

SOMETHING NEW UNDER THE SUN?
A LUTHERAN RESPONSE TO CANCEL-CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been a new phenomenon that has been circling in society called, Cancel Culture. What is it? Is it something that is new or has it been seen before? Is this a legitimate or illegitimate phenomenon? What impact does this have on Christians? If so, how does a Christian respond? To answer these questions, this researcher has looked at the various definitions of Cancel Culture from researchers, political scientists, and social psychologists, and a survey of the general public to come up with his own definition. This researcher has studied the possible history behind this societal phenomenon and what modern researchers have said today and has to come to the conclusion that Cancel Culture is a result of many societal theories. These theories show the impact of cancel culture to modern society that Christians live. This researcher has also looked at what two evangelical authors have said about Cancel Culture and has concluded that their response to Cancel Culture is focused on making a stand for faith. The response from this researcher was different in adding humility, prayer, and patience. Yet, there is no surefire method in responding to someone who is threatening cancellation. This researcher has found reasons to believe that Cancel Culture is a legitimate phenomenon. Yet, in terms of morality, it is nothing new. This researcher concludes that Cancel Culture may be a new term, but the idea and base of Cancel Culture has been around for a long time. A Lutheran responds in different ways to this growing culture of hate. It depends on the situation. This paper is a qualitative study without in-depth interviews.

INTRODUCTION

“What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say? ‘Look! Is there something new? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time.’” (Ecc 1:9–10, NIV). Solomon, the Teacher, in all the wisdom that God had given him, claims that there will be nothing new regarding morality. In his observations as king, father, and husband, he says that everything apart from God is in vain, meaningless, and futile (Ecc 1:1–2). In saying this, he insists that there is nothing new under the sun and if there is anything that has been done, it has been done before and will be done again. Is there truly nothing that is ‘*new under the sun*’ today? Is there something that Solomon did not predict, or was he right? Take, for example, the rise of a “new” phenomenon in our culture called Cancel Culture. Did Solomon predict that too? Did Solomon foresee the social media masses trying to silence each other over controversial opinions with online? Did he predict the culture wars that are in our society where people try to smother their enemies’ opinions with their own opinion? Or was he right? There truly is nothing new under the sun?

The words of the son of David may cause the reader to pause and think about what is truly *new*. On the one hand, some might believe that he did not predict the culture today, he did not live in 21st-century America. He did not see the culture wars or the different ways that people would ostracize each other. On the other, some might say that he was on to something. Maybe if the layers are peeled back and the core issue is found, it is not something *new*. Is this

thing that Solomon wrote about something different from what he saw in his day or is it the same old issue?

There are two goals for this researcher. First, to understand the cultural phenomenon of Cancel Culture. What is this modern phenomenon? Is it legitimate? Is it *new* or something that has been seen long before our time? Secondly, how does a Lutheran respond to this phenomenon? Does Cancel Culture have a direct impact on Christians and specifically, Lutherans? And if so, where do we see traces of it in our Christian lives and how do we respond as Lutherans considering the growing wave of Cancel Culture?

In finding answers to these questions, this researcher has looked at societal data trends, both expert and public opinions, and other Christian literature to prove or disprove its legitimacy. This is a qualitative study without in-depth interviews and will be divided into three sections. The first is cultural shifts seen in our society that contribute to this phenomenon. Secondly, how do other evangelicals respond to this growing tide of Cancel Culture? Lastly, how does a Lutheran respond to it? This is not meant to be a politically driven paper; it will aim to be unbiased. This researcher may use political topics to prove a point but does not support or refute any of these political topics. Before the literature review, terms will need to be defined as to what is Cancel Culture. Afterwards, the first section will be the literature review where we will read what the experts say about this phenomenon. Secondly, we will look at two evangelical authors and what they say about Cancel Culture. Lastly, I will articulate a Lutheran response using some Biblical examples where this phenomenon may have been seen. This is all to achieve the purpose of articulating what Cancel Culture is and *how a Lutheran responds to Cancel Culture.*

DEFINING TERMS

There needs to be clarification on defining terms that I will be using throughout this whole paper. First, the term that needs to be defined is *to cancel*. The verb *to cancel* something is pretty much unanimous regarding what it means. According to the New York Times, it is a consumerist verb and was originally meant to cancel subscriptions, TV programs, and checks.¹ The meaning of this word has evolved in a way and now applies to people. With synonyms like *ostracize*, *silence*, *block*, and *remove*, the terms of *canceling* all have an idea of removal or censorship. For example, as one person *cancels* someone else, they want to block them on social media, maybe remove them from their life, censor their opinion, or ostracize them for different opinions. People will *cancel* each other.

Secondly, *culture* needs to be defined. Even though there are many views and debates as to what *culture* means, three views are worthy of consideration. First, *culture* can be described as the values found in the hearts and minds of individuals.² This is known as the *common view* of

1. Ligaya Mishan, “*The Long and Tortured History of Cancel Culture: The public shaming of those deemed moral transgressors has been around for ages. As practiced today, though, is the custom a radical form of citizen justice or merely a handmaiden to capitalism?*”, New York Times Style Magazine; Dec. 3, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/03/t-magazine/cancel-culture-history.html>. In this, Mishan gives details as to how cancel culture has been perceived throughout the history of the world. From different ages and cultures, there can be many instances of cancellations.

2. James Davidson Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*. New York. Oxford University Press, 2010; 6–7, 32–43. Hunter describes values as simply moral preferences and inclinations toward or conscious attachment to what is good and true. This idea of values guides the actions and lives of individuals in each culture. It shapes everything and culture is made up of and can be seen as an accumulation of all these values and their choices based on them. To go even further, he would say that it can also be seen as a ‘total of beliefs in the world, the big picture that directs our actions and decisions in comprehension of reality’ [Charles Colson]. This is a common view of culture but he says that it falls a little bit because of many reasons. For starters, he says that culture is complex at its heart. He uses the example of language

culture and is important for discussion. Each person has different values in their hearts and minds and it may cause people to have tension in sharing their values. Or if anyone shares those values, they can be *canceled* for them.

Along with this, the other two views of *culture* can be found directly in Carl Trueman's,³ *The Rise and Fall of the Modern Self*.⁴ The second view of *culture*, made popular by Charles Taylor,⁵ can be described as expressive individualism;⁶ the way that someone expresses their individuality rather than being conformed to the things around them. This adds to Cancel Culture through individuals setting their expressions over others. Each person can express individuality and when that individuality is threatened, people can cancel the one threatening them.

to say that one's language helps shape their 'worldview' as a framework of knowledge and understanding. This is something that is seen throughout history in the way that culture is founded upon itself in a given society. There is a connection between the individual and institution and causes infrastructure as much as it is ideas. It is a source of power that makes connections and networks with individuals. It is less straightforward to describe and is like a complex puzzle that seems almost impossible to solve. This is otherwise known as the common view of culture.

3. Carl Trueman is an English Christian theologian and historian. He had served as a professor of Historical Theology and Church History at Westminster Theological Seminary.

4. Carl R. Trueman., *The Rise and Fall of the Modern Self*, Crossway Publishing House, 2020. 2031; 37–52. In his book, Trueman explains the background of the shift of commonplace thinking in the last sixty years. At the heart of his book, he seeks to explain the sexual revolution happening in those years. In seeking to answer these questions, he looks at three modern-day philosophers [Two of which are Philip Rieff and Charles Taylor] and philosophers in the past [Like Nietzsche, Marx, and Darwin]. His book aims to explain why and how a certain notion of the self has come to dominate the culture of the West and why it has manifested itself in the transformation of sexual mores. He also delves into the wider implications of these transformations and may well be in the future.

5. Charles Taylor is a Canadian Philosopher [McGill University] who is known for his contributions to political philosophy, social science, and social psychology.

6. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007, 474–475. In his book, Charles Taylor focuses on what makes an age secular. What needs to be discussed is how to understand the human self. Taylor says that expressive individualism is the way that each person has his/her way of realizing the humanity that we share and the way to live out one's own life. It is against surrendering to conformity to the things on the outside [society, previous generations, religious, or political authority].

Lastly, the third view of *culture*, made popular by Philip Rieff,⁷ can be defined as a design of motives directing the self to look outward toward the community around them to satisfy their wants and desires.⁸ For example, taboos that society places on its people drive them to outwardly act in acceptance or hatred. And when those taboos are viewed as accepted or hated, then it causes other people living in that culture to respond. This is important because each culture has a set of taboos in varying degrees. There are things that people do not like. And when those things are brought up, a person can respond with hostility. This too can apply to the culture in Cancel Culture. People's wants and desires can provoke a response from people.

In combining all these previous definitions of cancel and culture, one could define Cancel Culture as this:

The censoring, silencing, and blocking of expressive values in the hearts and lives of individuals.

This adds to understanding Cancel Culture. As society is made up of many individuals looking to express themselves, their values, wants, and desires can be seen as taboo by others. When these values are threatened, it drives the individual (threatened of being cancelled) toward outward notions of coping with the potential silence.

Still, this definition is not as straightforward. There can be subjectivism in defining terms and we will see the various views of Cancel Culture. The main term that needs to be defined is

7. Philip Rieff is a professor of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania. He wrote the book, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (1966) which describes the societal changes in culture.

8. Philipp Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic Self, Uses of Faith after Freud*, 40th-anniversary ed. 1966; repr., Wilmington: ISI Books, 2006, 25. Rieff describes culture in a very interesting way. Based on the Freudian way of looking at cultural changes; one of which is expressing what the modern man looks like, the psychological man, and how culture survives. He says that culture survives principally by the powers that lose and bind men in a way that they delve so deep into themselves that they become understood. As he understands it, culture is another name for a design of motives directing the self to look outward toward the community around them to satisfy their moral cravings.

Cancel Culture. Based on the previous definitions of *cancel* and *culture*, one could describe Cancel Culture in many other ways based on subjective viewpoints. For example, some could define Cancel Culture as: the values of silencing, the expressive individualistic sense of morality to block people from their lives, or the making of someone or something so forbidden/taboo that there needs to be outward action in their society. While these definitions could work, there needs to be more explanation. Just like culture, *Cancel Culture* is complex and difficult to understand because of many definitions of this phenomenon. Here are (some) sample definitions from experts, dictionaries, random people of the public, and evangelical authors on *Cancel Culture*.

Dictionary Definitions

To start, dictionaries have differences in their definitions of Cancel Culture. Webster's Dictionary defines it as follows: "*the practice or tendency of engaging in mass canceling*⁹. Cambridge Dictionary defines it as follows: "*a way of behaving in a society or group, especially on social media, in which it is common to completely reject and stop supporting someone because they have said or done something that offends you*¹⁰." Based on these two definitions, one could describe Cancel Culture as a practice or as a way of behaving. One could describe it as exerting social pressure (Webster's) or withdrawal of support (Cambridge). These two dictionary definitions show the complexity of defining Cancel Culture. Yet, these definitions have merit

9. Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. "cancel culture", <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cancel%20culture>. Webster's would define *canceling* as a way of expressing disapproval and exerting social pressure to withdraw one's support for someone, such as a celebrity, or something, such as a company publicly and especially on social media

10. Cambridge Dictionary.com, s.v. "cancel culture", <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/cancel-culture>. Cambridge also presents two subpoints to this definition. (1) The main argument against cancel culture is that it doesn't enable people who have wronged society the opportunity to apologize and learn from their mistakes. (2) If you are an Internet user, chances are you have come across the idea that we live in a "cancel culture" or "call-out culture."

because one could argue that Cancel Culture has both social pressure and withdrawal of support. It can be practiced or seen as a way of behaving by people.

