the gospel cannot be spoken except through linguistic forms shaped by the law. In this respect, the *nova lingua* arises neither *ex nihilo* nor as a dialectical development from the old. It arises through an act that grants new meaning to the linguistic material inherited from the old, so

that familiar terms may now signify realities that exceed the conceptual capacities that formerly governed them.[16]

The emergence of this new language may be understood only by attending to the way revelation alters the conditions of signification. In the older grammar, meaning is achieved when concepts are arranged in patterns judged coherent by autonomous reason. In the new grammar, meaning is granted by the divine act that stands behind the words and, in standing behind them, determines their truth. The divine Word speaks reality into being, and human language attains its referential force only by participating in that speech. The grammar of possibility and obligation is thus replaced by a grammar of promise, for promise is not an extension of possibility but the establishment of a new order in which the creature may receive what it could never produce.

Luther's insistence that the gospel is not an extension of the law must be interpreted in light of this alteration. The law orders human existence within the structures of creation, and its grammar is accordingly tied to human capacities and their failures. The gospel, however, is not tied to this order. It addresses the creature in a manner that does not presuppose a latent ability within the creature to receive it. The gospel creates the very capacity it commands.[17] Luther's claim that the divine promise "does what it says" is therefore not rhetorical but grammatical. Were the promise not to do what it says, the grammar of the gospel would collapse into the grammar of the law, and the *nova lingua* would be absorbed into the very conceptual order it was meant to overcome.

For this reason, the *nova lingua* is a language in which divine action grounds both meaning and reception. It is not that the creature possesses an antecedent conceptual order into which revelation may then insert new content. It is that revelation provides the conditions under which the creature may think at all about God's relation to the world. Luther recognizes that language, when left to its own conditions, will invariably attempt to fit divine action into the structures that govern creaturely agency. God will be understood as a magnified version of the human actor, divine causality as an intensified form of human willing. The *nova lingua* prevents this reduction by embedding creaturely speech within the divine act itself. In this way, the new grammar does not oppose the old but reorders it. Words that once bore one set of entailments now bear another, not because their definitions have changed, but because the act that grants them meaning is different.[18]

In Vestrucci's analysis, this shift marks a transition from a language governed by conceptual determination to a language governed by formal determination.[19] In the old grammar, the meaning of a statement is determined by the conceptual relations among its terms. In the new grammar, the meaning of a statement is determined by the divine act that renders the statement felicitous. Felicity is not merely pragmatic.

It is metaphysical. A statement is felicitous when spoken within the conditions created by the divine promise, and it is true when the divine act grants it reality. The distinction between felicity and truth persists, but it is now theologically interpreted: felicity belongs to the internal order of the gospel, while truth belongs to the divine act that interprets creation.

This explains why Luther consistently resists attempts to treat the promise as a proposition that might be evaluated independently of faith. Within the old grammar, a proposition is judged true when it corresponds to what already is. Within the new grammar, the promise does not correspond to a prior reality. It brings that reality into being. Its truth is inseparable from its performative character. Spoken by God, it constitutes what it declares. Meaning is no longer a function of conceptual organization but of divine agency.

The consequences for theological language are therefore profound. The *nova lingua* does not merely alter doctrinal content. It alters the very possibility of doctrine. It establishes a linguistic world in which creaturely concepts may be taken up, reordered, and granted new significance. This is not a rejection of conceptuality but its transformation. The law remains, and its grammar remains operative, but its function is to disclose the creature's incapacity to speak truthfully about God apart from the divine act. In this way, the law prepares not by conceptual anticipation but by revealing the limits of all conceptual spaces not constituted by the Word.

Luther's *nova lingua* is therefore not an alternative vocabulary within the same conceptual horizon. It is the formal reconstitution of the horizon itself. Promise, rather than possibility, becomes the fundamental category. Divine action, rather than human ability, determines the meaning of theological claims. And human language, rather than standing apart from divine agency, participates in the act by which the Word speaks the world into being.

The implications for contemporary culture follow immediately. A culture that speaks within a grammar of possibility cannot understand promise except as metaphor. A culture that organizes moral reasoning around the entailment that obligation requires ability cannot grasp the character of divine command as gift. And a culture that refuses to receive death except as negation cannot hear the gospel's declaration that life is given precisely where death appears.[20] To recover the *nova lingua* is therefore to recover the means by which our speech may again be anchored in the divine act that gives reality rather than in the conceptual structures that attempt to secure it.

III. The Modal and Deontic Grammar of the Contemporary West

THE CONCEPTUAL STRUCTURES THAT LUTHER identified in Erasmus have not vanished. They have migrated into the grammar by which modern Western culture understands

human agency, moral responsibility, and the meaning of life itself. Although the explicit theological content of Erasmian reasoning has faded, the underlying modal and deontic assumptions remain operative. What has changed is not the grammar but the world in which this grammar is employed. It is now a secular world, yet it retains conceptual habits that were originally formed within a theological context and renders them absolute within an immanent frame.

The most fundamental of these assumptions is the identification of freedom with possibility. In contemporary discourse, to say that an individual is free is to say that the individual possesses a range of potential actions that remain open until chosen. Freedom is measured by the width of the field of possibility rather than by the character of the act that orders a person's life toward others or toward God. Any constraint on this field is treated as a threat, and any condition that limits the capacity for choice is regarded as a diminishment of agency. Under such a grammar, freedom is conceived not as reception but as control, and life is judged according to its ability to sustain autonomous decision-making.

A similar structure governs the deontic sphere. The belief that obligation implies ability, which Luther rejected as both logically and theologically incoherent, now functions as an unexamined axiom in public discourse. Moral claims are evaluated not according to their truth but according to whether they can be integrated into the domain of human capability. If a moral norm requires the reception of life or the acceptance of death in ways that transcend the field of autonomous choice, the norm is judged unreasonable. What cannot be chosen cannot be morally demanded, and what cannot be morally demanded cannot be recognized as an authentic obligation. The consequence is that moral discourse collapses into a discourse about capacities, and capacities are themselves measured by the standards of individual self-direction.

These modal and deontic assumptions do not stand alone. They sustain a typology of human life in which birth and death are interpreted as conditions to be managed. Birth is not received as the appearance of a life whose meaning precedes the structures of choice but as an event whose significance is determined by the desires, fears, and plans of those already present. Death is not received as the moment in which the creature's life is entrusted to God, but as a failure of agency that must be forestalled, mitigated, or, in some cases, eliminated through the exercise of self-determination. The imagination required to see death as the site of divine promise has no place within this typology. Death is understood only in terms of its negating power, and life is understood only in terms of its instrumental value.

The contemporary culture of death therefore arises not from a rejection of morality but from the kind of morality that prevails. It arises from a moral vocabulary

that has lost the ability to speak in terms other than those of autonomy and control. When moral discourse is governed by the grammar of possibility and capability, the vulnerable cannot be received as gifts but must be interpreted as burdens. The unborn child appears only as a potentiality or an interruption. The dying human being appears only as a diminishing agent or as a problem for others to solve. The cultural logic does not intentionally aim at death; it simply lacks the conceptual resources to interpret life differently.

This grammar is further reinforced by technological rationality. The modern imagination is shaped by the conviction that human beings possess an obligation to overcome the limitations imposed by nature. When possibility is equated with freedom, and when technology expands possibility, technology appears as the guarantor of freedom. The management of birth and death becomes a moral imperative, for failure to manage is perceived as a failure to exercise properly the autonomy by which the individual is defined. The technological sphere becomes the arena in which the grammar of possibility finds its most forceful expression. Life is evaluated according to its malleability, and death is evaluated according to its resistance to control.

The result is a world in which the grammar of autonomy reigns even when explicit commitments to autonomy are questioned. The secular West does not need to articulate a theory of freedom in order to be governed by one. Its cultural practices presuppose the modal and deontic structures that Luther identified as inimical to the gospel. These structures persist because they organize the world in a manner that accords with the immanent desires of human beings who seek to avoid dependence and vulnerability. Such a grammar cannot but produce a culture of death, for death is the moment in which all autonomy fails and in which the creature cannot avoid the truth of its own finitude.

The task of the present argument is therefore to display this grammar in its conceptual shape so that its theological inadequacy may be seen. A culture that speaks only within this grammar cannot receive the realities that theological language seeks to name. It cannot hear promise except as metaphor, cannot accept dependence except as threat, and cannot recognize life except as a project whose value must be continually justified. To speak life truthfully, another grammar is required, one grounded not in possibility but in promise, not in the entailment that ability must accompany obligation, but in the divine act that gives before the creature can receive.

This new grammar is the subject of the next section, for it is the Spirit's act of interpretation that makes theological speech possible and that enables language to name death and life not according to the logic of autonomy but according to the logic of divine gift.

IV. The Typology of Birth and Death in a Secular Grammar

THE GRAMMAR OF POSSIBILITY AND AUTONOMY does not merely generate particular moral failures. It yields a world in which birth and death can no longer appear as events given in themselves but only as interruptions of the self's ongoing project of managing and extending its agency. When a culture understands freedom as the expansion of options and obligation as constrained by ability, the events that mark the beginning and end of life resist integration. They emerge at the edges of the conceptual field, and because they cannot be spoken within its grammar, they appear as problems to be solved rather than disclosures of meaning. Birth and death stand at the borders of a linguistic world that has lost the capacity to interpret its own limits.

In this respect, death functions as the primary limit-condition of a secular age. It marks the point at which the grammar of autonomy reaches its terminus, for the dying person cannot preserve sovereignty over possibility. To be dying is to be acted upon in ways that the cultural imagination cannot assimilate. The dying body is not a field of choices but a reality that resists choice, and so it is interpreted as a failure of the very structures that define personhood. When life is rendered meaningful by its capacity for self-direction, death becomes the negation of meaning. It becomes unintelligible except as a medical or technological challenge or as a burden imposed upon others.

This typological crisis becomes still sharper when death is no longer imagined within a horizon shaped by divine promise.[21] In earlier Christian cultures, death was interpreted not as an absolute negation but as a site in which divine action would be manifest. The grammar of promise allowed the church to speak of death without denying its reality and to speak of life without reducing it to the expression of human will. The contemporary secular grammar, however, excludes such possibilities. It treats death as a brute fact that must be managed or, if management fails, concealed. The cultural imperative to maintain autonomy extends to the very end of life, and the inability to sustain autonomy is interpreted as a diminishment of personhood itself.

A similar crisis emerges at the beginning of life. Natality, which Hannah Arendt identified as the fundamental condition of human existence, no longer appears as the arrival of a life whose meaning precedes human decision.[22] It appears instead as an interruption within a system organized around established projects and the management of risk. In the absence of a grammar capable of receiving life as gift, the unborn child is interpreted through categories of burden, limitation, and potentiality. The child becomes an entity whose value is not intrinsic but derivative, depending upon whether it fits within the field of possibility that adults regard as desirable.

Thus, both birth and death become unintelligible within the dominant typology.[23] They indicate realities that the contemporary grammar cannot assimilate. The result

is not merely moral confusion but a deep inability to speak truthfully about the fundamental conditions of creaturely existence. A society that cannot speak truthfully about birth and death cannot speak truthfully about life, for life is framed by these two limits and receives its meaning in relation to them.

This typological crisis points back to the deeper theological crisis identified earlier. The secular age's inability to receive death without denial is the direct consequence of a grammar that has severed language from divine action. When the meaning of a life is determined solely by internal capacities and external possibilities, the moment in which these capacities fail will appear as a collapse of meaning. Death then becomes something that must be hidden, euphemized, or eliminated. The grammar cannot allow death to speak. It cannot allow the event to disclose anything. It cannot allow the creature to be addressed by a promise that does not depend upon capability.

Under such conditions, the typology of death becomes inseparable from the typology of control. The dying human being is surrounded by technologies that promise to sustain autonomy, and when those technologies fail, new technologies arise to supply an exit from dependence. Euthanasia appears not as a rejection of life but as the logical extension of the grammar that defines life as self-direction. The crisis is not primarily one of moral intention but of conceptual possibility. A grammar that cannot speak of death as promise can speak of it only as negation, and in that negation, the desire for control becomes absolute.

The typology of birth follows the same pattern. Here too the grammar of autonomy transforms a reality once received into a reality that must be chosen. The unborn child becomes a potentiality, and potentiality becomes subject to evaluation. The result is that life at its beginning is spoken of in terms of risk, burden, and cost. The grammar offers no other way of speaking, and so the culture cannot imagine another way of receiving.

The typological crisis of secular modernity therefore reveals the deeper need for a language capable of receiving finitude as gift. Only a grammar shaped by divine promise can speak of birth and death truthfully. Only such a grammar allows death to be seen as the moment in which God's act is fully determinative and life to be received as the reality granted by that same act.[24] Without this grammar, the culture remains trapped within the conceptual field that Luther dismantled. It remains unable to speak life precisely where life most needs to be spoken.

The next section will therefore turn explicitly to the grammar of the Spirit, for it is the Spirit's act of interpretation that renders theological language capable of naming death without denial and life without illusion.

V. The Spirit's Grammar and the Reconstitution of Speech

IF THE TYPOLOGICAL CRISIS OF SECULAR modernity arises from a grammar that can no longer speak truthfully of birth or death, the theological response must begin with an account of the way language itself is transformed by the divine act. The grammar inaugurated in Luther's *nova lingua* does not consist simply in a new set of terms or a fresh conceptual arrangement. It is the result of an act in which the Spirit interprets the creature to itself by making the divine Word present. In this act, language is not merely clarified; it is reconstituted. It becomes capable of speaking of realities that cannot be named within the structures of autonomy, and it receives the capacity to say what would otherwise remain inexpressible.

For this reason, the *nova lingua* cannot be understood apart from the Spirit. Revelation is not an event that delivers information to be processed by an already existing linguistic faculty. It is an act in which the Spirit grants the conditions under which the Word may be heard and under which human speech may participate in what the Word gives. This participation is not metaphoric. It is the theological form of the creature's dependence, for the creature does not possess within itself the means by which divine realities may be spoken. The Spirit does not supplement human linguistic capacity but creates the very possibility of theological meaning.

At this point, the distinction between felicity and truth becomes theologically significant. In the secular grammar, truth is judged by correspondence or coherence, and felicity is relegated to the pragmatic sphere. In the theological grammar, felicity marks the condition under which language is rightly ordered to divine action, and truth marks the divine act that renders that language effective. The Spirit authorizes the speech of the church by placing it within the space opened by the divine Word. Without this authorization, theological language may remain grammatically well formed, but it cannot secure what it proclaims. It may gesture toward life and promise, but it cannot speak them.

To say that the Spirit interprets is not to claim that the Spirit clarifies meaning in the manner of a commentator. It is to confess that the Spirit grants the creature the capacity to hear the Word as Word, thus granting the capacity to speak of God in a way that is bound to God's act rather than to conceptual possibility.[25] Interpretation is not the extraction of meaning from a text; it is the divine act by which the text becomes revelation. In the act of interpretation, the Spirit gives what the language declares. This giving grounds the external truth of theological claims, for the creature cannot, by its own powers, verify the realities to which theological language refers. The Spirit alone secures this reference by uniting the creature's language with the presence of the Logos.

Within this grammar, statements about life and death take on a meaning they cannot otherwise possess. To speak *pulvis es* is not merely to utter a judgment about human mortality but to participate in a divine act that names the creature truthfully. Such naming is not destructive. It is gracious, for it places the creature within the horizon of promise. Likewise, to speak of resurrection is not to speculate about the prolongation of biological life but to confess the act in which God overcomes death. The Spirit's interpretation grants these statements their referential force. Without the Spirit, they remain pious or aspirational; with the Spirit, they become truthful.

This account of linguistic participation is central to any theological response to the culture of death. Without it, the church risks speaking within the secular grammar rather than from its own. It risks engaging in moral argumentation that presupposes the very conditions it seeks to challenge. The Spirit's grammar does not engage the grammar of autonomy on its own terms. It speaks from a different order, one in which life is given rather than managed and in which death is interpreted rather than denied.

To speak life truthfully, then, is not to offer a more persuasive moral argument. It is to speak from within the act by which the Spirit unites creaturely language with the divine Word. Such speech has a different character. It does not persuade by conceptual force; it bears witness by participating in divine reality. This witness is not abstract. It becomes concrete precisely in those moments where the secular grammar fails, for it is in the face of death that the promise of life becomes visible. The Spirit grants the church the capacity to speak in these moments, not because the church possesses superior moral insight, but because it participates in the grammar of the Word.

The next section will therefore turn to the public character of this grammar, for the church's witness in the present moment is not the dissemination of moral propositions but the enactment of a linguistic world grounded in divine promise. It is in this enactment that the truth of life becomes visible, and it is here that the culture's denial of death is most profoundly challenged.

VI. The Public Grammar of the Church

IF THE SPIRIT GRANTS THE CONDITIONS UNDER which theological language may be spoken, the church becomes the community in which this language is embodied. Its speech is not an alternative moral discourse within the same conceptual order but the public manifestation of another grammar. This grammar is not chosen. It is received. It arises from the Spirit's act of interpretation and is enacted whenever the church speaks in the confidence that the divine Word gives what it promises. In this manner, the church becomes visible not primarily through its institutions or its programs but through the form of life constituted by the language it speaks.

Such speech does not aim to persuade by appealing to shared conceptual assumptions. It seeks rather to reveal another order of meaning. Its force derives not from its ability to move within the grammar of the liberal order but from its ability to speak in a way that cannot be absorbed by that order. When the church speaks of life, it does not refer to the expansion of possibilities or the preservation of autonomy. It refers to the divine act by which life is given, sustained, and redeemed. When it speaks of death, it does not describe a failure of agency; it acknowledges a moment in which the creature is addressed by God. The church's speech, therefore, exposes the inadequacy of secular discourse by offering a grammar in which birth and death retain their theological significance.

This public grammar is not primarily doctrinal, though doctrine is essential to it. Nor is it primarily ethical, though it has ethical consequences. It is liturgical in the broad sense that it arises from the worship of the triune God. In worship, the church is constituted by the Word that speaks it into being. It hears the promise that interprets its life, and in hearing that promise, it receives the language by which it may bear witness in the world. The liturgy is therefore not an internal practice confined within sacred walls.[26] It is the matrix from which the church's public speech emerges. It is the place where the grammar of divine promise is learned, rehearsed, and enacted.

