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Theological Observer

Go On

[This speech was delivered at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, for the May 23, 2014, commencement ceremony. The speaker, the Rev. Dr. Ulmer Marshall Jr., was granted an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree at the same ceremony. The Editors]

To President Rast, the Board of Regents, members of the faculty, staff, alumni, friends, parents, and, most of all, to our graduates of 2014: I want to express my sincere appreciation to Dr. Rast and the faculty for inviting me to be the commencement speaker. Thank you.

Statistics tell us that graduates do not remember what was said at their graduation. So, I am going to give you two little words to hang everything on, "Go on." If anybody asks you years from now, "What did Pastor Marshall speak about?" you can tell them, "Go on." "Well, what did he say?" "Go on!"

As I bring you a word of encouragement today, I have decided to give you the same charge that God gave Joshua and the Israelites: Joshua, chapter one, verses one through five. When God spoke these words to Joshua, the children of Israel were probably experiencing an inner crisis. For you see, Moses was dead. The Moses who had been the one man courageous enough to confront Egypt's power structure, armed with nothing but his staff, an edict from God, and a directive to Pharaoh, "Let my people go," that Moses was dead.

The loss of a leader of Moses' stature is bad enough, but when the loss occurs at a critical stage in a people's history, when it occurs at a turning point of a people's life, that loss is magnified. You see, the children of Israel were about to embark on the second phase of their journey toward freedom; that phase was to capture the land of Canaan. They now stood looking over the Jordan River, standing between the slavery of Egypt and the freedom of Canaan, thinking about the challenges, the battles, and the struggles that were before them and knowing that whatever they faced this time, they would have to face without the seasoned, fatherly leadership of Moses. You, too, stand at the beginning of a new career, knowing that the challenges, battles, and struggles you will face, you will have to face them without the faculty there to hold your hand.

The God who first spoke to Moses through the burning bush, the God who had guided him, directed him, and upheld him during all those moments of crisis in the wilderness, the God about whom David said that he “shall neither slumber nor sleep,” was far from being dead. This same God spoke to Joshua, “So lift up your head and look around you. There is still a job to be done, there is still a charge to be kept, there is still responsibility to be discharged. So get up from where you are, you and all this people. The land that I promised your ancestors remains to be conquered, the wilderness has yet to be cleared, the cities still must be built. So arise, you and all this people, and go over the Jordan into the land of promise. Every place that the soles of your feet shall tread upon will be yours. Every piece of land that your eyes shall rest upon from the rising of the sun to the going down of the same will be yours. No man shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. So, arise, we say to you today. Arise, there are still souls to be won, there’s still God’s work to be done and Satan’s kingdom to be torn down.

Now don’t think that this is going to be easy. Sometimes you will give your best, and your best won’t seem good enough, and you will begin to wonder if you really are called to this work; but just *go on*. Sometimes you will go out of your way to help people, and the very ones you have tried to help the most will be the first to turn their backs on you; but just *go on*. Sometimes when you try to stand for what’s right, it will seem as if you are standing by yourself. But don’t worry about it; just *go on*. Sometimes it will seem as if the system will destroy you, but just *go on*. In spite of the high mountains, *go on*; in spite of the deep valleys, *go on*; in spite of the wide rivers, *go on*. In spite of being betrayed by friends, and rejected by relatives, and railed by your enemies, I say to you, *go on*.

Sometimes people will get mad at you and fight what you are trying to do for them; sometimes your staunch supporters will become discouraged and fall by the wayside; sometimes people will get mad and quit—but you just *go on*.

As God spoke to Joshua, so God speaks to you today. When you are overwhelmed by life’s problems and life’s setbacks; when you have tried to be good pastors, deaconesses, teachers, professors, good leaders, good Christian men and women, good husbands and wives, and it seems as if the devil has made a shambles of your work, your lives, your homes, your marriages; when the responsibilities are great, the odds against you are overwhelming, and you are most aware of your own weakness and shortcomings—God speaks to you simply with a word of persistence: “Don’t give up. Keep on fighting. Keep on trying. Just *go on*.” In spite of

the stumbling blocks thrown in your way and the ditches that have been dug and snares that have been set, just *go on* anyhow. *Go on*, even though many false prophets shall arise and deceive many and lead many astray. Even though iniquity shall abound, and the love of many shall wax cold, you just *go on* anyhow, because the person who endures to the end shall be saved.

I know sometimes you will feel like saying, "How can I go on Lord? I am all alone. It is just me, alone. The challenges are too great, the opposition is too powerful, and I am too weak and powerless." It is at that moment that God will speak to you the words he spoke to Joshua: "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you: I will not fail you nor forsake you." What God was saying to Joshua is, "You don't understand who it is that is talking to you. I am the one who causes to be what is. Before there was a when or a where or a then or a there, I was. It is I who stepped out into the darkness, into the bleakness of chaos, and said, "Let there be light." It is I that spat out the seven seas, it is I that carpeted the earth with grass, it is I that dotted the hills with trees and flung the stars into the Milky Way. It is I. It is I who told Abraham to go. As I have been with others, as I have upheld others, as I have fed others, as I have led others, so I will be with you. I will never fail you nor forsake you."

You can *go on* because God is your protector, because Jesus is your traveling companion, because the Holy Spirit is your comforter and guide. Therefore, no matter what happens from day to day, *go on*. No matter what foes appear in battle array, *go on*. No matter who tells you that you cannot make it, you know in whom you have believed, so *go on*, trusting in the Lord. When you have been falsely accused and are being persecuted for righteousness' sake; when jealous-minded, vindictive spirits, petty souls, and unconverted hearts cast your name out as evil, trust in God and *go on*. David said about it, "In all my born days, I've seen a lot of things happening in this world, but I have never seen the righteous forsaken nor God's children begging bread."