Academics and Research

Political scientists and university professors have added insight with their own definitions. Since Cancel Culture is considered a newer term,¹¹ there are only a few but different definitions from the realm of academia. For example, Joakim Wrethed¹² defines Cancel Culture as follows: *As ending (or attempting to end) an individual's career or prominence to hold them accountable for moral behavior*¹³. Pippa Norris¹⁴ defines it as follows: *As a collective of strategies by activists using social pressures to achieve cultural ostracism of targets (someone or something) accused of offensive words or deeds*¹⁵. Both definitions add more to the discussion of defining Cancel Culture. One describes it as ending someone's career for their moral behavior while the other describes it as a strategy to apply social pressures for offensive words or deeds.

11. Mishan, *The Long and Tortured History of Cancel Culture*. References to canceling started in Mario van Peebles's movie, "New Jack City" (1991) where a crime boss used the term to kill someone. Later in 2005, rap song, "I'm Single" by Lil Wayne used the term in the same sense. Then in 2014, the Twitter (also known as X) account of the Comedy Central show, "The Colbert Report" posted a joke that could be seen as offensive to Asians, and an activist [Suey Park] posted with the hashtag #CancelColbert. From then on, Cancel Culture has been seen as a sign of social exclusion of people.

12. Joakim Wrethed is an associate professor at Stockholm University with works in Irish Studies. He also focuses on phenomenology, postmodernism, aesthetics, and theology.

13. Wrethed, Joakim. *Contagion 29*, Stockholm University Press, 2022; 15–38.

14. Pippa Norris is a leading world political scientist and is a professor at Harvard. Her works have been highly regarded by many in the field of political science.

15. Pippa Norris, *Cancel Culture: Myth or Reality?* Political Studies, Harvard University Press, 2023. 145–174.

This shows that the reasons people cancel each other differ, the end-goal for the cancellation, and the way to go about cancelling someone.

In addition to this, PEW Research¹⁶ conducted a survey and asked random people to give their political leaning, age range, and a definition of Cancel Culture in their terms. Here are some of their results in no particular order:

“Cancel culture is a movement to remove celebrity status or esteem from a person, place, or thing based on offensive behavior or transgression.”—Woman, 30’s, liberal democrat.

“[Cancel culture is] a term White people use to complain that their White privilege culture is being outed. The myths of White supremacy are being dispelled.”— Woman, 60’s, liberal democrat.

“I think ‘cancel culture’ means we are living in a time where fans make the celebrity. If the majority of the fan base is offended by something their favorite influencer said or did, that influencer is going to get canceled. A boycott of merchandise, videos, and content will ensue.”— Woman, 20’s, liberal democrat.

“Cancel culture means attempting to punish an individual for an action or point of view by causing them loss of reputation, employment, and social support network.”— Woman, 30’s, moderate democrat.

16. Monica Anderson, Sara Atske, Brook Auxier, Chris Baronavski, Colleen McClain, Andrew Perrin, Margaret Porteus, Meera Ramshankar, Emily A. Vogels, (Researchers of Pew Research Center). *Americans and ‘Cancel Culture’: Where Some See Calls for Accountability, Others See Censorship, Punishment*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/05/19/americans-and-cancel-culture-where-some-see-calls-for-accountability-others-see-censorship-punishment/>. Pew Research Center 05/19/2021. The Pew Research Center is a nonpartisan fact tank that informs the public about issues, attitudes, and trends shaping the world. It conducts public opinion polling, demographic research, media content, and other empirical social science research.

“[Cancel culture is] trying to silence someone that does not have the same belief as you. Basically, [it’s] taking their First Amendment rights away. It violates affected people’s civil rights.”—Man, 50’s, conservative republican.

“[Cancel culture is] a virtual mob whose goal is to punish people who disobey politically correct rules of behavior.”— Man, 50’s, Conservative Republican

“[Cancel culture is] the desire to render ineffective any communication, commercial enterprise, or public discourse from those we disagree with philosophically.”— Man, 40’s, moderate democrat.

“[Cancel culture] means rewriting history and stopping the acknowledgment of facts because they are offensive to a racial, religious, ethnic, economic, group, etc. It is the rewriting of history to make people comfortable by ignoring facts-things that happened or bad. —Man, 70’s, moderate, no stated partisan leaning.

“[Cancel culture is] a synonym for ‘political correctness,’ where words and phrases are taken out of context to bury the careers of people—a mob mentality.”—Man, 20’s liberal democrat.

“[Cancel culture] destroys the ideals that America has stood for. This is a far left revolutionary movement that is about far more than race. It is an outright cultural war on America.”— Man, 70’s, conservative republican.

Depending on the political stance and age group, Cancel Culture is defined in a variety of ways. It can be seen as rewriting history for one (man, 70’s, moderate) to political correctness for another (man, 20’s, liberal). One could say that it is a boycott of a celebrity (woman, 20’s liberal) while another says that it is a ‘taking away’ of political rights (man, 70’s, conservative). With this variety of definitions, one wonders if Cancel Culture is legitimate or if it is a catch all term

for things that people do not like about each other. Yet, this proves it's legitimacy because people recognize the term Cancel Culture and believe that it is real.

It is interesting to note that there are common themes throughout these definitions found by PEW Research. It shows how different the definitions are for Cancel Culture, but a common thread some of the cases. For example, PEW Research categorized for the responses they received into a list.¹⁷

1. Actions taken to hold others accountable.
2. Censorship of speech or history.
3. Mean-spirited actions taken to cause others harm.
4. Canceling anyone over disagreement.
5. Facing consequences like being fired or boycotted.
6. An attack on traditional American society.
7. A misrepresentation of people's actions.
8. A way to call out racism, sexism, etc.

Evangelicals

Of the two evangelicals discussed in this paper, only one defines the term Cancel Culture in his own terms. Joe Dallas¹⁸ defines Cancel Culture as follows: *“That’s why I see Cancel*

17. An interesting observation is that some of the themes on the list have different political leanings. For example, out of the responses for #8, mostly democrats and liberals would define Cancel Culture this way with very few conservative responses. On the other hand, the opposite was true for #6. More republican people responded with #6 as their definition of Cancel Culture. It is also interesting to note that all of them had different ages and sexes, and there were no exclusive partisan leanings for any responses. Each response had at least one liberal and conservative.

18. Joe Dallas is an evangelical author, speaker, and counselor who speaks nationwide. He is the founder of Genesis Biblical Solutions in Tustin, California, and has written books on human sexuality from a Christian perspective. His articles have been featured in Christian Today and Journal of Psychology and Christianity.

Culture as a spreading madness, a virus of twisted thinking and immeasurable self-righteousness. There may be a patient zero somewhere who brought it into our midst, but he's not the one controlling its spread. It goes from person to person, group to group, infecting the susceptible."¹⁹ The other Evangelical author, Micheal Brown²⁰, uses a similar definition to Cambridge's dictionary.²¹ These definitions have some merit because they add the religious aspect to these definitions. One thing to note is the way Dallas described Cancel Culture as twisted thinking and immeasurable self-righteousness. This adds to the possible deeper meaning of why people cancel each other. This also adds that Christians are in the crosshairs of this Cancel Culture as well. Christians are cancelable. Their Bible is cancelable. Their God is cancelable.

With these being just a few of many examples of the definitions of Cancel Culture, we can see the complexity and difficulty with definitions. One person would say that it is a collective group of strategies to show ostracism, while another would say that it is political correctness, and another would say that it is a decline of the First Amendment rights. It usually varies from person to person. This may have to do with how new the topic is in our society today or the state of our culture. It is subjective just like the people who practice it. For example, a republican man in his 50s says it is the taking away of rights. As he views it, the political left is threatening to take away and block his 1st Amendment rights. For the man in his 20's, he calls it

19. Dallas, Joe. *Christians in a Cancel Culture: Speaking With Truth and Grace in a Hostile World*, Harvest Publishing House, 2021; 36-37.

20. Michael Brown is an Arminian evangelical author, professor, and talk show host [The Line of Fire]. He is the president of AskDrBrown Ministries and the president of FIRE School of Ministry. He has his Ph.D. from New York University and has debated against gay activists, agnostic professors, and Orthodox Rabbis.

21. Michael L. Brown Ph.D., *The Silencing of the Lambs*, Tyndale Publishing House, 2022. XVI [Preface]. He operates under the definition of withdrawing support from an individual, group, or business.

social reform. As he views it, it is progress for a group with a ‘mob mentality’ to call for changes when there is a need for social reform. And this may have to do with the way each person views their culture and each other in the public sphere.

From different angles, people’s subjective view on society, politics, and culture shape their opinion and definition of Cancel Culture. Yet, the research proves that there are common themes throughout. And at the base essence of Cancel Culture, it is *conflict and consequences for societal discourse*. Someone wants to change someone else’s opinion through words of conflict. This means they want to block or cancel the wrong opinion that does not match their own unless they conform. Whether that is seen as rewriting history, blocking out someone, or even censorship, there is a shared essence of what makes Cancel Culture what it is. There is no love for neighbor. And this hatred for the neighbor will cause someone to block out someone else or something else from their lives (or try to attempt to do so). Some would hate something they do not like about their neighbor that they would go out of their way to block, ostracize, and cancel them. That is the true essence of Cancel Culture. It is a legitimate newer term with an old essence that has been seen for a long time.

So, I would define Cancel Culture this way:

A phenomenon where there are unloving attempts or successes in trying to silence an opponent whose opinions are viewed as offensive in a public or private setting.

This can be done by a group of people with the same public opinion to ostracize a select individual or group they deem as offensive. For example, an online mob will try to deplatform an individual who practices hate speech or makes offensive jokes online. They will try to silence that opponent and hold them accountable for their actions in the public sphere. On an individual level, an individual can subjectively block the enemies that they face in their viewpoint. For

example, a live-streamer can block the group that want to cancel him because he made those offensive jokes. It is similar to the term, “blocking out the haters”.

Cancel Culture can be seen by people who use different mediums such as social media, with threatening words that are spoken, hate messages over tex, etc. For social media, this is due to the advances in technology where people can find a group that matches their own opinions quickly. For example, if I believe that practicing homosexuality is wrong, I can go online and find a group that believes the same thing I do. The information and speed with which I can find my group says that social media has helped fuel this Cancel Culture along with human nature. We could say that Cancel Culture is fueled by social media predominantly but not always. There are traces of it in each part of our culture especially when Cancel Culture has such a wide impact. Families are political. For example, a transgender teen blocks their parents or grandparents from their lives for disagreeing with who they say they are. Two family members do not talk to each other for whatever reason due to opposing political views. It is a grudge-holding canceling culture that applauds this type of behavior.

Yet, anyone could use any means to silence anyone to remove them from their life. This can be done to a person, place, or even a thing as well. For example, a conservative Lutheran college could be canceled due to its biblical beliefs. Even though the building is there, the institution or the ideas that it stands behind are viewed as offensive. The process of cancelling can start with people unsubscribing to their social media pages, then move to protest outside the school, then to a riot wishing that the building be taken down. Slowly, this process escalates until the reputation of that institution is destroyed.

With the rise of *subjective truth*²², any opinion could be viewed as offensive, bigoted, and hateful, even if there are objective truths. Cancel Culture touches many facets of our culture. It is fueled by people who have conflict with other people. They will speak out not afraid of the consequences whether that is online or in person.

