

Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word

Southeast Wisconsin District Conference

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Tuesday, June 9, 2015

Change usually occurs incrementally, in small steps, sometimes so imperceptibly that one may hardly notice – until a particular incident or decision or disaster startles us to attention.

Such may have been the case and the cause for outrage triggered by a local media event last November and early December. A billboard on St. Paul Avenue just south of I-94, visible to drivers approaching downtown Milwaukee, featured a little girl, writing to Santa, “All I want for Christmas is to skip church!” Why? “I’m too old for fairy tales.” This media event turned out not to be a local or singular effort but was sponsored jointly by the New Jersey-based American Atheists and Southeast Wisconsin Freethinkers.¹

The atheists’ message, at least, was clear. More ambiguous was some of the religious response – albeit one would expect ambiguity from Milwaukee’s Unitarian Universalist ministries – which said in effect that whether the Christmas story ever happened or if it is only a fairy tale is irrelevant. “People find their way to the churches because they want to know that somewhere in the darkest night, a candle glows,” said two UU revs. “They come to be part of a community and to feel like they belong. They come to be reminded of what love and joy might really look like – and isn’t that the magic of it all?”²

The bluntness of the ad campaign was a far cry from the blandness of 1950s-style public service announcements urging us to “celebrate the holidays at the church or synagogue of your choice.” This campaign has forced some of us to reflect on how much the religious fabric of our society has changed and is not changing back. Have we come to intersections like this before, or is this insurmountable evidence that we have now become a post-Christian society?

Certainly Americans have come to points like this before. The Missouri Synod’s John Theodore Mueller commented in 1931 that “only a short time ago we were horrified by the blasphemies of agnostic Modernists,” but now “we are facing a foe that is even more treacherous and pernicious. Modernism,” Mueller wrote, “with all its vagaries, at least endeavored to preserve some kind of religion and respect for God.” But that was now giving way to “an extreme type of atheism” that is “attempting to destroy altogether even the semblance of religion that Modernism has left.” Mueller quoted Elmer Davis from an article in *Harper’s Magazine* in March 1930 that “the bulk of the old-time religion” can no longer be believed. “The Fall-and-Atonement drama, which is the core of traditional theology, has had to go overboard.” Mueller cited other forces – Darwinism, Dewey educational philosophy – and H.L. Mencken, who announced that religion is done for in America: “Alone among the great nations of history we have got rid of religion as a serious scourge – and by the simple process of reducing it to a petty nuisance.”³

¹ The message on another billboard from the American Atheists said, “Tell your family you don’t believe in gods. . . . *They just might agree.*” A second billboard featured pictures of Santa Claus, a man wearing a devil’s mask, a statue of Poseidon, and Jesus, with the message: “37 million Americans know MYTHS when they see them. What myths do you see?” A third announced, “You KNOW they’re all scams,” an advertisement for the Southeast Regional Atheists Meet in Huntsville, Alabama. See www.atheists.org.

² “Billboard targets closeted atheists,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (December 4, 2014): 2B.

³ John Theodore Mueller, “Atheistic Propaganda in Our Country,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 2 (February 1931): 87-90.

Or one may point to the rise of godless Communism. Religion was important to Nikolai Lenin only “in the sense that he hated it.” Unlike Karl Marx, who despised it and considered it something marginal to life, Lenin saw religion as a “powerful and ubiquitous” enemy. “There can be nothing more abominable than religion,” Lenin wrote, and he created and maintained “an enormous academic propaganda machine against religion.” The men Lenin feared, hated, and persecuted most were the saints: “the purer the religion, the more dangerous.”⁴ Missouri’s Alfred Rehwinkel, citing numerous sources, concluded that communist writers all “boast of their atheism and materialism. They preach class hatred and bloody revolution,” and “they teach an ethic and morality which is purely utilitarian and anti-Christian in its very essence.” Communists may “pretend to cooperate with Church and other humanitarian groups to alleviate suffering, injustice, and inequalities and parade as the friends of the common man and the underprivileged masses. But once established, they reveal their real character.”⁵

One Lenin reminds of another. Some of us are old enough to remember the remarks John Lennon made in 1966. “Christianity will go,” he predicted. . . .

It will vanish and shrink. I needn’t argue about that; I’m right and I will be proved right. We’re more popular than Jesus now; I don’t know which will go first – rock ‘n’ roll or Christianity. Jesus was all right but his disciples were thick and ordinary. It’s them twisting it that ruins it for me.⁶

His words stirred protests and outraged sermons in the United States, they were not so inflammatory in Britain. Lennon biographer Philip Norman has explained that “Christianity” meant the Church of England, which “fewer and fewer people took with any seriousness.” Anglican worship and clergy “were the butt of every contemporary satirist from Alan Bennett to Peter Sellers.” Lennon’s comments were “so unremarkable” in England that editors of the *London Evening Standard* did not headline or highlight them, and columnists elsewhere seemed hardly to notice.⁷ Lennon’s appraisal of Christianity in the United Kingdom anticipated a 2003 statement from Cardinal Cormac Murphy O’Connor, head of the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales, that “Britain has become a pagan country over the past half century.”⁸ In 1940, the year Lennon was born, 36 percent of British children attended Sunday school. That number dropped to 24 percent in 1960, and by 2003 fell to 4 percent.⁹

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It is easy enough to lament, in the church basement after Bible class or at McDonald’s over coffee, how bad things have gotten. But how did they get that way?

⁴ Paul Johnson, *Modern Times: The World from the Twenties to the Nineties* (New York: HarperCollins, rev. ed., 1991), 50-51.

⁵ Alfred Martin Rehwinkel, *Communism and the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1948), 83-85, 106.

⁶ Maureen Cleave, “How Does a Beatle Live?” *London Evening Standard* (March 4, 1966); cited by Steve Turner, *The Gospel according to the Beatles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 20.

⁷ Philip Norman, *John Lennon: The Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 447-48.

⁸ “Britain is a pagan society, says Cardinal,” *Telegraph* (January 26, 2003);

<http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/fnews/830182/posts 1/16>, accessed May 18, 2015.

⁹ Turner, *The Gospel according to the Beatles*, 13.

Blame it on the Sixties. Francis Schaeffer wrote that a great revolution took place in American culture “in the short span from the twenties to the sixties.”¹⁰ Another observer narrowed things further: “Hell had been waiting in the wings for over a century; it finally broke loose in the 1960s.”¹¹

After the religious good times following World War II and during the Eisenhower years, mainline Protestant culture in the 1960s began to disintegrate. Enrollments in church schools and seminaries fell, budgets were cut, building programs curtailed, and foreign missionary work reduced. (This was not true in the WELS, which experienced significant growth in the 1960s and thereafter.¹²) This decline affected not only the many Americans who no longer identified with the mainline denominations but also the millions of church members who *remained* in their churches. They kept going to services and having their children baptized, kept calling themselves Methodists or Catholics or Lutherans, yet they found themselves “participating in institutions that no longer had the manpower, the financial resources, or the intellectual confidence to make orthodox faith seem as credible as it had been at midcentury.” These church bodies “struggled to claim the kind of influential role that Mainline Protestantism had taken for granted throughout most of American history and that the Catholicism of midcentury had joined in for a time.”¹³

The cover of *Time* magazine on April 8, 1966, asked, “Is God Dead?” Princeton Theologian Paul Ramsey claimed that 1960s America was the first generation “in recorded history to build a culture upon the premise that God is dead.” Others said the “God issue” had become irrelevant for them. While an extraordinarily high percentage of Americans—97%—said they believed in God, “only 27% described themselves as deeply religious,” according to a Louis Harris poll. “It is not faintness of spirit that the churches worry about now,” *Time* concluded, but “doubt and bewilderment assailing committee believers.” Particularly among younger Americans, *Time* reported, there was “an acute feeling that the churches on Sunday are preaching the existence of a God who is nowhere visible in their daily lives.”¹⁴

The 1960s and beyond “witnessed an extraordinary weakening of organized Christianity in the United States and a fundamental shift in America’s spiritual ecology—away from institutional religion and toward a more do-it-yourself and consumer oriented spirituality,”¹⁵ which endures and has only grown with time. Public interest in religion remained high and was in some ways growing: belief in God, hope for an afterlife, and the practice of prayer remained constant or even rose during those years.¹⁶ For Americans coming of age in that decade, the crucial events were not campus protests or civil rights demonstrations “but the emergence of a whole new culture, based on a new spirituality. A new world was gestating in the Haight-Ashbury, or the nurseries of scattered remote communes, or an

¹⁰ Francis Schaeffer, *Death in the City* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1982), 211.

¹¹ Kenneth Meyers, *All God’s Children and Blue Suede Shoes* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1989), 118.

¹² “In many respects the ‘60s and ‘70s represent the period of our synod’s greatest numerical growth and expansion. In 1960 we were active in 16 states,” but “by 1984 we had organized congregations in all 50 states. . . . Twenty percent of our current number of congregations were organized during this 20-year period. . . . We have a very clear focus during this period: start new churches and start them all over the country.” Robert C. Hartman, “The Growth of the WELS Through the Years,” *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 8 (Fall 1990): 37.

¹³ Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (New York: Free Press, 2013), 59-61.

¹⁴ “Toward a Hidden God,” *Time* (April 8, 1966): 82-83.

¹⁵ Douthat, *Bad Religion*, 62.

¹⁶ According to Claude S. Fischer and Michael Hout, *Century of Difference: How America Changed in the Last One Hundred Years* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008), 208, Americans were slightly more likely to believe in life after death in the 1990s than they were in the 1940s.

East-West [monastery of lamas].”¹⁷ Hillary Rodham (before taking on “Clinton”) said in her 1969 commencement address at Wellesley College, “We are, all of us, exploring a world that none of us even understands and attempting to create within that uncertainty.” They were “searching for more immediate, ecstatic, and penetrating modes of living. And so our questions, our questions about our institutions, about our colleges, about our churches, about our government continue.”¹⁸

One might argue that American religion had experienced other revivals and awakenings in its history. The hippie movement and Jesus Freaks, the turn to hallucinogen-assisted mysticism, interest in astrology and communal living could be regarded as recycled, slightly more dramatic versions of Shakers and Millerites and the Oneida Community. But what was different in the 1960s and 1970s was that more and more “the heretics ruled the day.” America “became more religious but less traditionally Christian; more supernaturally minded but less churched; more spiritual in its sentiments but less pious in its practices.” If you wanted to talk about UFOs or crystals or the *Kama Sutra* or the *I Ching*, it was a golden age, but “amid all of this enthusiasm, all of this hunger for the numinous and transcendent and revolutionary, the message of Christianity itself seemed to have lost its credibility.”¹⁹

Postmodernism. And not only its credibility, but also its centrality. For a long time the assumption stood that a single, all-powerful Being made the world, or at least was its first cause; that this Being rightly possessed the authority to judge the world and would determine who would go to heaven and who would go to hell. Those assumptions and others are denied by postmodernism.

