

Theological Observer

A Warning and a Strategy about the Dangers of Digital Media

Though Neil Postman warned us, there was a time not long ago when most of us were largely ignorant of what damage is done to our cognitive ability by almost any amount of time looking at electronic screens. We thought that all technology was neutral and what mattered was the message, not the carrier or medium. In hindsight, this was remarkably naive if not irresponsible. We have always known, at some level, that the medium itself has meaning.

Now, though, the evidence is so overwhelming that we cannot ignore it. Screens, along with a lack of reading physical books, are damaging our ministers, our members, and our society. We have all experienced this decline ourselves. We cannot focus and concentrate the way we used to. Our confirmands, despite Ritalin and the astronomical financial cost of public education, are often wigglier and less educated than ever before. Our congregations and our families are more fragile, more divided and opinionated, more prone to temper tantrums, and more stressed out than ever before. The sermons we preach and hear are often scandalously short compared to our forefathers. They sometimes lack much in the way of doctrine. At times their strict “gospel emphasis” leaves them having far more in common with Billy Graham’s revival preaching than Luther’s or Walther’s sermons.

But we do not need simply to rely upon our own experience and fading memories of what life was like before high-speed internet, smartphones, and social media. There is significant neurological research that demonstrates this is not just hand-wringing from old people. Our brains have changed with our habits. This is a reality that cannot be denied and should not be embraced. It is not simply a matter of taste. We are less than we used to be, and the cause is indisputable: screens are ruining us.

Even though it is now over ten years old, the best summary that I have found of the scientific evidence available in a single book that is accessible to those who are not neurological researchers is Nicholas Carr’s *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011). All pastors should read this. The bleak picture he paints has only gotten worse since 2011. For those looking for a theological perspective that is built upon much of the same research, or for those who teach at a seminary or are charged with ecclesiastical supervision, I suggest T. David Gordon’s *Why Johnny Can’t Preach: The Media Have Shaped the Messengers* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Pub, 2009). Again, Gordon’s argument only rings truer based upon the increasing expansion of “smart devices” into all of our lives.

Of course, it is not hopeless. God's Word does not change, but it can and does change us. Some have argued that God himself is in favor of technological advances. He used, for example, the Roman road system and papyrus to spread the gospel. That is true in a sense, but I think it works in reverse of the argument being made. My thinking is that God was deliberate in the timing of the incarnation and the subsequent Pentecost miracle and early spread of the gospel. He could have become a man earlier, before the Roman roads, but he waited. He could also have waited until the internet was available and spared Paul all that hard and dangerous travel, but he didn't. He chose when he came based upon the best technology for the gospel. The best technology for the gospel was written letters followed up by personal visits and preaching.

This is not to say that we should not use technology in service of the gospel. I do not think it was Luther who made use of the printing press to spread the Reformation. I think it was God. But the printing press, as technology, was not a change from letter writing and personal visits. It simply was a method for spreading the letters. It was still the written word that went forth, not images with embedded and distracting hyperlinks, not backlit letters on entertainment devices connected to the internet with the constant temptation of amusement and distraction. When we use technology in service to the gospel, we should know what the technology itself conveys, what its associations and abuses are, and how it might hinder the message or the ministry despite the intents of the user. We should not be so naive or irresponsible as to think that the technology itself is simply good or that it is neutral.

So what do I think pastors should do with regards to digital media in their own lives and in their ministries?

First, the pastor should become aware of not only potential dangers but also the harm that he himself and his people have suffered from digital media. Screens are making us distracted. Reading Scripture or listening to a sermon is more difficult than it used to be. Screens promise community and connection, but they actually make us feel more disconnected and lonely than ever before. They draw us into ourselves and away from others. The need for the dopamine rush from attention on social media or the hope for an interesting or flattering email keeps us constantly in the screen's glow and prevents us from listening to one another, looking one another in the eye, and simply being present. This is exaggerated by a particular nuance of big tech's algorithms. In order to keep us clicking, they create echo chambers and radicalize us. They have also ruined our ability to be bored and do uncomfortable things. Our wired brains are screaming for constant amusement. All of this increases

stress while decreasing healthy physical activity and quality sleep; it hurts body, mind, and soul.

Second, I am convinced that pastors should teach and warn their people about these dangers. Screens are a real and present spiritual danger. They are not neutral. They can have a purpose, and people will resist limiting their use. While I think it is unrealistic to suggest that they not be used at all, they should be treated with the same sort of respect that we treat guns, alcohol, and sex. Screens easily enslave those who use them. Therefore they should not be used without disciplined limits and safeguards. The danger is not simply pornography. The screen itself is a danger even when it delivers wholesome or edifying content.

Third, the pastor himself should engage in and model a purposeful and limited use of media for his members. Even as he should not be a drunkard, he should not be addicted to his phone. To this end, I suggest the book *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World* by Cal Newport (London: Penguin Business, 2020).