And, Cancel Culture can mainly be seen in two forms: A *proactive* and a *reactive* way. Proactively, Cancel Culture is *seeking* an opponent with an opposing viewpoint and trying to silence their message or idea so that their opinion does not spread: To go, find, and rewrite a history or attempt to silence an opponent. For example, another online mob looking for people who do not support teaching transgender pronouns in school. They are applauded for it by their contemporaries because they are seen as doing the right thing. They are the social justice warriors that want to snuff out any who do not conform. The masses going to Twitter or Facebook looking for anyone who disagrees with their opinion and isolating them. This is different from accountability culture.²³ In a proactive Cancel Culture, people look for discrepancies and ‘cancel’ the opinion that disagrees with their own. It is proactively seeking and looking to silence an opinion.

The *reactive* form of Cancel Culture can be seen when a public figure, institution, celebrity, or influencer says something that causes backlash from the established public opinion. For example, in 2022 there was a backlash when the new *Snow White* movie was going to be produced with a woman of color, without actors with dwarfism playing the seven dwarves, and with an altered main message of the movie. The main actress, Rachel Zegler, stated in an

22. This can also be seen as denial of objective truth or natural law.

23. Pew Research, *Americans and ‘Cancel Culture’: Where Some See Calls for Accountability, Others See Censorship, Punishment*; 2021. Accountability culture is the movement of holding people accountable for the actions they have committed. This is different from Cancel Culture because calling out holds them accountable while canceling them tries to block or censor their views, even if there is change.

interview, when asked about bringing a modern edge to the classic movie, *“I just mean it’s no longer 1937 and we wrote a Snow White that is not going to be saved by the prince and she is not going to be dreaming about true love. She is dreaming about becoming the leader she knew she could be and the leader that her late father told her she could be if she was fearless, fair, brave, and true.”*²⁴

One person reacted to that statement with backlash: *“Walt Disney is rolling [in] his grave. His first-ever film. One of the most revolutionary movies ever made. I usually just ignore these remakes, but this is where I draw the line. This is straight up unforgivable”*²⁵. Another, which was liked by 4100 people said, *“So they’re taking the love out of a classic love story, gotcha.”*²⁶

On another social media platform (X, formerly known as Twitter), one comment said, *“Rachel Zegler ‘Snow White’ should be CANCELLED. Let’s cancel this [expletive] and destroy this stupid Disney live-action ‘snow-white’.”*²⁷

Many more comments have shown the backlash against the modern take of the classic story. Some of these range from a general lack of interest to calling out the actress, Disney, or all who support such a movie. This shows the reactionary nature of this phenomenon Cancel Culture. Once one thing is said that disturbs the norm of public opinion, there is a reaction that

24. Zegler, Rachel. Interview by *Variety* at Disney 2023 Expo. Posted on 9/9/2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2RVg3yetTE4&t=3s>.

25. Comment from the Zegler interview. [@MasterBuilderDragon](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2RVg3yetTE4&t=3s). This comment was liked by 1,700 people.

26. Comment from the Zegler interview. [@Kasaix](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2RVg3yetTE4&t=3s)

27. https://twitter.com/search?q=rachel%20zegler%20cancelled&src=recent_search_click; 08/07/2023. 12:39 am. @VumiVosa. An X (Twitter) comment which was seen by 230,000 people as a reaction to the interview by Zegler.

will ripple throughout the social pond. The ripples will cause a tidal wave of people storming the electronic gates calling for the person to be canceled.

This is just a snippet of the many things that can be seen *proactively* or *reactively* in our society today. What are some things that have led up to this phenomenon of canceling in our culture? We have considered briefly what Cancel Culture looks and sounds like in our world. We certainly have anecdotal evidence. But is it a real thing? Is there evidence to support the existence of Cancel Culture? In the next section, we will consider what respected researchers have observed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, more and more research has been discussed about the cultural phenomenon of Cancel Culture and what it means. Some researchers²⁸ might look ahead to the future and see how this phenomenon will morph. Others may point to instances in the past to show that Cancel Culture may have taken different forms in the past. Yet, in the present, it is a modern phenomenon that is affecting all parts of society in our country and many others throughout the world. It has become a shockingly and surprisingly new phenomenon in the society we see today. I will attempt to summarize relevant literature and peer-reviewed articles about the subject below and present the evidence for this claim. For starters, we will see a theory proposed in the past that may have been the forerunner or start of the term Cancel Culture. Second, we will see how culture has shifted as well as public opinion. Last, we will see what social psychologists and political scientists say about this phenomenon today and the theories that have helped this phenomenon develop.

28. This would be social scientists, political scientists, and social psychologists.

How New is New?

In the early 1970s, a German social psychologist named Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann²⁹ proposed a theory that foreshadowed *Cancel Culture* in a way. After doing research in a voting campaign with the Allensbach Institute of Research, she and her team made a few discoveries that led her to propose the *Theory of Silence*.³⁰ This theory was groundbreaking at the time. For example, she believed that in a functioning society, some people constantly observe other people's behavior to find out which behaviors and opinions are met with approval or rejection in the public sphere.³¹ This may be different in a private sphere (or what people privately think of each other) but that was not a part of her research. This applies to everyone in a societal structure and she believes that most if not all people are afraid of social isolation (being isolated from the rest). Along with this, she says that some people exert *isolation pressure*³² or, in other words, frown or turn away

29. Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann was the founder and director of the Public Opinion Research Center in Allensbach, West Germany. She was a professor in communication research and an analyst for the public. She was a former president of the World Association for Public Opinion Research and has been published widely.

30. Thomas Peterson, *Spiral of silence*. Encyclopedia Britannica, January 2, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/spiral-of-silence>. According to Petersen, this theory was developed after a discovery during the German federal election campaign in 1965. Noelle-Neumann and her staff at the Allensbach Institute of Public Opinion Research conducted a survey that was designed to track public opinions of the electorate throughout the campaign. Throughout the campaign, the two opposing parties were the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SDP). The race was evenly split and it was almost impossible to assess what the clear favorite was to win. But in the final few weeks, the campaign scene suddenly shifted to favor the CDU. What they found is that even though voters remained unchanged in their opinion, there were a few SDP voters and undecided voters who shifted their vote. Noelle-Neumann suspected that because of a visit from Queen Elizabeth to Germany to visit the main German CDU candidate affected this. She theorized that supporters of the SDP may have wrongly concluded that their opponent's opinions were more popular than their own. It is almost like the saying, 'If you cannot beat them, join them'. But in turn, that wrong assessment changed the vote swing in the CDU's favor. This shows the power of public opinion and how it can be easily swayed.

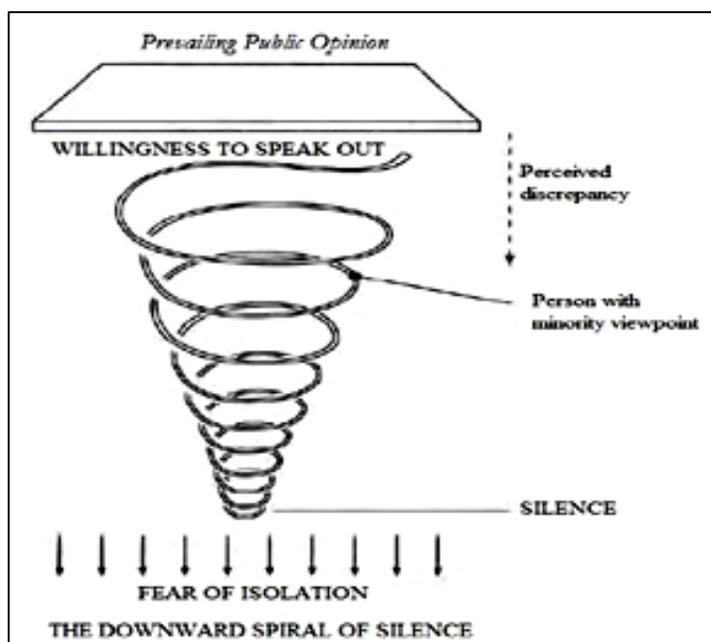
31. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence. Public Opinion – Our Social Skin*, Chicago University Press, 1984. 39–40.

32. Noelle-Neumann, *Spiral of Silence*, 6–7. She says that this fear of isolation is the driving force that sets this *spiral of silence* in motion. She believes that it is easier to go with flow of public opinion rather than share an opinion that could be publicly shamed. Even when this opinion seems to be a universally acclaimed conviction, it can still be publicly shamed and silenced. She draws this word 'silence', from Thomas Hobbes's book, *The Elements of Law*, published in 1650.

when someone says or does something that is rejected by public opinion. This could be the majority of people in society or a minority. This can concern moral issues or preferences in politics. People also tend to hide their opinion when it would expose themselves to “isolation pressure.” She also includes that many people who feel public support, in contrast, tend to express their opinions in a loud and clear manner. These are fueled by controversial topics that are emotional or moral. She says that mass media outlets may have a decisive influence on the formation of public opinion. As a

result, this causes fear for someone to speak their own opinion. For example, this may be best expressed in the figure (F1). In this, there is a plane of public opinion.

When there is a willingness to speak out and a perceived discrepancy in this opinion, it sets the spiral in motion. It breaks the norm of public opinion.



(F1. Aryal 2014; Noelle-Neumann 1993)

If this perceived discrepancy continues to go in a downward spiral, then it eventually leads to isolation or silence from the majority. The majority silences the minority to keep and defend public opinion. This *Spiral of Silence* may create new forms of public opinion and throw out the old ones.³³

³³ Noelle-Neumann, *Spiral of Silence*, 59–63. Noelle-Neumann believes that public opinion is difficult to define as well. She says that many jurists, philosophers, historians, and political theorists have different definitions of public opinion. For her research, she defines both and leaves many options for definitions. For example, her research for the word ‘opinion’ (*Meinung* in German) can be traced back to Plato’s Republic. She says that Plato

There are similarities to the *Spiral of Silence* and Cancel Culture. Just as it was a phenomenon about public opinion, so too is Cancel Culture. They both have the idea of silencing or ostracizing those who go against public opinion. Even if it is someone's own opinion.³⁴ Another is that there is pressure to conform. The *Spiral of Silence* emphasizes the impact of social behavior of groups of people or individuals. When those groups or individuals are pressured to conform, they can be silenced. Similarly, both phenomena talk about pressures to conform to certain moral values or risk being silenced. For example, cancelling people over sexuality, gender, or women's rights could be seen as the certain moral values people could get silenced over. In time, this theory of silence has become reality. This proves Cancel Culture's legitimacy because these aspects of the *Spiral of Silence* are seen throughout our culture today. The base essence each phenomenon of self-censorship, social pressure, and conformity to perceived moral values are nothing new.

defines it as Socrates did: *'Think you then, said I, that opinion is more obscure than knowledge but clearer than ignorance? Far, said he. Does it lie then between them both? Yes. Opinion then is between the two? Entirely so'* (Plato 1900, 165–66). Then throughout history, she states that opinion is a complex term in some cultures (like the French or Anglo-Saxons). For example, she cites Kant who defines opinion as, 'insufficient judgment, subjectively as well as objectively.' She then compares those definitions of opinion with her own culture and how it is seen. She believes that the German form of public opinion is as complex. She says that individuals would observe the consensus in their environment and contrast it with their behavior. That is why she believes that it may not be the consensus, but the concurrent behavior that comes along with it (offering one's seat to an old person or remaining seated in a public vehicle). In her research, she would see that opinion could be understood as: 'something acceptable'. For the word, 'public', she says that there are three possible definitions for it; openness, involvement of the state, or social-psychological. For openness, she says that there is a legal sense to it (public bath, restroom, etc.) Where it is public, open to everyone away from a private sphere, and in an open setting. For involvement of the state, she says it has something to do with concepts of public rights and force. She uses the example of the phrase, 'public responsibility of journalists'; the concern for the general welfare. She quotes legal scholars (von Holtendorff and Ihering) who found it amazing that public opinion has made norms and regulations for the government to use in terms of power. Thus, it would also be called 'ruling opinion.' It moves people to act, even against their own will. For societal-psychological, she says that it is a place where the individual does not live in their thoughts or emotions. In great civilizations, she believes that individuals stand more exposed to the demands of societies. This leads the individual to focus on the opinion of those around them. Why? She says that it is because of the fear of isolation, disrespect, and unpopularity. Think of people caring for the opinions of others (what they think of them) so that they do not get silenced.