Sometimes, like St. Paul, we may ask, "Lord, how can I go on when I have this thorn in my flesh and in my soul that keeps me from doing what I want to do and being what I ought to be? Three times I have besought you in prayer that you would remove this thorn from the flesh." God speaks to you the same as he spoke to St. Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, and my strength is made perfect in your weakness."

If you *go on*, depending upon sufficient grace, trusting in the promises of God, looking unto Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith, and

being kept by the power divine, one of these old days you will reach the promised land. You will cross over the Jordan River. Jericho's wall will fall down before you. One of these days, you will reach the end of your journey, and you will hear the master say to you, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant," and you will claim the prize of the high calling in Christ Jesus our Lord. Good evening now, God bless you. *Go on* in Jesus' name. Amen and amen.

Ulmer Marshall Jr., Pastor
Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church, Mobile, Alabama
Bethel Ev. Lutheran Church, Point Clear, Alabama

Inaugural Speech for the Robert D. Preus Chair

[On May 22, 2014, the Robert D. Preus Chair in Systematic Theology and Confessional Lutheran Studies was dedicated, and Dr. Roland Ziegler was named as the first holder of this endowed Chair. The following is his inaugural address for this auspicious occasion. The Editors.]

Dear Mrs. Preus, members of the Preus family, dear alumni of Concordia Theological Seminary, members of the Board of Regents, President Rast, members of the faculty, and dear students!

It is a great honor to be the first incumbent of the Robert D. Preus Chair in Systematic Theology and Confessional Lutheran Studies. With this chair, Concordia Theological Seminary and the donors who made this chair possible are honoring the memory of Robert Preus. Dr. Preus was not the longest serving president of this institution; in this respect he is second to Reinhold Pieper (1892-1914). But he has left a deep impression on this institution. The nestor of our faculty, Dr. David Scaer, was his student at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, where Dr. Preus started his academic teaching in 1957. Dr. Scaer has many times in conversation and in his writings expressed what he owes to Robert Preus. Early in his tenure as president of Concordia Theological Seminary, Dr. Preus brought onto the faculty of this institution some of the bright young lights he knew as his students. One of them is still with us, Dr. William Weinrich. Many others were called during his tenure and are still teaching at our seminary. President emeritus Dean Wenthe and President Lawrence Rast were his students. So, even though he did not found a "Preus school," this seminary would not be what it is without his teachings and his administrative

leadership. And, last but not least, LCMS President Harrison was another of his students who was formed by his teaching.

Time is too short to give a full appreciation of Robert Preus. The late Dr. Kurt Marquart, another one of his students who was brought to the faculty by Dr. Preus, described as the two main themes of Preus's work the doctrine of Scripture and the doctrine of justification. Dr. Preus began his scholarly career with his book *The Inspiration of Scripture* on the doctrine of inspiration in the period of Lutheran Orthodoxy. During his life, he showed the continued relevance and fruitfulness of engaging Lutheran Orthodoxy without being an uncritical repristinator. He thus became a world renowned expert on the field of Lutheran Orthodoxy; his books are still standard reference works on this topic. In the controversies in the Missouri Synod, he defended the biblical and confessional understanding of Scripture as the verbally inspired and inerrant word of God against the inroads of a lower view of Scripture and a false interpretation of Scripture as it was put forward by higher criticism. For the Nineteenth Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions in 1996, the series of symposia he inaugurated, he was scheduled to present on the topic of "Luther's Doctrine of Justification and Rome." What he would have said we can know from his last book—posthumously published and edited by his sons Daniel and Rolf under the title *Justification and Rome*—in which he engaged the early drafts of the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," authored by Rome and the Lutheran World Federation. Thus, Dr. Preus still teaches the church through his publications. Many of his articles dealing with Scripture, the confessions, and justification have been collected in the two volumes, *Doctrine Is Life*, edited by his son Klemet.

What does the establishment of the Dr. Robert D. Preus Chair in Systematic Theology and Confessional Lutheran Studies mean for this seminary? It shows that we heed the admonition of the author of the letters to the Hebrews when he wrote: "Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow" (Heb 13:7 KJV). Melancthon confesses in the Apology against the Roman understanding what it truly means to honor the saints. As he put it in the Apology, we give thanks to God that He has given teachers to the church. We are strengthened in our faith because we see that grace superabounds. And finally, to honor them is to follow their example, "first of their faith, then of their other virtues, which people should imitate according to their

callings" (Ap XXI 4-7).¹ In thankfulness for the work of Dr. Preus, this seminary declares its intention to continue his work.

Robert Preus confessed the faith unabashedly in the controversies of his time. He clearly upheld the distinction between the word of God and the word of man, so that in the church nothing but the word of God is preached, because nothing but the gospel can comfort the consciences with the forgiveness of sins. Christ alone is Savior, and man is justified before God only because of the righteousness of Christ won on the cross and received in the gospel by faith alone. The confessions of the Lutheran Church are a true exposition of Scripture and bind us to this center of the Christian faith.

In his inauguration address as President of Concordia Theological Seminary Dr. Preus stated:

The struggle and the suffering to achieve it [i.e., Concordia, oneness in doctrine] is always worth it. For unity in the pure doctrine of the Gospel is not only a basis for all preaching and teaching and evangelism and love and work in the church, as our Lutheran Reformers never tired of stressing. It is also an end in itself, the highest worship and service of God, the noblest hallowing of His name. How is God's name hallowed, Luther asks in our Small Catechism. And the answer: "When the word of God is taught in its truth and purity, and we as the children of God also lead a holy life according to it." This seminary is dedicated unashamedly and unabashedly to the preaching and teaching of the pure doctrine of the Gospel and all its articles. And this seminary is dedicated to unity in this doctrine, complete unity and unanimity, unity in the faculty, unity in the student body, in our congregations and our synod. That is what is meant by our very name, Concordia. And to retain this unity shall remain a goal of this institution.²

In this same address, he described the mission of the seminary in these words:

We seek to inculcate not merely facts, but faith; to teach not merely ethical principles, but love; to impart not merely information, but dedication, commitment. Commitment to what? To our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, of course. And to His Gospel, the good news, the never changing, always relevant good news, of what He has done to

¹ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 238.

