

Theological Observer

God's Word, Three Views, One Bible

[The following remarks on the ELCA were delivered at Zion Lutheran Church, Brentwood, PA, on May 22, 2011. The Editors]

We would not be here this afternoon discussing biblical authority in doctrine and practice unless the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) at its August 2009 church-wide assembly had not taken actions that many found distressing. The Episcopal Church in America had taken similar actions, but its history of embracing Reformed and Catholic elements makes innovations in practice less surprising. These actions and similar ones may be one reason for a declining membership in mainline churches. Lack of discipline in sexual matters in the Roman Catholic Church has led some to give up on church altogether. After attending a meeting of the Association for Church Renewal, Mark Chavez reported that the reason for church membership decline is "believed to be the result of doctrinal drift away from historic, biblical faith."¹

This drift away from the biblical faith may result from the use of certain historical critical methods that see the miraculous in the Scriptures as the imposition of ancient myths and its ethical principles as applicable only to the times and cultures in which they were prescribed. These principles also allow for the elimination of what scholars call interpolations. These are sections of the Bible that belong to the extant manuscripts but which the scholars hold are so out of step with what the writer has said elsewhere that he could not have written them. These sections are at odds with what the writer originally intended and hence should be eliminated. A glaring example of this is the trinitarian formula at the end of Matthew. Jesus' disciples, some argue were not so theologically advanced that they could have written it. When the Bible is stripped of its miraculous and moral core, the contemporary culture fills the vacuum. What a church presents as its message is hardly distinguishable from the platforms of political parties and the goals of special interest groups; it loses its reason for existence, begins to lose its members, and fails to attract new ones.

The challenge to the church since New Testament times is to preach the gospel in terms that can be understood in a particular culture but without embracing that culture. This "but" is the real problem. The Old Testament is the story of how Israel took into its worship the practices of the polytheistic environment that surrounded it. Paul faced this issue head-on in Corinth to the point of the church's faith being destroyed by the denial of the resurrection. No church is immune from being overtaken by the world in which it lives. In

¹ "Association for Church Renewal Examines Church Trends, Leadership Training, Membership," *Core Connection* (April 2011), 5.

addressing people in their particular culture, the church is danger of adjusting its message to accommodate it. A church adjusting its message to its culture may soon find itself out of step with the times, since culture is not a fixed commodity. Culture is in constant flux as the makeup of the community changes. For example, what you think is hip is downright old fashioned to your children.

Across the street from the campus of Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne is Gethsemane Lutheran Church, an ELCA congregation. It was established in the 1950s by the LCMS to serve professors, their families, and students of Concordia Senior College, who after graduation were to continue their education at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Disruption at St. Louis in 1974 led Gethsemane to join the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Church (AELC), presumably with the support of those senior college instructors who were members of that congregation. Small as it was, the AELC, the synod formed by ex-Missourians, became the catalyst for the formation of the ELCA, and its members are seen by some as a cause of the ELCA's current problems.² In 1976, two years after the disruption in St. Louis, the LCMS seminary in Springfield, Illinois, moved to the Fort Wayne campus and the senior college closed. The seminary president was Robert D. Preus, who served previously as the chief academic officer of the St. Louis seminary after the faculty walked out. He was also the brother of LCMS president J.A.O. Preus, who had taken decisive action against the Saint Louis faculty. In the thirty-five years the seminary had been in Fort Wayne, there seemed no good reason to cross the threshold of Gethsemane.

In October 2010, the iron curtain that ran down North Clinton Street was lifted. The local newspaper carried a notice that on the following Sunday afternoon Bishop Paull Spring of the North American Lutheran Church (NALC) would be speaking at Gethsemane. Since Mark Chavez had lectured at the seminary at the January 2010 symposium, we knew of the current ELCA trauma. Chavez spoke to a group of mostly LCMS clergy. Bishop Spring was an ELCA bishop speaking to a group of mostly ELCA laity. The dynamics were different. In the 1960s and 70s, ad hoc gatherings of parishioners distressed about what was happening in the LCMS were common. Not so in ELCA, until now. Gethsemane is visible and within walking distance from our campus home. An opportunity to hear the bishop and the reactions from the laity could not be missed. For me, it was a busman's holiday, since I could sit back and listen to others and not make a presentation. Several times Bishop Spring observed how flat Indiana was. Easterners react to the Midwest that

² See Carl E. Braaten, "The Crux of Christianity's Case: The Resurrection of Jesus," in *A Report from the Frontlines: Conversations on Public Theology. A Festschrift in Honor of Robert Benne*, ed. Michael Shahan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 23-34. Robert Benne, "The Trials of American Lutheranism," *First Things* 213 (May 2011): 21.

way, as I did in 1955 on waking up on the train in Ohio on the way to St. Louis and asking what God had done to me. Subsequent assignments to Kansas and Illinois my made world even flatter. My annual antidote for Midwestern flatness are summers in the Poconos. New York is still my home in a way that Indiana can never be.