The postmodern “critique is that there is no one center that is sufficient to encompass the experiences of all people.” Thus it is no longer possible for any of us to see or experience the center of things only on our terms: “we can speak only parochially from our own historical and cultural-bound perspectives.” Instead of an agreed-upon central truth, the postmodern world is viewed as “an arena of dueling texts and a never-ending struggle among competing interpretations.”²⁰ Ours is a “post” world, and in fact a world filled with “posts” – not just “postmodern” but “post-critical,” “post-industrial,” “post-metaphysical,” “post-European,” “post-colonial,” “post-imperial,” “post-socialist,” “post-patriarchal,” “post-ideological.” It is even described as “post-Fordist,” in which “the modern, Fordist form of capitalist society, marked by mass production and consumption, state regulation of the economy, and a homogeneous mass culture, is being replaced by ‘more flexible’ modes of sociopolitical and economic organization.”²¹

Add one more: “post-confessional.” No longer can any individual or group maintain dominance or impose the accepted norm for all of society. The key word, of course, is *pluralism*, but postmodernism includes “more than the fact of pluralism”; it is “the acceptance of pluralism as the ideal way to organize society in the long run,” a society that “cannot be controlled by accepted dogma.”²²

Truth, then, is relative. “What is true, right, or beautiful for one person isn’t necessarily true, right, or beautiful for another.” Truth cannot be fixed by any outside authority or reality, nor can it be

¹⁷ Robert Ellwood, *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening: American Religion Moving from Modern to Postmodern* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 7.

¹⁸ Hillary D. Rodham, “1969 Student Commencement Speech,” Wellesley College, May 31, 1969; <http://www.wellesley.edu/events/commencement/archives/1969commencement/studentspeech>; accessed May 21, 2015.

¹⁹ Douthat, *Bad Religion*, 63-65.

²⁰ Anthony J. Steinbronn, *Worldviews: A Christian Response to Pluralism* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2007), 176-77.

²¹ Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn* (New York: Guilford Press, 1997), 13.

²² Steinbronn, *Worldviews*, 167, 156-57.

“discovered,” but only “manufactured.” Human thought cannot exist independent of our social environment, but it is “derived from social forces imposed upon us.” Whatever “truths” I or we subscribe to “are beliefs we have been conditioned to accept by our society, just as others have been conditioned to accept a completely different set of beliefs.” Absent objective truth, “there is no final bar of appeal to determine truth and reality when cultures view the world in different or mutually exclusive ways.” We can only have “local knowledges” or “paradigms,” which are real to the individual. “Objectivity” does not exist.²³

Postmodernism attacks Christianity on different grounds than modernism did. “Modernists would argue in a variety of ways that Christianity is not true” – scientifically impossible, historically inaccurate, or logically unlikely. “Postmodernists, on the other hand, would critique Christianity by claiming that Christians think they have the only truth.” The mere suggestion of being in possession of “absolute truth” is dismissed by postmodernists as “intolerant” for “trying to force one’s beliefs onto other people.”²⁴ Intolerance “has come to mean simply disagreeing with anyone else’s beliefs.” To question the viewpoint of another “is to invade and pillage a different cultural context – or a different ‘reality.’”²⁵ Reduced to a bumper sticker, disagreement on any level makes you a “hater.”

Postmodernists grant one exception: it is entirely acceptable to challenge and denounce viewpoints they consider “fundamentalist,” which can refer to anyone who claims to know the truth or who charges another religion with being false. “Postmodernists argue that those they label fundamentalists are unacceptable because they subscribe to universal truth claims.” Questioning another’s beliefs implies that we can discover an external, objective reality. More than that, because postmodernists construct their own reality – something is true *because* I believe it – challenging the truth claims of another person’s religion devalues that person. Rejecting the *content* of another person’s beliefs is thought to be the same as rejecting the person who believes it. “In place of truths that make sense or truths that can be backed up in some way, postmodernism again leaves its adherents with two things: experience and power.” Postmodern religion says, “My experience is the basis for my beliefs, and those beliefs exist to empower me.”²⁶

Postmodernism is reflected in art, architecture, television, the movies, and music, and sometimes the picture is dreary. Sting’s song “All This Time,” describes the irrelevance and death of Christianity:

I looked across the river today.
Saw a city in the fog and an old church tower where the seagulls play. . . .

Two priests came ‘round our house tonight,
One young, one old, to offer prayers for the dying to serve the final rite.
One to learn, one to teach which way the cold wind blows.

His dissatisfaction pours through:

²³ Jim Leffel, “Our New Challenge: Postmodernism,” in Dennis McCallum, gen. ed., *The Death of Truth* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1996), 32-37.

²⁴ David S. Dockery, “The Challenge of Postmodernism,” in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. David S. Dockery (Wheaton, Ill.: Bridgepoint/Victor Books, 1995), 14.

²⁵ Jim Leffel and Dennis McCallum, “Postmodern Impact: Religion,” in Dennis McCallum, gen. ed., *The Death of Truth* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1996), 200-201.

²⁶ Leffel and McCallum, “Postmodern Impact: Religion,” 201-202.

Blessed are the poor, for they shall inherit the earth.
Better to be poor than a fat man in the eye of the needle.
All these were spoken; I swear I hear the old man laughing,
What good is a used up world and how could it be worth having? . . .

Father, if Jesus exists then how come he never lives here?

The only certainty is that “the river flowed endlessly to the sea.”²⁷

In a more well-known song, Sting admitted:

You could say I lost my faith in science and progress.
You could say I lost my faith in the holy church.
You could say I lost my sense of direction. . . .

Some would say I was a lost man in a lost world.

Sting’s last resort: “If I ever lose my faith in you/ there’d be nothing left for me to do.”²⁸

But postmodernism can also arouse an expansive, giddy response. Folk singer Pete Seeger told an audience at Harvard in 1980 that he would give a tribute to “that old time religion,” and he began with the traditional refrain—“Give me that old time religion; it’s good enough for me.” But the new verses of the song went in a decidedly nontraditional direction:

We will pray with Aphrodite; We will pray with Aphrodite;
She wears that see-through nightie, And it’s good enough for me.

We will pray with Zarathustra; We’ll pray just like we useter;
I’m a Zarathustra booster, And it’s good enough for me.

We will pray with those old Druids; They drink fermented fluids,
Waltzing naked through the woo-ids, And it’s good enough for me.²⁹

Messages from the East. Hand in hand with postmodernism is the rising attraction of Eastern religions. “We in the West have been taught that truth cannot be self-contradictory. But in Asian religion and culture, truths can often be contradictory.”³⁰

Few practicing Hindus are acquainted with the philosophical foundations of their religion, yet the numerous traditions within Hinduism make it “incredibly complex” yet “deceptively simple” and

²⁷ “All This Time,” <http://songmeanings.com/songs/view/10442/>; accessed May 22, 2015.

²⁸ “If I Ever Lose My Faith in You,” <http://www.sting.com/discography/lyrics/lyric/song/151>; accessed May 22, 2015.

²⁹ Pete Seeger, *Singalong in Sanders Theater, Harvard, January 11, 1980*, Folkways Records FXM 36055; cited by William R. Hutchinson, *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 224-25.

³⁰ Leffel, “Our New Challenge: Postmodernism,” 35, 43.

“seductive to anyone who might be pursuing all-inclusive spirituality.”³¹ Buddhism is “a religion without God and a pietism without religion,” originally “a highly disciplined philosophic formula for personal salvation through renunciations of personal cravings and desires.” The goal of both Hinduism and Buddhism is the prevention of reincarnation in order to bring about the individual soul’s release from the material world and absorption into an ultimate, impersonal state of enlightenment. Confucianism may be “the most important vital single force to have dominated Chinese culture for 2000 years,” but it says nothing about God, sin, forgiveness, or an afterlife. It is instead “a socio-political philosophy, a code of human behavior and an ethical idealism.” Taoism centers on the *Tao*, understood to be “the eternal and ubiquitous, or universal impersonal principle by which the universe was supposedly produced and is supported and governed.” All Eastern religions teach that “everything is part of one essence,” a viewpoint often called *pantheism* or *monism*.³²

The rejection of rationality and the acceptance of paradoxical thinking makes Eastern religions compatible with postmodernism. “Neither Eastern religions nor postmodernism accepts the reality of the world we observe in any objective sense.”³³ Hinduism has no sense of *sin* as a violation of the will of God. The material world is said to be *maya*, an illusion; what seems real to us is delusion. Zen Buddhism even makes use of contradiction in *koans*, which are short, clever, non-rational sayings meant to jolt one out of logically-bound thinking and to achieve a higher plane of understanding.

While traditional Christianity sees great differences between Christian teaching and Eastern thinking, a growing number of teachers now propose methods of harmonizing them. Christianity is often presented as an exclusivist religion, but teachers like S. Wesley Ariarajah considers such a position “socially inappropriate to our modern context.” Instead, he advocates reinterpreting biblical texts in such a way that will free us “as faithful people to be in dialogue with other faithful people.” This pluralistic approach to other religions requires “a theocentric meta-narrative, not a Christian one.”³⁴ John Hick proposes a “paradigm shift from a Christianity-centered or Jesus-centered model to a God-centered model of the universe of faiths.” The various religions can then be seen as “different human responses to the one divine Reality, embodying different perceptions which have formed in different historical and cultural circumstances.”³⁵ Katharine Jefferts Schori, then bishop-to-be of the Episcopal Church of the U.S.A., said in 2006: “We who practice the Christian tradition understand him as our vehicle to the divine. But for us to assume that God could not act in other ways is, I think, to put God in an awfully small box.”³⁶ In an interview later that year, Schori added: “Christians understand that Jesus is the route to God,” but that is “not to say that Muslims, or Sikhs, or Jains, come to God in a radically different way.” Hindus and “people of other faith traditions” come to God “through their own cultural contexts.” When her interviewer commented, “It sounds like you’re saying it’s a parallel reality, but in another culture and language,” Schori replied, “I think that’s accurate.”³⁷

The movement away from traditional Christian belief to Eastern spirituality was exemplified in popular culture by the religious journey of the Beatles, especially that of George Harrison. All four

³¹ Victor A. Raj, “The Inclusive Religion of Hinduism,” in *World Religions In the Light of the Lutheran Confessions*, ed. John A. Maxwell (papers presented at the Congress on the Lutheran Confessions, St. Louis, April 10-12, 2007), 37-38.