² Robert D. Preus, "Inauguration Address," *Springfielder* 38, no. 2 (1974): 92.

save us and all the world. And to the only source of this Gospel, the written Word of God, Scripture. And to our Lutheran Confessions as a true and correct summary and exposition of the biblical Gospel and all its articles.³

These words have lost nothing of their relevance in the forty years since they were spoken. This seminary has been committed to this task ever since because these words articulate what it means to be a confessional Lutheran seminary. And with the establishment of this chair this seminary shows that it continues this confessional commitment, for this commitment is not to some historical oddity, but to the gospel itself.

There is one aspect of Dr. Preus's work not yet mentioned: his interest in Lutheranism worldwide and in missiology. The Doctor in Missiology program, now the Ph.D. in missiology, was established during his presidency. His last major paper, "The Theology of the Cross," was delivered at the Second Confessional Congress, March 14–18, 1994, in Matongo, Kenya. He was proud of his Norwegian heritage, but that was far from any parochialism or any notion that Lutheranism is just for people of a certain culture or ethnicity. Since the gospel is for all people, we owe it to all people to bring the pure gospel and the rightly administered sacraments to all people. As Dr. Preus wrote in his article, "The Confessions and the Mission of the Church": "The passion for the Gospel is the passion for souls, and this is the essence of the spirit of mission. Therefore we have in our Lutheran Confessions with their burden for the teaching and proclamation of the Gospel the authentic Lutheran mission affirmations."⁴

I am honored and humbled by this appointment. I take it as a call to me and to all of us to honor Dr. Preus by following his example in our vocations: to be faithful to the Scriptures as the inspired and inerrant word of God, to joyously join in the confession of our fathers as we find it in the Book of Concord, to honor the fathers of the seventeenth century by reading and engaging them, to critically engage and confess the faith in the theological confusion of our time, to be a debtor of the gospel both among those with whom we live and to those abroad, and thus to heed the admonition of the apostle and honor the motto of Concordia Theological Seminary: ΚΗΡΥΞΟΝ ΤΟΝ ΛΟΓΟΝ—Preach the word (2 Tim 4:2).

Roland F. Ziegler

³ Robert D. Preus, "Inauguration Address," *Springfielder* 38, no. 2 (1974): 93–94.

⁴ Robert D. Preus, "Confessions and the Mission of the Church," *Springfielder* 39, no. 1 (1975): 33–34.

The Restoration of Creation in Christ: Essays in Honor of Dean O. Wenthe

During the Symposia gathering in January 2012, the seminary faculty announced its intention to honor their colleague Dean O. Wenthe with a festschrift to commemorate his fifteen-year tenure as president of Concordia Theological Seminary (1996–2011). This collection of essays, titled *The Restoration of Creation in Christ: Essays in Honor of Dean O. Wenthe* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2014), was fittingly described at that time by Dr. Arthur Just, one of the editors of the volume:

As a Biblical theologian, you have taught us about the sacramentality of God’s good creation, about Torah and temple and the land and even prophets like Jeremiah, how stuff matters as a means to deliver to us promises that are concrete and real and even infinite. How often we heard you proclaim that through the *viva vox Jesu* God restores his creation. How often we heard you proclaim how, in Christ, we have “real life” in a “real world” constituted by a “real presence.” Your critique of culture through real life in Christ focused our minds on the restoration of creation through Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension, and the ongoing restoration of that creation in the sacramental life of the church. So even our new curriculum, that does theology through the pastoral acts, accented the *viva vox Jesu* as that voice is embodied in word and water, in bread and wine.

Two years later, again at the seminary’s annual Symposia, the completed festschrift, published by Concordia Publishing House, was presented to Dr. Wenthe. Contributors to the collection include a wide array of colleagues representing the honoree’s wide-ranging spheres of influence in the church during his forty years of service. The table of contents follows.

Paul J. Grime

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The Eyewitness of the Other Son of Zebedee

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Christian Involvement in the Public Square

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The Psalter in Christian Worship

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Woman in the Image of God

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Scott R. Murray

Jesus: The Second and Greater Adam

Thomas J. Egger

Incarnation as the Perfection of Creation

Though March 25th, the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary, is set aside for commemorating the incarnation, for practical and historical reasons this is done on December 25th as the day on which the Word made flesh appeared. Standard for the church's definition of incarnation is John 1:14, "the Word was made flesh," but this doctrine can be drawn from the other Gospels. For Matthew, the unborn infant in Mary's womb is Emmanuel, God-with-us (1:23); for Luke he is the Son of the Most High and the Lord (1:32, 35, 43). Strikingly in Mark, the demons are able to see through the veneer of Jesus' humanity to recognize that Jesus the Nazarene is the Holy One of God (1:24). The word incarnation is derived from the Latin word "in flesh" and is most recognizably used in the Nicene Creed, *incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto ex Maria Virgine*. The one who is God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, of one substance with the Father "was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary," that is, he was made flesh, body and soul, flesh and bones. Earlier creeds did not make a distinction between the conception of Jesus, the actual moment of the incarnation, and his birth. Most of us probably don't either. Early Christians simply said "he was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary." Since this could be misunderstood—Mary and Holy Spirit being equal partners—later creeds attributed Jesus' conception to the Holy Spirit alone and his birth to Mary. Incarnation was also a matter of faith; Mary believed what the angel told her. "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). Since she was the first to put faith in her unborn son, God made flesh, she may rightfully be called the first Christian. In theological terms incarnation precedes justification in time and importance.