In this respect, the church's witness cannot be reduced to moral advocacy. Moral advocacy remains within the grammar of the surrounding culture and seeks to change outcomes by persuasion or legislation. The church's witness proceeds differently. It speaks by manifesting a form of life in which death is not denied and life is not possessed. It speaks by acting in ways that presuppose the reality of divine promise. It speaks by interpreting weakness, dependence, natality, and mortality as moments in which God's action is disclosed. This interpretive stance cannot be abstracted from its theological basis. It is grounded in the Spirit's grammar, which gives the church the capacity to understand death and life as realities interpreted by God.

Such a witness does not evade public responsibilities. It confronts the culture of death directly, yet it does so by exposing the grammar that makes such a culture possible. It shows that the grammar of autonomy cannot sustain a meaningful account of birth or death, for it hovers above the concrete givenness of life in what Luther once called *walking in the clouds*. The church, by contrast, speaks a different grammar. That grammar is not speculative. It is performative. It is enacted whenever the church speaks the Word that speaks it into being, and in speaking that Word, it reveals a world ordered not by possibility but by promise.[27]

This public enactment is most visible in those moments when the secular grammar reaches its limits. When the church stands beside the dying, it refuses to speak in the language of negation. It does not interpret death as the failure of life but as the moment in which life is entrusted to the One who gives it. When the church

receives the unborn child, it refuses to speak in the language of burden or poten-tiality. It speaks instead in the language of gift. These acts are not moral gestures. They are grammatical enactments. They reveal that life is not defined by capacity and that death is not defined by negation. They reveal that the grammar of promise can interpret what the grammar of autonomy cannot.

In this way, the church becomes a sign of contradiction. It speaks a language unintelligible to the prevailing order and yet capable of naming the realities that this order cannot bear to acknowledge. Its witness is not an argument but a display. It displays a world in which divine promise is determinative and in which human speech participates in the act that grants life. Such a witness cannot be confined to private belief. It is a public performance of a linguistic world grounded in divine ac-tion, and it is this performance that challenges the culture of death at its foundations.

The next section will bring this movement to its concrete conclusion by showing how the church's pro-life witness, understood in this way, is not an ethical position within a contested public square but the enactment of a grammar in which the Word speaks life where the world speaks negation.

VII. Pro-Life Witness as the Enactment of a Grammar of Life

THE ARGUMENT OF THIS ESSAY HAS BEEN that *the crisis of contemporary Western culture is not first ethical but grammatical*. A society that cannot receive the givenness of birth or the finality of death cannot sustain a coherent account of life, for life is framed by these two limits and derives its meaning from the way they are interpret-ed. When life is understood as the expression of autonomy and when death is seen as the negation of that autonomy, the culture's moral failures become inevitable, because the grammar that shapes its discourse cannot allow these realities to appear truthfully. They become problems to be solved or burdens to be managed. They cannot be received.

The church's witness does not address this crisis by offering an alternative ethical platform. It addresses it by enacting a language grounded in divine promise rather than in human possibility. Such enactment does not occur only in doctrinal statements or in moral teaching, although both are necessary. It occurs whenever the church speaks from within the act by which the Spirit unites creaturely language to the divine Word. In this speech, the church reveals a world in which life is given rather than achieved and in which death is interpreted by God rather than by the conceptual structures of autonomy.

This witness becomes particularly clear at the points where the secular grammar reaches its limits. When the church stands before the reality of death, it refuses to adopt the language that treats death as failure. It speaks *pulvis es*, not as a decla-

ration of futility but as a naming of the creature that places its existence within the horizon of promise. Such speech does not deny death. It acknowledges death as the moment in which the creature's life is entrusted to God. Conversely, when the church receives the unborn child, it refuses to speak in terms of potentiality or burden. It receives the child as gift, and in receiving the gift, it reveals that life has its meaning not from the desires of others but from the act by which God gives it.

These practices are not moral assertions. They arise from a grammar that interprets reality differently. They display the theological world in which life is not owned and death is not feared. Such a world cannot be made visible by argument alone. It must be enacted. The church enacts it whenever it speaks and acts from within the promise that sustains its existence. The witness that results does not persuade by demonstrating the insufficiency of the grammar of autonomy. It persuades by manifesting a grammar in which the creature's dependence upon God is not a limitation but the very condition of its life.[28]

This form of witness exposes the culture's inability to speak truthfully of its own condition. It shows that the grammar of autonomy cannot sustain a world in which human beings can be received as gifts. It shows that this grammar cannot interpret death except as negation and cannot interpret suffering except as failure. It shows that life, when constructed within this grammar, becomes a project that must continually justify itself. By enacting a different grammar, the church reveals a different world.

For this reason, the church's pro-life witness cannot be reduced to a set of positions within the public square. It is a public enactment of a grammar that speaks life where the world sees only negation. It is the performance of a linguistic world grounded in the divine act, a world in which birth and death are interpreted not by their relation to autonomy but by their relation to God. It is the manifestation of a community that speaks not from its own resources but from the Spirit who interprets the world through the Word.

In this way, the church offers the culture what the culture cannot supply for itself. It offers a grammar capable of receiving life as gift and death as promise. It offers a linguistic world in which the creature may be understood in relation to God rather than in relation to its own possibilities. It offers a form of speech that does not deny the reality of death but declares that death has been taken up into the life of God. Such speech is not an ethical alternative. It is truth. And in speaking it, the church bears witness to the world that life is not reducible to capacity and death is not reducible to negation.

This grammar, grounded in the divine promise, is the only grammar capable of speaking life truthfully in a culture that has forgotten how to speak of death without denying it. It is the grammar the church must learn again, for only in speaking from

within it can the church reveal to the world that its deepest crisis is not moral failure but the loss of the language by which life may be named as gift and death as promise.

VIII. Conclusion

IN THE END, THE QUESTION BEFORE US IS NOT whether the culture will adopt a different set of moral judgments but whether it can recover the language in which life may be received as a divine gift. The grammar that now governs public speech cannot sustain such reception, for it has severed the bond between language and the act of God that gives reality to what words declare.[29] A culture that speaks within the grammar of autonomy cannot name birth except as interruption or death except as negation, and it cannot name life except as a project that must justify itself. Yet the church continues to speak in a grammar formed by promise rather than by possibility, and in speaking thus, it reveals that the crisis of our age is not finally the collapse of moral consensus but the disappearance of the linguistic world in which human beings may understand themselves truthfully before God. The task, therefore, is not to refine the grammar of autonomy but to inhabit the grammar of the Spirit, for only in that grammar can the creature be named as dust and yet beloved, and only in that grammar can life be spoken where the world sees only death.[30] In that speech—in the language that arises from the Word who interprets creation—the church bears witness that life is given, that death is taken up into promise, and that a world which has forgotten how to speak truthfully may yet learn again to hear.

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

Notes

1. See Charles Camosy, *Resisting Throwaway Culture: How a Consistent Life Ethic Can Unite a Fractured People* (New York: New City Press, 2019).

2. Without the proper words, we cannot inhabit the proper world. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 5.6: "Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt." ("The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.")

3. Because this issue is not primarily one of ethical intervention, the church cannot be what the ELCA's *Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective* document imagines, that is, that the church commits itself to being a community of moral deliberation, and that it will

support its members in their moral deliberation and act to influence society through moral deliberation. See ELCA, *Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*, 1991, p. 5.

4. Luther speaks explicitly about the impossibility of mapping theological truth to philosophical possibility. See Luther's "Verbum caro factum est," in Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [*Schriften*], 73 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–2009), 39.II:3.3-4: "In theologia verum est, verbum esse carnem factum; in philsophia simpliciter impossibile et absurdum." Hereafter WA; Martin Luther, *Word and Sacrament IV*, ed. by Martin E. Lehmann, vol. 38, p. 239 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–): "In theology it is true that the Word was made flesh; in philosophy the statement is simply impossible and absurd."

5. Luther spoke of the language of faith as grounded not in the conceptual structures of philosophy but in the divine act that gives reality to what it declares. Thus, in his 1539 *Verbum caro factum est* he insists that philosophy must remain in its own sphere, for theology requires a genuinely new speech: "Rectius ergo fecerimus, si dialectica seu philosophia in sua sphaera relictis discamus loqui novis linguis in regno fidei extra omnem sphaeram" (WA 39.II:5.35–36); LW 38:242: "We would act more correctly if we left dialectic and philosophy in their own area and learned to speak in a new language in the realm of faith apart from every sphere." In the *Disputation de divinitate et humanitate Christi* (1540) he asserts the semantic transformation that occurs when words are spoken in Christo: "Certum est tamen, omnia vocabula in Christo novam significationem accipere in eadem re significata. Nam creatura veteris linguae usu et in aliis rebus significat rem a divinitate separatam infinitis modis" (WA 39.II:94.17–20). English: "For "creature" in the old usage of language and in other subjects signifies a thing separated from divinity by infinite degrees." Martin Luther, "Disputation on the Divinity and Humanity of Christ (Circular Disputation) (February 28, 1540)," in *Luther's Works: Disputations II*, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes, trans. Christopher Boyd Brown, vol. 73, *Luther's Works* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2020), 255.

Luther applies this *nova lingua* with particular force to the way Christians speak of life and death. In his 1545 *Sermon on Cantate Sunday*, he declares that the gospel overturns the natural judgments of reason: "Sic nobiscum loquitur nova lingua: qui effertur mortuus, sol nicht heißen: es ist verloren." (WA 49: 726.11–13). The new tongue refuses the verdict of *sensus communis*, renaming the dead not as "lost" but as those sown in hope. Elsewhere in his *Genesisvorlesung* (*Lectures on Genesis*), he notes—in a passage frequently misquoted in modern collections—that what we call "life" is in truth a continual movement toward death: "Nam etsi vitam, quam hic vivimus, non volumus appellare mortem, tamen profecto aliud nihil est quam perpetuus cursus ad mortem." (WA 42:146.21-22). LW 1:196: "Although we do not wish to call the life we live here a death, nevertheless it surely is nothing else than a continuous journey toward death."A parallel dynamic pervades the *Genesisvorlesung*, where the inherited linguistic and conceptual resources of *ratio* are shown to be inadequate for the works of God, whose creative Word brings about realities that natural reason cannot name without contradiction. Luther repeatedly argues that the Spirit must teach the church how to speak truthfully of God's acts—revealing, for example, that what reason calls "impossible" (e.g., creation *ex nihilo*, divine preservation, or the creature's total dependence upon God) is in fact the most certain truth

of all (e.g., WA 42:36–39; WA 42:146.20–22; LW 1:47-52, 196). While this lecture series does not employ the technical phrase *nova lingua*, it fully exemplifies Luther's persistent distinction between the old tongue of fallen reason and the Spirit-given speech by which the church learns to name God's acts truthfully.

6. See WA 39.II:5.33-34: "Quanto minus potest idem esse verum in philosophia et theologia, quarum distinctio in infinitum maior est quam artium et operum." LW 38:242: "How much less is it possible for the same thing to be true in philosophy and theology, for the difference between them is infinitely greater than that between liberal arts and crafts."

7. WA 39.II:5:35-6: "Rectius ergo fecerimus, si dialectica seu philosophia in sua sphaera relictis discamus loqui novis linguis in regno fidei extra omnem sphaeram"; LW 38:242: "We would act more correctly if we left dialectic and philosophy in their own area and learned to speak in a new language in the realm of faith apart from every sphere."

8. On the semantic incommensurability at the heart of Luther's *nova lingua*, see WA 39.II:5:13-39, LW 38: 240-242, where Luther insists that philosophical usage cannot govern theological predication because words change signification when spoken in Christ.

9. See WA 18: 600–787; LW 33:33–295.

10. Andrea Vestrucci argues that Luther's "*De servo arbitrio*" does not merely dispute Erasmus on the bondage of the will but reconfigures the very conditions of *meaningfulness* presupposed in the debate. Erasmus operates within inherited modal and deontic grammars in which freedom, obligation, and intelligibility are mutually entailed; Luther instead suspends these conditions through the concepts of *Deus absconditus*, *justification*, and *predestination*, thereby opening a new logical space in which revelation determines the grammar of thought rather than answering to it. In Vestrucci's reconstruction, theology becomes a formal practice whose concepts function as *operations upon conceptualization*, not as philosophical extensions—freeing language from the tyranny of modality and locating meaning in the divine act that gives it. See Andrea Vestrucci, *Theology as Freedom: On Martin Luther's "De servo arbitrio"* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2019).

11. See Andrea Vestrucci, *Formalizing Theology: Towards a Logic of Religious Discourse* (Cham: Springer, 2020), whose methodological program has been reviewed as a pioneering yet demanding attempt to articulate a logic proper to theological discourse; cf. reviews in *Modern Theology* 37 (2021); *Journal of Analytic Theology* 10 (2022); and *Religious Studies Review* 47 (2021). These reviews frequently observe that Vestrucci's formalism, for all its rigor, stands in need of an explicit *ontological articulation* showing how the logical transformations introduced by revelation relate to the being of God and the creature, a development his framework gestures toward but does not yet supply.

12. Wilfrid Sellars's critique of the "Myth of the Given"—that perceptual claims such as "this looks red" already presuppose the concept *red*—has become foundational in analytic philosophy, establishing that experience is conceptually mediated rather than delivered as a pre-linguistic datum. See "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 1, ed. Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1956), 253–329. Subsequent developments by McDowell, Brandom, and Brewer reinforce this point: a culture's conceptual grammar determines the space of intelligibility itself, shaping what can count as a "birth," a "death," or a "gift," and thus conditioning the moral and theological possibilities available within that form of life.

13. On this point, see my extended analytic-theological development of Luther's *nova lingua*, where I argue, following Vestrucci, that the Reformer's break with Erasmus is not merely argumentative but conceptual. See "Theology as Freedom: The New *Lingua* Comes of Age" (forthcoming in *Promissio*, vol. I, no.1, January 2026). I suggest that theological semantics cannot arise within extensional, non-agentive logical frameworks, since theological meaning depends upon *divine act*, not structural correspondence. I further develop this in "Constitutive Satisfaction: Divine Agency and Truth in Theological Model Theory" (forthcoming from ILT Press, 2026) which develops the *nova lingua* within a semantics of constitutive satisfaction.

14. Luther grounds the *nova lingua* in the performative character of the divine Word itself: "*in Deo dicere est facere*"—in God, to speak is to do. See WA 42:34–36; LW 1:46-48; cf. LW 1:29–30.

15. Luther declares that theology is a language that exceeds the structures of reason. See footnote 3. Luther, *Verbum caro factum est*, WA 39.II:4. 32–35: "...materia quae in angustias rationis seu syllogismorum includi non potest.… Sed est extra, intra, supra, infra, citra, ultra omnem veritatem dialecticam." LW 38:240-241: "…matter which cannot be enclosed in the narrow confines of reason or syllogisms."

16. Just as the gospel presupposes the law, but is not derivable from the law, the new grammar presupposes the old—yet does not unfold from the old. The content is genuinely new. Luther warns that the gospel cannot be poured into the inherited conceptual forms of philosophy without destroying both, for "novum vinum in veteres utres mittimus, ut utrumque perdamus" (WA 39.II:5.37-38); LW 38:242: "…if we put new wine in old wineskins, both of them perish."

17. Cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I.1: *The Doctrine of God*, 2nd ed., trans. G. W. Bromiley, eds., G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1975), §4.

18. I argued in *Luther, Logic, and Language-Games* (University of Iowa dissertation) that theological meaning arises only when a divine act *reconstitutes* the semantic field of inherited terms, granting familiar words a range of signification that exceeds the conceptual conditions that previously governed them. Already there I employed Max Black's interaction (tension) theory of metaphor to explain how meaning is not a function of lexical definition but of a *semantic event* in which previously unrelated domains interact to produce new entailments. I extended this argument in three essays that map the emergence of Luther's *nova lingua* precisely through this donated semantic surplus: "Luther, Metaphor, and Theological Language," *Modern Theology* 6, no. 2 (1990): 21–35; "Luther on Language," *Lutheran Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (2002): 195–220; and "Luther and the Strange Language of Theology: How New is the *Nova Lingua*?," in *Caritas et Reformatio*, ed. David Whitford (St. Louis: Concordia Academic Press, 2002), 221–44. These studies converge on the thesis articulated here: the *nova lingua* does not derive new meanings from old definitions but receives them from the divine act that grants words their new intelligibility, and thus create entailments that cannot be translated back into the old grammar of philosophy even though they presuppose it as material.

19. See Andrea Vestrucci, *Formalizing Theology*, esp. Chapter 2.

20. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

21. *Typological* here refers to the classical Christian conviction that temporal events, persons, and narratives receive their intelligibility from a divinely given pattern or *type* that precedes and interprets them—Israel's history prefiguring Christ, the old creation anticipating the

new, and the creature's end appearing in light of God's promise. Without such a divinely grounded pattern, death can appear only as an isolated biological terminus rather than as an event whose meaning is disclosed by God's redemptive action.

22. Andrea Vestrucci, *Formalizing Theology*, esp. Chapter 2.

23. Luther insists that ordinary terms (*homo*, *voluntas*, *vita*, *mors*, *iustitia*, *Deus*) take on new signification when placed within Christological predication or the communicatio idiomatum. Under the gospel, words receive their meaning from the divine act rather than from natural possibility. See WA 39, II, 94:17-20: "Certum est tamen, omnia vocabula in Christo novam significationem accipere in eadem re significata. Nam creatura veteris linguae usu et in aliis rebus significat rem a divinitate separatam infinitis modis." LW 73:255: "For 'creature' in the old usage of language and in other subjects signifies a thing separated from divinity by infinite degrees." See also WA 42:78–81; LW 1:102-107.

24. See *Disputationes de divinitate et humanitate Christi*, WA 39:104.24–26: "Spiritus sanctus habet suam grammaticam. Grammatica omnibus modis valet, sed quando res maior est, quam ut comprehendi possit grammaticis et philosophicis regulis, relinquenda est." LW 73: 265: "The Holy Spirit does have His own grammar. Grammar is useful everywhere, but when the subject is greater than can be comprehended by the rules of grammar and philosophy, it must be left behind."

25. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969).

26. Jean-Yves Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute: Disputed Questions on the Humanity of Man*, trans. Mark Raftery-Skehan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).