I made a report on the meeting at Gethsemane to the seminary faculty and commented that rarely had I ever heard such a clear and articulate expression of the Christian faith, even from LCMS synod and district presidents, as I had heard that afternoon from Bishop Spring. To my chagrin, I had not taken into account that newly installed LCMS President Matthew Harrison was in the room. Since in the 1960s and 70s similar gatherings of lay persons were common in the LCMS to address problems, I was familiar with how these meetings were conducted and what could be expected, but there were differences in this ELCA meeting. A not so subtle difference was that the meeting was chaired, and efficiently so, by one of the congregation's pastors, Debra Meuter. One lay person asked the bishop to explain what "orthodox" meant, as in the phrase "orthodox faith." Such a question would not have been likely asked in an LCMS gathering, since in 2001 the LCMS passed a resolution that the ELCA was no longer an orthodox Lutheran church body.³ At that time, the LCMS resolution was considered an obstacle to ecumenical relations and a bit outrageous in that one church would say something negative about another. Now it is often heard from within ELCA circles. Strikingly, an ELCA bishop was questioning the orthodoxy of his own church and calling those present back to its former orthodoxy, a theme that remains prominent in the bishop's public pronouncements.⁴ Other ELCA clergy have done the same.

Another lay person asked if courses in natural law could be taught at the seminary. This question suggests that if the Bible was unclear about prohibited relationships between those of the same sex, then natural law might provide an answer. There was a kind of desperation to it all, with good Lutheran people wondering what was happening to them and how this new set of circumstances came to be. Sitting next to me was a man who was discussing with his wife if he should ask a question. I tried to encourage him but failed; I never learned what his question would have been. Such temerity in public forums is not characteristic of LCMS members. It is hard to avoid a comparison of current ELCA struggles with LCMS ones forty years ago, but both

³ During the discussion that followed, the three convocation presenters were asked what "orthodox" meant. Within a Lutheran context, orthodox and orthodoxy may best be defined as adherence to the Lutheran Confessions and sometimes to the 100-year tradition of classical Lutheranism that followed the adoption of The Book of Concord in 1580.

⁴ Paull E. Spring, "How can we keep the NALC the NALC?" *NALC News* (April 2011), 3.

have to do with what the Bible says. For the LCMS, the whipping boy that was paraded out was the question of whether Jonah really had a three-day sojourn in the fish's belly. In comparison with the resurrection of Jesus, it seemed a matter of lesser importance, but it was only a cover for the larger issue of whether one could deny miracles (such as the virgin birth) and still remain a clergy member of the LCMS.

In an essay printed in a festschrift for Robert Benne, Carl Braaten implied that the denial of the resurrection of Jesus is an issue in the ELCA.⁵ Shortly after the American Lutheran Church (ALC) established fellowship with the LCMS in 1969, it authorized the ordination of women, a practice that had the wide support in the St. Louis faculty and would soon be adopted by the AELC. With a majority of only five to four, the ALC departed from the catholic tradition that only men would be ordained. ALC support for the innovation was hardly unanimous, but the LCA enthusiastically followed suit. At the founding of the ELCA, this was hardly an issue, but for some time it did resist the approval of the blessing of the marriage and ordination of those of same sex marriages. This resistance gave way in August 2009.

In the background was the more significant and never resolved issue of the proposed substitutes for the trinitarian formula of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Could God be called Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier, and what about a baptism administered with this or another alternate formula? To some, Father and Son language implied male domination; a gentler touch to our understanding of God would be advanced by the removal of masculine terms for the trinitarian persons. The issues of who can and cannot be a pastor and who can marry whom are integrally related to the very essence of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then there was the thought that the biblical formula was only a reflection of the ancient world culture that could be updated for current understandings of the relationships between man and woman. ELCA decisions of how God is to be understood are not only related but are cut from the same cloth; it is hard to say which perspective influenced the other. Liturgy is important because it carries the faith from one generation to another. When preaching goes bad—and it does, as we preachers know—liturgy serves as a defense of the faith against error and false teaching. When the liturgy is dismantled, the people are deprived of this standard in knowing what to believe. Ironically, the Book of Common Prayer has functioned as a standard in the Anglican Communion, providing stability in the midst of theological instability.

⁵ Braaten, "The Crux of Christianity's Case," 23. "To the question, 'Can we still be Christians today without believing in the reality of Jesus' resurrection?' some theologians said 'yes,' and some said 'no.' The result has been a huge controversy, one that has spilled beyond academic debate into the life of the churches, reflected in what is preached from the pulpit and believed in the pews."

Erik Heen of the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia follows Vergelius Ferm in placing the introduction of critical studies of the Bible in the predecessor synods of the ELCA just before 1930.⁶ As they developed, these approaches to the Bible provided the scholarly fuel for what is happening now. However, by 2009 Americans were acculturated by the times to accept these changes, and they happened quickly. As late as 2001, three quarters of ELCA laity still held to the old Lutheran doctrine of biblical inerrancy, a commitment dropped from the 1988 ELCA constitution.⁷ Agreement on biblical inspiration and inerrancy does not guarantee that all who accept this will agree on what the Bible says, but it does provide a common basis for discussion.

In emotionally-laden times, when the world we knew since childhood is dissolving, each will blame the other. One professor facing the ELCA dilemma makes some stunning and judgmental accusations about conservatives engaged in the LCMS battles of the 1970s as “unrelenting, fierce, and remorseless. Participants in the current conflict in the ELCA are playing by the Marquis of Queensbury’s rules compared to the bare-knuckle brutality of Missouri’s Great Unhappiness.”⁸ ELCA dissidents may not necessarily agree with his assessment that current ELCA officials are kinder than LCMS officials were in the 1970s. At that time, no obstacles were placed in the way of congregations leaving the LCMS. If we can read between the lines, some ELCA theologians now wish that the LCMS had kept their discontented theologians. Congregations leaving the ELCA are given more and more hoops to jump through.⁹ In spite of their differences, Esau and Jacob made peace and went their separate ways, not a bad biblical model for any church facing irreconcilable difficulties as the LCMS once did and the ELCA is now. Controversy in the LCMS that climaxed in the 1970s had been simmering since the 1950s. So when the time of the parting of the ways came, LCMS members knew where the lines of the controversy were drawn, but as in any controversy those on the same side of the lines may not agree among themselves. From my observations, the lines in the ELCA are still being drawn. Not all those who are discontent with the ELCA have left, but there is a steady dribble.