Following the biblical concept of time, modeled after the Genesis creation days, Christmas begins at sundown on December 24 and runs until sunset on December 25. Christmas Eve and Christmas Day constitute one holiday, two bookends on either side of one celebration. A Vespers, an Evensong, or a Divine Service can be held in the early evening of December 24th, ideally a festive Divine Service at midnight, with lights blazing, choirs singing, and trumpets blaring to proclaim the advent of God on earth. All this to be followed by an early morning Mass on Christmas Day, signifying the dawn has come in full splendor in Jesus Christ, the Brightness of the Father, the Dayspring from on High, the glorious Sun of Righteousness. It is unlikely that a pastor with the sole responsibility for his congregation can accomplish three sermons in the space of twelve hours and still another perhaps just a few days later. All

our attention at Christmas, however, must be on how the fullness of God, that is, everything that God is, dwells in the infant Jesus (Col 1:19). The philosophical question of how the infinite God can be embraced by a finite man and in the even more finite infant, a question that may never have been valid to begin with, has been answered in God becoming flesh in this child. Apart from Jesus all our thoughts about God border on speculation.

With the entrance of sin into the world, the harmony between the Creator and creature was replaced by what appeared to be an unbridgeable distance that is now erased by the incarnation. In the God-Man becoming sin for us, we become righteous in him (2 Cor 5:21). Further knowledge of God is given to us in the humiliation of that God-Man, what the creed describes as the *homo factus est*, "he was made man." Incarnation bridges the distance between heaven and earth; thus, the humiliation of the incarnate God makes him approachable. The one who is meek and lowly of heart invites the heavy burdened to come to him, and in coming to him we find God. "All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matt 11:27). In recognizing the great mystery of the incarnation that God is veiled in flesh, we peer into the greater trinitarian mystery of the Father giving of himself by eternally begetting the Son. The one who is begotten by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary was first "begotten of his Father before all worlds." By recognizing the man Jesus as God, we come to know the Father and then the Spirit. Out of love, the Father eternally begets the Son and extends that love to us by sending him into the world (John 3:16). God's begetting the Son is an eternal action taking place before and apart from time. His conception by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, the second action, takes place in time. In giving of himself both in eternity and time the Father provides a model of our giving ourselves for others. Now we are able to understand that the two great commandments of loving God and the neighbor are not laws in the sense of the prohibitions of the Ten Commandments but a description first of what God is as love and does in loving us, and then our loving him. God's love is never self-directed in the sense that he loves himself, but the love of each divine person is directed to the others. God loves those who are undeserving and helpless, and in loving us recognizes us as his neighbors. What he asks of us in loving others, he asks of himself. Thus the incarnation and humiliation provide the ethical and moral foundation of how we are to relate both to God and to one another.

In the child laid to rest in Mary's arms, God is finally and permanently found. Before the incarnation, God's dwelling with man was sporadic. At one time the tabernacle was the divine residence and at another time the temple, but these were temporary arrangements. Ichabod, one of Samuel's sons, says it all, "The glory has departed from Israel!" (1 Sam 4:21). From Jesus God's glory never departs because he *is* the splendor and the glory of the Father. Isaiah saw God's glory fill the temple, but Jesus is the greater temple that completely encapsulates God's glory; from the temple of his body that glory will never leave. In the nine months from Jesus' conception to his birth, the majesty of God in its fullness was found in Mary's womb. In greeting her cousin, Elizabeth recognized Mary as the mother of the Lord of hosts (Luke 1:42), the God before whose terrifying appearance flying seraphim covered their eyes. God's appearance evoked terror in Isaiah, who cried, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" (Isa 6:5). Now the tables are turned. The terrifying God of Isaiah 6 is found in the Virgin's child (Isa 7:14). He who lived in an unapproachable glory has come to us as Emmanuel, God with us. Not without reason we address this God who took on flesh in the Virgin, but now clothes himself in bread and wine, with the song of the seraphim, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of Sabaoth" (Isa 6:3). Should Mary be honored as the first Christian, then Elizabeth is the third Christian in recognizing Mary as the mother of God. Joseph qualifies as the second Christian.

Alongside our devotion to the Christ child, a parallel Christmas takes place from late October to the end of December. One can only take so many drummer boys and milking maids. Clement Moore's eight tiny reindeer have been replaced by a red-nosed one. In spite of sincere attempts to put Christ back into the Christmas out there, it will not happen because he was never there, at least not in the way he is in the church. It seems the media go out of their way each year to make fewer references to Christ's birth. It is politically correct to wish others a Happy Holiday instead of a Merry Christmas. A secularization of the holiday gives us Christians an opportunity to define who Jesus really is, an opportunity that we cannot afford to miss. We do not want what the world thinks about Christ to be confused with what we confess. Germans know of a fictional *Christkind* who is neither divine nor human, who brings presents at Christmas. Such a Jesus is something like a Martini, a bit of dry vermouth mixed with gin or vodka. Each one mixes Jesus to taste. Mixing divine and human elements to create a Jesus who is neither God nor man was at the heart of the ancient heresy of Eutychius. At the other end of the

spectrum was the equally destructive heresy of Nestorius, who held that the divine and human natures of Jesus lay side-by-side but never came together. For Nestorius, God and man were joined in Jesus at the hip. In Jesus lived two different persons, each with a separate center of consciousness. What was human in Jesus was not permeated by the divine, which in turn was not permeated by the human. Like cheese on a slice of bread, the divine and the human natures touched each other but one really never became part of the other. True to his own argument, Nestorius refused to call Mary *Theotokos*, the Mother of God. Mohammed took the heresy one step further in making God so separate and transcendent that a real incarnation could not take place and in fact did not. Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary but was not God's Son. Islam is a religion of revelation but not redemption. One's fate depends not on a redemptive act like the incarnation but on what Allah decides.