27. Luther's critique of speculative grammar is explicit in the *Disputatio de divinitate et humanitate Christi* (WA 39 II, 93–121). He notes that human judgment often prefers alternative formulations—"Verbum est incarnatum seu carneum factum"—to the Evangelist's "*Verbum caro factum est*" (WA 39 II, 94:5–6), yet insists that theological grammar must follow the church's received usage rather than human linguistic aptness (94:7–8). For this reason, he forbids speculative linguistic methods: "cavendum est… ab etymologia, analogia, consequentia et exemplis" (94:11–12). Grammar itself teaches the limits of such procedures—"nomina heteroclita et verba anomala non patiuntur etymologiam, analogiam seu exemplum" (94:13–14)—and usage frequently overrides rule: "usus saepe praescribit contra regulam" (94:15–16). Thus, all vocabulary applied to Christ undergoes semantic transformation—"omnia vocabula in Christo novam significationem accipere" (94:17–18). What the *vetus lingua* signifies as separation—"creatura… rem a divinitate separatam" (94:19–20)—the *nova lingua* signifies as inseparable union with the divine person—"novae linguae usu significat rem… inseparabiliter coniunctam" (94:21–22). Hence terms such as *homo*, *humanitas*, and *passus* become "new words" in their Christological use (94:23–24), and speculative appeals to analogy or etymology collapse into confusion, unable to distinguish equivocation (94:29–30) or avoid category mistakes denied by the entire Christian tradition (94:31–32, 35–36).

28. Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004).

29. For Luther, "Philosophia et theologia sunt diversa, non contraria." –Philosophy and theology are different, not contradictory. See WA 39.II:27–28; LW 38:259-260. cf. WA 42:79–81 (LW 1:103-106), where Luther describes the inadequacy of the old language to bear the realities of justification, resurrection, and divine action.

30. Luther's *nova lingua* does not merely alter the sound of words; it alters their very *signification*. Accordingly, it gives creaturely terms a meaning they do not possess within the old philosophical usage. Luther declares that although "vitam, quam hic vivimus, non volumus appellare mortem, tamen profecto aliud nihil est quam perpetuus cursus ad mortem" (WA 42:146.21-22), reason refuses to call this life "death." But the gospel names it truly. Accordingly, where experience perceives only decay, the new tongue declares life: "Per baptismum autem ad vitam spei, seu potius ad spem vitae restituimur. Nam haec demum vera vita est, qua coram Deo vivitur." (WA 42:146.27-28; LW 1:196: "Through Baptism we are restored to a life of hope, or rather to a hope of life. This is true life, which is lived before God."). In this way Luther's *nova lingua* overturns the judgments of *ratio* and *sensus*, enabling the church to speak of death and life not as they appear to autonomous reason, but as they are given in the divine promise.

Bibliography

Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. I/1, 2nd Edition. Translated by G. W. Bromiley. Edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975.

Bielfeldt, Dennis. "Luther on Language." *Lutheran Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (2002): 195–220.

Bielfeldt, Dennis. "Luther, Metaphor, and Theological Language." *Modern Theology* 6, no. 2 (1990): 21–35.

Bielfeldt, Dennis. "Luther and the Strange Language of Theology: How New Is the *Nova Lingua*?" In *Caritas et Reformatio*. Edited by David Whitford, 221-44. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Academic Press, 2002.

Bielfeldt. "Theology as Freedom: The New *Lingua* Comes of Age." *Promissio* 1, no. 1 (forthcoming January 2026).

Camosy, Charles. *Resisting Throwaway Culture: How a Consistent Life Ethic Can Unite a Fractured People*. New York: New City Press, 2019.

ELCA. *Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*. Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1991.

Lacoste, Jean-Yves. *Experience and the Absolute: Disputed Questions on the Humanity of Man*. Translated by Mark Raftery-Skehan. New York: Fordham University Press, 2004.

Luther, Martin. *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [*Schriften*]. 73 vols. Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883-2009.

Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works, American Edition*. Vols. 1–30, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan. St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76. Vols. 31–55, edited by Helmut Lehmann. Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86. Vols. 56–82, edited by Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes. St. Louis: Concordia, 2009 –.

McDowell, John. *Mind and World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994.

Pannenberg, Wolfhart. *Theology and the Kingdom of God*. Edited by Richard John Neuhaus. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969.

Ratzinger, Joseph. *Introduction to Christianity*. Translated by J. R. Foster. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004.

Sellars, Wilfrid. "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind." In *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 1. Edited by Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven, 253–329. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956.

Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.

Vestrucci, Andrea. *Formalizing Theology: Towards a Logic of Religious Discourse*. Cham: Springer, 2020.

Vestrucci, Andrea. *Theology as Freedom: On Martin Luther's "De Servo Arbitrio."* Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2019.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Kegan Paul, 1922.

Inward? – or Upward and Outward?

The Problem of Self-Primacy

Martin A. Christiansen

T HIS ARTICLE EXPLORES SELF-PRIMACY AS a key aspect of modern culture, examining its theological and philosophical meanings. It also examines how Christians can address this challenge through a hermeneutical approach grounded in Scripture and faith.

I write this because we live in a society that values individuality and encourages a persistent, contagious self-focus that influences everyone's consciousness. As a result, modern culture is often called the "Me Generation." I believe this tendency has become a core and defining part of our current "culture of death." This inward focus rightly earns the label "self-primacy" and can be seen as a fundamental issue that contributes to the widespread sense of unbelief that spreads throughout our society. Although the idea of self-primacy involves different criteria, humans tend to prioritize their own interests and define personal priorities and aesthetics through individual preference, both of which are expressed through a hermeneutical process heavily dependent on personal judgment. In the end, this points to the direction modern humanity is heading.

While I'm addressing this issue theologically—describing our fallen human state as "poor, miserable sinners" and seeing Jesus' death on the cross followed by His resurrection as the redeeming act that saves us—I do not plan to focus on that here. I also will not delve into psychological reasons why the human mind prefers its own self-interests over other influences as a guide and purpose in life. Further, this article defines the words "autonomous" and "free will" as follows: they refer to the countless everyday choices that do not affect spiritual status, such as whether to marry, attend college, buy a coat, help a person in need, or obey the speed limit—even when inwardly wanting to drive faster. These decisions are normally made freely. Theologically, true free will, which freely loves and obeys God, was lost after the fall, and only through Christ and the working of the Holy Spirit can people be freed to willingly and freely love God and serve their neighbor. Instead,

I want to argue that, at its core, all humans—non-Christian and Christian—are involved in a process of interpreting each moment of life, choosing between the options and values available to them, guided by a genuinely self-driven instinct in their own hearts and minds, even as other priorities also influence them. My aim is to explore how the freedom of our will interacts with a hermeneutical process through which the Christian mind interprets all of life. We experience this freedom of interpretation both in every conscious moment and on a larger scale, where our purpose and identity are shaped over many years through experience, creative choices, and moral and aesthetic influences.

Reckoning with Self-Primacy

BUILDING ON THE CONCEPT OF SELF-PRIMACY, this section examines the role of autonomous free will in human decision-making. It explores whether autonomy is inherently good or bad and how Christians can navigate the moral implications of their choices within the framework of faith.

This hermeneutical framework gives the human will the opportunity to establish a changing context for itself and allows for an interpretative process that is flexible and can be adjusted according to human needs, desires, and interests within our broader autonomous state. We navigate each moment of our lives, making quick decisions along the way, often leading us down the path driven by our own desires. This is where my main argument comes into focus: I assert that humans prioritize their own self-primacy above all other values or religious beliefs they claim to follow. The possibility of free choice, with its range of options, echoes the temptation shown to Adam and Eve and remains with us every day. In each moment of our awareness, we interpret what we encounter to decide whether we will follow the tempting and compelling call of self-will with its autonomy or whether we will choose to obey God's commands.

The idea of self-primacy is a slippery slope. To better understand how we interpret our choices, actions, and priorities, some clarity is needed. James Sire, in his helpful book *The Universe Next Door*,[1] objectively examines eight worldviews within a Christian framework, focusing on each worldview's core beliefs and creating what could be called a "worldview playing field." Among the common mindsets he discusses, Postmodern Humanism sounds like a despairingly familiar rationale seen today in our world—reflected among friends, neighbors, media, entertainment, and news commentary. Similarly, some recent Christian theology has adopted a postmodern perspective that conforms to the culture it exists within. Postmodern Humanism emphasizes almost solely self-primacy and personal preferences, rather than adhering to any specific ideological or religious principle. It views individual

consciousness as the authority for decision-making, granting autonomy to live as one desires. While this idea may seem familiar or simply part of life, a genuine commitment to the Christian Cross and a life of faith sanctified by the Holy Spirit rejects self-primacy and personal preference as the main guiding forces. How one applies this view of free will defines their worldview choice.

However, before we use the term "self-primacy" carelessly, let's clarify the balance between personal responsibility and obsessing over oneself, making oneself a little king. What do we really tell ourselves? What does it mean to believe we have the human right to do whatever we want? Our autonomy gives us the chance to be, do, say, and think whatever we feel. But what does that really mean? At every moment, we interpret our situation and make a choice—either guided by self-interest or by our faith. We also face outside influences: our friends, family, social networks, and other sources at any given time. To what extent should personal, autonomous will have the right to think and act freely? We are not robots created by God, but we also can't simply do whatever feels right on the good and evil scale. Do we sense a purpose and obligation as believers serving a God who provides everything we have? Do we have the right to pursue any desire or follow any whim that strikes us? These are big, important questions. Yet, we shape this reality every day through who we are and how we use our time, interests, and energy. Consider the following:

- "Just be yourself"
- "Do your own thing"
- "Looking out for number one"
- "Own it—make it your own"
- "It's a free country, I can do and say what I want"
- "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (now I'm treading on sacred ground!)

Each of these phrases is a commonly accepted maxim of personal freedom and rights, and based on anyone's own autonomous will, it seems we should consider each of them legitimate and acceptable. Each phrase reflects a self-interpretation rooted in personal freedom and the right to have, do, and be what one wants.

But how do we interpret such autonomy within the framework of a Christian self-view? The faithful Christian looks to Scripture for guidance and to set the rule and norm by which we define our lives. Yet, how we read and understand Scripture can easily become a tenuous issue. To what extent do we accept the authority of Scripture? To what extent do we interpret Scripture as the writer wishes it to be understood? And most importantly, to what extent do the teachings and doctrines of Scripture guide us and establish a normative basis by which we measure our lives and moral condition? The answers lie in the idea that the text of Scripture creates a hermeneutical dynamic that shapes our understanding. Scripture first interprets us as being in a sinful and helpless state, where we are lost and "cannot free our-

selves."[2] And so, the Word provides a God-ordained alternative through which our free will can engage in a dialogical exchange and ultimately build a relationship of meaningful understanding. In faith, we stay in this exchange and are guided by a hermeneutical circle, allowing us—guided by the Holy Spirit—to choose an appropriate response from the options available to our free will. This process helps us gain deeper insight into clarity, truth, and proper value in our choices and actions, leading us to a healthy and mature Christian awareness.

How might the dynamic of such a hermeneutic of self-interpretation arise from an open "discussion" with Scripture and acknowledge truth within an epistemology that offers a forum where meaning, value, and truth can be established? Here, we can envision a communicative dynamic more akin to a coach-player relationship than to the singular focus on authoritarian control and unwavering instructional commands that demand a specific, robotic response, leaving no room for a life of genuine self-guided freedom. All humans, and for this discussion, all Christians, live with a substantial degree of autonomy, allowing their behavior to become what they choose. Yet, at the same time, they are compelled by the redeeming and sanctifying salvation of our Lord Jesus to respond faithfully to the gift of grace, which we meekly comprehend through faith. Still, our sinful human tendencies seek the natural desire for self-primacy, as found throughout all of humanity. We have no choice but to interpret for ourselves what are matters of meaning and significance at every step. Let's explore this concept of self-primacy from different perspectives.

Autonomy: Good or Bad?

THUS, BUILDING ON THE CONCEPT OF SELF-PRIMACY, we must examine the role of autonomous free will in human decision-making, explore whether autonomy is inherently good or bad, and how Christians can navigate the moral implications of their choices within the framework of faith.

We should first examine the basis of where and how our personal interpretive process of consciousness functions within us, in relation to everything we experience in our being-ness[3] and how we manage each moment of our time consciousness.[4] We perceive each moment of time as it happens; we interpret what is meant in that instance, whether the words or actions of others or ourselves. We need to consider whether we are making a conscious choice or an assumption, whether our tentative interpretation is accurate, and to what extent. This interpretive consciousness is our constant reality, so deeply ingrained in our modern minds that we are often unaware of it. Within this flow of conscious interpretation, we continually make critical judgments about what we think, say, and do, reflecting our view of our autonomy and self-primacy at that moment. Sometimes, life moves so quick-

ly that it seems nearly impossible to control or influence our perspective on our self-primacy. Yet, our mind and memory maintain control over what our free will commands, allowing us to function with some level of direction, personal choice, and preferential tendencies. This is where our consciousness intersects with the moral order of our conscience.

Most of the time, each moment we exist, we live within a state of discrete, autonomous free will; it is here that we choose a course of action and a direction of thought or attitude. Usually, we have some control over our moral being and how we use it. Therefore, at every moment, we are in an interpretive state that connects us not only to everyone around us but also to God and his divine care and sustenance, since he gave us this autonomous free will initially. How we interpret each moment of our freedom significantly influences how we live, who we become, and the impact we have on others, as well as on our eternal status.

I realize this raises a question: Is autonomy good or bad? The clear truth is that it can be either, although we should really say that it is neither inherently good nor bad. But the issue isn't simply having or exercising an autonomous free will in our consciousness as we move through time because we actually don't have much choice about it. It's one of the fundamental traits of our human nature that we operate within a state of autonomy. Ultimately, the real question is what we choose to do with it, how we respond to the opportunity of autonomous freedom, and, specifically, how we interpret the circumstances, language, and significance involved—factors that surround each moment in our consciousness. Our autonomous free will is the very place where we navigate the delicate hermeneutical balance between good and evil in our choices with each breath of our existence. We do so out of necessity and often urgency because we also recognize that our time in life is limited, and our finiteness establishes a boundary that prevents us from knowing the infinite within this current temporal existence.[5]

Our autonomous will must confront our natural tendency toward self-primacy. It seems ingrained in us that we need to "look out for number one." Caring for and prioritizing our self-primacy comes naturally within autonomous free will, and, actually, deferring from our self-primacy and giving priority to someone or something else—especially if it conflicts with our own desires—can be quite challenging. However, any Christian should recognize that this is exactly what our Lord Jesus commissions us to do, especially in his example of the difficulty all humans would face in laying down their lives for another.[6]

Yet, self-primacy deserves its fair share of recognition. We are created as beings who *need to* care for ourselves, who must look out for and protect ourselves, and who bear responsibility for our own actions. A healthy control, along with the usefulness of our self-primacy, can lead us to accomplish significant good in this world: *genuine*

good that produces positive, influential, and constructive outcomes, not only for ourselves in our self-interest, but also benefiting others and potentially many people and situations. We must acknowledge that completely neglecting our self-primacy would be foolish, irresponsible, and unproductive. However, most humans realize this fairly quickly, and the balance often shifts in the opposite direction, creating a large imbalance in favor of the myriad desires rooted in our own self-interests.

Thus, self-primacy has a rightful place in life and can also be viewed as problematic. However, it is important to recognize how self-primacy can be managed in a controlled manner that keeps our autonomy aligned with the best way to handle the freedom inherent in any situation. The process of internal interpretation within the human mind can be understood as a circular relationship between the whole and its parts in any situation. This ultimately results in what Paul Ricoeur called the *Auslegung* or explication,[7] a resolution that emerges from the interpretive dialogic process leading to the completion of hermeneutical understanding. Theodore George specifically clarifies that such interpretive work leads to a "new understanding" and is not based on "already securely founded beliefs":

> In hermeneutics, the emphasis is on the "circularity" of understanding.… Central to hermeneutics, this concept is not only highly disputed but has also been developed in a number of distinct manners. Broadly, however, the concept of the hermeneutical circle signifies that, in interpretive experience, a new understanding is achieved not on the basis of already securely founded beliefs. Instead, a new understanding is achieved through renewed interpretive attention to further possible meanings of those presuppositions which, sometimes tacitly, inform the understanding that we already have.[8]

Christian understanding, however, must recognize that Scripture first interprets us, and then, in turn, our autonomous will understands God's command. As a result, we abandon the human desire for self-primacy and, guided by the Spirit, discover—or clarify—a new understanding. This understanding causes our will to act accordingly. Here, we see the completion of the hermeneutic circle in which we, as Christian beings, respond as we ought, ultimately leading to the establishment of a meaningful understanding of God's will for us.

Our autonomous will can be best described as a neutral zone, but only before each moment of our time consciousness. Once we act, respond, or initiate, we then move in a direction—either upward or downward, either good or bad. This hermeneutic moment spans from an objective potentiality to a subjective action or judgment, where the epistemic result is recorded and exerts a lasting influence on our ontological existence. In this instant, our autonomous action or judgment becomes reality, even if it is only part of our simple perception, and whether or not our self-primacy has been served.

The Subtlety of Capitalism

ONE OF THE MOST TANGIBLE WAYS SELF-PRIMACY manifests in modern culture is through financial decision-making within a capitalist framework. Here, we explore how Christians can navigate the moral challenges of spending and prioritize their values in ways that align with their faith.

Our autonomous free will engages in the hermeneutical process and interprets essential real-life situations—often carrying significant meaning and powerful consequences—as in making judgments and decisions about how we spend our money and set our priorities and values for those expenses. These personal battles, especially for someone living in the Western culture, are typically fought on the battleground of capitalism: that ideological framework of opportunity that offers any autonomous human will a range of freedoms—namely, the ability to gain personal or professional financial success through sale or effort and to build or purchase an unlimited materialistic kingdom.

What role does self-primacy play in this context? How should we allocate our money—toward ourselves or toward someone or something else? Since we naturally do both, what should the balance between them be? Of course, our needs and our responsibility to pay for what we should, especially for others in our lives, as is appropriate, play a vital role and are indeed a priority. However, these monetary expenses serve both our self-primacy and satisfy our responsibility to others. Consequently, it appears that the risk of unchecked self-primacy within capitalist freedom is more related to optional or voluntary expenses that are not among our responsibilities. While many people's idea of "money to burn" is just wishful thinking, we sometimes have the opportunity to voluntarily spend money on whatever we desire. How, then, do we interpret and decide which expense to prioritize? Aside from addressing genuine responsibilities such as debt or ideological commitments, capitalism offers us the opportunity to spend money on whatever our autonomous will desires, bartering the financial values we hold in exchange for some form of satisfaction.