Since its founding, the LCMS has been drawing lines between who and who may not be members of its congregations as well as lines with other Lutheran church bodies. Lodge members were not allowed membership, though the rule was often broken. The LCMS had no fellowship with non-

⁶ Erik M. Heen, “The Interpretation of the Bible among Lutherans in the Twentieth Century,” in *Hearing the Word: Lutheran Hermeneutics: Vision of Life under the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2006), 52-53.

⁷Heen, “The Interpretation of the Bible,” 51, 56.

⁸ Robert Benne, “The Trials of American Lutheranism,” 23.

⁹ See the headlines for *CORE Connection* (November 2010): 1. “ELCA council proposes changing rules to make it hard for congregations to leave.”

Lutheran churches, a rule that may be broken here and there, but not regularly. In adopting fellowship with Episcopalians, Moravians, Methodists, Reformed and Presbyterians, the ELCA formalized fellowship practices that were common in its predecessor synods. Lines dividing their churches from non-Lutheran ones were less distinct. Fight-to-the-death battles are not new to the LCMS, but they are to the ELCA. Laity in the ELCA do not read and know their Bible any less than LCMS people do, but they do not have the same kind of history that the LCMS has had in confronting unacceptable views and practices. The ELCA is eating the bread of sorrows. Some congregations are not leaving, and the denomination as a whole is facing declining support from its members. Reports of the merging of institutions of higher learning and reduction of church staffs are spreading.

Church and culture are always interwoven, but the existence of the church is endangered when the church is seen as no more than the religious expression of the culture of which it is a part. This was the position of the early 19th-century German theologian Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, who came to be regarded as the father of modernism or liberalism. He defined the church as a group of like-minded people, something like a community church. This sociological definition replaced the definition of the Augsburg Confession, that the church was the assembly of believers joined by a common faith. External piety rather than shared beliefs determined membership. Churches have cultural dimensions, and so one church is separated from another not only in what the members believe but by how they relate to one another. Only in the 20th century did Lutherans do away with synods that were partially determined by ethnic origins. Danes, Swedes, Finns, and Germans founded their own synods not only because they accepted the Lutheran Confessions, but because they brought people together who spoke the same language. The force of a particular church's cultural dimension comes to the fore when its members are forced for doctrinal reasons to leave their church body and the congregations in which they were brought up and where they find their closest friends. This church provided our parents, us, and our children with college and theological education.

Disruption of long-held close relationships is the price paid for confessing Christ. Jesus said that he who loves his family members more than him are not worthy of him (Matt 10:37). In determining the composition of its Church Council, the ELCA adopted a variation of Schleiermacher's view of the church, which he understood as an extension of the culture in which it existed. Since America has a diversified culture, members on the Church Council were proportioned according to sex, ethnicity, and race. Church decisions now are less likely to be determined theologically than sociologically. Not only did this no longer follow the early church model that decisions were made by the apostles and the other clergy, but it also did not take into account the fact that culture and ethnic percentages of the population are in constant flux. For example, the

Latino population now accounts for a larger percentage of the overall population than does the African-American, making it the largest minority, yet ELCA membership hardly corresponds to American ethnic divisions. Any church body reducing the theological component to a subsidiary or non-factor in making church decisions has introduced a foreign standard in determining its faith. In these circumstances, the LCMS and dissident ELCA members may come to recognize that they have much in common, especially in how they regard the Bible as the word of God, although current differences are the products of different histories and remain as obstacles to be overcome. Adjusting to new situations is what life is all about, and if our church bodies can recognize commonly held beliefs, necessary adjustments for unity become easier tasks.

Being present for discourse among ELCA members near Reformation Day was exhilarating, simply because it is always great to be among Lutherans contending for the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3). There is something Reformation-like in saying, "Here I stand." The ELCA may be facing what seems an impossible situation, but maybe not. Predecessor ELCA churches have overcome challenges to the Lutheran faith. Colonial based Lutheranism at the turn of the 19th century faced an implicit Unitarianism in the person of its New York Synod president, Frederick Quitman. A Reformed-leaning Protestantism took hold at the Gettysburg seminary at mid-19th century in Samuel S. Schmucker's Americanized Rescension of the Augsburg Confession, a document that conceded to the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's Supper. In a successful response to these aberrations, Charles Porterfield Krauth turned the Reformed tide back to restart the Lutheran heart. In facing problems, the church's history may not be exactly circular, but it is *déjà vu*. No situation is really entirely new.

What about the future? This is on the mind of Bishop Spring, who warns: "What is to prevent the North American Lutheran Church from reverting to what the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is?"¹⁰ If the factors that brought us to this situation are not addressed, we will return to what we do not want. The bishop's question may really be the subtitle for this conference. Historically, too many churches have already lost the word "Lutheran" in what they believe, and every church that calls itself "Lutheran" remains in the same danger. Then there are those congregations, probably mostly LCMS ones, that, in the interest of gaining outsiders for the church, have dropped the word Lutheran from their names. Recent ELCA alliances with non-Lutheran churches must be reevaluated if any church in its membership wants to be authentically Lutheran. That being said, the real issues are the Bible as the word of God and giving carte blanche to any critical method to interpret it. On the other side of the arena is Evangelicalism with its allurements of inspired

¹⁰ NALC News (April 2011), 3.