³² Won Yong Ji, “Challenge of Eastern Spiritualities to the West,” *Concordia Journal* 17 (April 1991): 133-35.

³³ Leffel and McCallum, “Postmodern Impact: Religion,” 205-206.

³⁴ S. Wesley Ariarajah, *The Bible and People of Other Faiths* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989), 27, 61, 63 cited by Gary Phillips, “Religious Pluralism in a Postmodern World,” in *The Challenge of Postmodernism*, 259.

³⁵ John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 18-19.

³⁶ Katharine Jefferts Schori, “10 Questions for Katharine Jefferts Schori,” *Time* (July 17, 2006): 6.

³⁷ “What Are You: A Unitarian?” NPR Interview with Katharine Jefferts Schori, November 3, 2006;

<http://www.alpb.org/forum/index.php?topic=295.0>.

dismissed Christianity long before they were presented as lovable mop-tops, and chief among the reasons they rejected it was its exclusivity. Asked to comment on Bob Dylan's purported and short-lived conversion to Christianity, John Lennon said he objected to Dylan's presentation of Christ as the only way: "There isn't [only] one answer to anything."³⁸

But it was Harrison who developed a permanent attraction to Eastern religion. First introduced to yoga in the 1960s, he came to believe the Hindu tenet that God is not "out there" waiting to be contacted but is already present in every person. Jesus, in Harrison's view, was "not the Son of God in a unique way but an example of a fully realized person." He said, "Everyone is a potential Jesus Christ, really. We are all trying to get where Jesus got. And we're going to be on this world [sic] until we get there."³⁹ Harrison expressed his Hindu beliefs more boldly in his post-Beatles music. His solo triple album *All Things Must Pass* was "suffused with the beliefs that he'd had to hold back." The inside sleeve of his 1973 album *Living in the Material World* contained a reproduction of a painting of Krishna and Arjuna in their chariot taken from a translation of the Hindu Scripture, the *Bhagavad Gita*. His wife Olivia said that he "embraced the essence of all religions" but "had little patience for organized religion or dogma that espoused guilt, sin, or mystery." After his death in 2001, two Hindu devotees issued a news release declaring that Harrison had "done more than any single popular culture figure during these past few decades to spread spiritual consciousness around the world."⁴⁰ A *Christian Century* writer said that although Harrison probably never went beyond being a "cafeteria Hindu," his greatest legacy "may be the way his decades-long spiritual quest shaped the way the West looks at God, gurus and life."⁴¹

The Sexual Revolution. The last half century has also seen a dramatic shift in American attitudes toward sexuality, and this shift has also had significant effects on religious attitude. The 1960s saw no new textual discoveries contradicting biblical passages on pre-marital and extra-marital sex, yet a decade later these passages were being called into question because of sexual constraints removed by the birth control pill. A sexual ethic centered in chastity and monogamy "had seemed self-evidently commonsensical even to many non-Christians," and what was understood as moral was also regarded as most practical. Scripture and church prescribed acceptable sexual behavior, but "it was the fear of illegitimacy, abandonment, and disease that made the position nearly universally respected," even if frequently still disobeyed.⁴² In 1962, only 15 percent of women who had turned 18 between 1928 and 1957 told a Gallup survey that it was "all right" for a woman to have premarital sex with a man she intended to marry. But by 1973, 43 percent of respondents said "Yes" when asked the same question, and by the mid-1980s the figure reached 57 percent.⁴³

The birth control pill not only disconnected sexual relations from pregnancy and procreation; it also severed the cultural connection between Christian ethics and public common sense regarding sexual relations. A 1966 *U.S. News and World Report* article chronicled the changes in religious thinking. "Widespread concern is developing about the impact of the pill on morality," and "with birth control now so easy and effective, is the last vestige of sexual restraint to go out the window? Will mating become casual and random – as among animals?" The general director of the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship felt certain that the pill would "tear down the barriers for more than a few young people

³⁸ Turner, *The Gospel according to the Beatles*, 191.

³⁹ Turner, *The Gospel according to the Beatles*, 139-40.

⁴⁰ Turner, *The Gospel according to the Beatles*, 176-79.

⁴¹ Steve Raby, "George Harrison as theological rock star," *The Christian Century* 129 (January 11, 2012): 19.

⁴² Douthat, *Bad Religion*, 70-72.

⁴³ David J. Harding and Christopher Jencks, "Changing Attitudes toward Premarital Sex: Cohort, Period, and Aging Effects," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 67 (Summer 2003): 211-26.

hitherto restrained by fear of pregnancy” and was “very much afraid that sexual anarchy could develop.” Presbyterian leaders warned of growing “confusion about the meaning of sex,” as clergymen from other denominations saw the pill as “becoming a major element in the crumbling of past standards of sexual morality.”⁴⁴

But voices in other religious periodicals appeared ready to bow to the inevitable. A writer in *The Christian Century* feared that “the Church of Jesus Christ stands at the threshold of total irrelevance vis-à-vis one of man’s most pressing concerns – his sexuality and the religious and societal demands associated with it.” Charging that the church had “spawned a host of tragic absurdities” for young people by still insisting on virginity and sexual purity before marriage, he announced that some theologians of “liberal bent” were already hinting at the emergence of a “new morality”:

They have been brave enough to say that non-marital sex is not necessarily wrong. Now we must go farther and proclaim that, properly understood and lovingly practiced, sex outside of marriage is indeed a positive good. The Pill and the scientific discoveries that will follow it mean that for the first time non-marital sex can be a loving interpersonal relationship.”⁴⁵

These changing attitudes led to the privatization of contraception, premarital sex, and, in time, abortion and homosexuality. The very notion of “morals legislation,” once common in American life, had now become suspect, and “Christian arguments about family law and public policy that might have been accepted by even secular audiences in the 1940s came to be regarded with suspicion as potential violations of the separation of church and state.” Americans who otherwise thought of themselves as “good Christians” decided that the sexual ethic professed in their churches was “repressive, cruel, and pernicious, a stumbling block to female advancement and a blight on healthy eroticism.” Anyone who dared to defend the church’s position was dismissed as either hopelessly nostalgic for an age of sexual repression or a helpless victim “unable to escape the burden of shame and guilt a religious upbringing had imposed.”⁴⁶

American attitudes toward homosexuality and same-sex marriage have changed dramatically in the last decade, across every religious, political and age group and in every region of the country. Support for same-sex marriage jumped from 32 percent in 2003 to 53 percent in 2013. The preaching of religious leaders against homosexual behavior is perceived to be driving people out the church doors. “Among those who say they left their childhood religion and now have no religious identity, nearly one in four (24 percent) say their church’s negative teachings or treatment of LGBT people was an important reason they left,” according to Robert P. Jones, CEO of the Public Religion Research institute.⁴⁷ A local commentator concluded: “At this point, with so much history and reality on the side of the LGBTQ people’s struggle for acceptance and civil rights, those who insist on fighting against them look all the more wrong-headed and out-of-touch.” Opponents to same sex marriage “risk

⁴⁴ “The Pill: How It Is Affecting U.S. Morals, Family Life,” *U.S. News and World Report* (July 11, 1966): 62-63.

⁴⁵ Gordon Clanton, “Understanding Sex in the Age of the Pill,” *The Christian Century* 86 (January 8, 1969): 43-46. Clanton’s proposals drew a flurry of response, some vigorously supportive, others vehemently opposed; see “In the Age of the Pill: Readers’ Response,” *The Christian Century* 86 (February 5, 1969): 187-95.

⁴⁶ Douthat, *Bad Religion*, 72-73.

⁴⁷ Cathy Lynn Grossman, “Survey: Americans turn sharply favorable on gay issues,” Religious News Service, February 26, 2014;

https://www.google.com/search?site=&source=hp&q=americans+turn+sharply+favorable+on+gay+issues&oq=Am&gs_l=hp.1.0.35i39l2j0l2j0i20j0l2.9446.11513.0.12986.5.4.1.0.0.102.346.3j1.4.0.ekpsrh...0...1.1.64.hp..1.4.280.0.s6GCzkBQ-zk, accessed May 23, 2015.

becoming the George Wallace's of their day, stubbornly standing in the school house door to oppose equality."⁴⁸

II

When we look back on biblical history, we can identify two moments in which the old way of life for God's people as they knew it came to an end and would never return.

The first such moment occurred at the decline, fall, and removal of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah – Israel in the late 8th century B.C., Judah a century and a half later. At mid-8th century, it must have been hard for Israelites to hear Amos and Hosea say, "The end is near!" when life looked so good for at least some citizens in the North under the prosperous though wicked rule of King Jeroboam II. But as latter decades of the eighth century unfolded, during the preaching of Micah and then Isaiah, first Damascus fell, then Samaria, and Assyrian troops deported Israelite captives to other lands and shipped in replacement peoples. This was now the post-Israelite era. One would expect that little sister Judah would have paid attention and learned lessons from her big sister's woes, but, as Ezekiel remarked in astonishment, "Her sister Oholibah [Judah] saw this, and she became more corrupt than her sister [Israel]" (Ezekiel 23:11). The South was taken into captivity and a remnant was spared to return to Jerusalem, but their old way of life was also gone for good. They would never resurrect the glorious kingdom of David but were occupied territory of Persians, then of Greeks, then of the Romans.

Returned exiles and Diaspora transplants developed four strategies to maintain their faith and retain a semblance of their way of life. All were well-intentioned and reasonable in the short term. The Pharisaic strategy was to protect their laws by surrounding them with layers of additional commands and traditions, erecting "a hedge around the law."⁴⁹ Making more rules remains the most common response when religions face threatening circumstances. The Sadducean strategy was to accommodate the dominant occupying force, but in such accommodation a group may lose the very essence that makes it distinctive.⁵⁰ The Zealot strategy was to meet the occupiers with armed resistance; the only good Roman was a dead Roman.⁵¹ A generation after Jesus, the Zealots picked a fight with Rome, with

⁴⁸ Emily Mills, "May it please the court to uphold gay marriage," <http://www.jsonline.com/news/opinion/mayitpleasethecourtupholdgaymarriageb99492290z1302255451.html> ; accessed May 18, 2015.