Fourth, along with this purposeful, limited use of media, the pastor needs to relearn and develop analog skills. I think pastors need to set aside blocks of time, probably at least twenty-five minutes at a stretch, for concentrated, single tasks, including reading. He not only needs to visit and minister to actual people in the physical world, but he also needs to get away from his computer while in his study. I suggest that pastors spend at least some time each day reading the Bible from an actual, physical Bible. Take notes on a piece of paper with a pen or pencil while you read, and do at least some of your sermon preparation this way. So also pastors should read other books in the real world and not always from a glowing screen. They should set strict weekly time limits for watching television, Netflix, and other media, as well as be careful about what they watch. The hours saved not looking at screens can be put to other, healthier recreational activities such as exercise or puzzles or doing chores.

Finally, pastors need to consider how their congregations use media in their ministries. I do not think congregations should abstain from using the media completely, but we should be more discerning in how much is used. The evidence in Carr's book above demonstrates the somewhat surprising fact that screens and multimedia presentations are not as effective at imparting knowledge, love of the topic, or retention in the students as lectures. Learning is work, and it is often boring. Students typically prefer to be entertained rather than make a concentrated effort. Convincing teachers of this will likely require a great deal of patience and kindness. We also need gently to destroy the myth of "learning styles." This has been

completely debunked by research,¹ but it is still taught in some education departments and at various seminars. Many teachers and students insist upon it based upon their own experience, which is heavily biased toward not liking to be bored, even though all the evidence demonstrates it is a fantasy.

Even if the teachers or board of education cannot be convinced about the challenges that screens present, the pastor himself does not need to let screens dominate his own Bible class, confirmation instruction, or other teaching duties. Though they may not like it and it may be less convenient, the pastor can at least attempt to have the people have real Bibles in front of them and look up passages. This will be of benefit to them.

If screens present challenges in the classroom, then we need to be sensitive to the challenges they present in worship. The argument is that they are often less boring than simply looking at words on a page or listening to someone talk. Decreasing or discontinuing their use will take great patience and compassion. If they must be used, I suggest the pastor do his best to make the slides as boring as possible. Keep them as black-and-white text without graphics or animation.

In a similar fashion, sermons that teach take time. They are not as immediately interesting as anecdotes, personal stories, or even an emotional existential crisis. Much in the way that people often prefer light hymns over sturdy hymns, the fallen flesh would rather be entertained or taken to an emotional mountaintop than be challenged or bored in a sermon. Changing the culture of our instruction and our worship will require a lot of patience, but if we are to be in the world but not of the world, we have to try.

For all that, I think that electronic media should be used by congregations for two purposes. First, it should be used to advertise. Congregations need a Facebook page and a webpage. Those pages should include not only times for services, contact information, and confessional identity, but also some photographs and perhaps videos and other resources or links that show potential visitors what the congregation is like and what they can expect. We want people to be able to find us. Keep the purpose of this to advertise and not to replace worship, evangelism, or visitation. The goal is to lead people to the congregation for real, physical ministry.

The second way that electronic media can be used is to supplement shut-ins or members home sick with devotional material and as a way of aiding and easing contacting the church or pastor. Every congregation and pastor wants to minister to

¹ See, e.g., William Furey, "The Stubborn Myth of 'Learning Styles,'" *Education Next*, <https://www.educationnext.org/stubborn-myth-learning-styles-state-teacher-license-prep-materials-debunked-theory/>.

their members. YouTube videos and Facebook chats are not a replacement for face-to-face ministry, but they can lead to and supplement ministry.

Taking up a disciplined approach to media is not easy. There are things that we love about media which will be lost, but what is to be gained is far greater: not only increased cognitive ability and focus, but also peace. The world is cluttered. Our minds need not be. Jesus came to bring us rest.

David H. Petersen

Pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, IN

Reach the Lost, Who?²

“Oh give thanks to the LORD; call upon his name;
make known his deeds among the peoples!”³

With these words of Psalm 105:1, we have been celebrating our 175th anniversary. Indeed, what a remarkable milestone! Together, “we give thanks to the LORD” for *his use of all of us* to “make known his deeds among the peoples!”

Perhaps some of you wonder why the preacher for this vital occasion is not President Rast or Dean Gieschen or even a synodical official. I wonder why too! It is my joy and privilege. But there is a tremendous risk in inviting such a lowly professor to preach. Dr. Grime has to live with his decision!

As foolishly as I accepted the invitation, I wanted to broaden my scope by looking into anniversary sermons of the past. I could not spend too much time in this inquiry. But I did find interesting articles and addresses in relation to certain anniversaries, such as the 125th anniversary of the synod, our sister seminary’s 150th anniversary, the 125th anniversary of CTS while still in Springfield, the inauguration addresses of a couple of our seminary’s former presidents, Wikipedia articles, and the 150th anniversary of CTSFW. These were all interesting reads, but what caught my attention most were remarks of four men whom you and I know quite well and hold in high esteem: President Robert Preus, President Dean Wenthe, Dean Charles Gieschen, and President Lawrence Rast.

Dr. Preus expounded on the meaning of the three words *Concordia*, *Theological*, and *Seminary* in his inaugural address back in 1974. In contrast to many

² Sermon based on Luke 19:1–10. For the 175th Anniversary Celebration. Vespers, Kramer Chapel, CTSFW Pentecost 22, October 24, 2021. The service and sermon can be viewed at <https://boxcast.tv/view/175th-anniversary-vespers-service-990253>.