34. This is known as self-censoring. In both Cancel Culture and *Spiral of Silence*, a person may silence themselves to avoid the public backlash that would star the spiral of ostracizing. There is a real pressure to conform.

Now one may argue that Noelle-Neumann was a product of one societal phenomenon in her day. She was in a German context and her research was done to a select group of people. Noelle-Neumann's theory of the *Spiral of Silence* can be seen in many other cultures today along with this Cancel Culture. For example, the following political scientists (Inglehart and Norris) say that our culture today is no different (in some regards) than any other culture³⁵. There was just different planes of opinions, differing moral values, and predictable cultural changes with outward advancement.

As time has gone on, culture has shifted as well as public opinion. According to Ryan Inglehart,³⁶ economic, cultural, and political changes go together in coherent patterns that are changing the world in predictable ways.³⁷ For example, he says that due to industrialization, technological advances, and societal changes, there are changes in societal norms that are likely to occur (e.g., gender roles, sexuality, etc.). This is called the *Modernization Theory*.³⁸ An example would be the changes that have happened in modern society in the last 100 years in the U.S. In industry, technology, societal norms, and psychology, there has been much change in all

35. Norris, *Cancel Culture: Myth or Reality?* 147. Norris says that after a wealth of cross-national surveys done in research on how social cultures are transformed by processes of human economic and human development, there are established public opinions. For example, the poorer (pre-industrialized) countries will have more of a conservative public opinion—this is where religion and traditional values prevail. This coincides with Inglehart's Modernization theory.

36. Ronald Inglehart is a leading world leading political scientist. He was a professor of political science and program director at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan.

37. Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997. 7–8. This is the point of his whole book that he is trying to prove. In doing so, he has done extensive research explaining the trajectory of societies across a vast majority of cultures.

38. Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization*. 8. Modernization theory suggests that due to the rise of industrialization, there can be expectations of cultural and political changes. He says that many social theorists have said that technological and economic changes are linked with coherent and predictable patterns of political and cultural change. Naturally, public opinion has been attached to this.

areas. Yet, he argues that progressive changes is not where it stops. Rather, he says that *Postmodern* values become prevalent bringing more to societal changes. This is called *Post-Modernization Theory*.³⁹ In the trajectory of the history of the world, he says that Postmodernism is a change that was unexpected in contrast to the trajectory from the years leading up to the Industrial Revolution. For example, he says that the religious and ideological metanarratives are losing their authority among the masses and that they are giving way to an increasing acceptance of diversity.⁴⁰ This theory suggests that Postmodernism rejects modernity and moves toward something new.⁴¹ These changes happen coherently and not randomly. This does not happen overnight but over generations and decades. He asserts in his study that there is a link between belief systems, political ideals, and socioeconomic variables which have changed over time. This is said because human behavior is heavily influenced by the culture in which one has been socialized. As time has gone on, the usual norms that define a culture usually shift when there

39. Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization*, 6. Postmodernization suggests that there is a more variety of societal changes. When a society has become modernized, the postmodern values seem to arise. From equal rights for women to the decline of the state social regimes. This is a continual change in a postmodern society. It goes past the modern values and finds new ones.

40 Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization*, 22–23. Throughout his book, he makes the case as to why this cultural shift is happening. Before he does that, he tries to categorize Postmodern thought because which version of Postmodernism is key to understanding why these cultural shifts are happening. The first school of thought is that Postmodern thought is that it is the rejection of modernity. There is a rejection of rationality, authority, technology, and science. In this school, he says that there is a tendency to equate this to “Westernizing” and makes it the rejection of “Westernizing” others. The second school of thought is the revalorization of tradition since it was rejected by Modernization. Lastly, the third school of thought says that postmodernization is the rise of new values and lifestyles, with greater tolerance for ethnic, cultural, and sexual diversity and individual choice concerning the life one wants to lead. Yet, he says that they coincide with each other and are not incompatible. They emphasize different things and can be seen together.

41 Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization*, 23–27. When talking about the emphasis of Postmodern schools of thought, Inglehart says that these shifts in culture have different aspects that can be applied to Postmodernism as a whole. For example, in the first school of thought, Modernization offers rewards but at a huge cost. He gives the example of industrialization and how there was an emphasis on rationalism, science, and technology. For example, Industrialization improves human productivity, but it causes working-class political parties and inhumane working conditions. He says that it dismantles a traditional world where the meaning of life is clear; warm, and personal communal ties have been replaced with an impersonal competitive society geared toward individual achievement.

are outward advances. For example, the terms of objectivity (like objective truth) seem to diminish over time. Everything is determined by one's cultural perspective. So much so that every reference to objective reality is viewed almost as reactionary.⁴²

Culture is tightly connected to public opinion. As society has shifted toward Postmodernism, so have the forms of public opinion. For example, the public opinion about truth. Truth has become so subjective in our culture today that there is a rejection of natural objective truth. One person's perceived opinion can be shared and agreed in the public sphere. When one forms an opinion that matches with others who share the same, then it can become public opinion. Then, others do not agree with the subjective truth that they believe is right (or their formed opinion), they are subject to ostracization, silencing, and being canceled.

Truth has become so subjective that it has been devalued in public opinion. And whoever's truth does not match with their own, they are subject to silencing, ostracization, and censorship in extreme cases. And if there are minor transgressions or misunderstandings with opinions, then it can have chilling effects on free speech and open discourse.

Along with this, Inglehart says that another main cause for the change from *Modernization* to *Postmodernization* is the growth of wealth in a given country⁴³. When a society is focused on the quality of life rather than economic growth and survival, shifts in public opinion may occur based on the advances of one's given culture. A society does not need to

42 Inglehart, R. *Modernization and Postmodernization*, 18–20.

43. Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization*, 30–31. Inglehart says that changes in culture and predominant norms and motivations underlying human behavior are equal in their progression. The old way of doing things (as an agrarian society would take over a land out of violence and bloodshed) has passed. The shift to social acceptance into which one was born has suppressed such an old way of culture. He says that the rise of Materialistic values has encouraged capitalism and industrialization. Because once one has achieved economic security, focusing on the quality of life rather than economic growth, comes a shift of politics and conflicts based on public issues (such as the status of women and sexual minorities). This trend tends to differ from different countries to others based on the advancement in their economy and industrialization.

focus on surviving, they have already achieved it. They are more focused on the ways that they can thrive and progress than survival. And this progression and thriving may have changed public opinion drastically over the last 100 years.

More recently, Hunter has added some insights into cultural change. He says that it is usually from the top down of a society than from the top up.⁴⁴ This change does not happen usually without a fight because these ideas can cause a power struggle which would upset the balance of a society. Along with this, *Postmodernization Theory* looks at the old values of a modernized society and sees some of them as irrelevant or useless regarding progress. Tying this to Cancel Culture, this can be seen as many fight for their ideals of progress over the ones of tradition and structure. Traditional ideas of the past are being phased out through public opinion slowly but surely.

Even though Inglehart wrote those things in the mid-to-late 90s, the shift in culture and public opinion has continued. Inglehart gave the possible causes and predictable patterns of ways cultures can change. Yet, as time has gone on, experts in political science and social psychology have added more to this discussion. For starters, Joakim Wrethed points out that *Speed Culture*⁴⁵ is something that has added to the discussion of public opinion.

The advancements in technology and science have greatly influenced the way people communicate with each other. With this great advancement, there is a growing fascination for being connected and having information quickly. This quickens the pace of society and one's

44. Hunter, *To Change the World*, 41-42. Hunter says that even though cultural change rarely happens because of a civil revolt, there are changes that can subtly change society in big ways. He gives a 'crude' example [in his words] of theorists expressing the ideas of change, then researchers delve and explore and revise the theories, then moves from them to the teachers to the students who apply and practice those changes. He goes more into detail, but he provides insight into how culture can change subtly over time.

45. Wrethed, *Contagion* 29, 21-24.

perspective of time. He argues that if speed becomes an embodied experience, then the distance needed for judgment on their opinion is not needed. The person is already there. If the space is closed, then the agent's viewpoint can be seen as the object of the judgment. Wrethed says that speed governs the whole experience of technology (watching movies, surfing the web, and gaming). Not only that, they could have anonymity in posing their viewpoint. He gives the example of cyberbullying because it is closely connected to Speed Culture as well as Cancel Culture.⁴⁶ A person can bully another and be completely anonymous. And even if they are blocked, canceled, or censored, the person can find other ways to do the same (e.g., making a new burner account⁴⁷). He says that when someone can have anonymity and speed, then it can make everything complicated and dangerous. He quotes from Paul Virilio⁴⁸ who talks about speed in a Cancel Culture context like warfare and the speed of weapons in battle,⁴⁹ “*The instantaneousness of action at a distance corresponds to the defeat of unprepared advisory, but also, and especially, to the defeat of the world as a field, as distance, as matter.*” When dangerous people have dangerous tools to “destroy” their enemy, then it is a mess on a cultural level. In terms of Cancel Culture, when people have the technology to ostracize, then there is no

46. Wrethed, *Contagion* 29, 21–24

47. A burner account is a way that people can be anonymous and use a false name online to cause mischief online. It is a ‘throw-away’ account where the holder of the account does not care what happens to it only then to later use it for more nefarious purposes. If that account gets banned, then someone could make another. It is like unlimited fuel to an unquenchable fire.

48. Paul Virilio is a French Cultural Theorist, urbanist, architect, and aesthetic philosopher. He is known as the creator of Dromology. Dromology means the compression of time and space and the overall speed of every aspect of life.

49. Paul Virilio, *Speed, and Politics: An Essay on Dromology*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006; 149–50. Virilio says that battles happen over distance whether physical or metaphorical. Yet, when one takes away the space for combat, the fight becomes instantaneous. It becomes even more dangerous. In a Cancel Culture, people can close the gaps on an enemy to silence them. To go onto X (formerly known as Twitter) and ostracize someone with a different opinion in an instant.

need to be there in person. They can close the distance of space with technological weapons to silence them. The weapons of X (formerly known as Twitter), fake TikTok accounts, and comments on a YouTube channel can target any enemy in the entire world in an instant. There is no need to travel to a distant country when there is cyber-warfare.

Norris also adds that the growth of technology has fueled this phenomenon as well.⁵⁰ Even though she does not see it as the sole reason for Cancel Culture, she does add that it likely accelerated the culture wars in our culture today. It does not stop there though. Norris has argued that Noelle-Neumann's *Theory of Silence* and Inglehart's *Modernization Theory* have helped shape this modern phenomenon of Cancel Culture.