⁴⁹ The Pharisees "set up a body of traditional interpretation and application of the law which in due course tended to assume a validity as sacrosanct as that of the written law itself. Later generations of rabbis, indeed, represented this oral law as coming down from Moses, who received it on Sinai equally with the written law; while the written law was transmitted by copyists, the oral law was transmitted by word of mouth from one generation to the next—from Moses to Joshua, then in turn to the elders, to the prophets, to the men of the Great Synagogue, to Antigonus of Soco, who delivered it in turn to successive pairs of scholars, generation by generation." F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 73.

⁵⁰ The Sadducees "acknowledged the Pentateuch alone as authoritative, interpreting it more literally and, in criminal cases, less leniently than the Pharisees. . . . In the long run the entrenched conservatism of the Sadducees weakened their influence. Whereas the Pharisees claimed the authority of piety and learning, they claimed the authority of blood and position. Whereas the Pharisees strove to raise the standards of the masses, they lost themselves in Temple administration and ritual and ignored the masses. When the Temple was destroyed, they became a small sect without influence." E. Glenn Hinson, *Faith of our Fathers, Vol. 1: Jesus Christ* (McGrath Publishing Co., 1977), 21-22.

⁵¹ The Zealots "were intransigent nationalists. For them, politics and religion were inextricably interwoven. The theocracy of which they dreamed was simply their own law imposed on the country. In this respect, they did indeed represent the militant wing of the Pharisees. They expressed in actions a hostility that, in the Pharisees, most often remained theoretical. They firmly believed that God would intervene, but felt it their duty to make the

devastating consequences. The fourth strategy was that of the Essenes, exemplified in the community at Qumran, which retreated into a holy huddle; they believed they alone were right and would await vindication when their God returned to save only them, the “sons of light.”⁵²

The second time that life for God’s people was altered, never to be restored, was when the New Testament church was forced out of Palestine by persecutions initiated after the martyrdom of Stephen and which continued for the rest of the century and beyond. Debate would continue on the place of the Gentiles in the new kingdom of Jesus. Familiar Jewish “markers,” such as the Saturday Sabbath, a pork-free diet, and obligatory circumcision, were still allowed but no longer required.

This was an extraordinary “turning point,” a “decisive moment in the history of Christianity.” It moved Christianity outward from Jerusalem and transformed it from a religion shaped by its early Jewish environment into a religion advancing toward universal significance. Congregational and theological discussion turned away from problems posed by the Sinai law and focused instead on reaction to Greek thinking or Roman concepts of order. By the time Rome conquered Jerusalem, most Christians had already left, and the many synagogues spread across the Mediterranean world “provided the main vehicles for Christian outreach.”⁵³

The strategies employed by the first momentous time – multiplication of rules, accommodation, militant resistance, communal retreat – helped shape modern Judaism, but they would not have served early Christians well, nor would they help us. But the strategies, attitudes, and behaviors of the early Christian Church, as they adjusted to a post-Jewish era, provide lessons for us as we may now be living in a post-Christian era.

Education was vital. A generation after the apostles, the *Didache* (ca. 80-110) appeared as an instruction manual, primarily for new converts. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch (ca. 50-117) urged that children be taught the Holy Scriptures and learn a skilled trade. Justin Martyr (100-165) established catechetical schools at Ephesus and Rome, as did Clement of Alexandria (d. ca. 215) in Egypt; these schools became widely recognized for their literary qualities.⁵⁴ These schools appear to have exerted a strong influence not only in Christian circles but also into Roman society. Christians also appear to have established schools that taught both sexes in the same setting.⁵⁵ Tatian (d. 120) proclaimed that Christians taught everyone, including girls and women.⁵⁶

first moves.” Marcel Simon, *Jewish Sects at the Time of Jesus*, trans. James H. Farley (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 44.

⁵² “The Essenes were a communal organization. They had rules for initiations and punishments, including expulsion. Some Essenes were celibate and some observed periods of celibacy limited to certain times or places. Essenes kept no slaves, and at least the full members held property in common. Agriculture was the main occupation; they made no weapons. They avoided the courts of outsiders and followed strict ritual purity rules. The extent to which they participated in the Jerusalem temple cult is still debated.” Stephen Goranson, “Essenes,” *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers and Astrid B. Beck (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 426.

⁵³ Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 27.

⁵⁴ Michael Walsh, *The Triumph of the Meek: Why Early Christianity Succeeded* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 151-54.

⁵⁵ Alvin J. Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001, 2004), 171-72.

⁵⁶ “Not only do the rich among us pursue our philosophy, but the poor enjoy instruction gratuitously; for the things which come from God surpass the requital of worldly gifts. Thus we admit all who desire to hear, even old women and striplings; and, in short, persons of every age are treated by us with respect. Tatian, “Address of

Despite the efforts of Christian teachers and schools, early Christians were sometimes accused of anti-intellectualism. Celsus, a pagan philosopher of the late second century, charged that “some Christians do not even want to give or receive a reason for what they believe.” Instead, they “use expressions such as, ‘Do not ask questions; just believe’; and ‘Your faith will save you.’”⁵⁷ But from the time of Celsus to that of Origen (185-254), who responded to Celsus’ attacks, Christianity gained in respectability as it defended its teaching and organized them into creeds.⁵⁸ “Unlike the religion of the Greeks and the Romans, the Christian religion is not only a matter of ritual; Christians affirmed that certain things were true. They not only believed *in* God, they also believed *that* God was the Creator of the world, and that Christ had been raised from the dead.”⁵⁹ Although not originally intended “as fences against heretical teachings,” the creeds soon came to function as “apostolic summaries of the Christian faith,” distilled from the Scriptures, allowing the church “to know its own mind.”⁶⁰

Rome did not care what “myths” Christians believed about their “God,” but Rome wanted nothing to interfere with the worship of the gods. One may not have been compelled to participate in all the public services to the gods, but to challenge the propriety of those services and sacrifices was seditious – especially after the emperor himself was declared a living god.⁶¹ Romans believed that all good things came from “divinity” and that people made offerings or promises of offerings to gain favor from these powerful beings. Cities had special guardians, patrons, or resident gods. The entire system, in one scholar’s view, was “a very spongy, shapeless, easily penetrated structure of beliefs.” By contrast, Christianity “presented ideas that demanded a choice, not tolerance.” It was no problem adding another god to the Roman collection, but Christians confessed that their God opposed all rivals. The God of Christians claimed authority to judge every man and woman who refused to give Him allegiance.⁶²

Lifestyle was noticed. Pliny reported to Emperor Trajan that Christians “bound themselves by a solemn oath not to do any wicked deeds, never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up.”⁶³ Galen, a Greek physician, in about A.D. 126 described Christians as practicing “self-discipline and self-control in

Tatian to the Greeks,” 32; in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 2:78.

⁵⁷ Celsus, *On the True Doctrine: A Discourse Against Christians*, trans. R. Joseph Hoffmann (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 54. “Celsus’ *True Doctrine* was the first systematic critique by an opponent who was both well-educated and well-informed concerning Christianity.” Celsus was also reported to have said, “We see, indeed, in private houses workers in wool and leather, and fullers, and persons of the most uninstructed and rustic character, not venturing to utter a word in the presence of their elders and wiser masters; but when they get hold of the children privately, and certain women as ignorant as themselves, they pour forth wonderful statements, to the effect that they should not give heed to their father and to their teachers, but should obey them.” Origen, “Against Celsus,” 3.55; in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 4:486.

⁵⁸ Walsh, *The Triumph of the Meek*, 152-54.

⁵⁹ Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012), 44-46.

⁶⁰ Noll, *Turning Points*, 44-45.

⁶¹ James A. Kellerman, “Christ Among the Gods: The Early Church Confronts Polytheism,” in *World Religions In the Light of the Lutheran Confessions*, ed. John A. Maxwell (papers presented at the Congress on the Lutheran Confessions, St. Louis, April 10-12, 2007), 5.

⁶² Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire, A.D. 100-400* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984), 13-19.

⁶³ Pliny, letter to Trajan, 10.96; in William Melmoth, *Pliny: Letters*, Loeb (London: William Heinemann, 1935), 401-407.

matters of food and drink, and in their pursuit of justice [attaining] a pitch not inferior to that of genuine philosophers.”⁶⁴ Augustine charged that the pagan gods failed to teach morality to the people and thus did not enhance human life.⁶⁵

People in Roman society were reported to have killed infants born deformed or physically frail, often by drowning. Seneca wrote, “We drown children who are at birth weak and abnormal’ (*De Ira* 1.15). The *Didache* includes among the many sins that form the way of death “murderers of children,”⁶⁶ and the *Epistle of Barnabas* (ca. 130) said, “Thou shalt not procure abortion; thou shalt not commit infanticide.”⁶⁷ Infants not murdered were sometimes abandoned. Several early church fathers warned men not to visit brothels because without knowing it they may commit incest with a child they had abandoned.⁶⁸ Clement of Alexandria condemned Romans for saving and protecting young birds and other creatures while abandoning their own children.⁶⁹ But Christians did more than condemn the practice; they frequently took young castaways into their homes and adopted them. Benignus of Dijon (late 2nd century?) provided care and protection for abandoned children, and Afra of Augsburg (d. 304), though a prostitute during her pagan life, after her conversion cared for the abandoned children of prisoners, thieves, smugglers, and runaway slaves.⁷⁰

Some abandoned children were the result of failed abortions, but abortion was widely endorsed. Plato argued that it was the prerogative of the city-state to have a woman submit to an abortion so that the state would not become too populous (*Republic* 5.461).⁷¹ Romans at times aborted pregnancies out of a desire to remain childless. Seneca said, “Childlessness bestows more influence than it takes away, and the loneliness that used to be a detriment to old age, now leads to so much power that some old men pretend to hate their sons and disown their children, and by their act make themselves childless” (*De Consolatione ad Marciam* 19.2).⁷² Christian opposition to abortion found roots in Jewish practice; Josephus wrote that “the law enjoins us to bring up all our children.”⁷³

⁶⁴ R. Walzer, *Galen on Jews and Christians* (London: Oxford, 1949), 14-15; cited by Stephen Benko, *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 142.