³ All Scripture quotations are from the ESV[®] Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version[®]), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Emphasis is added by the author.

seminaries in the world that teach *everything but theology*, he said that CTSFW is dedicated to *implant the seed of the gospel in all its articles* in the minds, hearts, and lives of our students. Dr. Wenthe added to this, in his 150th celebration remarks of 1996, four distinctively Wenthean phrases: *Integrity of Spirit, Clarity of Mind, Charity of Heart, and Centrality of Mission*. He stressed the importance of engaging in the contemporary culture. He emphasized the vitality of the chapel as our magnificent anniversary hymn, “Open Wide the Chapel Doors,” captures perfectly. He said, “Whether our culture and world perceive it or not, the church and its seminaries are more crucial for the future than Wall Street or Washington.” Dr. Gieschen, in his collegial recognition speech at the banquet following the installation of President Rast in 2011, compared the transition of presidency from Dr. Wenthe to Dr. Rast to Moses handing over his staff to younger Joshua, viewing the event as part of divine history, a history that unfolds with each service in Kramer Chapel, every class that lifts up Jesus, and every faithful student who is sent from here to testify to Jesus in this world. As a church historian, President Rast commented that the seminary would face new challenges, although I am pretty sure that he did not know about the pandemic yet back in 2011. More recently in 2019, he wrote in *CTQ* that our Lutheran identity has been challenged by the democratization of American churches, but we are “bound up with” our “confession of the biblical witness—the *fides quae*, the faith once delivered to the saints” that “is found in the Augsburg Confession (1530) . . . and in the Lutheran symbols that make up the Book of Concord 1580, *because* the Lutheran Confessions are a faithful exposition of the doctrine of the Scriptures.”⁴ CTSFW “remains committed to the vision of its founders to provide faithful servants who teach the faithful, reach the lost, and care for all.”⁵

To me, these voices of our beloved seminary leaders past and present are an echo of the Preface to the Christian Book of Concord: “We have desired to direct and earnestly to exhort our churches and schools first of all to the Holy Scripture and the Creeds and then to the aforementioned Augsburg Confession, in order that *especially the youth who are being trained for service in the church and for the holy ministry* may be instructed faithfully and diligently, so that among our descendants the pure teaching and confession of the faith may be kept and spread” (Preface 21).⁶

⁴ Lawrence R. Rast Jr., “Pastoral Formation in the 21st Century,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 83, nos. 1–2 (January/April 2019): 139.

⁵ Lawrence R. Rast Jr., “Seminary Future,” *For the Life of the World* 17, no. 3 (September 2013): 11.

⁶ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles Arand, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 14, emphasis added.

The Lord has blessed our seminary in the past 175 years. It is humbling for us to recognize that he has been using us to teach the faithful, reach the lost, and care for all.

To continue our joyful service at and through our beloved seminary to do just that, our Gospel appointed for this day brings us to another aspect of our celebration. In the form of a question, let me put it this way. Does our mission statement talk about *what we do* as a seminary? Or does it also talk about *what we receive* from the Lord as a seminary? Are we *to teach, reach, and care for alone*? Or are we *also* the ones *who are taught, who are reached, and who are cared for by Jesus*?

We know the Zacchaeus story.

He was a *tax collector*. He was not an “ordinary” tax collector as in the previous chapter in a parable who, with a Pharisee, went up into the temple to pray (18:9–14). Zacchaeus was a *chief* tax collector, which meant that he was *very* rich, perhaps richer than the rich young ruler who was told by Jesus to sell all his properties before following him (18:18–23).

This Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, just like some Greeks in John 12.

He did what a man of his stature never did. He ran before the people, just as the father of the prodigal son (Luke 15). He even climbed up on a tree like a little boy.

Luke then mentioned an action version of a confession, saying the same thing as what the Lord has spoken. He *did* exactly what Jesus had told him to *do*. Jesus said, “Hurry, and come down.” Zacchaeus “hurried and came down” (19:5–6).

Then, Jesus said to him, “I must stay at your house *today*” (19:5). *Today* is one of the key words the evangelist Luke uses at some key points: “For unto you is born [*today*] in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (2:11). “Truly, I say to you, *today* you will be with me in paradise” (23:43).

Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus to his home *rejoicing* or *joyfully*. This is the word of faith. This is the word of the gospel. Just like when a shepherd found a lost sheep (15:5) or when a father found a lost son (15:32) or when a sinner repents (15:7, 10).

Zacchaeus’s repentance and faith manifested themselves in his plan of returning his properties as he followed the stipulation written in Exodus 21.

Then, Jesus said, “*Today* salvation has come to this house” (19:9). This is the second time the word *today* is used. For Luke, salvation is always a result of forgiveness of sins, just as we sing in the Matins, the “Song of Zechariah” from Luke 1.

Jesus has the last words: “For the Son of Man came *to seek and to save the lost*” (19:10). This was the fulfillment of Ezekiel 34:15–16, “I myself will be the shepherd

of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the LORD GOD. *I will seek the lost*, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.”