For starters, she says that the *Spiral of Silence* theory could be seen as the starting point of *Cancel Culture*.⁵¹ She echoes Noelle-Neumann on the perceptions of being the majority or minority in opinions expressed within any group. Deeply polarizing moral issues and social pressures (spoken or unspoken) influence the way a person is willing to speak out in their group. An example she gives is the realm of politics in academics. She says that scholars, event speakers, and social scientists holding socially conservative values are likely to see their views silenced on campuses, events, and seminar discussions in the U.S. Yet, she says that it does not go in one way, as the political right also tries to silence the political left. If there is a place or institution where traditional values prevail, then it is more likely that those who are politically liberal would have their views silenced. Even though she says evidence like this is scarce

50. Norris, *Cancel Culture: Myth or Reality?* 153-54. Norris says that technology is likely an accelerant for Cancel Culture. Yet she says that it is not an independent driver of Cancel Culture. Technology has often been blamed and she says that studies of online communications have attributed to the intensification of the culture wars in the United States. It is a place where like-minded individuals with the same leanings could share their own opinions and attack an enemy that does not suit their own opinion (or if it is viewed as offensive).

51. Norris, *Cancel Culture: Myth or Reality?* 145-174.

[probably because the research has not been done on it yet], silencing in this realm can be seen as a “*dog which did not bark.*”⁵² A dog that did not bark is cancel culture. The right wing says that a dog recognizes its master and does not bark. Then the left wing says that a dog did not bark in the first place or asks, “*What dog?*” In other words, it is debated about the existence of Cancel Culture.

This picture of the dog that did not bark is seen not only in academia but throughout America. Norris says that right-wing spokespersons supports this claim while liberals have been skeptical about the dog’s existence. In other words, the right wing acknowledges the dog’s existence while the left wing does not acknowledge that the dog is even there. To even acknowledge the dog would claim that the dog even exists. This goes along with the theory she proposes concerning public opinion called *Congruence Theory*.⁵³ In the values of a culture, whether it is socially conservative or socially liberal, there is congruence with the social norm. Socially conservative people are congruent with socially conservative people. The same is true for social liberals as well. Then, if either conservative or liberal people are on the opposite side of the spectrum to the social norm, the minority is prone to silencing. For example, a socially conservative society will not be congruent with socially liberal people. They are prone to silencing. The people are like a “fish out of water.”⁵⁴

She says that this coincides with the development of countries. In the study that she did, the results confirm what she theorized. In societies where predominantly liberal values prevail

52. Norris, *Cancel Culture: Myth or Reality?* 147;155–57.

53. Norris, *Cancel Culture: Myth or Reality?* 147–157.

54. Norris, Pippa. *Cancel Culture, Myth or Reality?* 145–146;151. The picture of a ‘fish-out-of-water’ is one in describing congruence theory. When a political minority is in the opposite majority, their views are like that of a fish out of water. It cannot swim, breathe, or find safety. It will be prone to die. In a Cancel Culture, there is a similar weight to this as well. There is displacement, vulnerability, and adaptation that need to occur.

(e.g., the U.S., Sweden, and the U.K.), socially conservative political scientists, teachers, and institutions would face a frozen tundra in academia. But in places where there has not been development, then the opposite is true. Socially liberal scholars, teachers, and institutions are more prone to canceling and ostracizing. She argues that the situation is even worse for socially liberal scholars in a conservative setting. She says that this observation is consistent with the *Spiral of Silence Theory* proposed by Noelle-Neumann. The talk of mainstream values and predominant opinion would flourish while the other side becomes silenced. Group communication and wanting to express personal views with confidence can lead to reluctance to speak out.

Secondly, she says that *Modernization Theory* suggests many things that attribute to Cancel Culture.⁵⁵ She says that *Modernization Theory* emphasizes whether the dominant culture reflects certain liberal or conservative values. Cultures that are less developed (e.g., wealth, average income, technological advances, and weak economies) have more of a conservative leaning in terms of morality. Cultures that are more advanced in their societies are more liberal in terms of their cultures. This is not limited to one culture. She points to the cross-national surveys that were done by more than 100 societies in the last forty years (Inglehart). In these surveys, the less developed countries held on to more of a conservative view of moral issues than more developed countries. As an example, the less developed society holds to religious values, practices, and beliefs, while also having a general mistrust toward other people. Such things as [aberrant] sexual behavior, homosexuality, transgenderism, and LGBTQ rights are viewed with disapproval.⁵⁶

55. Norris, Pippa. *Cancel Culture, Myth or Reality?* 147.

56. Norris, *Cancel Culture: Myth or Reality?* 147.

Norris continues by saying that all these theories (*Congruence, Modernization, and Silence*) coincide with each other today. She argues that Cancel Culture is not a rhetorical myth: “*The evidence suggests that cancel culture is not simply a rhetorical myth; scholars may be less willing to speak up to defend their moral beliefs if they believe that their views are not widely shared by colleagues or the wider society to which they belong.*”⁵⁷ It is something that is real and affecting campuses in our society today.

She says some believe that Cancel Culture is a catch-all term for things that people do not like about each other (Duarte et al,2015; Simpson and Srinivasan, 2018). Skeptics have come to this conclusion because Cancel Culture has so many definitions, confusion, and contradictions, that it should not be considered. It is too ambiguous. That is why she says that it should be more precise in definition.

Even though these skeptics’ opinions may have some merit, she says that Cancel Culture is here to stay in our culture. Cancel Culture is to be expected for a couple of reasons. First, either the left-wing or right-wing ideologies become the norm in a culture based on the modernization of a country (post-industrial, technological, progressive in learning). The more advanced a society is, the more likely that the people lean in a politically liberal way. Second, the opposite ideology (left-wing or right-wing) is perceived by the predominant cultural norm or public opinion, for example, she says that Cancel Culture involves controversies concerning big moral issues that are seen politically, socially, and morally. Such things could be power and status associated with race and gender.⁵⁸ Not only that, but opposing ideologies cause issues on

57. Norris, *Cancel Culture: Myth or Reality?* 145.

58. Norris, P. *Cancel Culture: Myth or Reality?* 158.

campuses. She says that it proves that there is an implied erosion of tolerance for intellectual diversity and there are more closed minds.

Even though Norris discusses the terms of Cancel Culture in academia, we can see this phenomenon throughout our society today. In summary, from reading experts in social psychology, political science, and cultural scholars, we can see that this phenomenon is a legitimate phenomenon due to a couple of reasons. The first is the collection of theories seen in our culture that helped shape this phenomenon. Cancel Culture is recognized as a phenomenon from a collection of theories discussed earlier. From the definitions of culture made by Rieff and Taylor expressing the reasons for cultural change to theories posed Noelle-Neumann, Inglehart, Wrethed, and Norris, many explanations describe Cancel Culture. *Modernization Theory* shows the progress and advancement of a culture into an industrialized and technologically advanced society. *Postmodernization Theory* goes beyond that and tells of further advancement in societal beliefs and norms questioning the established norms of *Modernization Theory*. This feeds into the *Speed Culture* where technological advances that made how to express opinion have removed all original barriers. And those who are not congruent with the established norm of public opinion are prone to silencing (*Congruence Theory*). When there is a speaking out, then the *Spiral of Silence Theory* shows the progress of how one becomes socially isolated, silenced, or blocked. Second, Cancel Culture is recognized as legitimate by a majority of people. They may have differing definitions, but even the average person can recognize this phenomenon's legitimacy.

There are many factors to consider when thinking about Cancel Culture even though the definitions vary. It may be new in terminology, but old in its essence. We can say that the term Cancel Culture is something that has been predicted in the past by experts concerning public

opinion. It is legitimate because it has become recognized by many. There are many societal theories that have helped shape the culture that this phenomenon thrives.

One wonders what the view of Cancel Culture will be in the next fifty years. Will it be something that will be more defined and tangible as more people write about it? Will it be something that fizzles out and be known as something that rose and quickly died out? Will more social theories be added to help shape this phenomenon as well? Either way, Cancel Culture is here now and is staying for the foreseeable future.⁵⁹

59. Romano, Aja. *Why We can't stop fighting about cancel culture: Is cancel culture a mob mentality, or a long overdue way of speaking truth to power?*; August 5th, 2020. <https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/12/30/20879720/what-is-cancel-culture-explained-history-debate>; In this article, Romano tries to answer what is Cancel Culture. Is it something of a mob mentality or a way to speak against those in authority? Either way, they (preferred pronouns) say it was because of the divide in our nation. And it is not just a divide between ideologies, but also tactical approaches in navigating ideological differences and dealing with wrongdoing. The traditional approaches are no longer enough (apology, atonement, and forgiveness).

THE EVANGELICAL RESPONSES

We will now discuss the way that these cultural changes have affected Christians in our country today. There have been evangelical responses to Cancel Culture, but very few Lutheran responses. The next section will focus on what the evangelical responses to Cancel Culture are. The first part of this section will discuss how society has shifted its view of religion and Christianity. Then afterward, we will discuss how Christians play a role in a Cancel Culture society. Along with this, there will be a short discussion on which topics would be deemed *cancelable*. Then we will discuss what a two evangelicals have said concerning Cancel Culture; such as Michael Brown and Joe Dallas. In their approaches, there may be strengths in certain areas, but not much in the solidity of doctrine.

Sheep That Are Silenced?

As discussed before, traditional values of the pre-modern society decline as society progresses (Inglehart, 1997). Christianity in a sense is viewed as something of pre-modern society. It is a religion that was established way before cultures advanced into a post-industrial age where technology, social media, and societal norms have changed drastically. As our society has progressed beyond that point, there are many causes for Christianity's decline in the view of a post-modern society.

For starters, the rise of *secularization* could be seen as a reason why Christianity has declined. As Inglehart describes it, the rise of scientific discovery along with technological advances has left no room for religion's magical claims to explain the *supernatural*.⁶⁰ As societies progress, there is no need for the domination of religious meaning and institutions but a focus on progression. A progression that focuses on the freedom from the old belief system into a new one. In addition to this, Inglehart proposes that humans always need a belief system. Yet, that belief system does not necessarily need to be religious.⁶¹ He says that when a country grows and excels in the absolute security of finances and thriving way of life, there is no need for the predictable and absolute rules of traditional religion. There is no need for a religion like Christianity to command the way of life when life is generally is good for the public.

Second, this applies to the description that Charles Taylor brought up in talking about expressive individualism.⁶² In his book, he talks about the reason why outward things such as religion and institutions have no use in a culture. Culture is only toward expressing the individual.⁶³ Religion has declined in the way that it conforms a person to its ideals. Christianity is included in this decline.

In short, the traditional views that Christianity holds onto are deemed as old, traditional, and non-conforming to the post-modern society. This is contentious because many in

60. Inglehart, Ronald. *Religion's Sudden Decline*. Oxford University Press. 2021; 40-41. In his description of Secularization, Inglehart tells of how other scholars have viewed 'Religion'. Some say that religion is "beliefs, actions, and institutions predicated on the existence of gods or impersonal powers possessed of moral purpose (such as karma), which can intervene in human affairs" [Bruce, 2002, Kindle location 134]. The only way that some others view it is that the religion's future is extinction [Stark and Bainbridge, 1985]. Inglehart believes that if religion persists, then the thesis of Stark and Bainbridge can be refuted for setting up religion as a strawman. This is because the future of the said religion is secure in the hands of the future.