Typically at Christmas and Easter, articles appear in popular magazines debunking traditional views about the biblical Christmas and pretending to provide details about Jesus' life from documents claiming to come from the apostles. Depictions of Jesus in these articles are taken from the work of scholars who claim they can distinguish what is inauthentic in our Gospels. They impose their own ideologies on what they think Jesus should be. Some say we will never know what a kind of person Jesus really was or that perhaps he never really existed. All we have in our Gospels is what his followers said about him. This type of thinking can often be found in college religion courses. Such approaches are based on the presupposition that the supernatural is out of bounds to historical research, and the God-question with the incarnation is pushed to the side. The only thing they will grant is that the coming of God in the flesh is a matter of faith and not history. Another presupposition is that the past can never be fully recovered. Taken to a logical conclusion, we know nothing from the past for certain. Call it historical agnosticism. In these scholarly attempts to find Jesus, called quests for the historical Jesus, there are, however, a few bright spots. Bypassing historical questions of the person Jesus, some scholars look at the New Testament as a record of who first-century Christians thought he was. They have concluded his followers gave him the same worship that they gave God. In the eyes of many people, Jesus and God were on an equal plain.¹ All this is amazing since

¹ Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003); Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006).

idolatry of any kind was disallowed by the Jews in the first commandment. But worshipping Jesus was exactly what these Jewish-Christians were doing. They believed he was God. Now comes the question of whether the idea that Jesus was divine originated with his followers or whether it is more likely that Jesus convinced others he was God because of what he said of himself and did?.

We agree with the old Fundamentalists and present-day Evangelicals in insisting on belief in the Virgin birth. Such things as the incarnation, the humiliation, and the exaltation of Jesus are not open to examination, but had DNA testing been available, it could have shown that his matched his mother's. Jesus' birth of the Virgin has theological implications in that his origins are not only from earth but heaven. He was like us but not identical with us. He was made in our likeness, having the form of a human being, "ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος· καὶ σχήματι εὐρεθεὶς ὡς ἄνθρωπος" (Phil 2:7). Had he come from heaven in a body God created specially for him, he would not have been flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone. In making something entirely new, God would have rejected his own creation. In Jesus' conception by the Spirit and his birth from the Virgin, God was affirming his creation and allowing both heaven and earth to claim him. By taking our flesh upon himself, Jesus shares in our misery and death, and we share in his resurrection, ascension, and sitting at God's right hand (Eph 2:6). In his remarkable hymn, "See, the Lord Ascends in Triumph," Christopher Wordsworth speaks of

". . . rais[ing] our human nature
On the clouds to God's right hand;
There we sit in heavenly places,
There with [him] in glory stand.
Jesus reigns, adored by angels;
Man with God is on the throne."²

By incarnation, God places his deity within our humanity and, in turn, places our humanity on God's throne. Jesus' conception and birth belong to our history, and his incarnation propels our history to the final judgment.

If God does not exist (atheism) or if we can never know whether he does (agnosticism), then incarnation is not an issue.³ Hinduism, in finding

² *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 494:5. [henceforth *LSB*].

³ The question of whether there was an incarnation was set off by Bishop John T. Robinson in *Honest to God* in 1962 and was revived by the publication of *The Myth of God*

the divine at various levels in everything, looks like an excessive form of polytheism, though it really is a subtle form of atheism. If everything is God or part of God in some sense, then no one, not even Jesus, can be the only and unique Son of God. Unsurprisingly, Christians in India are persecuted because the doctrine of the incarnation insists on the uniqueness of Jesus. Notwithstanding the achievement of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir in singing Christmas carols, Mormonism is a form of polytheism or atheism. In a world where all can become gods, Jesus being God the Son is only qualitatively different from what others can achieve. Buddhism, which may be as much a philosophical way of living as it is a religion, does not allow for belief in a god according to the traditional definition. Buddha may be considered a god because he discovered the secret of life. Christians in the Reformation tradition see the uniqueness of Christianity in its doctrine of justification, but this honor might rightfully be shared with the incarnation, the doctrine that God became flesh in Jesus.

Just as the east is far from the west, so things of the flesh are opposed to those of the Spirit. We do not, however, want to become too Scrooge-like in detaching ourselves from all things worldly.⁴ In fleeing from the holiday season to pursue things spiritual, we might find ourselves denying the creation in which God became incarnate. God not only pronounced his creation good seven times but in the incarnation gave promise of its reconstitution to a creation superior to the first. Besides all that, in forming Adam from the dust of the ground, God showed that he likes getting his hands soiled, which is exactly what he did in the humiliation and crucifixion of his Son. While the commercial Christmas lasts two months from October into December, many churches are less serious and have cut back or even eliminated church services to accommodate holiday schedules. Sadly, or perhaps fortunately, more carols may be played in the malls than sung in some churches. Thanksgiving has already slipped out of our grasp, so that it goes by the common name "Turkey Day," a day on which we do everything but acknowledge that everything we are and have

Incarnate in 1977. It was followed a year later by *Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued*, edited by an avowed agnostic Michael Goulder, a collection of nearly thirty pro and con essays. Noteworthy was the vigorous debate it stirred up in the United Kingdom, something that would be unlikely today, thirty-four years later.

⁴ Well known is that Christmas was outlawed in Puritan New England in the seventeenth century. Nathaniel Philbrick, *Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community, and War* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2006), 128. Fortune was sent with supplies for the Cape Cod colony and brought "Strangers," those not committed to the Pilgrim way of life. They celebrated Christmas as they had done in England, by playing, leading Governor Bradford to confiscate the athletic equipment!

comes from God. In adjusting the sacred calendar to accommodate non-Christian definitions of Christian things, we are saying that who God is in Jesus is not all that important. To affirm the incarnation as the center of our faith, we should make our Christmas celebrations in the church as long and robust as possible. In spite of the abuse the world heaps on our liturgical calendar, Christmas gives us an opportunity to assess who Jesus is. What we do in the church at Christmas is not so much a party but a celebration with liturgy, ancient hymns, traditional carols, and preaching.