Jesus reached Zacchaeus, the lost, and forgave him. We love this story, because we used to be the lost, until Jesus found us and saved us with the water of Holy Baptism. We love this story because it encourages us to reach the lost. But another reason for our love of this story is that we still find ourselves among the lost in our daily Christian lives.

“Wait a minute,” some of you may challenge me. “I am part of the faithful. Who are you to tell me that I am still lost? I am a seminarian. I am a deaconess student. I am a professor. I am a Christian in good standing. Do not include me in the category of the lost!” I agree! But when you begin to say: “I do not need to *be taught*. I do not need to *be reached*. I do not need to *be cared for*,” you begin to see my point! Think about the apostle Paul. He was a former persecutor of the church. When we trace his words, we discover that his knowledge of his sinfulness grew deeper as he grew older. In 1 Corinthians 15:9, he was claiming himself as “the least of the apostles.” When we move to Ephesians 3:8, we hear him say, “I am the very least of all the saints.” But toward the end of his life, he confessed, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost” (1 Tim 1:15). Did Paul’s faith get weaker and weaker as he got older? No. Because he grew as a Christian, he became more aware of the fact of his sinfulness.

“Reach the lost” of our mission statement reflects the Lord’s words, “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (19:10). Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, Jesus knows you. Jesus knows your need, your fear, your concerns, your weaknesses, your sins. It is good to be reached out to by Jesus still *today*, which he actually does here and now! God came into the mess that sinners have created and was born as one of us. He took our sin and answered for it. He took our death and overcame it. All this he did *for you*, so that he might declare to you, “*Today* salvation has come to this house.” Jesus still comes to the messy sinners, and messy sinners alone. He does not call the righteous. There is *great joy* in heaven over one sinner who repents. And *you* are the reason for that *great joy*!

What a joy it must have been for Zacchaeus to welcome Jesus at his home. What a joy it is for us to welcome Jesus *today*, for messy sinners like us! It must have been for my father, too, when he was converted back in the 1940s, when Jesus through a devout Christian lady, a teller of a local bank in Japan, sought after a high school boy by *painstakingly* asking him more than thirty times to come to her tiny and poor congregation until he finally agreed to come. On that first visit, Jesus saved him. The

joy was *with Jesus and all his angels* more than with my father and more than with the members of that congregation.

Jesus is the one who rejoices more than us in this 175th anniversary celebration. And his joy will continue not only for another 175 years but forever, *because* the Lord Jesus is alive and will never die. We are his. Every day, Jesus continues to give us his gifts. “*Today*, I am here for you,” says he. So, we pray, “We are yours, oh Lord. Build us solid to you, and use us.” Happy anniversary! Amen.

Naomichi Masaki

Thanksgiving Day Church Services: Are They Really Necessary?

A not uncommon way of beginning a Thanksgiving Day sermon in conservative Lutheran churches is telling the assembled saints that the holiday is not liturgically required like Christmas or Easter is. This service is seen as nonessential. This may cause those present to ask why they are in church. They now have good reason not to come the following year. The holiday was initiated by Abraham Lincoln during the dark days of the Civil War, so the day has this religious significance: that God is worthy of thanks even in bad times. Whether Lincoln was a Christian, and in what sense, is a matter of continuing historical debate. Driving through the neighborhood on the morning of Thanksgiving Day, you are unlikely to see worshipers dressed in their Sunday best heading to church. Catholics do not celebrate the holiday and neither do the Eastern Orthodox. Other denominations often use the day for interdenominational worship, led by the members of the local clergy association. LCMS congregations commonly commemorate Thanksgiving, many with a service on Wednesday evening.

For the sake of religious freedom, the Pilgrims fled England first for Holland and then for America with a brief stopover back in England. They landed on Cape Cod in 1620, and the following year the survivors of a horribly cold winter held a feast with the Native Americans in thanksgiving to God. So here are the roots of our national holiday. In the Old Testament, certain days were set apart for thanking God, so there is a biblical precedent for the commemoration apart from a president’s or governor’s proclamation. Ironically, *eucharist*, a word sometimes used for the service of Holy Communion, means “thanksgiving” and specifically thanksgiving to God. If a Lutheran pastor ends a reading with the words “This is the Word of the Lord,” without coaxing the congregation would most likely respond, “Thanks be to God.” If he says, “Bless we the Lord,” again the response is, “Thanks be to God.” This

is part of our religious fiber. Thanking God comes close to being synonymous with believing in him.

Quite apart from whether a president or governor proclaims that as citizens we should thank God, our society has already scraped off any remnants of religious meaning from the day. Even going around the table and having each one say for what he or she is thankful for hardly makes it a Christian custom, since the focus of thanking should be on the God who gives and not on what he gives. The Giver takes precedence over the gift—or at least he should. Any thought of thanking God for his bounty has been rendered nearly impossible by calling it “Turkey Day.” If watching Macy’s two-hour Thanksgiving parade is not a good enough reason for staying home and skipping church, there are the afternoon football games. With Santa Claus coming in at the end of the parade, it provides a transition into the season named for Christ, a season in which, however, his name is hardly mentioned in public celebrations.