Scripture and high moral ground, but we will have gained little if, in fleeing from historical criticism and social liberalism, we find ourselves in the arms of a religious movement that substitutes a sovereign God in place of the God known only in Jesus and, in place of baptism, demands a decision for Christ. Without Luther's *simul iustus et peccator*, that we are as much sinners as we are saints, we fall into the false belief that overcoming sin in this world is an achievable goal. Apart from all the attractiveness of Evangelicalism, which can even use popular Reformation slogans such as *sola scriptura*, *sola fide* and *sola gratia*, the movement embraces opposing views of salvation. Its dispensational views of the end times see the kingdom of God in political terms; hence, it is not fundamentally different from the agenda of the old Social Gospel. Opposing views on women's ordination are allowed.¹¹

The title for this conference, "God's Word, Three Views, One Bible," presupposes agreement on the Bible as God's word and at the same time allows for differing and even opposing interpretations. By the time or before this essay is given as the last one on the program, we may have proved that there are three views or we may have proved that we agree more than we disagree. Up until 1988, the LCMS and predecessor ELCA synods had virtually identical views on the Bible as God's word. We have faced similar crises with the introduction of critical biblical studies, the ELCA around 1930 and the LCMS just after 1950. Internal LCMS differences came to the breaking point in 1974; ELCA differences came to a head in August 2009. In an essay delivered before a convocation of ELCA theologians in 2003, Erik Heen of the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia identified the moment in the decision to ordain women as pastors. Saying that this happened in 1970, Heen writes:

In the Old Lutheran approach it is impossible to entertain a doctrine of the ministry that includes women clergy. The proof texts (*sedes doctrinae*) are found in such passages 1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:11. It seems self-evident that scripture teaches with clarity that women cannot hold such an office in the church. So the decisions of the ELCA predecessor churches in 1970 to ordain women indicates the sea change that had occurred with respect to the way the Bible was interpreted by a significant number of Lutherans in North America.¹²

In Heen's view, and there is little reason to dispute him, the LCMS finds its theological methods in the Reformation and post-Reformation eras of the 16th and 17th centuries. ELCA methods are rooted in methods that came into full bloom in the 19th century and then entered their predecessor synods

¹¹ See the review of James M. Hamilton Jr., *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul's Letters*, by Philip B. Payne in *Journal of the Evangelical Society*, 54/1 (March 2011): 177-179. Both the reviewer and the author are credentialed Evangelicals.

¹² Heen, "The Interpretation of the Bible," 50.

around 1930. These methods assume that the New Testament is hardly more than a collection of historical documents influenced by the culture of the times, with less attention to their claim as the word of God. Items in the Scriptures that were seen as cultural accretions could be removed without damaging the central message. This approach has now allowed for same-sex marriages and for those in such arrangements to enter the ministry.

We are concerned about how the results of methods of biblical studies have led us to the current situation, but more importantly these methods often see Jesus as nothing more than a fabrication of those who wrote the gospels. These attempts to locate the historical Jesus are called “quests” for the historical Jesus; for the record, we are now in the third “quest” without any hope among the scholars of coming to a near-agreement about how much can be known about him. Without a supernatural Jesus of some kind, Christianity does not have a leg to stand on. Lutherans have the advantage of their confessions. Even if they are regarded as hardly more than historical documents from a particular era of our church’s history, they annoyingly remind us what Lutherans once believed. They can serve as antibodies to challenge foreign elements entering the Lutheran bloodstream, but infection by destructive viruses is inevitable since the confessions do not address every situation we might face. Confessional commitment did not prevent the introduction of critical methods from taking hold in biblical studies at the St. Louis seminary in the 1960s and 70s. These former LCMS professors, in joining ELCA faculties in the 1980s, tipped the balances in favor of social and biblical liberalism, at least in the opinion of one ELCA theologian.¹³ Changes in any church can have many causes. Current cataclysmic ones can be attributed as much to the methods of biblical interpretation as to radical cultural and societal change. A world that emerged in the middle and late 1960s bore little resemblance to what we knew in the 1950s.

The assignment for this afternoon from the Rev. Natalie L. Gessert came with this question as a guideline: “How in 2000 years has the Bible managed to resist culture and remain fairly consistently interpreted in the face of changing culture?” This may be a rhetorical question, but it does not work out that way, because the Bible, or at least our interpretation of it, has not managed to resist culture. That’s why we are having this discussion.

David P. Scaer

¹³Benne, “The Trials of American Lutheranism,” 23.

The Mission of the Church in an Age of Zombies

The church is living through an epidemic, a time of deadly serious threats. The situation in which Christians find themselves is best understood as a time of deep existential threat to the faith. If we are to think through this crisis in the church's mission today, the church needs honestly to see itself as living in a time of plague. How the church responds to this situation is in many ways the chief question of the day. How does a church respond to a culture around it infected with a deadly pestilence?

A plea for missions from a church official was published recently. The author made the usual encouragements that the church engage those outside the church. The article relayed statistics and breakdowns of Generation X, Y, and Z, the rise of the "nones," how this should alarm the church, and how ecclesiastical leaders ought to craft the Christian message to appeal to those demographics. What was striking about the piece was the imagery that the author used to portray the church's situation. He wrote that unfortunately many congregations isolated themselves, that many had a "fortress mentality." His contention was that so many Christians and church leaders spend their time inside the walls of the church where it is comfortable and not venturing out into the world, that it hinders the mission to the lost. The author wished to persuade his readers to take the battle into the field, to abandon the fortress and go on the attack.