⁶⁵ “Why were the gods so negligent as to allow the morals of their worshipers to sink to so low a depth? . . . They should have had as much concern for their worshipers’ conduct as these had for their cult. But someone will reply, each man is bad by his own will. No one ever denied this! Nevertheless, it was incumbent on protecting deities, not to conceal from their worshipers the laws of a good life, but to proclaim such laws from the housetops. It was for them to seek out and call sinners to task through the medium of prophets whose duty was to threaten evildoers with the punishment awaiting them, and to hold out the promise of reward for virtuous living.” Augustine, *The City of God*, 2.4; in *Saint Augustine: The City of God*, trans. Gerald G. Walsh, et al, (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1958), 69.

⁶⁶ *Didache* 5.2; in *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Kirsopp Lake (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1912, 1:319).

⁶⁷ *The Epistle of Barnabas* 19.5; in *The Apostolic Fathers*, 1:403.

⁶⁸ “Fathers, unmindful of children of theirs that have been exposed, often without their knowledge, have intercourse with a son that has debauched himself, and daughters that are prostitutes; and license in lust shows them to be the men that have begotten them.” Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor* 3.3; in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2:276; see also John Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 3.

⁶⁹ “Though maintaining parrots and [shore birds], they do not receive the orphan child; but they expose children that are born at home, and take up the young of birds, and prefer irrational to rational creatures.” Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*, 3.4; in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2:279.

⁷⁰ George Grant, *The Third Time Around: A History of the Pro-Life Movement from the First Century to the Present* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1991), 27-28.

⁷¹ Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World*, 56-57.

⁷² Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World*, 55.

⁷³ “The law . . . enjoins us to bring up all our offspring, and forbids women to cause abortion of what is begotten, or to kill it afterward; and if any woman appears to have so done, she will be a murderer of her child, by killing a

Widespread immorality and adultery caused Caesar Augustus to be concerned that the institution of marriage was being threatened and enacted *Lex Julia de adulteriis* in 18 B.C., but to little effect. Juvenal admitted that society had lost the goddess Chastity in its desire for promiscuous sex. In *Satire 6*, Juvenal portrayed sexually immoral women who gave themselves to gladiators, actors, comedians, and others who lived in the public spotlight. Tacitus (*Annals* 3.34) called a chaste wife a rarity. Catullus depicted the wedding ritual of his time as a facetious mockery, apparently because of low regard for marriage as a whole.⁷⁴

The anonymously written Christian Letter to Diognetus (late 2nd century?) highlighted the difference in Christianity regarding marriage and sexuality: “[Christians] marry and have children, just like everyone else,” and “they offer a shared table but not a shared bed.”⁷⁵ Constantine, the first emperor publicly to embrace Christianity, is credited with “revolutioniz[ing] the state’s view of marriage in order to bring it more in line with Christian ideas.”⁷⁶ The pagan Libanius lauded the Christian women’s high level of commitment and dedication to their role as wives and mothers: “What women these Christians have!”⁷⁷

Greek and Roman practice of homosexuality was often pederasty or pedophilia, in which an adult male had sexual relations with a teen-aged boy, typically 12 to 16 years of age. Martial was explicit about his practice, writing that one man was known to have relations with “long-haired boys whom you have procured for yourself with your wife’s dowry” (*Epigrams* 7.97). The practice was not limited to the Roman public but was also common behavior among Rome’s emperors.⁷⁸ The pagan gods worshiped by the Romans did not set high moral standards, offer examples of virtuous behavior, or urge contrition and repentance. Instead, the gods themselves “were often seen as the First Cause of the spiral of desire.”⁷⁹

Charity was heartfelt. Historian Philip Schaff called the Roman empire “a world without charity.”⁸⁰ If by “charity” we understand “voluntary giving to those in need, only a few charitable acts can be documented in the Graeco-Roman world.” Giving usually entailed gifts offered by the wealthy for the common good, providing for athletic contests, musical and theatrical events, animals for civic sacrifices, and payments for construction, decoration, and repair of public buildings. The most frequent acts of benefaction involved raising public statues, usually of the benefactor himself. “Benefactions were rarely done to benefit the needy or indigent.”⁸¹ The poor “were invisible, and a civic screen shielded citizens

living creature, and diminishing human kind; if anyone, therefore, proceeds to such fornication or murder, he cannot be clean.” Josephus, *Against Apion* 2:25; in *The Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (Lynn, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1980), 632.

⁷⁴ Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World*, 80-82.

⁷⁵ Letter to Diognetus, in *Eerdman’s Handbook to the History of Christianity*, ed. Tim Dowley, et al (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 69

⁷⁶ Susan Treggiari, “Roman Marriage,” in *Civilization of the Ancient Mediterranean: Greece and Rome*, Vol. 3, ed. Michael Grant and Rachel Kitzinger (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1988), 1343.

⁷⁷ L. Millar, *Christian Education in the First Four Centuries* (London: Faith Press, 1946), 54.

⁷⁸ Chris Scarre, *Chronicle of the Roman Emperors* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 35, 54, 101.

⁷⁹ Carlin A. Barton, *The Sorrows of Ancient Romans: The Gladiator and the Monster* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 69.

⁸⁰ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1896), 2:373.

⁸¹ Glen L. Thompson, “Christian Charity in a Non-Christian World: Benefactors and Paul’s Vocabulary of Giving,” (paper presented to the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Philadelphia, November 17, 1995), 2-3.

from the destitute lives of the impoverished living in their midst.”⁸² Giving to the poor defied common sense, which Romans viewed as a sign of weakness. There was nothing to be gained by expending time and energy on those who could not contribute to Roman valor.⁸³

But biblical passages urging care for the poor worked their way into the minds and actions of Christians. “In devoting so much attention to the care of the poor, Jews and Christians were not simply doing on a more extensive scale what pagans had already been doing in a less wholehearted and well organized manner. Far from it.” Charity directly to the poor “was notably absent.”⁸⁴ In a sense, “it was Christian bishops who invented the poor. They rose to leadership in late Roman society by bringing the poor into ever-sharper focus.”⁸⁵ The *Didache* urged, “Give to everyone who asks thee, and do not refuse, for the Father’s will is that we give to all from the gifts we have received.”⁸⁶ Tertullian (d. ca. 220) reported that early Christians, as part of their Sunday worship, maintained a common fund to care for those in need.⁸⁷ Basil of Caesarea (329?-379) organized a relief effort for the poor and called on magistrates and wealthy families to help those in need. He used his own family’s wealth to make food available to the poor, set up soup kitchens where the hungry could gather, and with the help of his servants waited on the hungry himself. Over time, caring for the poor and needy was seen as the responsibility of the bishop. By the fourth century Christians began constructing buildings to care for the poor and needy, to serve travelers and pilgrims, and to provide places for lepers to live. Outsiders took notice: the emperor Julian chided fellow pagans that the Christians supported not only their own poor but also the poor of others.⁸⁸

Basil of Caesarea also took an interest in the sick. In his writing *The Longer Rule*, he wrote that medicine is a gift of God, as much as the know-how of the farmer or the skill of a weaver. “Just as we would have no need of the labor and toil of the farmer if we were living among the delights of paradise, so we would not require the art of medicine for healing if we were immune to disease.” Origen vigorously defended the practice of medicine. “God, creator of human bodies, knew that such was the fragility of the human body that it could be subject to different kinds of maladies and injuries. That is why foreseeing the sufferings to come, he also created from the earth the means to heal [such as herbs and plants], so that if the body is assailed by sickness, there would be cures.” Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335-ca. 395) praised the skill of medical practitioners who by ingenuity and experiment had learned over the course of centuries which herbs were harmful and which beneficial.⁸⁹

⁸² Wilken, *The First Thousand Years*, 156-57.

⁸³ W.E.H. Lecky, *History of European Morals: From Augustus to Charlemagne*, Vol. 2 (New York: D. Appleton, 1927), 78; Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World*, 127-28.

⁸⁴ Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Hawthorne, N.H.: University of New England, 2002), 3.

⁸⁵ Walter Brueggemann, “Inventing the poor: How the early church practiced charity,” *The Christian Century* 120 (June 14, 2003): 30.

⁸⁶ *Didache* 2.5; in *The Apostolic Fathers*, 1:311.

⁸⁷ “On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. . . . And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who [helps] the orphans and widows, and those who, through sickness or any other cause, or in want, and those who are in bonds, and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need.” Tertullian, *Apology* 67; in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:186.

⁸⁸ Wilken, *The First Thousand Years*, 156-58.

⁸⁹ Wilken, *The First Thousand Years*, 158-59.

Dionysius of Alexandria (d. 264) described how the heathen “thrust aside any who began to be sick, and kept aloof even from their dearest friends, and cast the sufferers out upon the public roads half dead, and left them unburied, and treated them with utter contempt when they died.” But Christians, Dionysius said, “did not spare themselves, but kept by each other, and visited the sick without thought of their own peril, and ministered to them assiduously and treated them for their healing in Christ, died from time to time most joyfully along with them” and willingly took over” to their own persons the burden of the sufferings of the persons around them” (*Epistle 12.4*).⁹⁰

Up to the time of Constantine (d. 337), Christians did not enjoy access to high office presided over by other believers, were effectively denied significant careers in government, were commonly regarded as second class citizens, and were frequently dispossessed of place and property. Those living in cities found it necessary to conduct themselves discreetly alongside their unpersuaded neighbors, who regarded them with suspicion and were ready to believe the worst about them or even invent falsehoods to discredit them. After 313 and with the Edict of Milan, Christianity was recognized as a legitimate religion and won many more converts, especially among government leaders and intellectuals. But as the church came to enjoy greater worldly advantages, people were more likely to join it for mixed or even non-religious reasons. For them, religion – any religion – was not central to their lives, and becoming Christians neither subjected them to deep conflict nor required of them great commitment.⁹¹

In these first centuries after Christ, Christians had no golden age upon which to look back with longing or to regret at its apparent passing. The church did not possess the advantage of being a majority of the population or the dominant voice of the culture. It was not through political or military force that the kingdom advanced. Michael Green concluded, “We shall not be far wrong in supposing that Christianity made its impact primarily by satisfying the moral, the sacramental, the social and the intellectual needs of [people] in a way which neither paganism nor Judaism could.”⁹² The growth of the gospel was, as one of the titles cited previously here puts it, “the triumph of the meek.”