In the pericope of the cleansing of the ten lepers, which is the Gospel assigned for Thanksgiving Day, Jesus says that in thanking him the once-leprous Samaritan is thanking God. “Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” (Luke 17:18).⁷ So Thanksgiving Day is more than a First Article matter, in that we speak of God not in generic terms but address him as the Father of our Lord Jesus, who is present with his Spirit. Christians should be a little uncomfortable speaking of God only in terms of the First Article, as if that would be possible at all. John is quite specific about this: “All things were made through him [Jesus]” (John 1:3). Jesus is the Pantocrator, the Almighty, a title used of Jesus in the Book of Revelation (Rev 1:8). Should we have to settle on a corrective theme for Thanksgiving Day, it could be this one.

Nothing would be amiss if in our sermons, we commemorated those Englishmen who were not going to let King James I tell them how to conduct their church services. In Europe, kings called the shots not only in secular but also churchly matters. So it was ever since the Roman emperor Constantine legalized Christianity, which led to its establishment as the official religion of the empire. With the dissolution of the empire, kings and other princes assumed that authority, which led often to conflict between princes on one side and the pope and bishops on the other. It was also a factor in the sixteenth-century Reformation.

In England, the king’s domination of the church led to a group of outsiders, known to us as the Pilgrims, who left England first for the Netherlands. There a

⁷ All Scripture quotations are from the ESV[®] Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version[®]), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

shared faith with the Reformed did not compensate for differences in language, so they sailed across the Atlantic not to Virginia, as they had planned, but to the uninviting New England coast, not far from what was soon settled by Puritans as Boston. Within a year, half of the Pilgrims had died. Looking at replicas of the rickety *Mayflower*, one wonders how many times it may have crossed the minds of these English refugees that the religion of the king may not have been all that bad. Today with governments and courts in America making regulations about where and how Christians may worship, with persecutions of Christians who choose not to support same-sex marriage publicly, with cancel culture and wokeism, the Pilgrims in their day—even with their adherence to the Reformed confession of Protestantism—stand out as exemplars of faith.

If Lutheran congregations cancel Thanksgiving Day services so as not to associate themselves with the Pilgrims, they overlook their own story of how the Missouri Synod came into being when Lutherans in Saxony and Prussia fled their countries to avoid a religious persecution that would require them to adopt Reformed liturgies and practices. In 1830, Lutherans in Prussia were forced to use a liturgy that, in accommodation to the minority Reformed population, required them to compromise their faith in the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Holy Supper. This persecution occurred slightly more than two centuries after the Pilgrims successfully fled their persecution. Refugees from the Saxon State Church came in five ships, of which only four made it to the port of New Orleans—one was lost at sea. These Lutherans even prepared a document like the Mayflower Compact, which provided rules for their community in their adopted country. Things did not go well in their new home in Missouri, and some wanted to go back to Germany, just as some Pilgrims wanted to return to England and later did so. The fleshpots of Egypt have their attraction. Most stayed and found other Lutherans in America who believed as they did. These are the people who established The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

Compare the Missouri Synod's story to the Pilgrims'. Change the language from English to German, add a few more ships, push the calendar forward two centuries, and one story begins to resemble the other. The characters in the story have different names, spoke different languages, lived at different times, and came from different places, but the plots of their stories are startlingly similar—it was about fleeing religious persecution. Persecution belongs to the Christian experience. Read Acts. Why then would Lutherans in America *not* celebrate Thanksgiving Day services?

David P. Scaer

“Hark! The Herald Angels Sing”: What Happened to Stanza 4?

With the passing of time, how things once were is soon forgotten—but sometimes not. “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” is one of those pieces of music that is sung in church as a hymn and as a carol outside of the church, even though with the passing of each year carols are heard less in secular venues. For some, it was annoying to hear Christmas music on the radio and in all sorts of public places weeks before the holiday. Now we hear it less often. Christmas music, much of it religious, was standard in the local fitness club. Then one year it was all secular Christmas music: Santa Claus and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. My petitions to return to the old ways of playing religious Christmas music did not carry any weight, and besides all that, the club closed down during the COVID crisis. Things do change.

Things changed with *Lutheran Service Book (LSB)* replacing the *Lutheran Worship (LW)* hymnal and *The Lutheran Hymnal (TLH)*.⁸ It is hard to replace old friends with new ones, but according to all reports the transition from the older hymnals to *LSB* went, with few exceptions, smoothly, so congratulations to the surviving members of the Commission on Worship who produced it. *Lutheran Worship* was produced by the Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) with much of the material taken over from the *Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW)*⁹ that was produced by the synods now comprising the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the LCMS. The LCMS still possesses copyright privileges to *LBW*. This brings us to the rendition of “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” that appeared first in *LBW* 60, then *LW* 49, and now *LSB* 380, which sits in LCMS pew racks.