This hermeneutic of determining priority or preference ultimately becomes subjective. Likewise, it seems remarkably subtle. How much does it matter if we buy this item or that, even if it's not something we need but rather just something we want? And at what point does randomness or apathy overtake the idea of holding a preference for something? But the subtlety matters when establishing meaningful action, where, in light of a given Christian determination or some ethical judgment, we are obligated to regard a certain priority one way or another. In other situations, no difference can be had, and the choice we make is simply a matter of personal preference. We can call such a close-call judgment a nuance. The concept of nuance carries with it a delicate balance of style, perhaps of need or requirement, or perhaps

not. The idea of nuance is also so subjective that it becomes a matter of describing the fine distinction between very similar things. A simple yet useful real-world example is the PMS[9] color system: in its most basic form, it includes 256 color variations that separate all the shades of the color palette into their slightly different (nuanced) distinctions and is commonly used in both commercial and artistic realms.

The same applies with regard to our self-primacy and how we spend our money. What we choose to spend on, along with the subtle details of how much, why, and for whom, all operate on a sliding scale of interpreting value and priorities. This may be the one area of hermeneutical endeavor where humans pay closer attention to the specifics of their choices, especially if they are being responsible or being particularly thrifty. However, when viewed on a larger scale, we see that the entire system of capitalism—with its constant flow of commerce and the economic balance it creates—grows or shrinks, ultimately offering opportunities for profit or loss and potentially leading to great satisfaction or dissatisfaction for the autonomous will. Each financial situation provides us with a similar range of opportunities and emphasizes the importance of interpretive skill, where nuance can flourish.

The autonomous free will we exercise in managing our wealth should be viewed by Christians as both an opportunity to act responsibly and to enjoy and engage with the gifts of God's creation. Even the moral order of Immanuel Kant and the Enlightenment encouraged financial growth in a positivistic and possibly pietistic way, aiming to improve our world. However, the evaluative process that arises in our personal financial decision-making places a burden on our tendency toward self-primacy and causes us to interpret each nuance of expenditure within a hermeneutical circle that weighs and calculates the responsibilities of our priorities against our own preferences and desires, as well as the influences of any immediate circumstances involved. It seems clear, then, that any Christian should carefully consider their financial options; and since we have the freedom to act as God permits, we must recognize that voluntary choices and preferences in how we handle our money become moral judgments. These judgments can hold a willing and believing heart both accountable and faithful.

Radical Ideological Free Will

OUR DISCUSSION OF AUTONOMY AND SELF-PRIMACY leads us to consider how radical philosophies, such as Marxism and nihilism, have shaped cultural attitudes toward self-primacy. Below, we analyze these ideologies and their rejection of divine authority, offering insights into the dangers of excessive self-focus.

Therefore, I examine self-primacy through the lens of radical philosophies, with both Karl Marx's socialist framework and Friedrich Nietzsche's nihilism offering

valuable insights. These philosophical traditions emphasize self-primacy and dismiss any hermeneutical productivity that might result from interpretive reading of Scripture or from others on a moral level. Here, the scope for autonomous free will is limited to one place: the self itself.

For Marx, the "self" uniquely manifests as a whole society and culture. Although this exists outside the individual's personal identity, Marx's socialism finds an ideological goal within the singularity of an entire culture. Every person in it must conform to that culture's rules, just like everyone else. Therefore, the entire culture functions as, and essentially becomes, a single "self." Any moral or religious values attached to it are only defined by and judged within its collective identity. Theological historian James C. Livingston highlights the inseparable bond that Marx emphasizes within the necessity of a social culture and its conflicts for establishing any religion. He writes,

> For Marx the nature of a religion can be learned by examining the concrete social conditions that produced it. Therefore, there is no single essence of religion such as Schleiermacher's reduction of religion to the feeling of absolute dependence. Religion is always a cultural product, and thus each religion reflects the unique social conflicts of its particular culture. Remove the social conflicts, and you remove the religious illusions required by the conflicts.[10]

This is truly engagement solely in self-primacy rooted in a comprehensive ideology, along with its religious or moral conditions, and as such, it is the immediate denial of the opportunity to surrender one's free will to God or any other moral or religious authority. Marx himself writes:

> *Man makes religion*, religion does not make man. In other words, religion is the self-consciousness and self-feeling of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself. But *man* is no abstract being squatting outside of the world. Man is *the world of man*, the state, the society. This state, this society, produce religion, *a reversed world-consciousness* because they are *a reversed world*….[11]

Here, we see that Marx defines autonomous free will only in the inclusive plural, making his rejection or dismissal of the existence of God obvious. Although socialism has largely failed in the past, this "self-only" view shows that an excessive focus on self-primacy—as the embodiment of an entire collective culture—is, in reality, a denial of genuine freedom for each individual involved, as well as a denial of the vast richness of a loving God. Any hermeneutical exchange requires another agent with whom an *Auslegung* can be established, enabling the resulting explication to produce a meaningful exchange or definition. However, those trapped in a radical socialist environment like socialism have no choice but to be slaves to the ideology.

This problem clearly exists with nihilism as well, and Friedrich Nietzsche's distinct rejection of any God emphasizes the same issue for autonomous free will as socialism does. If God is dead and we have killed him, then self-primacy becomes our only choice. However, without a God, this self-primacy ultimately leads to despair. Although we cannot fully understand Nietzsche's mindset before his death—the fact that he spent the last 10-plus years of his life in insanity[12]—suggests that such intense focus on one's own superiority and the dominance of autonomous self-primacy may have become problematic.

The focus of Nietzsche's philosophical vision was on the humanist ideal of the *Übermensch*. His goal was to achieve the highest quality of being and meaning possible for any human. This is self-primacy taken to an extreme. When autonomous free will views itself as the ultimate arbiter in a nihilistic realm where no other considerations or ideological perspectives matter at all, the result is a relentless self-focus that completely destroys the possibility of meaningful hermeneutical exchange in a dialogical manner. Only one view of the self-primacy of our being is relevant here. This fragmented state of the nihilist mindset is reflected in an intriguing footnote by James C. Livingston concerning Nietzsche's choice of the title *Übermensch*. Livingston writes: "Since the term 'Superman' may connote something supernatural and has come to be identified with Nazi racial theories and with a comic book character, it is preferable to translate Nietzsche's term *Übermensch* as 'Overman' or superior individual."[13]

The idea of an "Overman" or *Übermensch* effectively elevates human self-primacy to a divine level, much as Marx's socialism turns the supposed goodwill of society and culture into a deity. To make this concept understandable to the modern world, both Marx and Nietzsche had to deny the existence of a separate, divine God. By removing the idea of a divine power or authority, they paved the way for the god of self-primacy. Ironically, their philosophical views fully supported the denial of God, despite both being raised as Christians—Nietzsche was even raised a Lutheran! Over time, their interpretive reasoning led them to transform their own autonomous free will into a deity of their own making. This radical departure from traditional thought on the reality of God results in a lack of shared interpretive exchange and leaves their philosophy without the fulfillment of a hermeneutical circle. If we view our human condition as one of inevitable decline, just like all the other elements in life—something even the Buddha observed—and acknowledge that we are constantly decaying, then the conscious choice that no other option exists besides our own self-primacy results in a futile and deadly flaw. Self-primacy alone seems ill-equipped to protect its own best interests. From this perspective, both Marx and Nietzsche illustrate the danger of complete submission to self-primacy, marked by the absence of spiritual hermeneutical exchange.

Inward? – or Upward and Outward?

HAVING EXPLORED THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND theological dimensions of self-primacy, we shift focus to the will and practical Christian living. We examine how believers can balance inward self-care with the upward call to love God and the outward responsibility to love others, as outlined in Scripture.

Our current "culture of death" arises from an Enlightenment influence that has turned inward and been bewitched by our solitary transcendental ego, as described by Immanuel Kant. Therefore, my essay title asks: "inward or upward and outward"? To illustrate how our human interpretive understanding develops with an will that reflects a Christian way of living, let us first remember that the entire Law can be summarized into two simple, familiar commandments: "'love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your strength, and all your mind,' and 'love your neighbor as yourself.'"[14] Loving the Lord is upward, and loving our neighbor is outward. Neither is inward, although we must acknowledge that inward attention is, to some extent, necessary and a vital responsibility. Two specific philosophers can be cited to help address this issue within self-primacy, each providing a path that any Christian can follow to recognize the necessary distinctions in this pursuit and ultimately avoid overemphasizing the self. Each example will also show how one of these two aspects of the Law is honored and fulfilled.

Johann Georg Hamann played a passionate and outspoken role in the "Counter-Enlightenment" movement of the 18th century, addressing one of the key issues in the tendency toward self-primacy. As James C. Livingston explains, Hamann's conviction of faith sees the foolishness in overemphasizing human reason and gets to the heart of the issue:

> Hamann reads the Enlightenment devotion to reason as *the* modern form of idolatry [where he says to Kant, et al.]: "The object of your reflections and devotion is not God, but a mere word-image, like your universal human reason…." Hamann's attack on the pretensions of rationalism is a crucial element in his … understanding of religious faith."[15]

Taking a somewhat unconventional cue from David Hume, Hamann recognized that the human mind must see itself as humble and proper, rather than elevating reason—which often dominates—to the level of absolute authority. This positioning of human reason in relation to (and in opposition to) God's divine authority is clearly shown as inappropriate in Hamann's downplaying of self-primacy, where he instead clarifies the correct way to frame the human mind before the Lord God. According to Livingston,

> Hume correctly insisted that reason has a way of dissolving our common-sense view of the self and the world and brings us to ignorance….

Hamann saw in ignorance a real and positive point of departure for faith. And for Hamann faith was intimately tied to the Christian virtue of humility. Our consciousness of the limits of reason engages our whole person, which issues in a new and vital awareness of our existential plight and thereby opens the way for an active faith…. For while faith lies *beyond* reason, in the sense that faith comes to an awareness that our real existence is not merely an affair of *ratio*, it nevertheless engages our whole person. Just as faith needs reason, so reason also needs faith; they are … dialectically related.[16]

Hamann's viewpoint underscores a key critique of prioritizing rationality as the most important part of our thinking. It suggests that when we focus on reason as our main interpretive tool and overlook the faith elements needed to complete a hermeneutic circle of understanding, we are not truly loving God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. Instead, we are raising our self-primacy—particularly, relying on our reason—above everything else. Hamann highlights an appropriate way to view our self-concept but also makes it clear that, because we live in a state of human freedom, we should not completely dismiss reason. As Oswald Bayer explains,

Humans live out their freedom and use their reason in criticism and politics. The perversion of their use of reason does not indicate the need for flight from it, but for its liberation and renewal. But even renewed reason situates the human at a distance from the environment and always includes behavior that makes of nature an object … an inclination now more and more on the increase, even in theology and church.[17]

How a Christian should understand and interpret everything they know and hear reflects Hamann's view that the Lord God should be recognized in all things, both in our work and our faith.

Hamann also criticizes this same mis-priority when discussing Johann Gottfried Herder's *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, where he emphasizes a crucial distinction in the nature of language's origin. According to Oswald Bayer, Herder sees the origin of language as entirely given by human freedom, but Hamann considers it much more as part of a uniquely *created* nature from God, which humans share in; therefore, they participate together in language.

If Herder's thought experiment is concerned with setting the human "in the of condition of awareness which is one's very own"—the human is to be what he is—if the human must still discover "what is natural to him," and "is himself the purpose and goal of his endeavor," then Hamann sees such circular relation to self burst apart by the fact that the human is addressed, and in such fashion that the address that *creates him* is mediated in world-

ly, in human fashion. As creature the human is addressed by the Creator through the creature, initially through one's parents, through those whose care speaking becomes as easy "as a child's game." The word draws near to the human. In the word of address which is God, "with this word in his mouth and in his heart the origin of language was as natural, as close and easy, as a child's game…."[18]

Hamann asserts that, as *created* beings, language must originate with God and be given to us for the essential purpose of fellowship with God, which He (God) establishes within us—and not with any other creatures! Therefore, they must be seen as beginning together, especially as the "master-key" element and the foundation of all our knowledge. Bayer elaborates:

> The question as to whether language is of divine or human origin rends asunder what inseparably belongs together…. The absolute beginning and goal are given here and now, at a center, in the midst, in which divinity and humanity unite and the Creator comes so close to us that a more fervent "union, fellowship, and communion," a more intimate *communicatio* of God and the human, God and world, cannot be conceived. "This *communication* of divine and human *idiomatum* is a fundamental law and the master-key of all our knowledge."[19]

To Herder and others who claim that the origin of language is exclusively human, Hamann affirms his belief that God must be recognized as the originator of everything that makes us human, especially language, since it serves as the means of dialogue between God and man. His reference includes Immanuel Kant's concept of the transcendental ego, which is based on and requires the necessity of our conscious self-primacy in any human judgment. It is clear that a focus on self-primacy in society has become much more common in the more than 300 years since the Enlightenment began shaping our culture, emphasizing this individual personal interpretive process. Hamann observed and recognized this flaw in thinking even as it was developing. Instead, we can envision a hermeneutical dialogue with the Creator that can rightfully be understood as loving God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. Bayer provides a clear overview of how Hamann's "Counter-Enlightenment" critique opposes Kant, even during his lifetime. In doing so, Hamann describes this valuable hermeneutical exchange between God and the believing human, using the terms "dependence" and "autonomy" to refer to these two origins of language, which most directly influence our freedom of thought and perception.

> From these propositions, belonging to the most remarkable set forth by Hamann, it is clear in what way Hamann deals with the Enlightenment and here especially with Kant, as a contemporary, but as *a contemporary in dissent*. For Hamann, dependence and autonomy do not exclude each

other but include each other. By virtue of the granted freedom the human moves beyond mere receptivity and mere spontaneity. The human is neither a mere listener nor a mere speaker, neither merely one who obeys nor one who commands, but always and in every case both, though according to the situation, with a different accent. The human's freedom is a game together with others between gift and appropriation, reception and transmission. The human does not have in hand the beginning and end of this game, but remains a learner.[20]

Hamann's playful term that our freedom is a "game" reflects his belief that language has both divine and human origins. This faith-based reasoning supports his view that God, whom we are to love with all our heart, mind, and strength, is the reigning authority and divine Lord for all humans. In this sense, it demonstrates his commitment to keeping the Law. Here, Hamann presents the idea of a Christian autonomous free will that looks *upward* to God, even when it addresses itself inwardly as is sometimes necessary and responsible. More importantly, it is understood through the Word, the *logos*, in God's revealed will via interpretive faith, where we can respond in the same language as God and are led by the will of God to live faithfully. This forms the hermeneutic circle of Christian faith.

Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas offers a very practical, easy-to-understand metaphor for Christian mentality and spiritual practice. Levinas shifts focus to an external orientation of the autonomous free will and, in doing so, captures the essence of "loving your neighbor as yourself." Here, we see the *outward* turn from ourselves, with any sense of self-primacy being set aside. He encourages believers to always see the "face of the Other," suggesting that our waking reality is shaped by an ongoing awareness of "the face" of others around us and how we can serve or do justice for them.[21] Levinas practically ignores the idea of self-primacy, though the responsibilities that come with it are a natural part of being human, helping us recognize others' needs when the situation calls for it.

Levinas envisioned a circular and reciprocal exchange where human intention exists in the "Other" and then returns to the agent-being as a moral obligation in the situation. In this process, the agent-being is called upon (perhaps we might say "beholden") to respond to, accommodate, account for, and most importantly, be responsible for an ethical interaction and its outcome. Levinas' vision truly inspires empathetic intersubjectivity with others, extending the "welcome of the face" to everyone we meet and presupposing an ethical scope in all daily Christian life. Seeing the Face of the Infinite God in the face of another should prompt a genuine ethical response toward both others and God. Such reflection should be meaningful and motivating for Christians when addressing any needs identified as part of the ethicality and responsibility required in the situation. Levinas' focus

on human intentionality highlights the immanent concerns "faced" by humans every day; it is a crucial motivator that forms a strong foundation for the self in Christian moral life and the vital area where our interests and responsibilities must go beyond ourselves.

> For Levinas it is precisely in the free ethical response to the other in the world that our selfhood emerges. The absolutely other (God) does not at all limit our freedom, it calls it to responsibility, founds it and justifies it. The "same" is a term that Levinas uses to refer to our intellectual thought systems that are disrupted and destabilized in the encounter with the Other. The Other, precisely because it is other and absolutely alterior, stands outside of our own self-same system "here below." This relationship with the other puts into question the spontaneity of one's destiny allowing for human change, resiliency and organic growth throughout life. This dynamic, the dynamic of revelation, is not a harsh one. The phenomenological method brings us closer to the things themselves by positing direct experience of the other as prior to comprehension and language.[22]

If we consider that all "faces" are similarly constructed and that they also all (mostly) participate in the same compulsive intersubjectivity of moral responsibility in this world, then the method used here to avoid overemphasizing self-primacy points to an ideal that involves awareness of and responsibility toward the Other. This is especially driven by the experience of being drawn into a "directedness" that has been perceived from others (or perhaps even from the absolute Other Himself). We might say this is a mirror image of *Gegebenheit*. Therefore, recognizing such "otherness" and giving it proper Christian consideration and response becomes the best way to interpret "loving our neighbor as ourselves."

Conclusion

As Christians, we have a dialogical and familial relationship with God, similar to how a son or daughter interacts with a father or mother, receiving loving guidance, advice, judgment, and critical formation in understanding life. How we interpret each moment, situation, judgment, and decision in our autonomous state appeals to the wisdom and guidance of a loving God as revealed in Scripture. From God, we are given freedom in Christ, but within this autonomous free will, we are permitted to choose what is right according to God's will. In this way, our interpretation of each decision in our life can align with that freedom to follow God's will, which He reveals to us every moment of each day. This freedom does not emphasize self-primacy, even though it is available to us and sometimes necessary; rather, our autonomous free will can rely on the interactive and interpretive fellowship found

through Scripture and in communion with the divine Lord, right here in our lives and language. The way we engage with the Word to interpret ourselves first, then the entire world and those around us, is key to fostering a culture of life and finding a path to escape this "culture of death."