61. Inglehart, *Religion's Sudden Decline*, 42.

62. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 62.

63. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 64.

Christendom hold differing opinions about certain moral issues about what the Bible teaches. It causes more confusion and adds fuel to an already scorching fire. And even though one could extensively write about each of these moral issues and how society views them, this is not the focus of this paper. But I will give a brief mention of these moral issues and how they are perceived in culture today.

There are topics in our society that are viewed as *cancelable* topics. This may cause a Christian to conform or stand in the wrong form of public opinion—and be subject to being *cancelled*. For example, sexuality, identity, reproductive rights, and women’s rights are a few of many examples that have become hot-button topics that cause much commotion in the public sphere. The two evangelical authors (Dallas and Brown) have mentioned these topics specifically in order to respond to Christians being cancelled. I will summarize two of those voices, and then in the following section I will say some beneficial things, and evaluate their views of Cancel Culture, and what a Lutheran approach might bring.

To start, Joe Dallas⁶⁴ says that most tensions in America between church and culture come from the culture trying to tell the church what to say or do.⁶⁵ He says that the church and it’s Christians know where they stand in terms of doctrine, but *how* do they stand in the face of a growing tide of hostility in our culture?⁶⁶ When Christians are charged with homophobia, sexism,

64. Joe Dallas is an evangelical author, conference speaker, and ordained pastoral counselor. He is a contributing writer for The Christian Research Journal and his articles have appeared on Christianity Today, The Journal of Christian Healing, and Southern California Christian Times. He has made many media appearances to represent the Christian viewpoint [ABC Evening News, Family Daily Broadcast, and The Joan Rivers Show, etc.] The main focus of his topics and books has been about sexuality from the Christian perspective.

65. Dallas, *Christians in a Cancel Culture*, 165.

66. Dallas, *Christians in a Cancel Culture*, 912.

racism, transphobia, and judgmentalism, a Christian needs to know how to answer such accusations.

In Dallas' mind, there are two temptations in a Christian's response to Cancel Culture. The first temptation is for Christians is to minimize doctrine to conform to the progression of society rather than sticking up for what is taught in the Scriptures. He says that there is danger when conforming Christians rewrite the Bible to accommodate abortion, homosexuality, and transgenderism, and embrace the errors that biblically founded Christians reject.⁶⁷ It is because Cancel Culture, in his mind, has painted a portrait of Christianity without the Christian's consent.⁶⁸ A Christian faces hostility for not supporting homosexual behavior and is viewed as a bigot, hypocrite, and non-conforming. Not only that, in the face of all this turmoil and growing hostility, the main temptation for Christians is to minimize the importance of standing on the truth. For example, someone may accept the social pressure in order to keep the relationship. Sometimes it is easier to keep peace and make concessions rather than to stand up for what is right and take the brunt of the hostility. His term for this type of Christian is called a *caver*⁶⁹. A *caver* is a Christian who caves into societal pressures instead of facing hostility. He affirms that

67. Dallas, *Christians in a Cancel Culture*, 14.

68. Dallas, *Christians in a Cancel Culture*, 49–52. He compares the picture to the way society views Christians as a funhouse mirror. The image is there but it is distorted. He believes that Christians in the light of Cancel Culture have been painted in the picture of something they truly are not. For example, he uses the misrepresentation of Jesus' words as the Jewish leaders tried to persecute Jesus. They misquoted him to try to use his words against him (Matthew 26:61) and distorted their image of Jesus. He asserts that they wanted him silenced and distorted His words to misrepresent Him so that they could persecute Him. In society today, he uses the picture of transgenderism as something that is often misrepresented among Christians. He says that God creates people as male or female, and that status cannot be changed and should be embraced always. This is something fundamental but those who dislike that view distort the image of Christians to say that Christians who disapprove of gender-reassessment surgery say that Christians hate transgender people, or are transphobic and that they encourage others to hate them, while also encouraging the transgender person to hate themselves.

69. Dallas, *Christians in a Cancel Culture*, 26-27.

such Christians say, “*That’s fine, don’t cancel me, I will conform to your ways,*” for the sake of being viewed nicely in the public sphere.

The second temptation is for a Christian be hostile in the face of cancellation. In *Cancel Culture*, Dallas says that this method does not help a Christian at all. In his mind, he says that a Christian who fights back against this growing tide of hostility is called a *raver*⁷⁰. A *raver* is a Christian who fights *fire with fire* so to speak. Here he uses the picture of warfare. To use weapons of media and the “Christian voice” to show the enemy who is the boss. He asserts that *ravers* in their polemical style win the argument occasionally, but never really prosper. They are doomed to burn bridges and never win the soul. That is why he affirms that the best way to respond to Cancel Culture is to repay evil with good rather than evil with evil (Rom 12:21).

Dallas wonders which blatant sins in our society Christians often let the world command us and the other ones not to touch. He rhetorically asks which sins are right and which ones are wrong. He says this because he believes that there is a hierarchy and catalog of sins in our society. Some are viewed as heinous and unforgivable (murder, rape, torture). Others are viewed as minimal, and still others are not even considered sins at all (sexual, greed, homosexuality). Some of these he says are the issues of marriage, unborn life, and sexuality.⁷¹ These add to the tensions of our culture trying to tell Christians what to do.

He continues by pointing out specific topics that may cause hostility against the Christians. For example, he discusses the points of homosexuality, race, transgenderism, and abortion and goes in-depth into each one. He describes what could be a good response to have when faced with the growing tide of Cancel Culture and uses Scripture to respond to it. Such

70. Dallas, *Christians in a Cancel Culture*, 23–25.

71. Dallas, *Christians in a Cancel Culture*, 30-31.

things include passages, common phrases that could be said, and some responses to them. For example, in the transgender section, one question he asks and answers is, “Trans people are always happier when they embrace who they are.” He answers by saying two things. First, he says that he technically agrees because if trans people embrace the sex they were born with, then they would be happier if they did. Second, he says that statistically speaking, transitioning often does not bring happiness.⁷²

Dallas says that Christians face adversity everywhere. While some have progressed marching to the tune of the world, other churches face the growing aggressiveness of progressive Christianity. That is why he says that the Church needs reform and hope for revival.⁷³ He says that while members will go about their business, they will want to love each other and show each other love. They will want to teach their youth about such hot-button topics because children will be exposed to those issues at an early age no matter what. The church is facing tough times. As time goes on, he believes that members of churches will be subject to cancellation, fines, or jail time for speaking and standing up for the truth. That is why he theorizes that churches one day may become subject to state licensing and be subject to doctrinal scrutiny under local or civil government.⁷⁴ And if that is the case, then the church will suffer. This suffering would not only the church as a whole, but also the individual Christians as well. He talks about how some individuals are paying the price in their families being labeled as toxic, or hateful for holding onto their beliefs. He concludes by saying that vilification is the verification that Paul confirmed

72. Dallas, *Christians in a Cancel Culture*, 144-145. He offers responses that could help a Christian know what to say and gives encouragement and insights into each topic. He uses quotes from Scripture often and other Christian authors. For example, he ends with a quote from C.S. Lewis, ‘*When we want to be something other than the thing God wants us to be, we must be wanting what will not make us happy*’.

73. Dallas, *Christians in a Cancel Culture*, 179-180.

74. Dallas, *Christians in a Cancel Culture*, 181-182.

in his letter to the Philippians (Phil 1:28) and ends his book with this: “There it is. God is not mocked, we are still more than conquerors, and the truth cannot be canceled by even the most aggressive culture. We can weep, but still sing, then alongside the millions of saints who for ages have rejoiced in how firm our foundation still is and how solid the rock we still stand on.”⁷⁵

The other evangelical author was Michael Brown’s,⁷⁶ *The Silencing of the Lambs*. In it, he says that Cancel Culture must be addressed and overcome with spiritual weapons and biblical principles.⁷⁷ In the first half of his book, he tells how Cancel Culture is seen in society today. He says it is a real cultural battle. In the second half, he lays out how to use effective strategies to combat such a real battle. In the first part, he equates canceling in the way that TV series get canceled or in a way that a person cancels their Netflix subscription [similar to the New York Times description]. People are getting canceled. It is more than their presence, but their ideology as well.⁷⁸ He says that their influence is being removed along with their voices and relevance. Along with this, he uses examples from modern times to explain the circumstances and reasons why this phenomenon is happening in society today.⁷⁹ Not only that but Christians get caught up

75. Dallas, *Christians in a Cancel Culture*, 184.

76. Michael Brown is an Arminian evangelical author, professor, and talk show host [The Line of Fire]. He is the president of AskDrBrown Ministries and the president of FIRE School of Ministry. He has his Ph.D. from New York University and has debated (against) gay activists, agnostic professors, and Orthodox Rabbis.

77. Michael L. Brown Ph.D., *The Silencing of the Lambs*, Tyndale Publishing House, 2022. ix (preface)

78. Brown, *The Silencing of the Lambs*, 1-2. He says that the level of suppression and oppression that people are dealing with in our society today is not coming from the government. These ‘dissenters’ are not being whisked away by the police, or locked away, but by the online culture.

79. Brown, *The Silencing of the Lambs*, 3–50. In this section, he uses examples from politics to prove the attacks on conservative Christianity. For example, he tries to explain the Cancel Culture of the far-left (politically). The movements seen in the ‘woke’ culture could be BLM and other progressive movements (like LGBTQIA+), and the left-wing academics on campuses canceling their opponents. In this, even if there are anti-conservative celebrities or people, they can be prone to canceling, students being canceled for not using the right pronouns to describe the gender of a gender-fluid person, and publishing houses being blocked from major websites for their writings.

in this. He calls them, “*lambs*,”⁸⁰ asking why they are being viewed as a threat to those pushing for their cancellation. A lamb poses no threat at all. But why is there continual hate? All he can say is that this is the way that culture is progressing against Christian morals and that now is the time to take a stand against the rising tide of Cancel Culture and the dangerous topics they hold onto. For example, he uses the growing attacks done by Satan and the evil forces in the world going after the children in many forms (whether that is depression, anxiety, sexual immorality, or sexual identity). He calls for Christians to take a stand against and be tenacious if they are to win the war for their children.⁸¹

In the second half of his book, he points out effective strategies to combat the real battle. He discusses some steps that people can take to be encouraged and equipped to fight Cancel Culture. First, he says that Christians should not be afraid to speak up when they are in the face of cancellation.⁸² Instead, they should be confident to speak and stand in the name of Christ. He uses words of Jesus saying that if anyone avoids following Him to save their lives, they become the slaves to the wills of others, their opinions, and ultimately fear itself (Matt. 10:39). Second, he says that even if the world would silence Christian lambs, the Word of God cannot be bound; it cannot be muzzled. Even if horrible things happen to Christians because of their faith (whether

80. Brown, *The Silencing of the Lambs*, 62-63. He says that Lambs in themselves are not threatening at all. He says that on the contrary they are viewed as innocent—being led to the slaughter. Why are they threatening to the world and why do they seem like their opinion is the worst of the worst? One of which is the idea of homosexuality, transgenderism, and the way Christians see and use their Christian ideals on others. That is why he argues against conversion therapy since he believes that it is dangerous and abusive.