Here is a carol that many churched and unchurched folks know by heart. In singing the *LSB* version for the first time, coming to the end of the hymn at the third stanza and not going on to stanza 4, as we did in *TLH*, was like traveling along an interstate at seventy miles an hour and driving into a wall. The mind and the voice wanted to go on, but the organist did not, and really could not. Whatever happened to stanza 4? Those over thirty may have a living memory of the missing stanza, and those under twenty may have never heard its words in church. Here is the missing stanza taken from *TLH*: “Come, Desire of Nations, come. Fix in us Thy humble home; Oh, to all Thyself impart, Formed in each believing heart! Hark! the herald

⁸ *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006); *Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982); *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941).

⁹ *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978).

angels sing, ‘Glory to the newborn King; Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!’ Hark! The herald angels sing, ‘Glory to the new-born King” (*TLH* 94).

Omitting the stanza was hardly on account of the hymn’s length. Of Charles Wesley’s nine hymns that made it into *LSB*, only “Christ, Whose Glory Fills the Skies” (*LSB* 873) is measurably shorter. So the omission of the fourth stanza of “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” was hardly a matter of space. The longer hymn “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” (*LSB* 700) escaped the executioner’s ax, as did the seven-stanza “Oh, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing” (*LSB* 528). Stanza 4 of “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” was missing in *LW*, which probably took over the amputated version from *LBW*. Here it can only be surmised what was in the mind of the joint commissions of the LCMS and the synods now comprising the ELCA, or whoever makes these kinds of decisions, in omitting the fourth stanza. Was it omitted because of the Lutheran aversion to the dwelling of Christ in the believer as a cause of salvation, as might be suggested to some in the line “Formed in each believing heart”? Whether this has ever crossed the mind of anyone who sang the carol, especially Lutherans, is doubtful. More of a concern is the fourth stanza of Charles Wesley’s “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”: “Finish then Thy new creation, Pure and spotless let us be; . . . Changed from glory into glory, Till in heav’n we take our place” (*LSB* 700). As it stands, this fits the Wesleyan doctrine of striving for moral perfection, but it can also refer to the glory believers will receive, experience, and enjoy in the next life—and that is great. Hymns as forms of poetry are not subject to doctrinal scrutiny in the way ordinary theological sentences are. My concern here is not doctrinal, but deals with why the fourth stanza of “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” was omitted and why this omission, originating in *LBW*, made it into *LW* and from there was transfused into *LSB*. Was its continued omission in *LSB* accidental in that the commission did not compare the *LW* version of “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” with *TLH*?¹⁰

If we can speculate, its omission was due to an aversion to the Methodist teaching that the indwelling of Christ is a cause of salvation, which according to the

¹⁰ As written by Wesley in 1739, the hymn had ten four-line stanzas. According to the eight-line melody familiar to us, this would be five stanzas. In a later edition (1743), Wesley revised it, omitting the last eight lines, giving us our traditional four-stanza hymn. Already in 1940, stanza 4 was omitted in *The Hymnal of the Protestant Episcopal Church* (New York: The Church Pension Fund, 1940), no. 27. Was *LBW* following the lead of the Episcopal Church? See also John W. Matthews Jr. and Joseph Herl, “380 Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” in *Lutheran Service Book: Companion to the Hymns* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2019), 1:136–139; W. G. Polack, *The Handbook to the Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1942), 76–77, no. 94. Polack includes the original text.

Lutheran doctrine of subjective justification happens through faith. If this is the reason for its omission, then also stanza 13 of Luther's well-known Christmas hymn "From Heaven Above to Earth I Come" (*LSB* 358) should be subject to the same kind of scrutiny: "Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child, Prepare a bed, soft, undefiled, A quiet chamber set apart For You to dwell within my heart." Christ dwells in believers.

After "O Come, All Ye Faithful" and "Silent Night," "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" is the hymn that both church and unchurched people sing by memory. This short Theological Observer is written with the hope that in the next edition of the hymnal, which this author will not be around to see, the fourth stanza of "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" will be restored to its rightful place in the galaxy of the songs we love to sing in the Lutheran Church at Christmas. Until that time, maybe the words can be supplied in the church bulletin. It does not take up that much space.

David P. Scaer

One of the Holy Trinity Suffered for Us

Very few books come with a title bearing such theological depth as the recently published *Festschrift* for William C. Weinrich, *One of the Holy Trinity Suffered for Us*. Trinity Sunday, which commemorates the mystery of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, comes several weeks after Good Friday, and it may not be evident that the two commemorations belong together. Christ's death for our sins is the object of our faith and, on that account, crosses are placed on our altars. We are accustomed to hearing "Jesus died for us," "the Son of God died," or as Paul says, "at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom 5:6).¹¹ Christ's death for our sins was part of God's eternal plan. It was not just a random moment in time. In his sermon on Pentecost, Peter called his hearers to repentance for calling for the crucifixion of Jesus; however, it happened according to the "foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). The second stanza of the hymn "O Darkest Woe" has this startling line: "O sorrow dread! Our God is dead" (*LSB* 448). This does not mean that God went out of existence, as was proposed in the formerly popular "God is dead" theology of the 1960s and 70s. God himself is life and the source of all life. In preaching to the Athenians, Paul said as much: "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). So what does it mean that God died?