Traditional liturgical services have an advantage over unstructured worship as a continuation of the past. We are doing many things that can be traced back to post-apostolic and apostolic era churches. Each part of the liturgy is given a meaning. For example, the congregation standing for the Holy Gospel reading is a recognition of the gospel, because in it God is not speaking through the prophets but through his Son (Heb 1:1-2). Bowing the head and genuflecting is traditionally done during the creed, but there is a difference of opinion whether it should occur at the words "he was conceived by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary" or at "and was made man," the *homo factus est*. The answer to this question carries theological weight. Incarnation means that God took on human body and soul without the ravages of sins, but humiliation means he was made like us sinners. He was made in the likeness of men (Phil 2:10). Incarnation means that God became man and that by this action the humanity of Jesus was totally permeated by the deity. Incarnation allows for humiliation but is not synonymous with it. The typical metaphor for incarnation is a branding iron glowing with fire or sponge or piece of cloth totally soaked with water. As no part of the cloth is without water, so no part of Jesus' humanity is without deity. God's assuming a human form does not compromise his deity. John may be referring to the transfigured glory of the man Jesus in writing that he was among those who beheld the glory of the one made flesh (John 1:14). In the transfiguration, Jesus looked like God, which of course he was. A similar depiction of the incarnation in all its glory is found in the book of Revelation. "His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire (Rev 1:14), language strikingly similar to how the transfiguration is described. As extraordinary as the transfiguration appearance of Jesus was, equally extraordinary or even more so was the appearance of the God-Man Jesus Christ as a sinner. As Paul says, he took on "the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Phil 2:7), which is expressed in the creed's phrase *homo factus est*, "he was made man." All of us are humiliated, brought to our knees, at one time or another in our lives—it comes with the turf of being a sinner—but the humiliation of Jesus was profound, because

it was the humiliation of the God-Man that ended not in a normal death but one by crucifixion. The man Jesus divested himself of divine appearance and privileges that were his by right, and in their place he took on the form that possessed characteristics that made him indistinguishable from us. Rather than seeing Jesus' humiliation as a contradiction within God, it is how God is known.⁵

While incarnation takes place in Nazareth, at a particular moment in time when God became man (*incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancti ex Maria Virgine*), it is extended into our own time first by our baptism in which the Spirit, by whom the Son of God became incarnate by the Virgin Mary, makes us God's children and hence brothers and sisters of Jesus (Gal 6:4). Our baptismal day is our own Christmas, the day on which we put on the flesh of the one who was made flesh, and in this action he makes us one with him. In baptism the incarnate and crucified one comes with his Father and the Holy Spirit to live with us and within us, and thus we know God as Trinity. Since by incarnation Christ has become our brother, we may now address God as "Our Father who art in heaven." Martin Luther in his hymn rendition of the Nicene Creed, "We All Believe in Our True God," said that the one who possessed an equal Godhead, throne and might with the Father was "made flesh, our elder brother."⁶ Of course Jesus said as much. Those who do his Father's will are his brothers and sisters (Matt 12:50). After his resurrection, Jesus might have called his disciples on the carpet for denying and deserting him, but amazingly he called them his brothers (Matt 28:10).

Holy Communion also extends the incarnation into the congregation. At Trinity Lutheran Church of Flatbush in Brooklyn, where my father served as a lifelong pastor, a faithful member refused to attend the Christmas midnight communion service. For her such a sad ritual was out of place. She saw the Lord's Supper in terms of "on the night on which [Jesus] was betrayed," a ritual in preparation for death. Now, there is something to this. "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26), death as an atonement for sin, but it also brings the incarnation to reality for the congregation. Incarnation makes Jesus' atonement by death possible; thus, in the sacramental elements he comes to us as the man in whom God is

⁵ While Lutherans generally translated the Greek *μορφή* with "form," the Reformed use "essence," as does the NIV, which is widely used in Evangelical circles. The Reformed scholar Joseph H. Hellerman argues for the Lutheran position. "ΜΟΡΦΗ ΘΕΟΥ as a Signifier of Social Status in Philippians 2:9," *Journal of the Evangelical theological Society* 52, no. 4 (2009): 779-797.

⁶ LSB 954:2.

with us, Emmanuel, the incarnate God. Jesus' promise to drink of the Eucharistic cup in the kingdom of his Father (Matt 26:29) is fulfilled in the Holy Communion first after his resurrection with his disciples and then in every subsequent celebration. His closing words, "Lo, I am with you until the end of the age" (Matt 28:20) are more than his claim to omnipresence. It is the actualization of his name, Emmanuel, because in the Eucharist he is God-with-us, body and soul, flesh and blood, both as the host at the table and the very sustenance for our bodies and souls. Early Christians set aside each Sunday to commemorate Jesus' resurrection, but the Sunday celebration of the Holy Communion commemorates the incarnation, a weekly Christmas, if you will. For the first centuries Christians did not make pilgrimages to the Holy Land because the Lord's Supper was their Nazareth, their Bethlehem, their Jerusalem, where the Lord was conceived, born, died, and rose again. By the incarnation what Adam lost in his transgression was restored in Jesus, so that ordinary things are released from Eden's curse to become vehicles for the flesh and blood of the incarnate God to come to us. This Sacrament is a kind of secondary incarnation, though we should hardly speak in such terms. Incarnation is also a matter of the Holy Spirit, who perfected the primordial ancient chaos (Gen 1:2). He who proceeds from the Father and Son, and with whom together he is worshiped and glorified, focuses his action on one cell, one particular ovum of the Virgin Mary, and in this action "the Word was made flesh." Through the incarnation he becomes the Spirit of Jesus, and, in being sent into the world by the crucified and resurrected Word made flesh, the Spirit's person and work are defined alone by Jesus. He takes what belongs to Jesus and declares it to us (John 16:24) and accompanies the Sacraments that flow from Jesus' side as water and blood (John 19:30, 34). The Spirit, by whom the Son of God took on flesh, encases himself in Baptism and the Supper, and so the incarnation realizes itself for us in the sacraments. Luther placed the origin of Holy Communion one step backwards in the incarnation. In his eucharistic hymn "O Lord, We Praise Thee," he prays that the body "born of Mary" and blood of Jesus might plead for us in every "trial, fear and need."⁷