81. Brown, *The Silencing of the Lambs*, 90-91

82. Brown, *The Silencing of the Lambs*, 103–113. He says that one of the most powerful tools of Cancel Culture is fear. If you speak up, then you are subject to be shut down. If one crosses the line on the PC platform, then they are subject to being dethroned from their platform. He says that it is less fearful to silence yourself privately so that the culture around you does not have to.

that is prison time or worse), then it is a good thing to suffer for the sake of belief.⁸³ Third, Brown says that Christians must speak up and speak out to tell their stories. He encourages every Christian to tell their story, especially those who have had a change in their life.⁸⁴ For example, a person who was formerly gay goes against modern social norms. If they tell their story, they cannot be ignored. Others would have to listen to their story.⁸⁵ He calls on Christian parents to take a stand against the evil forces on their children,⁸⁶ evangelists who can shout their message, and other Christians who are of this world. He wants Christians to be better than the cultures they are living. He pleads for them to offer forgiveness when forgiveness is needed and to be models of faith in their communities.⁸⁷ He affirms that the weapons they fight with are not the weapons the world fights with, rather with unconventional weapons. Spiritual weapons are not cancelable because of the voice that speaks up from inside the Christian. He rallies all Christians to take their stands on their faith and prepare for the wave that has hit them. He says many times, “*We will not fall! We must fight and take our stand because the word of God cannot be blocked or canceled nor His church.*”⁸⁸

In these two evangelical responses, we can see that this phenomenon is legitimately affecting Christians.. For example, Christians are subject to hate and backlash as society tries to mold the Christians to conformity. Christians face hate for believing what the Scriptures teach

83. Brown, *The Silencing of the Lambs*, 114–118.

84. Here Brown would use an example of someone being ex-gay or ex-transgender. If they speak out and say that there is change possible through their stories without conversion therapy, then it is something that cannot be ignored and must be noticed.

85. Brown, *The Silencing of the Lambs*, 119–123.

86. Brown, *The Silencing of the Lambs*, 129–134.

87. Brown, *The Silencing of the Lambs*, 152.

88. Michael Brown, *Silencing of the Lambs*, 154,167, & 171.

and they are ostracized, silenced, or cancelled. This is nothing new. Maybe this is a newer term for an older hate that the world has for Christ's followers.

A LUTHERAN RESPONSE

The next section will be my response as a confessional Lutheran to this phenomenon. In this, I will summarize what I liked about the evangelical responses mentioned above. Then I will say in what ways does a Lutheran response possibly differ from evangelical responses. Then I will bring in sections of Scripture to support what I have said. In this Lutheran response, I want to be clear and disclaim that I am not speaking for all Lutherans or even my church body, but these are my observations in reading and studying this phenomenon in our modern day.⁸⁹

Response to the Evangelicals

In comparison, the two authors had somewhat similar messages. They both approached with idea of boldly equipping fellow Christians to handle these tough topics and win people from the other side. For Joe Dallas, he asked how we should stand in the face of a Cancel Culture. The reason for this is that Christians may be thoroughly equipped for the controversy that they would face for their beliefs, whether that is with friends, family, or strangers. Michael Brown, calls people to a rallying cry of taking a stand against the evil forces of this world. He wants Christians to stand against this Cancel Culture. In saying this, he tells them how they should stand and uses effective strategies on how to stand.

89. That is why this is called *a* Lutheran response. If the reader comes to a different conclusion than what I say (or does not think that my response to Cancel Culture is a fair assessment), then the reader is entitled to their opinion.

They both focused on how to stand and to fight the good fight of faith. In general, I would agree and say that we need to know how to stand in the face of growing hostility in our culture and be bold to proclaim our faith when faced with opposition. But there should be more in our response. First, we let the Scriptures speak for itself on the moral issues of our culture rather than us trying to defend it (Heb 4:12). We need more than boldness. We need wisdom, humility, patience, and prayer in this Cancel Culture we live. We desire wisdom not from a human mind, but a Godly wisdom. We need humility; humility to put our sinful pride aside and clothe ourselves with humility (1 Pet 5:56). We need to be patient. An example of this is not to be angry with others but quick to listen (James 1:19-20). We need prayer. We need to pray for those who persecute us (Matt 5:43-45). We need to know what the scriptures say (1 Tim 4:13; 2 Tim 3:16-17) because there will be times when we will face the hostility of this world. All of these needs that we have could be encapsulated with a section of Peter's first letter to the churches in Asia Minor. Peter encourages us to be sympathetic, loving one another being compassionate and humble, not repaying evil with evil or insults, and eager to seek peace as the Lord listens to prayer (1 Pet 1:8-13). He wants us to do this with humbleness and respect as we ready ourselves to be prepared to give an answer for the hope that we have (1 Pet 3:15).

There were also many other things that a Lutheran could take away from reading the two evangelical authors. First, there was an appreciation for God's Word. They both see God's Word as a groundwork on which one could stand. They both see the wave of Cancel Culture as a serious phenomenon that is affecting all aspects of our society. Cancel Culture is affecting society, families, and institutions and the general response would be drawn from Scriptural principles. Another was some of their responses to the burning topics in our society today could merit the same responses as a Lutheran. For example, they each talk about the main moral issues

that are affecting Christians everywhere and suggest ways to respond when being threatened with cancellation. In other words, they find importance in being tactful and careful what to say is important in response to Cancel Culture as a Christian. This is done to build confidence for the Christian reader. They both used Scripture in their responses to explain what the main issues are (e.g., transgenderism, racism, sexism, abortion, and homosexuality). For example, Joe Dallas, in his topic concerning abortion or pro-life issues talks about how life is precious. He says that it must be protected and there are Biblical responses for this topic (Psalm 139:15-16; 82:34; Jeremiah 1:5).

As a Lutheran, I would agree. But in their responses to the topics, they could have mentioned specifically the root issue of these cancelable topics—sin. They would mention the problems that are found in the world come from Satan and this broken world, but they do not mention about the original sin that each person has and that it is the main fuel of Cancel Culture.

As for Joe Dallas, I appreciated his approach in talking about things in a non-political way. This was slightly different than Michael Brown who called many things the real obstacles from the left-wing ideologies⁹⁰. As Lutherans we should approach things in the way we let Scripture speak for itself; we do not let our political preferences get in the way. The goal is to let the gospel predominate. We do not want to show our political preference. For example, if we start calling out the societal movements for promoting things contrary to scripture publicly, it can cause more harm than good. We do not want to burn bridges but leave the door open to let the Spirit work through someone's heart.

90. Brown, *The Silencing of the Lambs*, 22-23.

As for Michael Brown, I did appreciate the power of the Word in times of Cancel Culture. He says that the power of the Gospel can change the hearts of many.⁹¹ To that, we as Lutherans would agree that the power of the Gospel can change the hearts of sinners and that it can change the lives of people drastically because of the Word that is preached to them.

But there were some things that I did not like or would cause pause for a Lutheran reading these books. For starters, there is a general lack of the individual's sin. They state the problems and say how one can solve them. Joe Dallas talked about these issues but did not refer to the sin of humanity, namely, original sin. For example, when talking about abortion, he does not mention the sin that the child gets from his or her parents and their need for a Savior. Maybe this was done on purpose, but we can say that sin is one of the main contributors to the issues we see in our society today. The sin that is found in everyone's heart, Christian hearts too.

As Michael Brown, his call to make a stand is something I did not see as beneficial. For example, in discussing "lambs" who have changed back from being gay or transgender, he says this: "*With the loudest possible voice possible, then, let us join together with our ex-gay and ex-trans friends in shouting to the world, 'In Jesus, change is possible—And let us go preach liberty to all in the power of the Spirit and the name of the Lord. These lambs will not be silenced—not on our watch.'*"⁹² This type of statement is spread throughout his book, and anyone can understand what he is getting at: To make change, there needs to be a way to stand up and defend yourself from the attacks of the world's social pressures and Satan's lies that people so often believe. If one does not stand up for what is right, then how can there be any change or progress

91. Brown, *The Silencing of the Lambs*, 135–139. In this section, Michael Brown calls for evangelists to shout and proclaim their message. I am assuming that he has a different word for evangelists than the way that a Lutheran would describe evangelists because he describes them as being 'anointed'.

92. Brown, *The Silencing of the Lambs*, 79.

against the tide of Cancel Culture? Yet, in the face of speaking out along with others, whether that is online or in person, does that not cause more division and harm rather than winning others over? If we stand and make a stand in what we believe in for homosexuality, transgenderism, and all these other *cancellable* topics, will we be like a *raver* who wins the argument, but not the soul?

The Best Way, the Right Way, or the Highway?

So then what is the best way to respond in the face of being canceled for being Christian? Is it a polemical way?⁹³ Is it apologetics?⁹⁴ Is it saying nothing, turning the other cheek? Is it a mix of all three or something else? In this section, I will make a case for which ones could be seen as beneficial and give some scenarios as examples. Again, this is an opinion based on research and observations as a confessional Lutheran.

In responding to many moral issues in our society, there is no clear or formulated way to respond to Cancel Culture that would work every single time. It is a complex minefield to navigate. In other words, there is no surefire way to get people to see what the Bible teaches, God's love, or admit they are wrong. Through sin all people are stubborn. So, it all depends on the issue at hand and where this form of Cancel Culture is seen. Is it a group or an individual? Are they proactively seeking to cancel you? Or are they reacting to a statement made on your

93. Polemics can be defined as a written or verbal attack/ criticism of a controversial opinion. As described earlier, it would be something like a raver who fights fire with fire.

94. Arthur Eggert and Geoffery Kieta, *Clearing the Path for the Gospel: A Lutheran Approach to Apologetics*, 2019. 2–4. Apologetics, especially Lutheran Apologetics, could be seen as using reason to make a defense for what Lutherans believe. This is based on two key passages (1 Peter 2:15 and Hebrews 11:1). The goal of this discussion could be to lead people to what Jesus has done for them using a logical progression of reason. It could be seen as putting that pebble in the shoe for someone to think about. The goal is not to win the argument or convince people that the Bible is true. It is about getting a hearing for the gospel.

church website? For example, if it is online as a mob seeks out the Lutheran for not conforming to the ways of the world, then one response may be better than the others. If it is in person, as a family member threatens to cancel one of their family members based on the lifestyle choice they do not agree with, then another response may be better than the others.

So what do we say? What is the best way to respond to the group or individual that threatens to block you? Do we join with comedian, Ronny Chieng and say, “*Go ahead, cancel me?*”⁹⁵ Well, it depends on the situation. Cancel Culture comes in many forms and sizes. It is always political.⁹⁶ Apologetics may work if the person is willing to listen to the arguments that you would want to make. A group coming after you may not be the best combat with apologetics. For example, it may be difficult to respond to a group of people protesting outside a church saying that the pastor and his people are non-conforming, bigoted, and hateful. The pastor comes out to try to calm down the riled-up crowd and tries to speak with people calmly. The people protesting do not see the reason but have their minds made up; they want the church shut down and closed forever for its beliefs. They want the establishment to be canceled and the people to be held accountable for their beliefs. Apologetics⁹⁷ has its place and it may not be best to try to talk to each one individually to state your case for Christ. Even if you can reasonably point to the Gospel and defend the church for its beliefs, the crowds of people wanting to cancel

95. Ronny Chieng, *Speakeasy*. Netflix Comedy Special, April 5, 2022. Ronny Chieng is a Malaysian comedian. He states in his comedy special the state of the United States’ culture. He jokingly says to the people, “Go ahead cancel me...Cancel me so that I can go home and be with my mom.” In this, he is saying that he does not have to worry if he is canceled because he’s already accepted in another culture.