III

Why save Lutheranism? That may sound like an impertinent question even to ask, yet we all know that the current American religious marketplace offers many other varieties of conservative Christianity. If in fact we have arrived at a post-Christian era, should we be most concerned only about preserving our own comfortable denominational brand? Some of us – or maybe some of our children and grandchildren – may find features in other churches that they consider appealing, admirable, and even preferable to Lutheran Christianity as they have learned and experienced it.

Take Evangelicalism. Julia Corbett-Hemery presents a textbook summary of Evangelical characteristics:

- “Evangelicals take the Bible as the objective, authoritative word of God. It is inerrant, although not all of it is to be taken literally. . . .
- “The only way to salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only way, not one among other ways.
- “Evangelicals tend to emphasize the death and resurrection of Jesus for the forgiveness of human sin more than the moral example of Jesus’ life.

⁹⁰ *The Works of Dionysius, “Epistle to the Alexandrians,”* 12.4, 3; in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 6:237-38.

⁹¹ MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire, A.D. 100-400*, 57-58, 68, 102-103, 118.

⁹² Michael Green, *Evangelization in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 119.

- “Evangelicals emphasize the necessity of conversion, of a turning of one’s life toward Jesus. . . . Being born again and asking Jesus to come into their lives establishes a warmly personal relationship with God that far exceeds anything they might have experienced prior to conversion. Even those who had been active church members say that they became a Christians at that point in time. They distinguish sharply between being a member of a church and being a Christian. Usually it is understood that all Christians are church members, but not all church members are Christians. . . .
- “Evangelicals place great importance on sharing the good news with other people. . . .
- “Evangelicals tend toward conservative moral positions, especially on issues of personal morality such as abortion rights, gay rights, marriage and divorce, and school prayer. They uphold what they interpret as traditional family and social values.”⁹³

Lutheran objections to Evangelicalism tend to fall into two categories. One has to do with the “decision theology” tone of such phrases as “being born again” and “asking Jesus to come into their lives.” We reference well-worn Scripture passages: “**You were dead in your transgressions and sins**” (Ephesians 2:1); “**It is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works** (Ephesians 2:8); and, “**No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit**” (1 Corinthians 12:3). We recite lines memorized long ago from Luther’s *Small Catechism*: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.”⁹⁴ Conspicuous by its absence in this description of Evangelicalism is any reference to baptism, but this is by design, not by oversight. Lutherans again recall their *Catechism*: baptism “works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe, as the words and promises of God declare.”⁹⁵ In Evangelical thinking, baptism is something we do for God, not something through which He does something for us. Evangelical and Baptist acquaintances present what they consider their clinching argument: “We are saved by grace, not by works. Baptism is a work. Therefore baptism does not save.”

The second category of Lutheran objections to Evangelicalism involves more its style than its substance – though it has been argued persuasively, even passionately, that one inevitably conveys the other. Lutherans frequently find fault with Evangelical worship by calling it “just entertainment,” “feel good worship,” “fun and games,” “all gospel and no law,” (or “all law and no gospel”), “more a performance to enjoy than a study of God’s Word,” with “a lot of ‘Amens’ uttered throughout the service.” The most common evaluation from college students who have visited Elmbrook is, “I didn’t feel like I went to church.” One is uncertain whether to take that as a complaint or a compliment.

Surprising is to discover that some of our own fellow church members – some of the very students we have baptized, taught, and confirmed, even some members of our own families – are not particularly convinced by any of our objections. To the second objection, they may reply simply, “I like the style at Evangelical churches. Really – do you *like* the style of Lutheran worship?” But responses to the first objection can be much more disturbing: “How can little babies really believe? I don’t think I ever believed that in the first place! Is that what we teach? It makes more sense to me to ask people to make a decision when they’re grownups than to baptize them when they are little babies and can’t even get what’s going on.” Suddenly, one has the opportunity to reteach the catechism lesson on the

⁹³ Julia Corbett-Hemery, *Religion in America*, 6th ed., (New York: Prentice Hall, 2010), 83.

⁹⁴ *Doctor Martin Luther’s Small Catechism, Explained for Children and Adults*, originally ed. by C. Gausewitz (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1956), 6.

⁹⁵ *Doctor Martin Luther’s Small Catechism*, 11.

work of the Holy Spirit and the means of grace to someone who clearly has reached a more teachable moment!

Thomas Bergler has assessed the rise of Evangelical style in *The Juvenalization of American Christianity*. Beginning in the 1930s and 1940s, Christian teenagers and youth leaders “staged a quiet revolution in American church life” in which “the religious beliefs, practices and developmental characteristics of adolescents became accepted as appropriate for Christians of all ages.” Although undertaken with the commendable goal of appealing to the young, Bergler admits that in many cases it has ended badly, with Christians of all ages “embracing immature versions of the faith.” Though attempting to personalize the faith by “creatively blending it with elements of popular culture ranging from rock music to political protests,” it also “pandered to the consumerism, self-centeredness, and even outright immaturity of American believers.”⁹⁶ Worthy of note is that both Bill Hybels and Rick Warren began their congregations using this approach.

Although Bergler is a professor of ministry and mission at an Evangelical school, Huntington University, and although he finds more to commend than to condemn in Evangelical worship, his criticisms are blunt:

Given the history of youth ministry and juvenalization, it should not be surprising to find that many Americans have an inarticulate faith characterized by moralistic, therapeutic deism. As early as the 1950s, youth ministry was low on content and high on emotional fulfillment. Religious illiteracy may not have begun in youth ministry, but most youth ministries did little to reverse the trend. . . . Songs, games, skits, and other youth culture entertainments are followed by talks or discussions that feature simple truths packaged with humor, stories, and personal testimonies. The pattern works because it appeals to teenage desires for fun and belonging. It casts a wide net—by dumbing down Christianity to the lowest common denominator of adolescent cognitive development and religious motivation. . . .

As they listen to years of simplified messages that emphasize an emotional relationship with Jesus over intellectual content, teen-agers learn that a well-articulated belief system is unimportant and might even become an obstacle to authentic faith. . . . In far too many youth groups, teenagers learn to feel good about God without learning much about God. And increasingly, Americans of all generations take it for granted that emotional fulfillment is one of the main purposes of religious faith.⁹⁷

Bergler even gets to the music itself:

Is the music we sing in church fostering a self-centered, romantic spirituality in which following Jesus is compared to “falling in love”? If so, we should not be surprised if some people have a relationship with Jesus that has all the maturity and staying power of an adolescent infatuation. Do we ask every church member to master a shared body of basic truths, or is all of our Christian education on an “a la carte” basis? If the latter, then we should not be surprised if people pick and choose which parts of Christian truth to believe and live.⁹⁸

It would be easy to reference dozens—maybe hundreds—of Lutheran criticisms of Evangelical teaching. But it may be more beneficial to cite two remarkable endorsements of Lutheran doctrine and

⁹⁶ Thomas E. Bergler, *The Juvenalization of American Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 4.

⁹⁷ Bergler, *The Juvenalization of American Christianity*, 220-21.

⁹⁸ Bergler, *The Juvenalization of American Christianity*, 227.

practice written by Evangelicals. One comes from a review of *The Genius of Luther's Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church*, by Robert Kolb and Charles Arand, professors at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. The reviewer, Dane Ortlund, now an editor at Crossway Books, presented more than three pages of highly positive, if not astonished, analysis of the book. But Ortlund concluded with this still more remarkable appraisal:

If hundreds of pastors all over the English-speaking world were to read and digest the message of *The Genius of Luther's Theology*, Christianity could, under God, experience another Great Awakening. . . . [The authors] have simply latched onto the gospel itself, in all its counter-intuitive, doctrinally-contoured, conscience-cleansing, wrath-remembering, love-generating dimensions. In today's fragmented, a-theological evangelical mishmash, nothing could be more important. As pastors and writers have scrambled to delineate the boundaries of evangelicalism, the center – the gospel – has gone neglected. Indeed, confusion over the gospel is rampant today both in our [Evangelical] pews and in our seminary classrooms. For some, the gospel is the announcement of Jesus' lordship; for others, the arrival of the kingdom of God and its ramifications for this life; for still others, a story (not propositions) in which we are invited to participate. Yet as important as Christ's dominion, the coming of the kingdom, and the ongoing biblical narrative are, none of them is the gospel. Looking at and reflecting on a single core reality from various angles, Kolb and Arand, through the penetrating mind and prickly temper of Martin Luther, have reminded us that the gospel is simply the counter-intuitive announcement that one is put irreversibly right with and perfectly approved before God by looking, in trusting faith, to Christ, against all fallen human instinct to earn one's salvation. Luther came to see that the only thing that qualified him for divine approval was a frank recognition that he did not qualify. Self-despair was the way out of despair. Approaching God not only having emptied his hands of rebellious wickedness but also scrupulously meticulous obedience, Luther clung only to Christ, God's promise in flesh and blood. Impatient with the domestications of Luther, human sin, and divine holiness so pervasive in various branches of evangelicalism today, Kolb and Arand have, like the Reformer, brought us back to the heart of biblical theology – free grace, received open- and empty-handed, by virtue of the ultimate sacrifice. This, indeed, is the genius of Luther's theology.⁹⁹

The second comes from Mark Noll, professor at Notre Dame and longtime observer and admirer of Luther and Lutherans. Contra the "quietism" Lutherans are often accused of in public life, Noll sees Lutheran teaching and practice as a healthy counterbalance to Evangelical overreach. "Political activity by American Christian believers, especially Protestant evangelicals, has often been lacking exactly in those areas where Lutheran theology is strong," Noll contends. Too often, Evangelicals have preferred "revivalistic political moralism over patient political discernment." Eager to mount crusades over single issues such as slavery, temperance, and abortion, Evangelicals "have done less well at thinking about Christian political responsibility from the bottom up and acting with consistent Christian integrity as a whole." Noll notes the irony that Evangelicals expressed panic and outrage over the possibility of a Catholic becoming president in 1960 and Bill Clinton being re-elected in 1996 (Noll wrote this before the election of Barack Obama), yet Evangelicals have eagerly endorsed leaders "who professed something like evangelical faith, but who have performed in office with anything but a consistently Christian political ethic." Noll also charged that Evangelicals "often have shown a predilection for confusing the history of the United States with the history of salvation. The long line of