Martin A. Christiansen *is a PhD Fellow at the Institute of Lutheran Theology, serving as Managing Editor for* Verba Vitae, Promissio: A Journal of Confessing Theology, *ILT Press and ILT Media. He is also an Adjunct Assistant Professor for the State University of New York, teaching English, Philosophy, and Religions courses*.

Notes

1. James Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*, 5th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009). This highly readable volume presents a straightforward and predominantly conservative perspective on contemporary thought.

2. "Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness," *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, et al., 1978), 56.

3. Compare Dermot Moran and Timothy Mooney, eds., *The Phenomenology Reader* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), 286-290ff. Martin Heidegger's conceptual program of *Dasein* in his seminal work *Being and Time* provides an extended discussion of the ontological status of the human as a "being-in-the-world" (*in-der-Welt-sein*) and the necessary limitations caused by our finitude. Although the autonomy of our free will occurs within our being, we are always mindful that our being-ness (*Dasein*: "being there" in the world) is a temporary state and thus lends a sense of urgency to any judgement about life that we make. Heidegger makes quite clear that it is at this most foundational level where our conscious interpretations function to influence our personal decisions.

4. Compare Moran and Mooney, eds., *The Phenomenology Reader*, 109-123ff. Edmund Husserl's philosophical concept of phenomenology foresaw an effective use of the human experience of "time consciousness," those ongoing moments of existence which we live through and in which we encounter our reality each step of the way through our lives. Because each moment is only an instant of time, and because these moments of time continually stream into our grasp and pass through into our memory, such interpretive read of our reality and the judgements we make for ourselves as we encounter them are the place, the "frame," where our autonomy engages in its hermeneutical activity. Although Husserl's entire program of the *epoché* where anything outside of our minds is bracketed away is less helpful for this discussion, the moment of our "time consciousness" as it houses our interpretative process allows a vital place for our autonomy to function.

5. The concept of "finitude" comes from a Heideggerian view of the limits of our life, casting a shadow of a cold, harsh reality where we often forget or ignore our deep longing for infinite existence.

6. See specifically John 15:13: "No one has greater love than this: that someone lays down his life for his friends." *Evangelical Heritage Version* (EHV) 2019 Wartburg Project,

Inc. All rights reserved. Used by permission. Compare Moran and Mooney, eds., *The Phenomenology Reader*, 593ff.

7. Compare Moran and Mooney, eds., *The Phenomenology Reader*, 593ff.

8. Theodore George. "Hermeneutics." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2021), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), §1.3. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/hermeneutics/. Accessed December 10, 2025.

9. This is the standard acronym for the Pantone [color] Matching System, commonly used for paint or ink.

10. James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, Volume 1: *The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 231.

11. Ibid., 230 [italics in original].

12. Ibid., 399.

13. Ibid., footnote, right column.

14. See reference in Luke 10:25-28, among others.

15. Livingston, *The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century*, 71-72 [italics in original]; internal quote taken from Hamann's "The Letter H By Itself."

16. Ibid., 72 [italics in original].

17. Oswald Bayer, *A Contemporary in Dissent: Johann Georg Hamann as a Radical Enlightener*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville and Mark C. Mattes (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 109.

18. Ibid., 104 [italics mine]; quotations within cited from various Herder and Hamann writings.

19. Ibid., 105 [italics in original]; quotations within cited from various Herder and Hamann writings.

20. Ibid., 111; [italics mine, pointing out the reference to the monograph title and Bayer's descriptive phrase for Hamann as a rather vocal intellectual objector to Enlightenment thinking even in its earlier stages].

21. Moran and Mooney, eds., *The Phenomenology Reader*, 517.

22. George Drazenovich. "Towards a Levinasian Understanding of Christian Ethics: Emmanuel Levinas and the Phenomenology of the Other." *Cross Currents* 54, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 40.

Bibliography

Bayer, Oswald. *A Contemporary in Dissent: Johann Georg Hamann as a Radical Enlightener*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012.

"Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness," *Lutheran Book of Worship*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, et al., 1978.

Drazenovich, George. "Towards a Levinasian Understanding of Christian Ethics: Emmanuel Levinas and the Phenomenology of the Other." *Cross Currents* 54, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 37–54.

George, Theodore. "Hermeneutics." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosoph*y (Winter 2021), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), §1.3. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/hermeneutics/. Accessed December 10, 2025.

Livingston, James C. *Modern Christian Thought*, Volume 1: *The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century*, 2nd ed. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006.

Moran, Dermot and Timothy Mooney, eds. *The Phenomenology Reader*. London, UK/New York, NY: Routledge, 2002.

Sire, James. *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*, 5th ed. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009.

Promoting a Culture of Life in America

M. Anthony Seel

It was Pope John Paul II who conceived the phrase culture of death,[1] and warned in his encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*,

> because of the extraordinary increase and gravity of threats to the life of individuals and peoples, especially where life is weak and defenseless. In addition to the ancient scourges of poverty, hunger, endemic diseases, violence and war, new threats are emerging on an alarmingly vast scale.[2]

John Paul II goes on to say,

> This situation, with its lights and shadows, ought to make us all fully aware that we are facing an enormous and dramatic clash between good and evil, death and life, the "**culture of death**" and the "**culture of life**." We find ourselves not only "faced with" but necessarily "in the midst of" this conflict: we are all involved and we all share in it, with the inescapable responsibility of *choosing to be unconditionally pro-life*.[3]

John Paul II identifies "new threats to human life," utilizing words taken from the Second Vatican Council:

> Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia or willful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where people are treated as mere instruments of gain rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others like them are infamies indeed. They poison human society, and they do more harm to those who practice them than to those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are a supreme dishonor to the Creator.[4]

While we may disagree with one or more of the particulars raised by the Second Vatican Council, we recognize that threats to human life are of concern to all followers of Christ.

On January 8, 2006, in the Sistine Chapel, Pope Benedict XVI was the celebrant at the first baptisms of his papacy. His words at that time were, "In our times we need to say 'no' to the largely dominant culture of death..."[5] At the beginning of a new church year in Advent, 2008, Pope Benedict issued this prayer: "That, faced by the growing expansion of the culture of violence and death, the Church may courageously promote the culture of life through all her apostolic and missionary activities."[6]

During his pontificate, Benedict consistently championed life and fiercely opposed the culture of death that marks our times. He spoke regularly and forcefully against the practices of abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, and the poor treatment of the disabled.

From the third chapter of the Book of Genesis, we see the consequences of rebellion against God and His ways that have metastasized into our current culture of death. From the spiritual death of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3, the story quickly advances to the physical death of Abel at the hands of his brother Cain in Genesis 4. In Genesis 6, we read,

> The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart (Genesis 6:5-6).[7]

God's response to human evil in Noah's time was the flood, which resulted in only Noah and his family being saved. Today, evil's threats to human life are exponentially greater than they were during Noah's era, as demonstrated by the above statement from the Second Vatican Council.

Since the overturning of Roe v. Wade by the Supreme Court, supporters of the right to abortion in the United States have been working hard to limit the damage caused by the Court's decision to the abortion industry. For instance, activists in so-called "blue states" aim to ensure that the abortion industry remains unrestrained,[8] while activists in the so-called "red states" are working to expand abortion rights.[9]

Euthanasia is on the rise in America, with medical aid in dying legal in eleven states and Washington, D.C.[10]

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, "The number of persons prosecuted for human trafficking more than doubled from 2012 to 2022 (from 805 to 1,656 persons). The number of persons convicted of a human trafficking offense

increased from 578 in 2012 to 1,118 in 2022."[11] According to the U.S. Department of State, there are "two primary types of human trafficking, forced labor and sex trafficking."[12] Antony Blinken, the Secretary of State during the Biden Administration, wrote, "Human trafficking is a stain on the conscience of our society. It fuels crime, corruption, and violence. It distorts our economies and harms our workers. And it violates the fundamental right of all people to be free."[13]

We could examine every aspect of Pope John Paul's declaration on the culture of death, but instead, let's focus on the best way to promote a culture of life. Many different approaches have been explored in this effort to change our culture. In this essay, I will mainly discuss the work of John Davidson Hunter and Timothy Keller.

For the church, one approach is the culture warrior strategy, which aims to influence the political sphere through pressure groups. Whether it is National Right to Life, Focus on the Family, the Moral Majority, the Christian Coalition, or many other organizations, this method has achieved limited success. The overturning of Roe v. Wade stands as the most historic victory for the Christian Right in recent times. However, for nearly every Christian Rights group, there is usually at least one opposing organization. For instance, the goals of National Right to Life are countered by the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights.

Some, like author Rod Dreher, have argued that Christians should build an alternative culture outside the mainstream. This would include churches, parochial schools, and Christian businesses. Dreher's work echoes Alasdair McIntyre's call for another St. Benedict.[14] After the fall of the Roman Empire, monasteries, Benedictine and others, played a key role in preserving and cultivating a culture of life during a time of great upheaval.[15] However, unlike Dreher's vision, the monastics whom sociologist John Davison Hunter describes as "the cultural vanguard" during the fifth and sixth centuries were "mission-oriented," extending themselves beyond the cloistered world of their monasteries.[16]

Benedictine communities continue today as they did in the fifth and sixth centuries, remaining separated from the world, in accordance with the Benedictine vow of stability. Stability, in the Benedictine tradition, means staying in one monastic community for the rest of a monk's life.[17] Unlike the Franciscan and Dominican orders, Benedictine monks generally do not travel outside the monastery for purposes of evangelism, preaching, or teaching. Because of this, the Benedict Option has little influence on the wider culture. Perhaps a Franciscan or Dominican approach would be more impactful, but even these methods are unlikely to make much difference in a diverse society like America. How can Christians bring life amid a culture of death?

The aforementioned John Davison Hunter has wrestled with the issues surrounding influencing culture in his work titled *To Change the World*. He notes that in the

---

sixth and seventh centuries, monasteries served as "centers for learning," making significant contributions to Western culture.[18] Another aspect of influencing society was the evangelization carried out by the monasteries. The strategy of the evangelizing monastics was to target the highest levels of society, believing that reaching the elites would lead to a broader diffusion of the Christian faith.[19]

Referring to the period from the fifth to the eleventh centuries, popularly called the Dark Ages, Hunter traces the expanding influence of Christianity as "pagan war-kings" were replaced by a "sacral dynasty of Christian war-kings."[20] From Pippin the Short to Charlemagne, Christian influence grew along with the Holy Roman Empire. By the late Middle Ages, changes were underway that threatened the Western social order, including the growth of the Ottoman Empire. Then came the Reformation, bringing internal struggles that threatened the stability and influence of the Roman Catholic Church. According to Hunter, the result was

> an alternative elite that was not bound tightly within the Catholic network, overlapping with other networks of leaders, drawing from the wealth of resources they brought with them–intellectual, institutional, administrative, financial, and political–all in common cause. All of these were nothing short of decisive.[21]

Successive movements in the U.S. include the Great Awakening and the efforts of the abolitionists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In assessing the contemporary scene, Hunter observes that "very few resources within the Christian community, in all its diversity, go to supporting leadership in developing cultural capital in the centers of cultural production."[22] This is where Christianity in America significantly lags behind our predecessors in the Middle Ages and the Reformation. The "culture-producing institutions of society" were once Christian in outlook, but this is no longer the case. Colleges, universities, elite private schools, and Hunter additionally mentions, "even the public schools" that once had "a self-conscious and distinct Protestant identity" now do not. Furthermore, the decline of mainstream Protestant denominations is well documented. Regarding cultural influence, Hunter asserts,

> Since the 1960s, none of the movements in contemporary Christianity have been prominent in creating, contributing to, or supporting structures in the arts, humane letters, the academy, and the like; structures that either explicitly express their faith tradition or that are implicitly compatible with or reflect the assumptions of their tradition.[23]

Hunter's strongest indictment is that Christians are less influential in America today "*because they have been absent from the arenas in which the greatest influence in the culture is exerted*."[24] His verdict is that "the idea that American Christianity

could influence the larger culture in ways that are healthy and humane is, for the time being, doubtful."[25] Yet, as Hunter sees it, Christians are still called to what he terms "faithful presence."[26] He interprets the Great Commission broadly in a way that might bother some evangelicals and fundamentalists:

> The church is to go into all realms of social life: in volunteer and paid labor, skilled and unskilled labor, the crafts, engineering, commerce, art, law, architecture, teaching, health care, and service.[27]

This understanding of engaging with the whole world isn't exclusively for evangelism and discipleship. While emphasizing the importance of proclaiming the Gospel, this broader perspective of Christians being faithfully present in the world serves the well-being of "a new city commons," where the church lives "within a dialectic of affirmation and antithesis."[28] The author elaborates on his vision by first referencing the prophet Jeremiah, who writes from Jerusalem during the Babylonian exile.

> Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their produce.

> Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage; multiply these and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.[29]

Hunter believes that "this is a word for our times." He explains that "A theology of faithful presence calls Christians to enact the shalom of God in the circumstances in which God has placed them and to actively seek it on behalf of others."[30] Hunter has already told us that he believes the church is not in the places where "the greatest influence in the culture is exerted."[31] Yet, in our current context, the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives is a professing Christian.[32] Six of the justices of the U.S. Supreme Court are professing Roman Catholics, five of whom were nominated by Republican presidents and are part of the more conservative voting bloc on the court.[33] Many years ago, President Jimmy Carter proudly proclaimed that he was a born-again Christian.[34] If professing Christians can rise to these seats of power, what prevents them from holding prominent positions of influence in other parts of our culture?

One of the issues Hunter repeatedly addresses is power. Of the three essays in his book, one focuses on the use and misuse of power. In this essay, he analyzes the statements, practices, and goals of the Christian Right, the Christian Left, and Neo-Anabaptists. He recognizes that "the forces of secularity in contemporary America, within such institutions as higher education, public education, the news

media, advertising, and popular entertainment, are very powerful and their agenda (deliberately or not) is fundamentally at odds with traditional Christian morality and spirituality."[35]

However, he is justly cautious about the accumulation and exercise of power. Despite our best intentions, Christians are just as prone to misuse power as anyone else, as history has shown. The goal to which Hunter directs the church toward is "the renewal of all of life."[36] The church, in its local expressions and wider communions, should be animated by a vision of shalom. In this, Hunter shares the concerns of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

> It is a vision of order and harmony, fruitfulness and abundance, wholeness, beauty, joy, and well-being. For the Christian, this was God's intention in creation and it is his promise for the new heaven and the new earth.[37]

In this light, the church is to affirm what is good in this world, and "work toward the constructive subversion of all frameworks of social life that are incompatible with the shalom for which we were made and to which we are called."[38] Hunter believes that

> ...there are intellectual, economic, and managerial resources available within the church and among Christians to make a profound difference in every sphere of life – the social welfare of the needy, the environment, education, the arts, academia, business, community formation and urban life, and so on; and at every order of magnitude – the local, the regional, the national, and the international.[39]

But if he truly believes this, why is he so pessimistic in other parts of his work? Why does he say, "the idea that American Christianity could influence the larger culture in ways that are healthy and humane is, for the time being, doubtful"?[40] He does end his work on a muted but hopeful note.

> Certainly, Christians at their best, will neither create a perfect world nor one that is altogether new; but by enacting shalom and seeking on behalf of all others through the practice of faithful presence, it is possible, just possible, that they will help to make the world a little bit better.[41]

What happens between his pessimism and his muted, yet hopeful note? The church happens in three movements: the Christian Right, the Christian Left, and the Neo-Anabaptists, all responding to the challenges of secularity, pluralism, and radical skepticism.[42] There are also new communication technologies that have "transformed the nature of consciousness and culture as well." The author acknowledges that "We find ourselves in territory that is less and less familiar."[43] The three paradigms—the Christian Right, the Christian Left, and the Neo-Anabaptists—are insufficient answers to address the new challenges this less familiar territory pres-

ents to the church. Hunter calls for an alternative to these paradigms, once again, advocating for the way of faithful presence outlined above. His pessimism stems from his belief that the church will resist moving away from the three paradigms of cultural engagement that are now evident.

The late Tim Keller, who founded Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, and the Redeemer City to City church planting organization has wrestled with Hunter's work, as well as the work of Richard Niebuhr (*Christ and Culture*), Leslie Newbigin (*The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*), and many others who are deeply concerned with how the church can make progress in cultures that have largely abandoned their Christian heritage, primarily American culture. Keller's work can be constructive for us as we seek to bring a culture of life to the culture of death that surrounds us in America.

Keller sees our cities as a necessary focal point for our missional efforts. As we observe the greying of our American congregations, Keller observes how

> Urban centers have higher percentages of single people, and it is far easier for a single Christian to get a single non-Christian friend to come to a church gathering than it is for a Christian family to get an entire non-Christian family to come. Singles make unilateral decisions (without having to consult others), tend to spend more time out of their homes, and are more open to more experiences.[44]

Keller convincingly argues that the church needs to focus its planting efforts on cities. If we accept the logic of Keller's observation, where does that leave us? Those of us who do not live in cities can still grow as singles become married couples and some, if not many, migrate away from cities to the suburban and rural areas where many of our churches are located. How do we reach those couples and families? Keller advocates a wide range of strategies, and he provides a framework for any missional activity.

Keller describes what Redeemer Presbyterian Church does using an analogy of hardware, middleware, and software. Hardware represents the doctrinal foundation, which for Redeemer is the Westminster Confession of Faith. Software refers to ministry programs. In between these is middleware, defined as "a well-conceived vision for how to bring the gospel to bear on the particular cultural setting and historical moment."[45] This middleware serves as a theological vision that explains how our doctrinal foundation "might relate to the modern world."[46] Keller learned this concept from Richard Lints of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Keller summarizes his understanding of Lints by saying, "a theological vision is a faithful restatement of the gospel with rich implications for life, ministry, and mission in a type of culture at a moment in history."[47]

How is this framework helpful for promoting a culture of life in the midst of a culture of death? As confessional Lutherans, our doctrinal foundation is the Bible as interpreted by the *Book of Concord*. This essay, as a reflection on bringing life to a culture of death, started with how Pope John Paul II defined for us many of the practices that contribute to a culture of death. John Davidson Hunter and Timothy Keller offer us faithful Christian responses to the present culture of death. Hunter and Keller agree that the gospel must be at the center of any Christian enterprise. Hunter interprets our culture and our culture's need (the shalom of God rooted in Jesus Christ). The shalom of God is the flourishing of life in all its God-given and sustained richness. Keller offers a framework for understanding what will shape ministry and mission in specific contexts. Between the two, we have a well-reasoned way forward to a faithful Christian response to the current culture of death that leads toward the shalom of God, which is a culture of life.