Incarnation not only has spiritual but material benefits. In the incarnation the Creator identifies with us and reclaims his creation for us who are Christ's brothers and sisters. Paul says, "All things are yours" (1 Cor 3:21). Thus, we Christians do not even pretend to engage in the hypocrisy of projecting a holiness or sanctification that is superior to that of others; neither do we exclude ourselves from a full enjoyment of the

⁷LSB 617:3.

material world. We are privileged with a blessed overindulgence. Luther admitted that now and then he may have had a few too many beers—and why not? Incarnation is our claim on the world. Those who do not come to terms with the incarnation in knowing God cannot look beneath the surface of the creation to see the Creator. Their engagement with world is superficial and their enjoyment of its pleasures last only a short time. For them, life is a succession of mental hangovers with delusions quickly following ecstasy. They see their past in a primordial cell from which they have evolved by chance; their future is described by the most miserable verses from Ecclesiastes so that they see no difference between their lives and those of animals (Eccl 3:21). For them the world is autonomous, self-contained. What they see is all they get, and so they work to get as much as they can and ignore the inevitable—that in the end it all will be taken away. Our view of life is determined by the incarnation, in which we see that God has transformed the world so that we see him as Creator. Hence, incarnation has cosmic dimensions:

[Jesus Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, . . . all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Col 1:15-17)

Though only at the resurrection will the world be fully ours, we assert our claim to what God has created and redeemed by enjoying it to the extent that our resources and deteriorating bodies allow. Perhaps Jesus probably was thinking of how we Christians would or at least should celebrate the incarnation when he said of himself, “The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds” (Matt 11:19; cf. Luke 7:34). Jesus’ abandonment in the face of his own death was his own confession that after being raised from the dead, a world of excessive pleasure and joy lay before him. Not without reason Jesus used a wedding feast as a description of the life to which we look forward (Matt 22:1). The weeks leading up to our annual observance of the Nativity are a time of partying, eating and drinking, a general carousing, often without purpose, straining even the most physically fit bodies and occasionally resulting even in vehicular deaths. We Christians don’t party, we celebrate as a statement of faith that by the incarnation God vanquished Satan’s hold on this world and has taken to himself the world that rejected him. In the Bible the word “flesh” belongs to the unholy triad of “the world, the devil, and our flesh” that oppose God (Jas 3:15). Flesh will not inherit God’s kingdom (1 Cor 15:50) and flesh cannot recognize who Jesus

really is (Matt 16:17), but in the incarnation Jesus takes on our flesh, retrieves the world from Satan, and returns it to us in the Sacraments. Easter is also a holiday of the incarnation. By raising Jesus from the dead, God recognized that the God-Man made atonement for sin and laid the foundation for perfecting his creation begun in the incarnation. Easter is the middle point between incarnation and the perfection of creation.

So incarnation should also be understood as a celebration of creation in terms of Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth," and the Lord's Prayer, "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10). In the beginning, God was at home on the earth as he was in heaven. Heaven is God's throne and the earth his footstool (Is 66:1). Genesis 3 changed all that. For the sake of Adam, the ground was cursed and the "and" in between "the heaven and the earth" was removed. In Christ, God put the "and" back between heaven and earth, but this could only be done by reclaiming the world from Satan who had set himself as its god (2 Cor 4:4). The Lord's Prayer provides the blueprint of how this would be accomplished by the incarnation. God's name, his kingdom, and his will were firmly established in heaven but met resistance everywhere on earth. In the Lord's Prayer we pray that what is ordinary in heaven could be commonplace on earth. Through the incarnation, the foundation for cosmic restoration was laid and completed by the resurrected Jesus, who proclaimed that "all authority [was] given to [him] in heaven and on earth" (Matt 28:18). God's work of renovation begun in Christ continues in his church. God has heard our prayer "on earth as it is heaven" and has answered it. Heaven and earth are reconciled. They are brought together. In the Old Testament, God was already answering the Lord's Prayer in bringing the world to himself by choosing Israel, but his successes were sporadic. Each success was followed by failure as Israel was gradually reduced from a nation to a remnant of one man and that one man was Jesus Christ who was God's new Israel (Matt 2:15). Luther's great hymn "A Mighty Fortress" put flesh on these words of the Lord's Prayer, "on earth as it is heaven." Satan appears invincible and devils fill the earth, but on to the earth steps an ordinary looking man who, upon closer examination, happens to be the Lord of hosts.⁸ Then Luther adds this kicker: apart from this man, Jesus Christ, there is no other God. Luther was probably not thinking of Matthew in describing Jesus as the Lord of hosts, but the idea is found in the opening narrative of Matthew's Gospel that the infant Jesus is Emmanuel. Jesus, the God-with-us, who rescued Israel from its enemies, saves his people from their sins (Matt 1:21). There was never a question

⁸ LSB 657:2

that the Son of Man had authority in heaven (Mark 2:10), but by his death he established it on earth. Now God is as much at home on earth in his church as he is in the heavens. Isaac Watts caught this in "Joy to the World."⁹ Heaven and nature sing together because the curse that brought thorns has been lifted. Fields, floods, rocks, hills, and plains join the heavens in one united chorus. Incarnation is simply another way of saying that heaven and earth have come together in Jesus with the promise of a complete restitution on the Last Day. A world captured by Satan is returned to us by Jesus, and so Christmastide has become for us a season of a celebration. God has vanquished Satan hook, line, and sinker. Fishing terms might seem inappropriate to describe God becoming flesh, but that is how the ancients saw it. Hidden in the humanity of Jesus was God entrapping Satan like a worm covering a hook that lodges in the fish's mouth to catch it. Ancient theologians may have stretched the worm, hook, fish analogy a bit far because God defeats Satan not with trickery but by his righteousness. In fact, the analogy could be totally false in that the devils saw Jesus as the incarnate God long before anyone else did (Matt 8:29). However, the ancients correctly saw the incarnation as God appearing as an ordinary man to destroy Leviathan, the ancient Serpent, who from the beginning deceived the world.