A second picture the author used was an athletic one, an image borrowed from the football field. Christians, he thought, spend too much time playing defense and not enough time playing offense. His point was that today's church all too often expends energy defending traditions, protecting turf, and reacting rather than going "out there" to share the gospel and seek the unchurched. In other words, the author recommended a game plan centered on the mission-minded forward pass rather than the ecclesiastical prevent defense.

It is important to consider the language used to discuss the mission of the church. Many insist on speaking not just in terms of warfare or athletics but in terms of commerce and competition. The mission of the church is seen and discussed in terms dealing with customers, attracting clientele, and crafting a product that appeals to the vast throngs of people who do not come to church. It ends up being seen as a marketing problem. If we can just come up with a Christianity that is labeled and marketed the right way, then the crowds will flock to the church and her mission will succeed. Often, such frantic appeals to grow the church spring from the palpable sense of panic at the shrinking numerical and cultural clout the church has in the Western world.

Such panic is understandable. There is a crisis in western Christianity. The church is shrinking or even disappearing in many quarters. The numbers of

"nones" is rising rapidly.¹ Mission thinking, strategies, and emphases are critical now. But what is fascinating about these approaches are the metaphors that are used. While the situation changes and worsens, the language used does not fit that situation. Are the pictures and images we use adequate to the situation we face? An excessively market-based church life also falls flat in an age when children are gorged on media well before their teens and have been deeply inoculated against the appeals of advertising and promotion. The point is that the church in the West faces an unprecedented, existential threat. There is real animosity against the Christian message in many sectors. The statistics are beyond alarming and every pastor and every congregation can feel it and notice it in daily life. But often, talk about missions is shallow and misplaced. Fortresses and football? Marketing salvation like a hamburger or a latte? The emergent and missional church movements recognize these dangers² and are in many ways a flawed reaction to the over-emphasis on church marketing and success-based visions of the evangelistic enterprise in the older church growth movement.³

Speech about the church and mission is vital. Speaking affects actions. More is needed than cheerleading and scary statistics. What is called for is imagination and thought that explores what is happening around the church today. Critical questions need to be asked. What is it that we are facing? What is it like? What can it be compared to? To deploy an overused word, what is the hermeneutics of mission? This concerns itself not with how the Bible is interpreted but how the culture is understood in which the church finds itself and to which it proclaims the Scriptures. The church does not need more strategies or techniques, but should seek to relate theology to the prevailing culture. Wilbert Shenk writes that "Christians living in modern culture face a fundamental challenge . . . to learn to think about their culture in missional

¹ The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2012, October 9). "Nones" on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation, from http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/Unaffiliated/NonesOnTheRise-full.pdf. Accessed January 29, 2013.

² "It is individuals and communities on the proactive path that converge in many ways with the Missional Church Movement, which emphasizes that the church has to move from a marketing mentality to a missional mentality. The missional church is seen as an incarnational (versus an attractional) ministry, sent to engage a postmodern, post-Christendom, globalized context. This understanding requires every congregation to take on a missionary posture for engaging its local context, with this missionary engagement shaping everything a congregation does." R.J.A. Doornenbal, *Crossroads: An Exploration of the Emerging-Missional Conversation with a Special Focus on Missional Leadership and Its Challenges for Theological Education* (The Netherlands: Eburon Academic Publisher, 2012), 40.

³ For an introduction to the methods of the emergent church movement, see James S. Bielo, "The 'Emerging Church' in America: Notes on the Interaction of Christianities," *Religion* 39 (2009), 219-232.

terms.”⁴ How do we understand the existing situation? What is “out there” is surely not like an army of British redcoats with muskets or a strong-armed quarterback trying to score a touchdown. It is not a consumer deciding whether to buy this product or that product. It is something more serious and more basic.

An effective way to diagnose a society is to look at its popular arts. The popular imagination of a culture tells stories. It gives clues to its self-understanding. Writing about zombie movies, Paul Pastor comments that “really, the films are about us, about all of us, in this time and place in history, and about our hopes and fears.”⁵ A society discloses its ailments with fairy tales, movies, video games, television, and social media. The stories that resonate today are very revealing about the mission of the church. There are tales of zombie apocalypses, vampires, contagions, and epidemic diseases threatening the stability of the world. These may sound frivolous, but societies live out their dreams and nightmares. The form these nightmares take clarifies what the church faces. The forces arrayed against Christianity are more like deadly zombies, brutal disease, and vampires than rifle-toting soldiers in straight lines or professional athletes in a stadium.

These images suggest the direction in which the church might move to meet its real enemies. Diagnosing such mass entertainment or social media fads does not yield programs or specific strategies. Such fads suggest ways to think and how best to approach the problem of missions in age of apathy and hostility to the message. They show us ways in which current approaches are mismatched with the world the church inhabits. The fact is simply that such adversaries are not easily conquered. The movies and stories about such adversaries are tales of terror, loss, and fear. They are not feel good-stories with happy endings where everyone gets away clean and safe. The evil that the church faces today is deep and difficult. There is an awareness among even the most energetic proponents of mission and outreach that something is different about the atmosphere in which churches and pastors labor. The easy answers don’t work.