¹¹ All Scripture quotations are from the ESV[®] Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Death in the Scriptures does not mean that the one who dies no longer exists. Rather in death, the soul is separated from the body. As the Book of Ecclesiastes says, the body returns to the earth and the soul to God who gave it (12:7). Jesus was God, but as a man, he died the kind of death that all die. In dying, he entrusted his soul to God: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Luke 23:46). And so Stephen committed his soul to Jesus—“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (Acts 7:59)—and he became the first of many martyrs who died confessing Christ, whose souls are safely with him (Rev 20:4). Jesus promised the thief who was crucified with him that he would, on that very day of their death, be with Jesus in paradise (Luke 23:43). Jesus’ words on the cross, “It is finished” (John 19:30), do not refer to his death as the soul leaving the body, but signals that his suffering for our salvation had been accomplished. This was happening as he spoke these words: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46). When he committed his soul to God with those words, the atonement for all was a completed reality.

Christ’s suffering was literally hell. Along with the extreme agony of being put to death by crucifixion, God the Father had removed his gracious presence from him. Matthew points to God’s abandonment of Jesus when he says that, from noon to 3:00 p.m., there was a darkness over the face of the earth (Matt 27:45). In his preaching, Jesus spoke of the horror of hell as the “outer darkness” (see Matt 8:12; 22:13; 25:30), the place where the light of God’s gracious presence is absent. Death by crucifixion may have been the cruelest form of execution ever designed, inflicting pain throughout the body. Until the moment of death, this form of public execution exposed the victim to public ridicule. Being forsaken by God is unimaginably worse. God’s abandonment of Jesus in his crucifixion is the most profound moment in time and eternity because it involved all three persons of the Trinity, which, in and of itself, is the mystery of all mysteries.

All this is contained in the title of the *Festschrift* for the Rev. Dr. William C. Weinrich, *One of the Holy Trinity Suffered for Us*. It is also all made visible in the book cover, a thought-provoking painting of the Holy Trinity by Jusepe de Ribera (1591–1652). At the center of the painting is the corpse of Jesus, resting on a shroud stained with his blood. Suspended in space (indicating that Christ’s death was more than just another event in time), the shroud is held by angels who turn their faces away, daring not to look upon the tragedy brought about by man’s sin. Wounds in the hands, feet, and side of Jesus are visible, indicating that Jesus’ death happened in time. In the painting, the Father looks forlornly down on the corpse of Jesus, signifying that this was the only way in which humankind could have been redeemed from the tragedy of sin which separated them from God and which all had brought upon themselves. In offering Christ as an atonement, God was not coerced by

anything outside of himself. He did it out of a sense of his own love and righteousness. He loves because he is love, not because of an external ideal of love. He is righteous not because of an external ideal of law, but because he is righteous in himself. God is moved to do what he does because of what he is in himself. In him, righteousness and love exist in perfect harmony. His righteousness required responding to man's disobedience with exclusion from his presence, and his love for the creature, created in his image, moved him to offer his Son as an atonement to bring the disobedient creature back to himself. Without atonement for the transgression, God would offend against who he is. As it says, "The LORD is our righteousness" (Jer 33:16).

Execution by crucifixion was not uncommon in the ancient world. The Persians did it, the Greeks took it over, and the Romans perfected it until it was abolished by Emperor Constantine in the fourth century. The crucifixion of Jesus may have been a perversion of justice in that he had done nothing that made him deserving of death, but others, too, had been put to death unjustly. What made Christ's death an exception was that it happened in heaven. To be more exact, it happened to him who is true God, and all three persons were involved in the act. Not only did Jesus as the Son offer himself as a sacrifice to God, but also, in the same act, God offered his Son as a sacrifice. In de Ribera's painting, hovering above the hands of the Father, on the head of the Son, is the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, who had assisted Jesus in his suffering and through whom God would raise Jesus from the dead. As the sin-bearer, Jesus was abandoned by God, but in carrying out God's will, in offering himself as a redemptive sacrifice, the Father never abandoned him. Those who are in Christ are, in life or death, never abandoned by God. The title of the Weinrich *Festschrift* says it all: *One of the Holy Trinity Suffered for Us*.

You can order your copy of Dr. Weinrich's *Festschrift* at <https://bookstore.ctsfw.edu/> or by calling +1 260-452-2160.

David P. Scaer

Christian Identity: Colossians 2:6–15¹²

Well, is it so or not so that we live in totally unique times? It is, of course, true that every time is filled with its own evils and its temptations and its destructiveness. But I must say, I do not know of any time in the history of man which is quite like our time. Tell me of a time in which the entire reality which lies outside the psychic

¹² This sermon was preached on July 30, 2021, in Kramer Chapel. Video of the sermon can be viewed at <https://media.ctsfw.edu/Weblink/ViewDetails/19750>.

self is denied. In what time has such a view ever been, except in our own time? And so, of course, it is true, obviously, and necessarily so, that identity is at issue, when the substance and foundation of identity is merely on the vagaries of psychic instabilities! So it comes to somewhat of a shock to the modern mind how this text by the apostle Paul speaks.