⁹⁹ Dane Ortlund, review of *The Genius of Luther's Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church*, by Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51 (December 2008): 874-78.

books, sermons, and speeches claiming to see a special providential destiny for the United States – beyond the care that divine providence has promised for all nations in all circumstances – has consistently put American Christians at risk of spiritual idolatry and national hubris.”¹⁰⁰

Noll appreciates the Lutheran doctrine of the Two Kingdoms because, instead of disparaging political and governmental functions, Two Kingdom theology affirms that “God is the ruler over all, including the political sphere” and that “political tasks are God-ordained.” Noll adds that “since God-ordained political tasks exist in a different sphere from God-ordained means of salvation, these tasks may be carried out honorably by non-Christians as well as Christians, and sometimes better by non-Christians than by Christians” [!]. (One is reminded of Luther’s comment that, if one were forced to choose, it would be better to have a smart ruler who is not pious than a pious ruler who is not smart.¹⁰¹) Back to Noll: “One of the special strengths of Two Kingdom theology is to detach the personal standing before God of political leaders from their political actions.” Human failing is present in everyone, but God gives various gifts to all; therefore, “when it comes to life in the worldly sphere, it is entirely possible for nonbelievers to act politically with greater wisdom, fairness, and justice than do believers.” Finally, Noll commends Lutheran awareness that political dominance and cultural influence are never of primary importance: “The more fundamental field is the human heart where for every person, believer and unbeliever alike, the battle between God and self, light and dark, righteousness and corruption, is fought every day and where there will be no absolute, complete, or perfect triumph until the end of time.”¹⁰²

IV

But to treasure the way Lutheranism frames and offers the gospel does not, or should not, cause blind compliance to particular, peculiar, even dysfunctional elements which may exist among us. What blind spots do we have in our own church/school/synodical culture, which may raise barriers between us and those we serve and which may even misrepresent who we are and want to be?

Since accepting this assignment I have been asking questions, listening, and taking notes. The reflections, observations, and concerns presented in the upcoming paragraphs have come from young and not so young people, from female as well as male, from clergy and not clergy, from WLC and beyond, from lifelong Lutherans and from those new to the WELS. There is no significance to the fact that there are *ten* items; these are not anybody’s Ten Commandments! Feel free to listen, consider, discuss, disagree, or dismiss as you think appropriate.

No longer only “where the boys are.” Twenty years have passed since amalgamation, and so male and female college students have been classmates at New Ulm for almost a generation. Male-female enrollments at preparatory high schools have been balanced for twice as long. Yet there are still many of us in ministry and leadership who came through prep school, college and seminary at a time when enrollments were almost entirely male. A notable feature of that male environment was the language

¹⁰⁰ Mark A. Noll, “What Lutherans Have to Offer Public Theology,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 22 (Summer 2008): 125-26.

¹⁰¹ On **Deuteronomy 1:13**, Luther observed: “The question has been properly raised whether a prince is better if he is good and imprudent or prudent yet also evil. Here Moses certainly demands both. Nevertheless, if one cannot have both, it is better for him to be prudent and not good than good and not prudent; for a good man would actually rule nothing but would be ruled only by others, and at that only by the worst people. Even if the prudent man harms good people, yet at the same time he governs the evil ones, which is the most necessary and suitable thing for all the world, since the world is nothing else than a crowd of evil people.” *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, 9:19.

¹⁰² Noll, “What Lutherans Have to Offer Public Theology,” 129-30, 133.

we used with one another—heavy on sarcasm and replete with verbal put-downs. We were expected to “give as good as we got.” It was the *lingua franca* of our world, surely in the dormitory but sometimes also in the classroom, and some of us—I say this to my own shame—became masters at it. What many of us have discovered, however, and what some of us have openly acknowledged, is that this communication style has not proved to be a useful transferrable skill to the rest of our lives, for our ministries, or in our families. Many of us praise our wives for helping us curb the instinct to use this language, although it tends to resurface at reunions reserved for one another.

A survey of the 600 or so males in this auditorium, asking whether any hints of chauvinism remain among us, would probably not yield reliable results. But is the question worth asking?

Good-bye to hazing days. Included in the style of language some of us remember from decades ago is a collection of strange but distinctive phrases: “pink bellies,” “reefers,” “*Strafarbeit*,” “grease,” “moldy grease,” “schmearing,” “powers,” and the memory of being collectively known and referred to for an entire year of our lives as either “*Sex*” or “*Fuchs*.” An honest assessment of the middle decades of the last century force us to acknowledge that hazing, verbal abuse, shame-inducing pranks, and physical torments went on randomly but repeatedly on some of our campuses. Looking back a half century later on that culture and environment, most remarkable is that perpetrators and victims alike seemed to believe themselves bound to a self-perpetuating system that simply had to be endured as the unalterable order of things.

Also remarkable are the various attitudes with which we look back on those days and behaviors. Some accept them with the same cheerful optimism that has characterized all their lives. Some express appreciation that these experiences, though they sometimes got out of hand, “knocked the rough edges off” their personalities and taught them to persevere under mistreatment. Some remember particular episodes and pranks that “went to a level far beyond what could be called ‘Christian.’” Most amazing is how this conduct is still excused: “If you could make it through that, you could make it through the ministry.” “It was even worse before my time.” “It weeded out the weak ones.” “Boys will be boys.”

It is reassuring to see only looks of bewilderment on the faces of more recent students when this past hazing culture is described. How wonderful it would be if the hazing culture were never to arise at our schools again.

Our educational system produces certainty. Numerous observers have lamented the disparity “between Americans’ veneration of the Bible and their [weak] understanding of it, painting a picture of a nation that believes God has spoken in Scripture but can’t be bothered to listen to what God has to say.”¹⁰³ Examples are amusing yet sad: high percentages of children do not know that Adam and Eve, Noah’s ark, David and Goliath, Jesus’ birth, or the Good Samaritan were rooted in the Bible; fewer than half of American adults can name the four gospels; many cannot name more than two or three of Jesus’ disciples; 60 percent cannot list as many as five of the ten commandments; 82 percent think that “God helps those who help themselves” is a Bible verse; some think Joan of Arc was Noah’s wife; and many guess that Sodom and Gomorrah were husband and wife.

What a treasure we have in our Lutheran elementary schools and high schools, in our preparatory schools, colleges, and seminary! “It is very difficult, if not impossible, to teach abstract concepts to children in confirmation classes without their having a knowledge of the concrete, historical accounts

¹⁰³ Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – and Doesn’t* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2007), 7.

of Scripture.”¹⁰⁴ Some of our earliest elementary schools were older and more firmly established than the public schools in their locations. Our schools have shaped generations of men and women in the truths of the faith, produced diligent workers and honest citizens, and prepared future teachers, pastors, missionaries, professors and other church leaders. Over four and five generations, our schools shaped student behavior and classroom culture, so that we have come to expect that we will be teaching students who are very much “like us.”

But our educational environment is undergoing extraordinary changes. If we are comfortable only to be teaching those who are “like us,” will we run out of children to teach? But a growing number of parents who are “not like us” recognize education as our greatest strength and they want for their children what we have to offer. Are we ready to teach new generations that are “not like us”?

Does our educational system arouse curiosity? The question goes back more than thirty years to my first years of teaching catechism classes. Each year there were two groups of students: the Lutheran elementary school 7th and 8th graders – veterans of years of daily religious instruction – and the public school students – often having only learned Sunday School stories and sometimes inconsistent in their church attendance. If being well-instructed is to be measured by the ease and accuracy with which children can recite Bible passages and portions of the *Catechism*, there is no question that the Lutheran elementary students were far ahead of their public school counterparts. But public school students often were the ones asking the most questions, and their questions were not hypothetical. Some were going back to their public school classrooms to challenge or debate things their teachers had taught them. When I and many of my Lutheran elementary school classmates were their age, we *had never been inside a public school and were afraid to go into one!*

Maybe we were told *that* we are correct in everything we believe long before we could understand *how* and *why* we are correct. If we were certain we were right, what need was there to express curiosity? We did not want to make a mistake or cause trouble with our questions. Since we are often told that “the Bible is clear” and that “the gospel is so simple,” maybe it’s not smart to ask questions about things that do not seem clear or simple to us. On those occasions when some students have shown curiosity and persisted in their questions, other students seemed to become disturbed at the direction things were taking, and several times one of the non-questioning students – having had enough of it, perhaps? – has announced, “That question is not necessary for our salvation,” almost as if this was a pre-programmed tactic to thwart too much curiosity.

How do we talk with people who do not believe as we do? We enjoy church fellowship with many Christians, and we pray there will be many more Christians with whom we will also one day be in church fellowship. But what sort of relationship and conversations can we have with the many Christians and even non-Christians with whom we may always have doctrinal disagreements?

We recoil from the term “dialogue” because we take it to involve doctrinal compromise. How comfortable are we carrying on discussion or discourse with others? Perhaps this is an unintended downside of being a confessional church. In our effort to present the Bible and its saving teachings, we may use insider language familiar to us but confusing to those not of our confession. An Evangelical author, John Dickerson, has underscored this concern. He suggests that in America, even though most of the people we meet speak English and appear to share our cultural assumptions, many of them belong to “tribes” whose thinking, assumptions, morality, and even use of language are as different from ours as if they were from a different corner of the world, and they may regard our culture as a

¹⁰⁴ John M. Brenner, “Biblical Illiteracy in the Western World,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 112 (Winter 2015): 68-70.

threat to their own. The great gap which was the norm between church and society for believers in the New Testament is becoming more the norm for us.¹⁰⁵

Do we routinely equate confessional Lutheranism with conservative political positions? Missouri and Wisconsin Synod Lutherans historically have found themselves more in agreement with the conservative side than the liberal side of American politics and culture, and understandably so. Edward Fredrich observed that “in general, it could be said that we love the Fundamentalists most for the enemies they made,” because Fundamentalists “opposed and stood against what we too stand against and reject, the development we try to sum up and characterize with the general descriptions of liberalism and modernism.”¹⁰⁶ No doubt we will continue to find greater agreement with political conservatives on issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage. But is there only a single, correct opinion regarding every issue in American politics, and is the correct opinion always on the Republican – even the Tea Party – side? Is there only one acceptable viewpoint for confessional Lutherans to hold on issues like universal health care or Act 10 or the Common Core?