These realities suggest that mission starts with prayer. This seems a facile and clichéd thing to advocate. Often prayer is brought up simply to fill another bullet point in an outreach presentation otherwise jammed with practical, hands-on activities. But when faced with the existential threats the church now sees outside its doors, prayer goes from being a perfunctory embellishment to being closer to the focus of the entire enterprise. Missional prayer in an age of

⁴ Cited in Ed Stetzer and G. A. Alpharetta, “The Evolution of Church Growth, Church Health, and the Missional Church: An Overview of the Church Growth Movement from, and back to, its Missional Roots,” *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 17 (2006), 98.

⁵ Paul Pastor, “The Zombie Apocalypse,” *Christianity Today* 57(2013), 80.

zombies is serious. It is sober, liturgical, and churchly prayer that flows from the hearing of God's word and is a weapon in a spiritual war. This kind of prayer is not a pious covering on what we would do anyway, but a plea that recognizes no other option. It is prayer that bases itself squarely on the promises of God not to forsake his church, prayer that comes from hearing that God's word will not return void, prayer that receives the life-giving sacraments of Christ and then faces the world and Satan with trust only in God's saving will, prayer that one might employ when facing a deadly virus or a ravenous zombie. Missional prayer will be much like what Luther describes in the Large Catechism:

All this is nothing more than to say: " Dear Father, we ask you first to give us your Word, so that the gospel may be properly preached throughout the world and then that it may also be received in faith and may work and dwell in us, so that your kingdom may pervade among us through the Word and the power of the Holy Spirit and the devil's kingdom may be destroyed so that he may have no right or power over us until finally his kingdom is utterly eradicated and sin, death, and hell wiped out, that we may live forever in perfect righteousness and blessedness (LC III, 54).⁶

Such prayer comes from the means of grace and circles back to those same means. Missions in an age of hostility to God must rely on the promises of God.

When standing face-to-face with a deadly vampire, one does not sit down for a nice chat. Rather, the afflicted cries out to God and shoves a crucifix in its face. It is interesting to hear how, in the popular imagination, zombies and vampires are overcome. The scientific and rational world quickly gets stripped away and the superstitions of the Middle Ages come roaring back: crucifixes, incantations, magic rituals, potions, and prayer. Vampires succumb to holy water, crucifixes, and a wooden stake (the cross!) to the heart. Zombies are susceptible to fire and water. Here the church must learn that what it is often eager to throw away or hide is what the world often secretly yearns for: ancient truth, supernatural power disclosed in the service of the good, concrete salvation that does not evaporate with the whim and fads of time. The sacraments, rich and authentic liturgy, the use of the arts and mystery and ritual all fit the imagination of people haunted by the supernatural and by dark forces they do not understand.

Mission in an age of zombies suggests that the church again take the presence and power of evil seriously. The popularity of horror movies, the zombie apocalypse, and fear of mass disease or pandemic indicate that our

⁶ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, tr. Charles Arand, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 447.

civilization knows there is such a thing as evil and malevolence. Evil does not succumb to marketing. Doing one more witnessing workshop will not drain a vampire of its lust for blood. Designing a winsome church sign will not ward off a deadly strain of influenza. The threat to the church is more foundational and existential. Luther's view of the church as an entity in constant battle with Satan is a missional insight.⁷ For Luther, "the coming of the kingdom depended on God's own sovereign power and freedom, working through his word and the Holy Spirit. God himself engaged the devil in conflict on a cosmic scale, and his kingdom of grace and righteousness would ultimately triumph over the devil's kingdom of sin and death."⁸ Seeing the atmosphere in which the church works as a demonically-contested arena suggests that the church is better off not acting like an entrepreneur who constantly seeks to reinvent or disguise herself in order to attract a customer who is looking for its product. What is more and more accurate is that there are less and less people interested in the church. The devil is active. Offering great coffee or a zumba class will not change that. Instead, the church is better off acting like what the scripture says it is and what our culture unconsciously understands: a supernatural miracle of God in the midst of an evil and hostile place. The church offers mysteries, not products.

The reality of evil suggests that a church serious about mission will look for mission texts in the Scriptures in more than the normal "Great Commission" places. The temptation scene following Jesus' baptism is such a mission text. As Christ goes forth to battle Satan, so also do his followers. The body of Christ is baptized and the words of the Father are ringing out as the Spirit leads the baptized people of God with Christ out into the demonic wilderness. The same Spirit that brings the blessed light of heaven's promise and hovers over the water pushes the church into mission, face to face with Satan. But this is no easy parade, no 1950s triumphal march through happy streets where victory follows victory and the crowds just keep getting larger. It is fighting the devil. It is a self-denying journey for the salvation of the world, where suffering and clinging to the promises of God constitute victory. Here, the only strength is to follow Christ to the cross and endure and hold on and point to the Savior.

⁷ The 19th-century view that Luther and the reformers had little or nothing to say about the mission of the church has been almost completely overturned. Luther's writings have become a deep source for thinking about missions. See Charles Chaney, "Martin Luther and the Mission of the Church," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 13 no.1 (Winter 1970): 15-41. See also Martin Luther and Stolle Volker, *The Church Comes from All Nations: Luther Texts on Mission*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003.

⁸ James Scherer, "Luther And Mission: A Rich But Untested Potential," *Missio Apostolica* 2 (1994), 21.