M. Anthony Seel *is Pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Chenango Bridge (Binghamton), New York.*

Notes

1. Matthew R. Petrusek, "Why St. John Paul II's Warnings about the "Culture of Death' Matter in a Pandemic," *Angelus*, May 14, 2020. https://angelusnews.com/faith/what-todays-pandemic-reveals-about-st-pope-john-paul-iis-culture-of-death/. Accessed October 28, 2025.

2. John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life: Evangelium Vitae* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1995), 14. See also: *Evangelium Vitae*, March 25, 1995. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html. Accessed October 28, 2025.

3. Ibid, 50 [italics in original; boldface added].

4. Ibid., 14. Here John Paul II is quoting from *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: Gaudium et Spes* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1966), 27.

5. NBC News, "Pope Attacks 'Culture of Death' at First Baptisms," January 8, 2006. https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna10760901. Accessed October 30, 2025.

6. Catholic News Agency, "Pope Benedict Prays That the Church Fights the Culture of Death," December 1, 2008, https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/14483/pope-benedict-prays-that-the-church-courageously-fights-the-culture-of-death. Accessed October 15, 2025.

7. *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

8. Christine Vestal, "Blue States Enact New Laws to Create Abortion Havens," *Stateline*, April 1, 2022. https://stateline.org/2022/04/01/blue-states-enact-new-laws-to-create-abortion-havens/. Accessed October 22, 2025.

9. Sophia Resnick, "Voters in at Least Seven States Restore Reproductive Rights," *Maine Morning Star*, November 6, 2024. https://mainemorningstar.com/2024/11/06/voters-in-at-least-five-states-restore-reproductive-rights/. Accessed October 22, 2025.

10. "States Where Medical Aid in Dying is Authorized," *Compassion and Choices*. https://compassionandchoices.org/states-where-medical-aid-in-dying-is-authorized/. Accessed October 16, 2025.

11. Bureau of Justice Statistics, "Human Trafficking Data Collection Activities, 2024," October 2024. https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/human-trafficking-data-collection-activities-2024. Accessed October 27, 2025.

12. U.S. Department of State, "Understanding Human Trafficking Fact Sheet," January 20. 2025. https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Understanding-Human-Trafficking_LOW.pdf. Accessed October 20, 2025.

13. U.S. Department of State, *2024 Trafficking in Persons Report*, June 2024. https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/TIP-Report-2024_Introduction_V10_508-accessible_2.13.2025.pdf. Accessed October 21, 2025.

14. Alasdair McIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 263.

15. See Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997).

16. John Davison Hunter, *To Change the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 58.

17. Rule of St. Benedict 58:17-18a. See Dom Paul Delatte, *The Rule of St. Benedict: A Commentary* (London, UK: Burns, Oats & Washbourne, 1921), Chapter LVIII.

18. Hunter, *To Change the World*, 58.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 61.

21. Ibid., 74.

22. Ibid.

23. Hunter, *To Change the World*, 88.

24. Ibid., 89 [italics in original].

25. Ibid., 92.

26. Ibid., 243.

27. Ibid., 257.

28. Ibid., 281.

29. Jeremiah 29:4-7.

30. Hunter, *To Change the World*, 278.

31. Ibid., 89.

32. Sarah Beth Hensley, "What Role Speaker Mike Johnson's Religious Views Play in his Politics," ABC News. https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/role-speaker-mike-johnsons-religious-views-play-politics/story?id=104366347. Accessed October 27, 2025.

33. Frank Newport, "The Religion of the Supreme Court Justices." Gallup News. https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/391649/religion-supreme-court-justices.aspx. Accessed October 27, 2025.

34. Douglas Brinkley, "Jimmy Carter's Born-Again Christian Legacy," *America Magazine*, October 1, 2024. https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2024/10/01/jimmy-carter-born-again-legacy-247953/. Accessed October 27, 2025.

35. Hunter, *To Change the World*, 167.

36. Ibid., 227.

37. Ibid., 228.

38. Ibid., 235.

39. Ibid., 271.

40. Ibid., 92.

41. Ibid., 286.

42. Ibid., 208.

43. Ibid., 211.

44. Timothy Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 177.

45. Ibid., 17.

46. Ibid., 18. Keller quotes Richard Lints of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

47. Ibid., 19.

Bibliography

Brinkley, Douglas. "Jimmy Carter's Born-Again Christian Legacy." *America Magazine*, October 1, 2024. https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2024/10/01/jimmy-carter-born-again-legacy-247953/. Accessed October 27, 2025.

Bureau of Justice Statistics. "Human Trafficking Data Collection Activities, 2024." October 2024. https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/human-trafficking-data-collection-activities-2024. Accessed October 27, 2025.

Catholic News Agency. "Pope Benedict Prays That the Church Fights the Culture of Death." December 1, 2008. https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/14483/pope-benedict-prays-that-the-church-courageously-fights-the-culture-of-death. Accessed October 15, 2025.

Delatte, Dom Paul. *The Rule of St. Benedict: A Commentary*. London, UK: Burns, Oats & Washbourne, 1921.

Fletcher, Richard. *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997.

Hensley, Sarah Beth. "What Role Speaker Mike Johnson's Religious Views Play in his Politics," ABC News. https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/role-speaker-mike-johnsons-religious-views-play-politics/story?id=104366347. Accessed October 27, 2025.

Hunter, John Davison. *To Change the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

John Paul II. *The Gospel of Life: Evangelium Vitae*. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1995. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html. Accessed October 28, 2025.

Keller, Timothy. *Center Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012.

McIntyre, Alisdair. *After Virtue*. 2nd Edition. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984.

NBC News. "Pope Attacks 'Culture of Death' at First Baptisms." January 8, 2006. https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna10760901. Accessed October 30, 2025.

Newport, Frank. "The Religion of the Supreme Court Justices." Gallup News. https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/391649/religion-supreme-court-justices.aspx. Accessed October 27, 2025.

Paul VI. *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: Gaudium et Spes*. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1966.

Petrusek, Matthew R. "Why St. John Paul II's Warnings about the 'Culture of Death' Matter in a Pandemic." *Angelus*. May 14, 2020. https://angelusnews.com/faith/what-todays-pandemic-reveals-about-st-pope-john-paul-iis-culture-of-death/. Accessed October 28, 2025.

Resnick, Sophia. "Voters in at Least Seven States Restore Reproductive Rights." *Maine Morning Star*. November 6, 2024. https://mainemorningstar.com/2024/11/06/voters-in-at-least-five-states-restore-reproductive-rights/. Accessed October 22, 2025.

"States Where Medical Aid in Dying is Authorized," *Compassion and Choices*. https://compassionandchoices.org/states-where-medical-aid-in-dying-is-authorized/. Accessed October 16, 2025.

The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001.

U.S. Department of State. "Understanding Human Trafficking Fact Sheet." January 20, 2025. https://www.state.gov/what-is-trafficking-in-persons. Accessed October 20, 2025.

U.S. Department of State. *2024 Trafficking in Persons Report*. June 2024. https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/TIP-Report-2024_Introduction_V10_508-accessible_2.13.2025.pdf. Accessed October 21, 2025.

Vestal, Christine. "Blue States Enact New Laws to Create Abortion Havens." *Stateline*, April 1, 2022. https://stateline.org/2022/04/01/blue-states-enact-new-laws-to-create-abortion-havens/. Accessed October 22, 2025.

Book Review Essay

Klaus Detlev Schulz, *Theological Anthropology and Sin*, Volume 5: Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics, ed. Gifford A. Grobien (Fort Wayne, IN: The Luther Academy, 2023), xvi + 292 pp. $29.99

Reviewed by Douglas V. Morton

KLAUS DETLEV SCHULZ'S *Theological Anthropology and Sin* is the ninth volume in the Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics series, published by The Luther Academy. Schulz, a Professor of Pastoral Ministry and Missions at Concordia Theological Seminary and a former missionary to Botswana in Southern Africa, serves as Dean of Graduate Studies and Director of the Seminary's PhD in Missiology program. Drawing primarily on Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, and engaging modern topics and alternative theological perspectives, Schulz aims to provide a more expansive anthropology than is typically found in standard dogmatic textbooks—a goal this reviewer believes he has accomplished.

He defines theological anthropology as the study of human relations with God, others, the environment, and the self. The book approaches this subject from God's viewpoint as revealed in Christian Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. The author identifies three main themes: humanity's original status at creation (relationship with God), the loss of that status through the fall and its restoration in Christ, and how this renewed relationship is expressed in various aspects of life—such as with God, family, society, and the self (xii).

He argues that the question "Who is man?" is not merely "a speculative or cerebral topic" but is deeply tied to the real-life effects of sin. Ignoring this perspective risks an overly optimistic view of humanity and diminishes the importance of the Gospel's gift. While humans are created by God and capable of doing much good, they are also capable of causing great harm to themselves and others. What God promises is not "a world of utopian dimensions but rather one of redemption and forgiveness" (xii).

Schulz divides the book into three main parts: Part One examines humanity's relationship with God, Part Two considers the impact of sin, and Part Three explores how humans live. It concludes with a brief summary of Lutheran Anthropology's meaning and relevance. One may believe that focusing on Lutheran Anthropology

narrows the book too much. However, the book is written by a Lutheran scholar and is intended for Lutheran students and pastors. It can also still be of benefit to non-Lutheran Christians.

Part One: Humanity and Its Relationship with God

Survey of Human Identity and Competing Perspectives

THE AUTHOR OPENS PART ONE BY SURVEYING different views of human identity in Chapter 1. He notes that once dominant biblical and confessional perspectives on humanity now contend with philosophical and scientific alternatives in modern society, resulting in no single, unified Western concept of what it means to be human (3).

He draws on Helmut Thielicke's *Being Human… Becoming Human: An Essay in Christian Anthropology*. Thielicke stresses that humanity has experienced three major "humiliations" in recent centuries: cosmological, biological, and psychological. Copernicus and Kepler removed humans from the center of the universe (cosmological), Darwin's theory of evolution reclassified humans as advanced animals (biological), and Freud argued that subconscious drives, rather than the self's conscious willpower, largely control human behavior (psychological) (4).

Schulz explains that modern anthropology "is the Enlightenment's birth child," having developed into the distinct discipline it is today and often seeking to separate itself from any theological foundation, including God (5). As a result, today's culture endorses a wide array of perspectives on human identity, treating them all "as equally true" (6). This cultural shift stands in marked contrast to the biblical view, which asserts that humans are uniquely created by God and that their true identity is found in their relationship with Him (7).

Theological Structures and Schemes

Chapter 2, "Examining the Life Lived Under God: Theological Structures and Schemes," explores the longstanding diversity of views on human nature, noting that these perspectives predate the Reformation. However, more specialized approaches to anthropology emerged after the Reformation (10). The reformers, including Luther, treated anthropology as an independent theological category that precedes soteriology. In doing so, they could emphasize Christ's work as the answer to a fundamental problem: humanity's original creation, its fall through temptation, and the resulting irreversible damage to humanity's relationship with God and others (10). Thus, Schulz stresses that the doctrine of "original sin" must also be considered an essential part of theological anthropology.

Since the fall, human nature has been fundamentally governed by original sin and a persistent desire to resist God's will. Schulz argues that true restoration is found only in complete submission to God's gracious and saving will in Christ,

made possible through the crucifixion, which secures eternal life for all (10-11). Therefore, understanding what it means to be human requires moving beyond the original state of innocence and focusing on Christ and the hope of redemption, making a Christological approach essential to theological anthropology. He writes, "True humanity and destiny, temporal and eternal, are Christologically defined" (11).

Thus, he argues that a true biblical anthropology must address Theology (God's nature), Anthropology (human nature), Hamartiology (the nature of sin), and Soteriology (how God saves sinful humans) (11). Schulz also examines major theological frameworks: "Salvation History Scheme," "Law and Gospel," "The Trinitarian Context," and "Two Kinds of Righteousness" (11-17). Additionally, the chapter highlights what humans share with all created life and what makes humans distinct as God's special creations—"yet not God" (18-23).

Interdisciplinary Perspectives and the Limits of Humanism

Chapter 3 highlights the importance of integrating philosophy, biology, sociology, psychology, neuroscience, and cultural anthropology into anthropological studies. Schulz notes that these fields contribute to "functional anthropology," but their humanist and naturalistic perspectives rely on empirical methods, limiting their scope. Philosophical anthropology often overlooks theological issues such as God and metaphysics, resulting in views that contrast with those of theological anthropology (26). However, he encourages dialogue between Christian anthropology and the sciences, citing Luther's "Disputation Concerning Man," which identifies reason as distinguishing humans from animals (27). Although sin affected human reason, it did not erase it, leaving it to play a role in humanity's use of the sciences. At the same time, philosophy and science often overlook the impact of the Fall on creation. Philosophy, therefore, either denies the Fall or offers inadequate solutions for understanding its effects (29). This prompts the author to stress that, apart from Christ, humanity cannot regain the original state it had before the Fall. He also notes that Martin Luther views anthropology not simply from the past or present but from a teleological angle, continually considering humanity's ultimate purpose and destiny (30).

The fallen condition, according to the author, is one in which people are dominated by original sin—a form of spiritual bondage or irresistible tendency that affects every aspect of a person and drives them to defy God (31-32). By contrast, most modern anthropological perspectives, especially those shaped by Kant and the Enlightenment, regard humans as self-sufficient, rational beings who possess dignity and exist independently of any notion of God (38). The emergence of Darwin's evolutionary theory brought about a more negative outlook on humanity's status in the universe, highlighting constraints on human influence within evolutionary development. Nietzsche, in particular, denies that humans possess distinct worth or special status, influencing present-day views of human nature (51). Schulz observes that when anthropology

excludes God, it loses an external and objective basis for morality, resulting in the belief that human worth is determined by standards people devise themselves. These ideas are troubling from a theological perspective because they ignore the influences of sin, evil, and the necessity for personal responsibility (52-53).

The Image of God in Humanity (*Imago Dei*)

Chapter 4, "The Theological Contribution to Anthropology: The Image of God," examines how Martin Luther and Lutheran Orthodoxy interpret the *imago Dei* in humanity. The author explains that, according to Luther, the original human was created to reflect God's qualities, with intellect and will properly aligned toward God, resulting in a perfect relationship and a life of righteousness (55-56). The loss of this image meant losing right relationships with God, others, and the world (57). Restoration of the image, according to Luther, begins when individuals are renewed through faith in Christ, leading to a genuine relationship characterized by fear, love, and honor toward God—not merely possessing these traits but actively engaging with God (57). For Luther, fear and trust in God serve as the criteria for the *imago Dei* when present and for original sin when absent. (57).

Post-Reformation orthodox Lutheran theologians, such as Johann Gerhard, accept Luther's view that "the image of God in man at first was the righteousness and holiness of truth," yet "after the fall, men must be renewed in accordance with this" (58). However, they also broaden Luther's concept of the image, arguing that although humanity lost the original righteousness and holiness through the fall, certain attributes remain: the human soul, "mind, will, and memory," "general similarities to divinity," "dominion over other creatures," and "moral principles." These were not lost, but only "the righteousness and holiness in which man was originally created" and only "received in Christ in the context of restoration" (59). By contrast, Luther views the image of God not as an essential possession but as an accidental—relational rather than substantive, with only Christ possessing it in essence (61). This perspective underscores the central role of Christ's justification event in understanding the image of God and affirms that believers experience its restoration now, even though its complete fulfillment awaits Christ's return (85, 88). Later orthodox Lutheran thought emphasizes the image's relational and accidental nature, connecting it to Christ, through whom restoration occurs (80). Contemporary theological debates explore whether the *imago Dei* is a substantive quality, a functional capacity, or a relational, non-substantive aspect (68-89).

The Structure and Origin of the Human Person

Chapter 5, "The Structure of the Human," examines what constitutes a human being (90). The author contends that, while humans share "bodily existence" with all other earthly creatures, they are set apart as possessors of the soul (90). The remainder of

the chapter explores the origin of the soul and considers several major perspectives: traducianism, which holds that the soul is inherited biologically through parental seed or sperm (92-94); pre-existentialism, which maintains that the soul exists prior to the body (94-95); and creationism, which holds that God uniquely creates each soul for every individual (92-97). The author also discusses the debate over whether humans consist of three distinct components—body, soul, and spirit (trichotomy)—or just two—body and soul (dichotomy). He notes that Martin Luther initially favored the trichotomous model but later adopted the dichotomous perspective (100, 103). He concludes that human nature definitely consists of body, soul, and spirit. However, he also notes that Scripture does not clearly state whether the soul and spirit are distinct or essentially the same, leaving the matter unresolved (104).

Modern Theories of Human Origin

Chapter 6, titled "Past and Contemporary Discussions on the Origin of Humans," concludes Part One and surveys prevailing modern theories of human origins. Schulz highlights the intersection of theological anthropology with disciplines such as physical and biological anthropology, which study human anatomy, primates, and the origins of humanity (105). This is one of the shortest chapters—only six pages. It would have been better if it were longer and more in-depth. He notes that while certain theories have lost traction due to more recent findings, a notable development was the unearthing of fossil remains by paleoanthropologist Donald Johansen in Ethiopia in 1974. This find, which Johansen named "Lucy," was identified by researchers as the skeleton of a female who lived approximately 3.2 million years ago and was likely a member of a pre-modern human species known as Australopithecus afarensis (105). Schulz considers Johansen's findings and interpretations representative of efforts to account for the origin of humans with theories that do not take the biblical creation narrative into account (105).

He concludes that theological anthropology offers a distinct perspective on human nature, emphasizing that human existence is fundamentally rooted in a relationship with God. This relationship shapes beliefs about origin, purpose, and meaning and distinguishes humans from animals through God-given personhood and intellectual abilities. In contrast, attempts to explain human existence without reference to God lead to epistemological and philosophical dead ends (111-112).