Joel Gerlach, addressing this subject in the 1960s, granted that both political and religious spheres contain right and left wings, and “in this parallelism, some see a relationship between conservative theology and conservative politics.” They may seek membership in a theologically conservative church and then expect – even insist – that their church “bless, sanction, and promote the cause of conservative politics.” Some even assumed that the gospel endorsed the free-enterprise system and opposed anything that had even a hint of socialism. But to do that, wrote Gerlach, reveals a failure to distinguish between the Two Kingdoms. Political conservatism is based on the natural knowledge of God written in people’s hearts, not on God’s revealed will in Scripture. “Thus when political conservatives make statements about God’s place in their philosophy, and about the moral law of God underlying the entire structure of their conservative philosophy, they are not thereby demonstrating that the Bible subscribes to their thinking” but that “what nature and conscience reveal about God must be taken into account in ordering a free society.” Political conservatives must beware of “the temptation of suggesting that the Bible underwrites their political point of view. It doesn’t. It doesn’t underwrite any political point of view. It isn’t interested in politics. It is interested in men’s souls and their destiny in eternity.”¹⁰⁷

Reconsider how we talk about homosexuality. We know that many church bodies, even some that claim to be theologically conservative, are now arguing that Christianity has for centuries misunderstood the biblical passages that address homosexuality. This is not a call to join their number and insist we change our understanding of Scripture; it is an encouragement to reconsider how we present our position. A young member of Protestant denomination wrote:

I talked to a non-Christian twenty-something who said she dismissed Christians because she, as a non-Christian, knew more about the Bible than a Christian friend of hers did. A college English literature class had taught her that the many words [that] many Bible versions translate as “homosexual” or something similar shouldn’t really be translated that way. . . . Her Christian friend had no idea about that, and she was disappointed in her friend’s faith

¹⁰⁵ John F. Brug, review of *The Great Evangelical Recession: 6 Factors That Will Crash the America Church . . . and how to Prepare*, by John S. Dickerson; in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 110 (Summer 2013): 215.

¹⁰⁶ Edward C. Fredrich, “The Difference between Fundamentalism and Orthodoxy,” (paper prepared for the Minnesota District Pastoral Conference, New Ulm, Minn., April 24, 1968): 9.

¹⁰⁷ Joel C. Gerlach, “Is There a Relationship Between Confessional Lutheranism and Political Conservatism?” (paper delivered to the California Delegate Conference, January 1966), 1-2; 4. <http://wlsessays.net/files/GerlachRelationship.pdf>, accessed May 28, 2015.

because of that. . . . She felt that her friend's faith was [too] elementary and [she] blamed the church for not teaching her these things. . . .

Pro-gay theological arguments are becoming more and more well-known to the average person. If you hold to a different position, are you ready to answer these arguments? . . . We need to do our homework so that we aren't just putting out shallow answers on the position we take. . . .

The author offered examples:

We generally have taught that the primary sin of Sodom was homosexuality, yet neither Jesus nor any of the five prophets who mention Sodom talk about sexual sin. . . . Another argument is that the sin of Sodom was gang rape, not homosexual sex. . . .

Leviticus 18:22 and **20:13** are verses quoted all the time about homosexuality that are part of the holiness code, which lists forbidden behaviors. When other parts of the code [forbid certain] haircuts, tattoos, working on the Sabbath, wearing garments of mixed fabrics, and even touching the skin of a pig, we would agree that the code was written for a specific time, place and people. But if we say we aren't bound today by the code on such items as these, how do we explain our being bound by these verses about homosexuality, which were written in the same context? . . .

If pastors aren't able to address [these objections], then the people in their churches certainly aren't either. Yet anyone, whether a pastor or a person in the pews, who uses these verses to say homosexuality is a sin needs to be prepared to explain why and to answer questions about them.¹⁰⁸

Reconsider how we talk about non-Christian religions. The traditional way of presenting non-Christian religions has been to condemn them all because they lead people away from Christ. It is surely true that no one comes to the Father except through Jesus (**John 14:6**). But if we dismiss all other religions with swift, abrupt condemnations, and provide little or no supporting information, listeners may rightly wonder if we understand the other religions or if our evaluation is fair. One of my students recalled that when he was in grade school, "we never learned anything about other religions unless we were talking about how bad they were compared to Lutheranism."

The opposite approach, the fully multicultural methodology mentioned earlier, is equally problematic and a denial of Scripture. Huston Smith, author of the most widely used college textbook on the world religions, pictures the goal of all religions as reaching the top of the mountain; lateral moves, therefore, from one religion to another, are in his view pointless. "At base, in the foothills of theology, ritual, and organizational structure, the religions are distinct," Smith says. "But beyond these differences, the same goal beckons."¹⁰⁹

But there are now teachers, notably Stephen Prothero in Boston, who advocate a third method, emphasizing the treatment of all religions with respect and the effort to understand them on their own terms. Prothero employs a four-part approach: each religion articulates "[1] a *problem*; [2] a *solution* to

¹⁰⁸ Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus But Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 152-54.

¹⁰⁹ Huston Smith, *The World's Great Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 73.

this problem, which also serves as the religious goal; [3] a *technique* (or techniques) for moving from this problem to this solution; [and 4] an *exemplar* (or exemplars) who chart this path from problem to solution.”¹¹⁰ Because people across the world possess the natural knowledge of God and bear traces of God’s law written in their hearts, it should not surprise us to find commendable features in other religions, especially in their ethical standards. But Buddhism, for example, does not recognize sin and estrangement from God as humanity’s greatest problems and it therefore offers no viable solution to that problem. Only Christianity recognizes the human predicament as our sinful separation from God, and Christianity offers the only solution to that problem in the perfect life and death of Jesus, who came to be our Substitute. Other religions may offer certain temporary benefits, but **“salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).**

Christianity is moving south. In April 2015, The Pew Research Center on Religion and Public life unveiled extensive data on the anticipated future of religion in the world. Among its projections:

- The number of Muslims will nearly equal the number of Christians worldwide.
- In the United States, Christians will decline from three-quarters of the population in 2010 to two-thirds in 2050, and Muslims will surpass Judaism as the largest non-Christian religion in the country.
- Four out of every 10 Christians in the world will live in sub-Saharan Africa.

A powerful shift is occurring in worldwide Christianity, for which we are not responsible and which we can do little to curtail. For centuries “the story of Christianity has been inextricably bound up with that of Europe and European-derived civilizations oversea, above all in North America.” During the 20th century, however, “the center of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably south, to Africa, Asia, and Latin America.”¹¹¹ The international centers of the church are “no longer in Geneva, Rome, Athens, Paris, London, New York, but Kinshasa, Buenos Aires, Addis Adaba, and Manila.”¹¹² It is estimated that by 2050, only one out of every five of the world’s projected 3 billion Christians will be of non-Hispanic European or North American ancestry. The very phrase “white Christian” will soon sound “like a curious oxymoron, as mildly surprising as ‘a Swedish Buddhist.’”¹¹³

Pray for the peace of the city. Jonathan Rauch wrote last summer in *The Atlantic* that “culturally conservative Christians are taking a pronounced turn toward social secession, asserting both the right and the intent to sequester themselves from secular culture and norms.” Although Rauch is an atheist and so professes not to care what Christians do, he believes such a recession is not a good idea because “when religion isolates itself from secular society, both sides lose.” First on the list of reasons for Christians to drop out of society is “the fear that traditional religious views, especially about marriage, will soon be condemned as no better than racism, and that religious dissenters will be driven from respectable society, denied government contracts, and passed over by jobs.” Yet Rauch rightly noted, “There is, of course, a very different Christian tradition: a missionary tradition of engagement and

¹¹⁰ Stephen Prothero, *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World – and Why Their Differences Matter* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 15.

¹¹¹ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 123.

¹¹² Kenyan scholar John Mbiti, quoted by Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa* (Edinburgh University Press/Orbis, 1995), 154.

¹¹³ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 3.

education, of resolutely and even cheerfully going out into an often uncomprehending world, rather than staying home with the shutters closed.”¹¹⁴

Some might argue that Lutherans have already done their share of “hunkering down” from society. But that caricature has never been true, and now may be the best time ever to get rid of it entirely. A writer in *Concordia Journal* reminds readers that Scripture is “filled with passages that witness to God’s concern for the vulnerable and compassion for the hurting.” When God’s people neglect the poor and the stranger – or worse, when they become perpetrators of injustice themselves – “we encounter in the Scriptures some of the most severe chastisements and condemnations coming from the mouths of prophets, the apostles, and even Jesus himself.” How the church should speak and act has not always been clear, and fair-minded people may arrive at different conclusions.¹¹⁵ But the place for salt is in the soup.

Again and again *and again* we have cited the verse from Jeremiah, **“I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11)**. Let us shift our attention to another verse in that letter the prophet sent to the exiles in Babylon: **“Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper” (Jeremiah 29:7)**.

V

“Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word” – Your grace, Your promises, Your instruction, Your encouragement.

- **Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there. The LORD was with Joseph so that he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did, Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned. From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the LORD was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field. So Potiphar left everything he had in Joseph’s care; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate (Genesis 39:1-6).**
- **When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. “Oh no, my lord! What shall we do?” the servant asked. “Don’t be afraid,” the prophet answered. “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” And Elisha prayed, “Open his eyes, LORD, so that he may see.” Then the LORD opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha (2 Kings 6:15-17).**
- **“Alas, Sovereign LORD,” I said, “I do not know how to speak; I am too young.” But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am too young.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will**

¹¹⁴ Jonathan Rauch, “The Great Secession,” *The Atlantic* (July/August 2014);

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/07/thegreatsecession.372288>; accessed May 29, 2015.

¹¹⁵ Erik Herrmann, “Rhetorical Frameworks for Justice: Creedal Perspectives on Christian Compassion in the World,” *Concordia Journal* 39 (Summer 2013): 217.

rescue you," declares the LORD. Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant" (Jeremiah 1:6-10).

- Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: 'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.' Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness" (Act 4:23-29).
- Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers (Galatians 6:9-10).
- For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing (1 Thessalonians 5:9-11).
- "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star." The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let the one who hears say, "Come!" Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life. I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this scroll: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this scroll. And if anyone takes words away from this scroll of prophecy, God will take away from that person any share in the tree of life and in the Holy City, which are described in this scroll. He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen (Revelation 22:16-21).

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