Now, this text does not quite read as the translation has it. It does not begin, “As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him” (Col 2:6, ESV).¹³ That is not quite what the Greek says. The Greek says, “Since you have received Christ Jesus, the Lord, walk in him.” That is a much stronger statement. It does not say “walk after him,” as though Jesus is a good example. This is a much stronger statement of discipleship than following after Jesus. No, “In him, walk.” In him, not according to him, by way of his example, nor even according to his power, but “In him, walk.” It is a remarkable claim! It is a remarkable demand! It is a remarkable promise!

And exactly who is this “him” in whom we are to walk? Well, the apostle tells us. He is the firstborn of creation. He is the one through whom all things have been created and unto whom all things are tending. He is the one in whom there is the fullness—later on in our text—of deity, which dwells bodily (Col 2:9). This “him” in whom we are to walk is a man, but such a man. This text does not speak of the preexistent, divine Christ. It speaks of Jesus, the man of flesh, who was himself the very human form of God. And so, this man’s cause was none other than the cause of his heavenly Father—no distinction, no separation, no division. The cause of God was nothing else than this man, who in the world and as man represented the cause of God. So when our apostle tells us, “Since you have received Christ Jesus, the Lord, walk in him,” he means that you and I are now given the task to represent in the world the cause of Christ, which is the cause of God. And our identity lies precisely therein.

When you go home, I want you to open up this text of Colossians. You can start if you want where our text begins, in chapter 2, verse 6. Or maybe you could begin in chapter 1, verse 15 and the great christological hymn, and just ponder these words that you read. Is it about Christ? Of course! It is about you too—every verse.

Just pay attention. For example, in chapter 2, verse 9 and following—we love this dogmatic claim, do we not? That the fullness of divinity, the *πλήρωμα τῆς Θεότητος*, dwells in him *σωματικῶς*, bodily. The next passage, following directly on: “And you are completely filled in him.” You are a participant in that man, who is of

¹³ Scripture quotations marked ESV are from the ESV[®] Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. All other Scripture quotations are the author’s translation.

deity, bodily inhabited. Now, that is an identity, ladies and gentlemen! That is an identity. You are rooted in a man, who is himself by a personal identity rooted in the divine Son, who is himself rooted in the divine Father. That is an identity! So when we sing about Christ being the head of the church, it means he is *your* head. And the body follows the head, or the body is *dead*. A body decapitated does not walk. And so, it is in this man that you are going to walk—because we are talking about Jesus! We are not talking about some divine sphere of influence. We are talking about the concrete man, Jesus. Is it a mystery? I suspect it is. But nonetheless, this man in whom we are to walk is a man. That is our identity.

So when today the issues of identity rise up in strange, strange ways, you ask yourself, “Is that according to Christ?” Who was the man who represented directly, and by way of an inseparable identity, the cause of God? Is that really what he represents? I know it is a little strange and banal, but “What would Jesus do?” is a serious question.

And then, of course, our text speaks about our Baptism, does it not? This is said to be the circumcision of Christ (Col 2:11–12). Your Baptism was a circumcision. But what a circumcision! The circumcision of the old covenant of course was the foreskin. Paul says Christ’s circumcision means you’ve taken away your entire flesh! And put on, of course, his body! And so we can speak, “You were dead in your trespasses and in the uncircumcision of your body” (Col 2:13). So to be circumcised according to Christ is not just to become a member of a group. It is to die, so that you might live in the One in whom you are to walk. That is identity. An identity which is rooted in a *reality*. Not your reality, not my reality, not the reality of our heads or of our psyche or of our heart, but the reality of the ever-living God. That is an identity! So, when we are called upon to give our identity, or when we ask the question, “Who am I?” the answer we are to give is this: “I am what Jesus is.”

And then, the last part of this passage. “He disarmed the rulers and the authorities, and placarded them openly to their shame” (Col 2:15). Now, the ESV translation here says “by triumphing over them,” but I think the Greek word here has its primary meaning: “leading these powers in a victory procession as slaves.” How does Jesus do that? Is that just something Jesus does? Well, yes—but through you. Or through me. If we are in him, then Christ leads the powers captive through faithful Christians. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, you are in this text. If you abstract yourself from the story and meaning of Christ, then this text loses its focus and its meaning. This text does not speak in abstractions. It speaks quite directly to you and to me. There is no victory in the world if *you* are not victorious. Or is it not true that Jesus came for you, that you might rise with him?

It is quite amazing how often in these few verses this dative construction exists: “In him, walk.” “Buried with him.” “In him you have life,” this kind of language. Seven times in our text, the “in him” appears, and if you add the first chapter to the mix, you’ve got a bigger number. Christian identity lies in the man Jesus, our Savior, in the man Jesus, our Lord, in the man Jesus, our King. And yes, in the man Jesus, our identity.

So as you confessed in the hymn, which we just sang, “Your sacraments, O Lord, And Your saving Word To us, Lord, pure retain.” And then comes the plea: “O make us faithful Christians.”¹⁴ If you want a description of the reality—big word, ontology—of Christian identity, of that faithful Christian, you read Colossians.

William C. Weinrich

¹⁴ From the hymn “Lord Jesus Christ, the Church’s Head” (*LSB* 647:2, 3). Text: © 1941 Concordia Publishing House.