96. What I mean by “political” is that it is not necessarily about politics, but about moral issues. These moral issues shape the way that relationships are seen in the family. Families are political in their dynamics with prevailing public opinions, it is just a smaller group with control over authority. People’s relationships can be affected by this in the family unit.

97. Again, apologetics may be beneficial only for people that want to listen. If a mob is at the front doors of a church, they may not see reason.

the church may not be willing to listen. Though this is a far-fetched example, it shows that apologetics may not be the best approach. The other approaches or responses may not be better either. Polemics would cause more harm than good and burn any bridges of possibly reaching out to them. The only one that could be a benefit is to stay silent and let the energy of the crowds settle down and be patient for those who would possibly want to listen.

Often Christians will face Cancel Culture on an individual level or in an online setting. The response here also depends as well. It depends on the one wanting to cancel YOU. If they are unwilling to reason with you, then it may be best not to use polemics or apologetics. It may be beneficial to ask questions and seek to understand and see if they are willing to meet with you and discuss later. If that is not the case and your cancellation is inevitable in their life, then it may be best to let bygones be bygones and stay silent and move on. My mind is brought to the words of Jesus as he sent out his disciples two by two, “If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, leave that home or town and shake the dust off your feet” (Matt 10:14). In a modern example, the emotionally charged scene where a teenage girl who wants to transition into a man yelling at her parents saying, *“If you don’t accept me for who I am, then I don’t need you in my life. I will cut you off. You will be blocked out from my life!”* What does the parent say when their child wants to cancel them from their life? Their cancellation is right there. Do they try to argue to win their point? Do they conform to keep their daughter around? Do they try to use reason to explain that her viewpoint is wrong and point her to Christ? Or do the parents stay silent? This is difficult in many areas and requires patience, love, prayer, humility, and forgiveness when forgiveness is needed.

In an online setting, it is different. Now it is no longer in person, but in the public sphere for everyone to see. It is the place where Cancel Culture could be the most rampant. So then how

does one respond in the face of a growing tide of cancellation online? Well, it depends. For example, a church's Facebook page may have their livestreams and posts about upcoming events. Then a group swarms the page after seeing the pastor on the local news making statements on what he believes. The comments come in like daggers that are violent and calling that the church should be canceled because of his statements. There, one must be careful. Because it is easy to fire back at them using Scripture and try to win the argument. In an online setting, Cancel Culture is more confrontational and direct with its attacks. One must be careful how to respond, especially online.

In total, it all depends on the situation to say which response is best for a Lutheran facing Cancel Culture. Sometimes a stand may be needed to hold onto the beliefs that Lutherans confess. But it should be done tactfully with patience, humility, and love. Sometimes being silent also may be needed to let things settle especially when there is animosity toward the Christian. Sometimes apologetics works to make a sound argument and speak the truth in love to those who are willing to listen within reason. Maybe polemics work too in the right setting. And even staying silent remembering that we will have hardships in this world. It depends because whether we are online or in person, face to face with a stranger or with a family member, Cancel Culture is complex and each situation is different. And for a Christian who is facing such hardships, my mind is drawn to the words of Christ who says, "*Remember, the world hated me first. It will hate you as well*" (John 15:18–27). For us, we may not always have the right response, but we know that God's Word is powerful and if we let the Scriptures stand and speak for themselves, then God can use those means to let his truth prevail.

A Tale as Old as Time?

God's people have always faced persecution. From the time of Abel being silenced by his brother to today, persecution has been seen for a long time. That, in turn, is nothing new that we as Christians have to deal with it today. And the responses have varied in the way we present them. Biblically speaking, there were a few who had a similar situation that could be seen as Cancel Culture. In this section, we will discuss the possibility of Cancel Culture being seen in Scripture.

Jeremiah

Could the prophet Jeremiah have been in a Cancel Culture? There may be points that support such a claim. God put His own words in his mouth (Jer. 1:9) to speak to His people. And God told his prophet to not be afraid to say to them whatever he has commanded them (Jer. 1:17). In his speaking of his godly message, he told them to turn from their ways and repent because destruction and punishment are coming. But how did the people of Judah and Israel respond to God's message? They wanted *to cancel* the prophet for not only his words but God's. For example, when Jeremiah was restricted from entering the temple and asked Baruch to write down words that he got from God. Baruch then told the officials to tell the king Jeremiah's words on a Scroll. They brought the report to Jehoiakim, King of Judah, and he did not want to listen to God's word and burned His prophet's scroll. Not only once but twice (Jer 36). So, they canceled him because what God said went against their public opinion. As Allen states, "So closes the

literary block of chs.34-36 to a close with a melodramatic attempt to deny the truth of Jeremiah's prophesying, which helps seal Judah's fate."⁹⁸

The people did not want to listen to the words of God. When Jeremiah was trying to bring God's message to his people, a captain guard would not listen to his words and arrested him. The guard twisted his words to make it seem like he was an enemy sympathizer. They had thrown him into prison for a long time (Jer. 37:11–16). And even when he was saved from that prison, more people wanted to cancel him by putting him to death (Jer. 38:14). As the king stood back and did nothing, soldiers put him in a silent cold pit. And in that pit, his message was cut off from the rest of the culture around him. He was canceled and despised for the words God gave him.

The people did not want to listen to God's message. They wanted to cancel him by burning his words, locking him in prison for a long time, and throwing him into a pit. He was persecuted for his words as people proactively spoke out against him and God. They spoke out against God's message and hated it. We see many parallels in our culture today. First, there is judgement and accusation toward the word of God. God's people are judged for what they believe and accused for hate. People judge sins how they want to judge them. In Jeremiah's role, he was supposed to call out sins of the people, but they did not want to hear it. Second, the sins that are broadcasted are often seen with betrayal. Jeremiah confronted the sins of the people, but he was often met with betrayal for opposing sin. In our Cancel Culture today, people are met with betrayal for opposing sin. There can be individuals that can be ostracized for holding onto

98. Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah Jeremiah: A Commentary*; The Old Testament Library, Westminster John Knox Press; 2008. 396–400. In this section, Allen lays out the terrible scene of what the king thought about God's message. It is Jehoiakin's ghastly deed, both as a sin that needs to be punished and a wrong to be put right. If it was a symbolic action, then it would show that God's word would endure forever while man would face punishment in the oracle of disaster [Isa 40:8].

their beliefs. People do not want to hear the message that God says to them. They only want to hear what they want to hear. So, they twist God's words and do not want to hear what any of his messengers want to say. And when the hostility grows, so too does the method of cancellation. Jeremiah lived in a Cancel Culture that wanted God's message silenced. Which sounds familiar, does it not? It is nothing new and has been seen before in a different culture.

Jesus

One could argue that Jesus faced a Cancel Culture too. It was a hostile environment where the Son of God was hated for his message. For example, there was a time when Jesus was in a field with his hungry disciples. After this, a group of His enemies spoke out against him and tried to say that he was doing wrong⁹⁹ for the "new traditions" they supported. Even after they saw him speak the truth in love and heal a man with a withered hand, they began to conspire to kill him (Matt. 12:1–14). They did not want to listen to his message and hated it. They would plan to kill him and would even succeed in doing so! They figured that they had the ultimate way of cancelling him forever; to kill him and remove the threat to their power and thought they succeeded. And even when he lives today, he and his message are hated, changed to conform to society, and silenced by those who do not want to hear it. It makes one think if Christ was born in this modern age, he sure would have been canceled for his extreme ideas. Those on social media would call Him crazy, bigoted, and non-conforming and they would cancel him from their lives.

99. Jeffery A. Gibbs, *Concordia Commentary: Matthew 11:2-20:34*, Concordia publishing house, 2010. 605-606. In this, Gibbs says that the Pharisees claimed that Jesus violated the Sabbath. He gives a three-fold answer not to debate but to say how he and his disciples did not violate the Sabbath, both explicitly and implicitly.

Yet, there are differences in Jesus' day to our day. First, there was no electronic social media that would help fuel the fire of hatred toward Christ. He was hated for his message in person. Second, the topics that Jesus was cancelled for come from different sources. Christ was killed because he was innocent. People are canceled for saying or posting something that causes offense. Even in these differences, the main root problem of Cancel Culture is seen throughout many societies throughout history. The same hatred that was brought upon Christ also has a direct impact on Christians today. The tools that are used, like social media, may be new, but the idea is the same. There is a lack of love and hatred for the Word of God in a Cancel Culture. The methods may be new, but the essence is still the same. This legitimate phenomenon has been seen throughout history in different forms and in different ways.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

So what has been done will be done again. The words Cancel Culture may be “new” in our ears today, but the meaning behind them is the same. In terms of morality, nothing is new. In the words of Bollhagen, “*No, nothing of this world is new, and the sooner we believe Solomon’s words, the better off we will be...The ‘new’ morality is indeed the old immorality*¹⁰⁰.” Because of the base essence of Cancel Culture, there is no love for neighbor. No way that they take their words and actions in the kindest possible way. It purely deals with the second table of the law (as well as the first¹⁰¹). There is no love for the neighbor, it is only looking out for self. And it shows itself in a modern-day phenomenon where people do not want to hear what others say. But that has been done before and will be done again. Nothing is ever new; nothing is new under the sun. And the same attitude for God’s people will be the same as it always has been. People in their sinful flesh will always hate God’s word, his people, and his message. They will go out and proactively try to seek to cancel God’s message get rid of it and find many ways to do so. Whether that is a post on X wanting a Christian to be canceled to a family member who wants to cancel their family for their worldly beliefs, this is nothing new. People will react with anger and

100. James Bollhagen, *Concordia Commentary: Ecclesiastes*, Concordia Publishing House; 2011. 59-60. Bollhagen says that there is nothing new in terms of morality, and the more we realize this, the better off we will be. Cell phones and the internet? People talk to each other in many ways, just like before. People hating each other? It has been seen before and will be seen again.

101. The first table of the law is loving God. The second is loving neighbor (Matt 12:30-31).

hatred for God's message and for those who are preaching that message. They will want to cancel and ostracize them for their beliefs.

As time goes on, our message will be even more hostile to society. Just in the times we live in, we see the growing hostility against God's word. And I fear that it is going to get worse as Jesus promised (Luke 12:51-53; John 15:18-27). Where the message of God and those who follow his message will be hostile to the unbelieving heart. So much so that I could see that in the future there will be censorship for God's church. The society we live in will progress from the traditional values that the generations before held onto before and become more dehumanized. Cancel Culture is real. It is here and will progress into growing animosity toward God and his word. This is nothing new under the sun. It has been here a long time and will be again. As the world continues in its downward spiral of morality, the dislike for the neighbor will take to a new level throughout each generation. Even if his people are silenced, his message will stand. Even when we pass away and the next new thing is here, God's Word will endure forever (Isa 40:8). Nothing is ever new concerning morality. It has been here before and will be here again. Even Cancel Culture.

For Further Research

In this paper, we have examined the phenomenon of cancel culture and the response of evangelical writers to cancel culture. We have articulated a Lutheran response to cancel culture in general with a small sample of authors. Future research could investigate what this Lutheran approach looks like in the specific various area of cancel culture (viewpoints on sexuality, transgenderism, racism, and sexism). Further research could include a larger sample of authors as more information is being released about the phenomenon of Cancel Culture. Other research

could also include different areas in the Culture Wars. For example, Speed Culture could be another area of research talking about the advances in technology and how it affects Christians.

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102. No exact time stamp was found on the comment. Only the data of, “1 Year ago”.