Part Two: The Tragedy of Human Existence—Sin and Its Effects

The Nature and Effect of Human Sin

PART TWO, "THE TRAGEDY OF HUMAN EXISTENCE," examines a subject often overlooked in secular anthropology: the nature of human sin, its origins, how it operates, and how the world's major religions understand and address it.

The Nature and Effect of Sin

Chapter 7, "Sin, Nature, and Grace," examines the far-reaching effects of sin on human nature and relationships. Schulz describes sin as a pervasive force impacting every aspect of life for both believers and nonbelievers (115). Drawing on Luther, he identifies the core issue as humanity's inward-turning self-obsession (*homo incurvatus in se*), which leads to self-destructive love and a lack of genuine love for God or others. The author asserts that only a transformation through faith in Christ, who addresses sin at the cross, can resolve this problem; otherwise, the root issue remains unresolved, affecting not only our understanding of sin but also our efforts to address it. The chapter reviews historical debates, including Gnosticism, asceticism, Platonic and Neoplatonic thought, Donatism, Pelagianism, and semi-Pelagianism, as ineffectual solutions—and how church fathers across eras responded (116-125). Schulz particularly focuses on Roman Catholicism, detailing differences from Lutheranism regarding original sin: the Catholic exemption of Mary from sin through the Immaculate Conception, the view that original sin weakens rather than completely corrupts moral capacity, and the belief that baptism erases original sin, leaving only a neutral inclination (125-128). He notes the persistence of semi-Pelagianism in many Protestant circles, highlighting ongoing disagreement among Christians about humanity's original state, the extent of the Fall's damage, and the resources for recovery in Christ (128).

The author concludes the chapter with his "Lutheran Contribution: The Proper Discovery of Sin," arguing that while Christians differ on original sin, secular research goes further astray by identifying only surface symptoms of deeper problems, as the actual "disease"—original sin—remains beyond the reach of empirical study (129). He claims that unregenerate people's understanding of sin is shallow because they neither recognize nor admit the root cause, often blaming others and refusing to acknowledge their own unbelief or denial of God's Word as the underlying issue. For Schulz, this "penetrating truth" is what Scripture reveals about all people, linking them to Adam and Eve (129). The chapter ends with a summary of the Lutheran view: the cause and seriousness of sin, its total impact, humanity's helplessness under the condemning law, and the Gospel's unique power to set people free (129-135).

The Doctrine of Original Sin

In Chapter 8, "Original Sin," Schulz presents a thoroughly biblical and Lutheran perspective on the nature of sin, emphasizing four key aspects: its essence, properties, causes, and consequences—especially death and the effect on free will (136). He challenges contemporary views that attribute evil to societal influences, instead locating the root of all sin in Adam's original transgression, which is inherited by every human through natural "conception and birth" (136). He asserts that this in-

herited sin thoroughly corrupts human nature, rendering people incapable of genuine goodness and inclined toward evil, thereby subjecting them to God's wrath (136). Schulz defines original sin as the loss (*privatio*) of righteousness and true "knowledge, trust, fear, and love of God," followed by a corrupted disposition (*habitus*) opposing God (138-139). He notes that while Enlightenment optimism dismisses this view as overly negative, a biblical anthropology must recognize that humans cannot claim neutrality toward evil; rather, evil dominates human nature (150).

Our author challenges the notion that humanity can achieve moral improvement or perfection through education, technology, or self-help, warning that such beliefs ignore the profound reality and consequences of sin. He concludes by emphasizing the seriousness of sin's consequences: spiritual, physical, and eternal death (153-154), and warns against reducing sin to mere error or something easily remedied. Without the grace found in Christ and received through faith, people are left with superficial responses to sin and death—a tendency common across cultures and eras.

The Ongoing Struggle with Sin

Chapter 9 addresses "The Ongoing Struggle with Sin," describing the *homo incurvatus in se*, the human being as one "who is turned in on himself" (156). The author emphasizes that this concept is a significant aspect of theological anthropology, held by Augustine and Luther. He stresses that "the incurved human being puts the self before anything and anyone else" (156). Even more bluntly: "If the absence of sin would enable humans to truly love God and one another, then sin's presence is fundamentally a selfish occupation with oneself, both inwardly and outwardly" (156). This is true for all people, even the believer who has been given a "new life in Christ" (157). While the Christian is in the present possession of "the righteousness of Christ," in himself he is not there yet and lives "in the hope of its full manifestation" (157). The believer still must contend with the "selfish 'I'" as a "constant threat and reality in [his] Christian life because he is not free of sin," and thus carries the need for faith to maintain "an extrinsic focus on the cross for forgiveness and for the drowning of one's old Adam" (158).

For Luther, as for Augustine, "baptism extinguishes the guilt [of sin] … the proclivity to sin remains; thus Paul, like all Christians, is engaged in this battle with sin" (160). For Schultz, this means that while Luther affirms the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work in the Christian's life, his emphasis is on the lifelong battle against the desire to sin in which every Christian is engaged (160). He cites English New Testament scholar C. E. B. Cranfield, who describes two realities existing "simultaneously in the same person, not as 'two successive stages but two different aspects, two contemporaneous realities, of the Christian life, both of which continue so long as the Christian is in the flesh'" (160-161). Therefore, Schultz emphasizes that no

Christian can live without sinning, even though "he is no longer under the dominion of sin and the Law because of Christ" (161).

This section of the book, in the opinion of this reviewer, is extremely important for any theologian's grasp of proper biblical anthropology and for the average lay Christian susceptible to the many false teachings about the Christian life that run rampant in the Christian world.

Actual Sin and Personal Responsibility

Chapter 10, "The Actual Sin, or the Sin We Commit," begins by asserting that actual sins—our wrongful thoughts, words, and actions—stem from the inherited condition of original sin, understood as an inner drive called concupiscence (176). Schulz, citing theologians such as Chemnitz, Gerhard, Hollaz, and Hunnius, explains that sin involves not only outward actions but also an inner attitude of rebellion against God's will, echoing Adam and Eve's original disobedience (176-178). At its core, all sin is rooted in a lack of proper fear, love, and trust in God, though it takes many forms, including both deliberate and unintentional acts (178-179). Schulz also addresses varying degrees of sin, such as venial and mortal sins, and discusses the unforgivable sin—blasphemy against the Holy Spirit—as a persistent refusal to accept repentance and the forgiveness that comes through Christ (180).

A particularly notable section explores "Sin and Societal Structures," in which Schulz cautions against viewing sin solely as the product of social systems. He argues that while sin can pervade institutions and customs, personal responsibility remains central (182-184). He insists that structural sin should not be considered separate from the individuals who create or sustain such systems. He concludes the chapter by addressing the problem of evil and suffering, ultimately urging readers to find the answer not in abstract arguments but in Jesus Christ, where God Himself endures human suffering for all people and offers hope amid pain (184-188).

Sin in Major World Religions

"The Phenomenon of Sin in Major Religions," chapter 11, is Part Two's final chapter. Here, the author presents the religious worldviews of sin, particularly in Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. He notes that while all three recognize sin as an act "performed against principles or laws laid down," they do not recognize "the deeper inclination of a human (concupiscence, AC II) that leads him to perform such sinful acts," nor do they acknowledge the universal guilt and death that extend to all humans because of Adam's first sin (Rom 5:12) (194). This places Christian anthropology in a different category from the other world religions.

At the chapter's end, Schultz compares other religions and Christianity regarding the motivation for charitable acts and cites research in *Altruism in World Religions*

by Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton. According to Schulz, research shows that although "all religions cultivate acts of welfare and charity," none do so "entirely unselfishly and without any interest in reward." This is true, according to Schultz, "for some branches of Christianity" (194-195). His conclusion is that Lutheran Christianity stands apart not only from other religions on this issue but also

> from other Christian denominations in its core understanding, unparalleled elsewhere, of grace and objective justification accomplished by Christ on the cross. Since the reward, the gift of grace, is received already prior to a believer's own actions, he will do charitable acts voluntarily and freely…. Thus, neither reward nor fear of punishment are operative terms in the ethical approach Lutheranism takes (195).

In his conclusion to Part Two, Schulz asserts that the church has a responsibility to openly acknowledge and address the real sins present in people's lives, especially where individuals experience "guilt, fault, pain, anxiety, culpability, and disorder" (197). He emphasizes that, alongside this task, the church should continuously clarify the historical roots, underlying causes, and biological aspects of original sin (197).

Part Three: Human Existence in Action

Ethical Approaches to Christian Living

PART THREE, "HUMAN EXISTENCE IN ACTION," opens with Chapter 12's exploration of "Ethical Approaches to Christian Living," in which Schulz asserts that no one lives in isolation—especially the Christian, who stands in relation to others (201). He frames his ethical inquiry around the Christian's relationship to the world, creation, and self, showing how restoration to God's image shapes daily life. He draws on Luther's explanations of the Apostles' Creed: the first article addresses the Christian's bodily createdness and interconnectedness with people of all backgrounds through vocation; the second focuses on redemption through Christ; and the third concerns renewal in spiritual life through worship and the means of grace (201). For Schulz, co-humanity arises from divine justification, and how people relate to one another belongs to ethics. He emphasizes that human identity is rooted in a relationship with God, in which humans are recipients of God's gifts and respond with gratitude (201). This justification through Christ is the foundation for all Christian views and actions toward humanity (201). He references Romans 12:2 to highlight the trans-formation Christians undergo, emphasizing that justification leads to a reshaping of life in which individuals surrender self-interest for the good of others (202). The Christian's understanding of God's character inspires love of neighbor, and, para-phrasing Luther's ethic that Christians are to serve their neighbors as Christ served them, he does only what benefits the neighbor (202). This impartiality, mirroring

God's, means Christians make no distinctions based on status and treat all people equally, including at life's beginning and end, affirming the dignity and equality of all (202-203).

He also contends that the biblical Lutheran understanding of humanity should challenge other ethical frameworks and views on human and Christian conduct (203). Thus, he critiques virtue ethics (204), pneumatological ethics (205), ethical systems centered on pursuing happiness (205-206), and duty-based ethics, such as Kant's, which emphasize behavioral imperatives over motivation (206). Schulz identifies a significant challenge in contemporary devotion to individualism, a trend intensified during the Enlightenment and Romantic periods, which prioritizes personal rights, freedom, and choice at the expense of community and God. This elevation of the self, Schulz notes, displaces both God and others, undermining core Christian ethical principles (206).

Humanity within Social Structures

In Chapter 13, "Human Existence Set in Broader Structures," Schulz examines how people relate within foundational frameworks such as family, society, and creation. He emphasizes that our status as created beings entails responsibility to others and that both Christians and non-Christians share a common existence, working together on ethical matters for society's benefit. Drawing on Gustaf Wingren, Schulz critiques Karl Barth for downplaying the importance of creation, which, according to Schulz, limits Barth's approach to social ethics by failing to provide guidance for all humanity (217). Schulz argues that Barth's focus on his particular Christology can foster a subjective outlook that overlooks the real-world frameworks in which lives are embedded (218). While Schulz acknowledges that Luther also centers his view of humanity on Christ, he notes that Luther recognizes both the God who created the world and the God who actively works through specific structures, affirming that God's presence continues in the world today. He adds that overly rigid adherence to these structures—what some call "orders of creation"—can be problematic if it ignores the possibility of human abuse, but insists that these frameworks still serve an important purpose and should not be dismissed merely because they can be misused (218-219). Through these divinely established structures, Schulz asserts, human existence is made possible in an inherently social and interconnected way. Thus, he maintains that Lutheran anthropology cannot overlook the social settings addressed by the gospel (220).

He highlights one such structure: the male-female distinction, which he calls a foundational aspect of human existence that gives rise to other social arrangements. He warns that disregarding sexual differentiation leads to confusion in relationships and distorts God's intention for men and women (221-222). In addressing contem-

porary challenges, Schulz argues that attempts to dismiss God's ordained structures as outdated or merely social conventions are misguided. He emphasizes that these structures are rooted in Scripture and urges the church to actively call people to realign their lives with biblical and traditional theological guidance (229).

Vocation, Stewardship, and Christian Engagement with the World

Chapter 14 concludes Part Three by highlighting the role of humans as responsive and responsible coworkers with God. Our author emphasizes that all people are called to acknowledge their stewardship of the world, with vocation serving as the means by which individuals participate in God's providential activity over creation (113). This stewardship extends to caring for all living and nonliving things and carries global significance. Humanity's experience of God's providential care is universal, enacted through all people—Christian and non-Christian alike—under His rule (234).

Schulz describes vocation as a "station instituted by God," a channel for His love and care for humanity (235). Paraphrasing Luther, he notes that although God can accomplish everything Himself, He chooses to work with humans, honoring them by allowing His work to be carried out through their actions (236). His on-going work in creation involves everyone gifted with reason and natural abilities, including those unaware of their role—such as non-Christians working in science, technology, and other fields—still contribute to God's preservation and guidance of creation (240, 243). Despite these positive contributions, Schulz warns of the dangers that human sin brings, as every advancement also introduces potential risks to individuals, societies, and the planet itself.

In his conclusion to Part Three, Schulz explains that Lutheran theology calls Christians to actively engage with the world rather than remain isolated in religious settings, encouraging them to pursue secular vocations (251). Although Christians may feel like outsiders and focus on how society opposes them, Schulz cautions that this perspective can cause them to overlook their important role in serving others as a community and in fulfilling their individual responsibilities through their vocations (252).

Conclusion: The Unique Contribution of Lutheran Theological Anthropology

Our author concludes his book by emphasizing that a Lutheran theological anthropology uniquely integrates insights from non-theological disciplines, interpreting them through the lens of Scripture's revelatory truth. He contends that while empirical sciences—rooted in naturalism—cannot fully address dimensions such as

dignity, the soul, and personhood, theological anthropology offers a more holistic and realistic understanding of human nature (253-254). Rejecting utopian ideals, this perspective grounds human identity in the reality of Christ's righteousness, with the crucifixion and justification through Christ as the central events that inform all other theological claims (254).

He advocates a robust Trinitarian approach, highlighting the triune God's work in creation, redemption, and sanctification. He views the doctrine of creation as a remedy for modern individualism, reminding humanity of its dependence on God's daily provision and its calling as servants and co-workers to honor life through proper relationships and societal structures (253). The creation account, he argues, calls for renewed respect for human origins and bodily existence, offering a universal perspective that challenges self-centeredness. Even as the focus remains Trinitarian, Schulz insists that the Christological dimension—centering on forgiveness and the restoration of the divine image—remains vital (254).

Conclusion of This Reviewer

This reviewer highly recommends the book. It is a necessary refocusing on what is required to fully engage with the subject of anthropology. In our secular age, anthropology is pursued almost entirely without understanding the difference between pre-Fall and Fallen humanity. Thus, the idea is often that when we can improve humanity, a new utopian day will dawn. But to engage in anthropology without acknowledging God, sin, and redemption in Christ is like looking at an object with one eye closed—one does not take in the full view. One understands why secular man might do this, but the church should never allow it to compromise its anthropological view, all because of some illusory hope of gaining better standing with the secular world. The church has been gifted with the one realistic view of humanity. Because of original sin, each person is *incurvatus in se*, turned in on himself. The only fix for this comes through redemption in Christ, where God begins His *imago Dei* in us and will ultimately perfect it when we are totally renewed. That day is not some illusory utopia we ourselves can provide, but our resurrection day, when we are raised totally restored and ready for a new universe, untouched by sin. It may be a difficult message to relate to the secular mind, but it is the only message that actually looks at humanity through God's eyes—through His anthropology.

Douglas V. Morton *is Assistant Professor of Biblical Theology, Christ College, Institute of Lutheran Theology, and Associate Editor of* Verba Vitae.

Book Review

J. Brian Bransfield, *The Human Person According to John Paul II* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2010), xvii + 263 pp. $19.95

Reviewed by Patrick Steckbeck

Scope and Style

Bransfield's aim in *The Human Person According to John Paul II* is not just to comment on John Paul II's theology of the body, but also to relate his teaching to the broader teaching of the Roman Catholic Church and to the thoughts of various theologians. He does this all to "...help readers more easily understand what the theology of the body is all about" (3). He divides his book into three parts: Part 1 explains the factors that shape Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II). Part 2 discusses the Theology of the Body in relation to creation and the fall— including original innocence and original shame. Part 3 covers the Theology of the Body in salvation, or, what John Paul II calls "life according to the Spirit." He ties this section to the call of the Second Vatican Council for the renewal of moral Theology (3).

Stylistically, the book is characterized by the author's wide reading and creative syntheses. He connects John Paul's Theology of the Body to numerous theologians from ancient, medieval, and modern periods. Additionally he demonstrates a solid understanding of the various concerns of church councils. With this, his writing remains engaging and accessible, avoiding dryness or obscurity. He integrates anecdotal stories from his own life, quotations from church fathers, references to literature, and expositions of Bible stories to illustrate his points. The author's richness of detail, combined with lively prose, makes the book enjoyable to read. However, the array of quotations and different ideas being synthesized can over-whelm the reader, making it difficult to discern whether what is being said is John Paul II's Theology, the quoted theologians, or the author's own opinions. This book is not a simple popular-level exposition of John Paul II's Theology of the Body, nor is it purely academic. Instead, it strikes a balance suitable for the well-educated layperson or member of the clergy.

Content

THE FIRST SECTION OUTLINES THE MAJOR experiences that shaped John Paul II (Karol Wojtyla). The author explains that three revolutions are central to his formation: (1) The Industrial Revolution, (2) The Sexual Revolution, and (3) The Technological Revolution/Mass Media. It isn't necessary to reflect much on how these three "revolutions" might influence a man to develop a Theology of the Body. What's notable about these sections is that they serve as helpful summaries of how humans relate to themselves and their bodies. He most effectively summarizes the impact of these revolutions in a single phrase: *acquire pleasure quickly*—where "acquire" comes from the industrial revolution, "pleasure" comes from the sexual revolution, and "quickly" from the technological revolution. For John Paul II, however, the human being must *give beauty slowly*. The issues raised by these three revolutions compound the problems of original shame and reveal, more profoundly, our need for Life According to the Spirit.