In the current culture, one recurring shared nightmare is epidemic. Books and movies and television have repeatedly sketched out scenarios where the ability of science and medicine to give and preserve life (and abundant life) fails.⁹ We put our faith in modern medical science, and so the fear that it might give way is a persistent one. It is also one ripe with missiological meaning. Disease and sin have long been linked in theological and even Scriptural discourse. How we treat sickness discloses clues as to how the church “saves sinners.”¹⁰ It has long been noted that the Greek word meaning to “save” (σώζω) can have a physical or a spiritual meaning, either to heal or to rescue one from sin. The Gospel writers seem to use the word in an intentionally ambiguous way, so that both physical wholeness and forgiveness are proclaimed.

In an extreme epidemic, health officials do two things. First they protect the vulnerable and put up walls so that the contagion cannot spread. A true and necessary fortress mentality takes hold where there is need of places where a plague cannot enter. Whenever a flu outbreak is serious, there are signs at the hospital advising all affected people to stay out of the hospital so the sickness does not spread. Walls and barriers are erected to stop the spread of the virus. But medical professionals also go out with vaccines, practices, or medicines into public places, so that people can be saved. They seek to treat as many as will listen. Medical practice in such times is centripetal. It pulls sick and at risk people out of the danger, out of the epidemic, into the safe place where the walls keep out the sickness so they may be treated.

An age of epidemics, real and imaginary, suggests that the church see itself as living in a time of plague, spiritual plague. It must have protective walls around itself for the very sake of the mission. It is not unloving or parochial when the church seeks to ward off the world and guard the treasure of the gospel against change or corruption. In a time of evil, when deadly plagues are ravaging the surrounding culture, the church must quarantine itself. It does this precisely for the mission, so that there is a place of safety and healing. But the church does not brick itself off completely. It also carries blessed medicine out to the folks who need it. This happens in utmost seriousness, as a matter of life and death. Mission is not an entertainment revue seeking customers or an audience. Rather, the church wishes to save the dying, to pull the infected, the diseased, the sinners all around her to where there is safety and salvation. The church’s mission is both centrifugal and centripetal. The church goes out to

⁹ A comprehensive list of such media is beyond the scope of this paper. Some notable recent examples of movies dealing with fictional epidemics include *Contagion* (2011), *I am Legend* (2007), *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (2011), and *Carriers* (2009).

¹⁰ Joel Green, commenting on Luke 17:19, notes that the Samaritan who was “saved” from leprosy “on account of faith gained something more—namely insight into Jesus’ role in the inbreaking kingdom. He is enabled to see and is thus enlightened, itself a metaphor for redemption.” Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 627.

pull sinners in. The missionary impulse embedded in the church from the Ascension charge of Jesus to make disciples is a centrifugal outward movement. However, the church has also always recognized an equal centripetal movement, pulling disciples back towards the center, into the church. Richard Bauckham has noted the prevalence and complementary nature of these mission impulses in both the Old and New Testaments.¹¹

Differing models of outreach emphasize differing sides of these forces. An attractional model of outreach recognizes the centripetal logic of missions. It wishes to bring people into the church. However, an attractional model assumes that people “out there” desires to come to Christ and only have to be lured. They are hungry fish looking for food. It is the job of churches to find the right bait. This is simply no longer the case in the Western world. The “incarnational” movement in missional thought recognizes this weakness of the attractional model in a hostile society. An incarnational model assumes that the non-believers will not come to the church, but that the church and individual Christians must go to them and engage them on their own terms and foster relationships with them. Such a model, however, has a problem with the centripetal impulse. If the church consists solely of “going out there,” to what place does the church bring non-believers?¹² The popular, incarnational, missional model of the church risks having no center. It can become a trajectory that does outreach, that goes out into the world, but has no church to which to come home.

What is needed is a model of the church’s mission that can both go out to the lost and bring them back into the church. The history of the church supplies an unlikely template for this: monasteries. A monastery can be a model of a type of missional thinking that recognizes both the outward and inward push of missions. Monasteries were constructed as places to flee the world, but also as places where combat against Satan continued and even intensified. Monasticism gives an example of churchly practice that both fled from the noxious elements in the world but retained a sense of purpose and mission to that same world. The monastic movement, of course, turned into much more than that, much of it unhealthy and associated with unscriptural notions of works righteousness and abandonment of vocational calling. But monasteries also preserved a great deal of the divine truth in times of peril and disaster, especially in the earlier centuries of the church. When civilization was col-

¹¹ Richard Bauckham, “Mission as Hermeneutic for Scriptural Interpretation,” unpublished lecture given at Cambridge University, 5. See also, Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003).

¹² Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost detail what an “incarnational” approach to missions looks like. An incarnational and missional paradigm speaks in terms of “go to them” while an attractional model says “come to us.” Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2003) 41.

lapsing and corruption was eating away at the church, monasteries were quarantined places where the truth was kept and from where it was eventually sent forth. The Irish church of the sixth and seventh centuries is an example of a monasticism that both preserved the church in a hostile culture as well provided vigorous missionary activity.¹³ The Irish monastic movement was centered on the preservation and extension of sacred learning in the midst of an Ireland that knew little of these things. Yet, at the same time, it was strongly missionary in character. The monasteries had a role not only in converting a deeply pagan Ireland, but also in bringing Christianity to a still largely pagan Europe.¹⁴ Monasteries at times became missionary centers where, in the midst of decay, falsehood, and danger, preachers were sent forth to preach the Gospel to pagans and to extend the church.