Christians who do not see beyond Christmas to Lent and Good Friday will never know what God purposed in the incarnation, but on the other hand, without a full and robust understanding of the incarnation, the meaning of Good Friday is not grasped. Without the incarnation, the death of Jesus appears as a tragic miscarriage of justice or as the death of an innocent but feckless man who did not exercise his legal options to avoid execution by crucifixion. Humanly speaking, escape was possible. Without the incarnation, Jesus' death would have no value for others, and if it did, its value could not be understood as a full atonement for sin. Its value would rest in the magnanimity of God, who was willing to accept a partial payment in place of the full price. It would be as if God took pennies on the dollar for the debt we owed him. But that is not the way it was. God had no other choice but to accept the death of Jesus as a full and complete atonement for sin because by the incarnation the death of Jesus was the death of God and, thus, had an infinite value. To put it crassly, the incarnation put God in a box. He had to accept Jesus's death as a full atonement and forgive all. Had God not accepted Jesus' death as an atonement for all sin, he would have denied his own righteousness, for God had to release the world from its curse and us from the sentence of death. It was not a

⁹ *LSB* 387

matter of his free will. For pedagogical purposes God's works of creation, redemption, and sanctification are attributed separately to each of the three divine persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but this does not do justice to understanding the incarnation as a trinitarian event initiated by the Father and effected by Spirit. Finding God in Jesus' humanity precedes our knowing him as Trinity. Our creeds present God as he is in himself, Father-Son-Holy Spirit, but the Gospels begin with Jesus as God or the Son of God before presenting the Father as God. In Matthew, the Father is implicit in calling Jesus out of Egypt (2:15) and at his baptism (3:17), but he is only made explicit in the Sermon on the Mount (5:16). Luke identifies the sources for his Gospel as the eyewitnesses of the word, that is, Jesus (1:2). In John, the Word is introduced before God (1:1). Incarnation is the threshold to knowing God as Father. God does not come to the world apart from Jesus. There are no end-runs around Jesus. In her womb Mary carries the eternal, infinite God. The manger becomes God's throne. Again, we reference Luther in his translation of the ancient Latin sequence:

"All praise to Thee, Eternal God,
Who, clothed in garb of flesh and blood,
Dost take a manger for Thy throne,
While worlds on worlds are Thine alone.
Hallelujah!"¹⁰

It has been asked, "If Adam had not sinned, would God would have become incarnate?" Speculative questions do not in each case deserve definite answers, but John Duns Scotus may have been on the right side of the argument in holding that the incarnation had to happen. The presence of the tree of life showed that God intended something better for Adam. Eden was the testing place to see if Adam would recognize himself as the creature and God as the Creator. Of course he did not, but if he had, Genesis 3 would not have been the account of expulsion and death but Adam's elevation to a higher life in which he would have lived in an even closer communion with God. To paraphrase the creed, God "for us men would have come down from heaven and become incarnate." In spite of our sin, God through the incarnation almost puts us on par with himself. How much more would this have happened, had Adam not sinned. God's image in us could have been tweaked. We will leave the question at that point. A less speculative question is whether God had a choice in coming to save us. Could he have left us wallow in our sin? Was our redemption optional? Here we can say with a bit more certainty that our damnation was not an option for God. Had he not come to our aid, he would have relinquished his material creation to

¹⁰ *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), 80:1.

Satan and acknowledged Satan's claim as the god of this world. Genesis 3:15 is not so much a promise to our first parents of our salvation as it is a threat of judgment that the serpent will be destroyed—not by a show of divine omnipotence, but God beating Satan at his own game by using a man! For us this was a win-win situation. The God who was the creator of heaven and earth and allowed no other gods besides himself could not tolerate the serpent masquerading as god, claiming the earth as his own. Thus, the certainty of our salvation rests not in God choosing one option among others but in his being the God who tolerates no other gods. So incarnation is not first a matter of the second article of the creed, but the first article, because by it God succeeds in reasserting his control over his creation. God is not a monolithic monad, an infinite expanse of majesty and terror, but the tri-personal God with each of the three divine persons continually communicating with the other two. By the incarnation, that God brings us into the divine conversation with himself. In our hearing, the words of Jesus are the word of God. By our prayers, liturgies, and hymns we engage in the divine conversation. As in Eden, God is again socially comfortable with us, and by faith we are home with him. We are no longer aliens but members of the household of God (Eph 2:19).

What is intended in the incarnation may be summed up in the coming of the magi, at which time Jesus was perhaps six months old—a time when babies are forever hungry, waking up in the middle of the night, suffering in acquiring teeth, forever needing a diaper change. When the wise men came into the house of Mary and Joseph, they did not worship the God in heaven. They worshiped the *παιδίον*, the child that was indistinguishable from any other six-month old, a baby that was made in the likeness of other babies. Understand this and you know what the incarnation is. Now is the time to put your faith in the incarnation to the test. Lutherans are comfortable referencing the altar and the cross. Perhaps the next step is placing a creche in the church surrounded by Mary, Joseph, shepherds, magi, and animals. Then on Christmas, we place an image of the Christ-Child in the manger and kneel before it. This would carry the message that as God for us men and for our salvation, Jesus came down from heaven and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary. What a blessed idolatry that would be—God in the flesh.¹¹

David P. Scaer

¹¹ See David P. Scaer, *Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics*, vol. 6: *Christology* (Fort Wayne: The International Foundation for Lutheran Confessional Research, 1989). Especially note chapter three, "The Preexistence and Incarnation of the Son of God," and chapter four, "The Virgin Birth of Christ."