Bransfield explores *original innocence* and *original shame* in Part II. Notable for original innocence are some concepts that many believers do not regularly consider. Bransfield also examines other commonly discussed topics, such as the image of God and creation. However, he also discusses intriguing topics such as *original solitude* (83-92), *original unity* (93-103), and *original nakedness* (104-112). While many Christians today are prone to overlook the creation accounts and what it means to be human, Bransfield offers a thorough analysis of topics ranging from consciousness to contraception. In his section on *original shame*, he considers original sin, temptation, choice, and the effects of original sin. What is particularly fascinating is his "seven steps" of sin: the ritual of temptation. In this section, he outlines the descent of man in sin, which will later be linked to with other "sevens" (seven deadly sins, seven virtues, seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, etc.).

After outlining John Paul II's views—as well as the views of other theologians— on sin and the human person, Bransfield enters the third part of the book on "life in the Spirit," a phrase often favored by John Paul II. In connection with his "seven steps" of sin, he discusses a curious section on the "seven steps" of grace. He derives these seven steps of grace from the Gospel of Luke, beginning with the structure of the Holy family (Jesus, Mary, and Joseph) and culminating in the Magnificat. The creativity here is clear; however, one might wonder if the seven steps of sin and the seven steps of grace are actually in the text of Scripture. One of the most beautiful sections of the book follows after this part; it focuses on the effects of grace, which the author titles, "The Efficacious Nature of the Self-Gift of Jesus." Many Bible lovers will appreciate the depth of analysis and ability to draw connections that Bransfield demonstrates in his discussions of Jesus' Cry of Abandonment, His Opened Side, the Prodigal Son, and the Good

Samaritan. One excerpt from his treatment of His Opened Side illustrates the significance of this section.

> Just as Adam's side was opened as he slept in paradise, the body of Christ is opened as he sleeps in death upon the cross. Whereas Adam's body gave forth woman, Christ's body gave forth the Church. The spear pierces into the curve of eternal love, and the curve yields, giving itself up to include even all the sins of man. And in this yielding of love, the wound transforms the spear into a gift… God gives an even more superabundant gift: access to the open heart of Christ. The heart of God, the innermost core of love itself, pours forth in a never-ending cascade of mercy upon man, heals man's sin, and restores his dignity… (177).

Evaluation

CONFESSIONAL LUTHERANS WILL RECEIVE THIS book somewhat in a mixed way. While they will appreciate the cultural critique Bransfield provides when situating Pope John Paul II's life and influences, and how his cultural critiques impact our Theology of the Body, they will also value insights into the nature of Roman Catholic Theology. In the second section, they will appreciate depth of the author's analyses, especially in prompting gratitude for being made in the image of God.

The section on *life according to the Spirit* is where Lutherans will have the most pause, qualification, and concern. Though the Lutheran Confessions emphasize that we grow in *love* and in *fulfillment of the law* more and more, these same confessions are always concerned with works-righteousness and over-introspection (the will curved in on itself). They will likely agree with many points made in this section, but they will find a problem with the author's strong emphasis on what God is currently doing *in me*, rather than on what Christ has done outside of me. Again, these are differences in emphasis; Lutherans believe God works *in them* through sanctification, but the emphases differ.

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

Book Review

Eric Metaxas, *Letter to the American Church* (New York: Salem Books, 2022), xiv +139 pp. $22.99

Reviewed by Nils I. Borquist

THE LIST OF SUBSTANTIAL ISSUES PLAGUING America today appears quite extensive, with problems ranging from extraordinary inner-city violence, pharmaceutical substance overdoses, plummeting academic performance, political strife and division, absolute reliance on digital devices, and personal and national financial stress, which together constitute a significant portion of the concerns. With such an array of plaguing conditions, attempting to locate both causes and possible explanations may be desirable, though with the roots buried deeply within our history and traditions, preventing further toxic spread may be beyond our collective grasp.

However, certain institutions could seemingly provide relief in some capacity, offering answers and commiseration, community, and hope. Writer Eric Metaxas believes that the Church, specifically the Christian Church, is one such entity, yet his book *Letter to the American Church* presents a perspective in which American churches (and their leaders), citizens, and the national government parallel the German Christian churches of the 1930s during the rise of the Nazi regime under Hitler. Recalling the resistance of voices pursuing morality, particularly that of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who bravely stood his ground against the swelling violence toward innocence and targeted scapegoats, Metaxas cajoles American Christians today to unite behind the Word of God to defend their neighbors from the attacks of the unethical, the depraved, and the cruel, which are proliferating through evil ideas and acts in society and poisoning children, adults, and the elderly alike.

Metaxas asks several questions early in the text: how does the United States avoid making the same mistakes as Germany, which endured similar political turmoil? Regarding the Church, what does the institution represent, how can Christian influence positively impact citizens, and how do we produce trustworthy leaders with moral fortitude and the willingness to speak up against harmful practices? As part of the answer to the latter set of questions, Metaxas proclaims that Christians

who "actually live out their faith in all the spheres of their lives so that all of society is blessed," rather than simply attending to services (and their supposed faith) on Sunday mornings, pursue the fulfillment of God's desire for His followers (3). However, regarding the question of staying quiet in the face of damaging actions, Metaxas points to leaders such as Bonhoeffer, William Wilberforce, and Billy Graham, who all defied the acceptability of the notion that protecting those seeking to persecute the innocent, the Christian faithful, and societal ethical absolutes was justified. Essentially, these men represent the voice of the moral right, those defending the Word of God and the liberty of humankind to live by His laws and expectations. Christians should be inspired to continue such models of standing with and by biblical truths.

Another question naturally arises when Metaxas considers America's history: how did we get to this point? He provides a brief chronology of events that have led to the deterioration of proper faith, including the misreading of the idea of separation of Church and State (which Metaxas labels the "wall of separation"), the removal of prayer in schools, deviations in the institution of marriage, and the rising numbers of people defending the right to have an abortion (7). As such cornerstones of America's foundation, a structure largely built upon Christianity, crumbled, Christian leaders primarily stood aside quietly and motionless. Why, Metaxas asks, did they actively avoid responding? One major reason, especially noticeable in the social media age, is a fear of being canceled, or removed from the public spotlight, a charge often linked with social ostracization, outrage, and exclusion. For pastors leading churches, alienating the congregation, many of whom are unable to exercise free will and instead rely on following "woke" trends for guidance, can sound the death knell for the business of the church. Additionally, the common belief in Christ's passivity has become ubiquitous, so submission to the looming voice of the political left appears, for them, to be truly the way of the Savior. As Metaxas continues, he exclaims that these misreadings, these outright weak and cowardly premises, will undoubtedly lead to further issues and societal division.

Returning to the downfall of Germany in the 1930s and the role of the Church in that decline, Metaxas declares that an inability to exercise foresight led to rapid damage. The Church proved complicit in the Nazi movement due to complacency, the sense that the Church was basically untouchable, a powerful force that no political or military regime could overwhelm. However, history repeatedly proves otherwise. That complacency, then as now, usually aligns with ignoring ominous foreshadowing of turmoil, war, and the destruction of communities, traditions, and cohesion.

Metaxas leans heavily on Bonhoeffer's works and ideas, which is to be expected given his prior book devoted to Bonhoeffer's message and heroism. The parallels between the German Church nearly one hundred years ago and the American

Church today are, however, quite notable, making Bonhoeffer's perceptions seem apt. Much as Søren Kierkegaard described mid-19th-century Denmark, Bonhoeffer described the German Church of his day as "Christianity without Christ," devoid of true faith and wholly reliant on rudimentary religious practice (24). As this laziness coincided with the rise of National Socialism, Bonhoeffer began to realize the likelihood of a terrible future for the country's citizens. Unfortunately, however, Bonhoeffer's warnings went unheeded, even those addressed to the Lutheran Church, still a revered and powerful institution, calling for intervention. With a lack of any action, Metaxas poses a pertinent question: "What did the Lutheran Church of Bonhoeffer's day fear? Losing their respectable positions in society? Did they fear anything at all?"(29). Here, Metaxas raises an interesting point—were Church leaders afraid of being ousted and thus losing possibly cushy positions, or were they so jaded that they never even considered the possibility of the Church's elimination? In either case, they, as a collective group, chose to wash their hands of the eventual bloodshed.

In America today, churches have been forced to reconcile with the dominant presence of social media, so to reach out to active and potential congregants, church leaders resort to building Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter pages, posting pictures of services, clips of songs, and promoting bake sales and recent baptisms. An alignment between the Church and social acceptance has emerged, and this connection feeds directly into another union, that of the Church with the government, though not the government with the ideals of the Church. When the Nazi Party took control of Germany, its leaders sought to subtly ingrain themselves in the Church, certainly because of their awareness of the Church's influence on citizens. Hardly anyone foresaw the carnage to come. Metaxas provides four primary reasons why Church leaders and citizens alike failed to act: "their inability to see things clearly," their insistence on clinging to what they felt "was safe," a departure "from leaning on God," and a loss of trusting God "with what lay ahead" (35). The domino effect from the first problem to the fourth brought submission to Nazi authority, the imprisonment of dissenters, then of those in leadership positions who could be a nuisance, and, finally, executions. As Bonhoeffer witnessed the changes, he implored the Church to stand against the Nazis and gave three reasons for the Church's specific involvement. He believed the "Church was the conscience of the state and must call [the state] to account" or object to governmental wrongdoing. His second point centered on the need and obligation of the Christian Church to "help any victims of the state" (39). Lastly, he looked to the individual Christian as a representative of the Church to act ethically, even against the actions of the Church. Unfortunately, church leaders turned away from Bonhoeffer's ideas, and the parishioners followed along. Metaxas provides a description of the Barmen Declaration, a document written to oppose the German government's takeover of the Church; sadly, the declaration went largely

unsigned by clergy, thus allowing the state to takeover freely. Seventy years later, Charles Colson in the United States drafted the Manhattan Declaration for the same purpose, and, dishearteningly, it, too, was overwhelmingly dismissed. Metaxas, like the drafters of both documents, asked a resounding "Why?"

An interesting perspective on voting or voicing an opinion concerns silence. Again, Metaxas looks to Bonhoeffer for guidance, and the former notes that the latter believed that complacency equates complicity and avoiding speech against wickedness amounts to "participation in their wicked cause" (51). Interestingly, Metaxas writes about the contagious quality of speech. Once someone builds the courage to publicly denounce evildoing, others more easily join the efforts to counter the evil as well. The "price" of speaking out may not decrease, but the willingness to participate in righting a wrong becomes easier within a group. What Metaxas correlates with speaking out is true faith, and exercising such faith on a public stage can be easier to accomplish by following the courageous acts of others. In other words, seeing others defend right may not have anything outright to do with one's possession of faith, but one's willingness to proclaim that faith publicly can be lifted by witnessing the strength of another. This allows the faithful who may be hesitant to outwardly profess their faith to live the lives they desire to live.

What we must avoid is what the German Lutherans achieved, as referred to by Bonhoeffer, namely "cheap grace." Cheap grace, also considered "counterfeit grace," may be best described as the belief in that grace is earned by attending church regularly, proclaiming one's belief in God, and dressing the part, in a sense. With cheap grace, the idea is that one may sin at will, but God will forgive simply because the individual claims to be a devout Christian. Looking at the outcome of German society throughout the period of World War II, the consequences of faith in cheap grace prove foolish, but, almost worse yet, Metaxas boldly states that the very condition of German Lutherans and Church leaders exactly matches the condition of the American Church and American churchgoers today.

The rise of evangelicalism has produced an idolatry of the state of Christianity, or a love of the idea of Christianity and of what it means to be a Christian as defined by the social elite. Being part of this assembly requires silence to a large extent. Speaking out is considered an act of negative judgment, so keeping one's views private is the norm. What becomes acceptable is conformity, yet in amalgamating with the larger group, the individual loses his individuality, his ability to think for himself, and his ability to engage faithfully with the Word of God. Additionally, being an evangelically-minded Christian means avoiding confronting people with uncomfortable truths that need to be addressed; neglecting such conversations makes a person feel as if he is doing the right thing by not upsetting the other person, yet Metaxas claims the opposite, that such an act harms the other person.

Everything Metaxas writes, up to the final few chapters, centers on Americans' submission to social acceptance and avoidance of personal criticism. He writes that "we in the American Church swallowed" the same lies as the German citizenry in the 1930s, and that we have been "similarly silenced from speaking and acting boldly against what we see happening in our own time" (99). Quite bluntly, this is wrong. Metaxas states that Americans should recognize Bonhoeffer's heroism and line up to mimic him. He acted out of true concern, realizing that "truth is truth" (104). Instead, we too often play life as safely as possible, avoiding confrontation and discomfort because we "have drifted from the pure and utter freedom that it means to live out our faith fearlessly" (125). Ultimately, we must learn to return to a deeper level of Christianity, one in which we live our lives wholly and absolutely faithfully and with devotion. We must push back against evil and have the courage to act heroically, selflessly and with pride in our Christianity. Otherwise, we will suffer the fate of those before us who preferred a silent death to a life of love and morality.

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

Book Review

Dennis Ngien, *Paragon of Excellence: Luther's Sermons on 1 Peter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2023), xiv + 241 pp. $32.00

Reviewed by Nicholas Hopman

Dennis Ngien has begun to fill a lacuna in Luther Studies (*Lutherforschung*), namely, Luther's sermons on 1 Peter from 1522 and his broader reflections on 1 Peter. Luther scholarship has concentrated on his use of Paul's epistles to the near exclusion of his work on Peter's. Ngien's book brings 1 Peter into the discussion and finds considerable commonality between Luther's use of Peter and Paul.

In his foreword, Robert Kolb identifies 1 Peter as a catechetical book and sets the stage for Ngien's discovery of the categories that are the basic elements of Christian faith and life in Luther's sermons on 1 Peter. As Kolb notes, by 1522 Luther's theology was reaching maturity, so the timing of the sermons and their basis in a catechetical book make them especially relevant for understanding Luther's theology and, of course, how he presented it to the Wittenberg faithful.

Ngien's introduction is an extended presentation of Luther's theology. The numbered chapters then examine the foundational elements of Christian faith and life that he finds in Luther's sermons on 1 Peter. The first chapter, "God's Word as Performative," is heavily indebted to Oswald Bayer's *Promissio* (1972), which was published in English translation in the summer of 2025. Ngien distinguishes between the living nature of the gospel word, as opposed to the law, and discusses Luther's theological understanding of preaching. Drawing on Luther's preaching on 1 Peter 1:2, "[to those] chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for the sprinkling with His blood," Ngien lays out Luther's essentially trinitarian understanding of 1 Peter.

Chapter Two's ("Christ, the Chief Cornerstone") section on Luther's Christological reading of Psalm 118 in light of 1 Peter 2:10, "once you were no people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy," offers an interesting window into Luther's view of the

Testaments' relationship to one another. Its section on the theology of the cross versus the theology of glory does what has been too rarely attempted, relating the theology of the cross to the majestic doctrine of Christ's full divinity and humanity. This section provides some of the deepest analysis of the 1522 1 Peter sermons in the entire book.

Chapter Three examines Luther's distinction between Christ as sacrament and Christ as example, which he borrowed from Augustine. I found Ngien's discussion of Christ's preaching in hell (1 Peter 3:18) the most interesting section of the entire work. It is essential reading for those interested in the Formula of Concord or in ongoing debates among Christians about Christ's descent into hell. Chapter Four describes Luther's perspective on marriage, while Chapters Five and Six deal with the two kingdoms, respectively.

Luther's sermons on 1 Peter provide some interesting perspectives on the Christian's life in this world. Luther understood that the law could not produce the righteousness that suffices before God and, in fact, made things worse *coram deo*. He did not consider this to make the law unimportant or render right from wrong impossible to discern. The genre Ngien examines—sermons—makes Luther's assertions about the law interesting theologically, as well as ecclesiastically and socially.

Ngien's perspective places a strong emphasis on the freedom of the gospel and the freedom of the Christian. For example, he often quotes and references Gerhard Forde. However, his knowledge and use of contemporary and recent commentators on Luther is encyclopedic. Certain members of the gospel freedom caucus among Lutherans are prone to sloganeering and overly systematic summaries of Luther's theology. Ngien helps by weaving together a tapestry of Luther's theological commonplaces found in these sermons. The fact that not only these sermons but also Luther's thoughts on 1 Peter in general have hardly played a role in Luther Studies makes Ngien's book all the more helpful.

The lengthy introduction is a useful summary of Luther's theology. However, most readers eager to examine a particular sermon series from Luther are likely already very familiar with the topics covered in the introduction. The general discourse on Luther's theology continues through significant portions of Chapter One before turning to the sermons on 1 Peter. At times, one has to rely on the endnotes to identify the passage within those sermons from which the quote or concept comes.

Interested Lutherans and other Christians, including those in undergraduate theology or seminary courses, could benefit from reading the introductory presentation of Luther's theology. Ngien's style is accessible throughout the book, but

Luther scholars can particularly benefit from his work on Luther's sermons on 1 Peter. Hopefully, Ngien's book will also stimulate further work on Luther's use of 1 Peter in his 1522 sermons and beyond.

Nicholas Hopman, *PhD (Church History, Princeton Theological Seminary), serves as Senior Pastor of Our Saviour's Lutheran Church in Iron Mountain, Michigan, and teaches at Christ College, Institute of Lutheran Theology.*

A Call for Papers

Verba Vitae is seeking essay submissions
for the following upcoming issues:

Volume 3, No. 1 (Spring 2026):
  "Christian Vocation as an Antidote to Radical Contemporary Critical Theory"

Volume 3, No. 2 (Summer 2026):
  "Christian Medical Ethics in a Secular Medical Environment"

Volume 3, No. 3 (Autumn 2026):
  "Christianity and Transhumanism: Ethical Considerations"

Volume 3, No. 4 (Winter 2026):
  "Artificial Intelligence: A Rigorous Examination"

Volume 4, No. 1 (Spring 2027):
  "The Issue of Gender: Old and New Perspectives in Conflict"

Volume 4, No. 2 (Summer 2027):
  "The Dawn of Life: Pre and Neonatal Life in Modern Society"

Volume 4, No. 3 (Autumn 2027):
  "The Power of Language: Navigating Ethical Communication
   in the Era of Newspeak"

Volume 4, No. 4 (Winter 2027):
  "Facing the Final Frontier: Divine Perspectives and Social Narratives
   on Mortality"

All essay submissions (on any life-related topic) should be made at:

https://verba-vitae.org

Submitting authors need to register with a *Verba Vitae* account
***Please see the Submissions Guidelines for important information*!**

Any questions should be directed to:

Douglas V. Morton, Associate Editor

dmorton@ilt.edu