The point is not that churches today somehow seek to renew or start a monastic movement. Rather, the point is to seek ways to talk about the church and to seek models of how the church should respond in mission to the world in our day. Each congregation can be seen as a “monastery” where the saints of God flee the dangerous world to be in the presence of the living and forgiving God and to receive and safeguard his word and truth. But the ministry of pastors and the vocation of the baptized also send them out into that very same poisonous context from which they seek to flee.¹⁵ The world is both an enemy to be fought against and, at the same time, loved and embraced as an object of God’s own crucified compassion. The congregation as a monastery is both a bulwark against error and confusion and a missionary outpost where the saints of God, fed and forgiven, take the light of the gospel into the dying world and lead the dying back into the safety behind the walls of the fortress church.

The images that are used to speak about the church and the mission of the church are important. It is vital that the words and practices used to describe that mission match the actual situation. In a time of when Christianity is shrinking in the West and is under serious attack, popular arts provide a framework and a language for the mission challenge. Understanding that phenomena such as zombies, vampires, and fear of epidemics reveal in society an intuitive knowledge of deep-seated evil and the reality of demonic forces can help the church re-orient its missional stance. Mission in an age of zombies

¹³ See John R. Walsh, *A History of the Irish Church 400–700 AD* (Blackrock, Co; Dublin: Columba Press, 2003).

¹⁴ See Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 80–96.

¹⁵ “The church’s mission requires both the individuals who, authorized by God to communicate his message, go out from the community to others, near or far, and also the community that manifests God’s presence in its midst by its life together and its relationships to others.” Bauckham, “Mission as Hermeneutic for Scriptural Interpretation,” 5.

uses prayer seriously as a real outreach tool; so the church must remember the nature of prayer as an outgrowth of salvation through faith alone. We have no resources to combat Satan other than to ask our Father in heaven to deliver us. Such mission thinking also takes the reality of evil seriously and seeks both to protect the truth from error and contamination while also seeking to bring the lost into the church. The church can be seen as a place of safety in the midst of spiritual plagues and a sort of "monastic" fortress where the gospel is both protected and proclaimed.

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One Nation under God: Thoughts Regarding "Patriotic Services"

At least since the middle of the first century, the church included intercessory prayers for government leaders: "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way" (1 Tim 2:1-2).

Prayers for political figures in a highly polarized political climate do have some drawbacks. Those who identify themselves as progressive, for example, may have found their fists clenching and teeth grinding as prayers were offered for the immediate past incumbent in the White House. Now, the tables are turned, with some conservatives having similar reactions in regard to the present incumbent. Regardless of our political leanings, we follow Paul in offering prayers for our leaders.

General prayers for the nation are not so difficult, especially in this perpetual post-9/11 era, most recently renewed by the attack during the Boston Marathon. Our congregations seem attuned to the importance of praying for the nation and especially for those who protect and defend us. Matters once taken for granted no longer are. This is a bit humbling for a nation whose role as a superpower was assumed to mean that we maintained a strong defense as much for the sake of others as for the actual defense of our own shores.

All this leads me to raise a cautionary flag (pardon the pun) regarding a practice in some churches of holding patriotic services, usually on the Sunday nearest to the Fourth of July, to give thanks for the freedoms granted to us in our constitution and to pray for God's continued blessings on our nation. Patriotic services vary from congregation to congregation, but they generally include such standard hymns as "God Bless Our Native Land," "Faith of Our

Fathers,” and “God of Our Fathers.” It is another thing when the services have the congregation sing the national anthem and patriotic songs like “God Bless the U.S.A” with its refrain, “I’m proud to be an American.” Alongside or in place of the creed, the congregation is sometimes even asked recite the Pledge of Allegiance

Now, what are we to make of associating the church with love for country? Let us address that question by means of this scenario. A member of the Lutheran Church—Canada (or any other church in another country in fellowship with the LCMS) attends an LCMS congregation on the Sunday closest to the Fourth of July only to discover that the service includes the Pledge of Allegiance accompanied by patriotic songs and perhaps even a sermon extolling the virtues of the nation. Reciting the Pledge of Allegiance with hand on heart and singing the Star-Spangled Banner is a real dilemma for fellow Lutherans from outside our borders, as it would be for us if we were attending such a service in another country. The situation may be more common than we realize, since the LCMS has long-time relations with churches in Europe, Africa, South America, and Asia and is working to establish new ones. The confessional fellowship of the LCMS is not confined to national borders and never has been.

Here is the question. Should anyone ever be made to feel like an outsider during the Divine Service? Admittedly, this is not the only way a visitor becomes aware that he or she may be an outsider; each congregation has unique customs that other congregations may not have. Asking allegiance to a particular government, however, goes much deeper because it gets to the heart of what the church is all about as citizens of heaven and members of God’s household (Eph 2:19). All this is made more sensitive by the current debate over citizenship for resident immigrants. The liturgy brings worshipers together as the body of Christ regardless of national citizenship. It dare not contain elements that disenfranchise visitors from other countries. Today, Lutherans from countries from all over the world come to our shores to do business. They are also here for educational opportunities and are enrolled in our colleges and seminaries. Patriotic services put our fellow Christians in an embarrassing, and maybe even compromising, position.

Perhaps it is time to tone down the patriotic services a bit. Certainly, we can still pray for our leaders and those of other nations. And we can petition God to bless the citizens of our land as we give thanks for the freedom he has granted us, not to mention praying on behalf of those in other lands. I love to sing the national anthem and other patriotic songs, but this is best left to Memorial Day and Fourth of July commemorations and the opening of athletic events. After all, what would a baseball game be without the national anthem?

Paul J. Grime