

# CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY



Volume 87:3–4

July/October 2023

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## **Theological Observer**

### **Funeral Sermon for Jordan Louis Scaer<sup>1</sup>**

“Let the little children come to me” (Mark 10:14).<sup>2</sup>

Dear friends in Christ,

Today we acknowledge together, gathered in the company of each other and in the presence of our Lord Jesus, that Jesus also weeps with us and that he cries over the death of this child, Jordan Louis. He loves you both, John and Anyssa, and he loves your child Jordan. He weeps with us, and he shows forth his love and compassion for us. In the midst of our tears, sorrow, and anguish, can we say with the psalmist, “O, give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, and his mercy endures forever”?

Today we rest our hearts and minds on God’s word. We know that it is only God’s word that will comfort and sustain us through these days. He says, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:14). No, Jordan did not have the opportunity to be baptized, but we also know from Scripture that faith comes by hearing, and we believe and trust in the promises and mercy of God, that not only did our Lord create this life inside your womb but he also sustained Jordan for a time, through word and prayer. When we all heard the news of the pregnancy, we immediately began to pray for the faith of the child, and continued to do so for those few months. Our congregation has been praying for this child as well as JoAnn and me, family, friends, and many others. God hears the prayers of the faithful. Did Jordan hear the word of Christ? Yes, absolutely. He heard when John and Anyssa would have their daily devotions and read Scripture and sing hymns, and when you were present in God’s sanctuary on Sunday mornings, hearing the lessons read, hearing the preaching of the word, the hymns rich with God’s word sung reaching through Anyssa’s body to the ears of Jordan. He heard the Creed and the Our Father too. There is no way he could have not heard. Knowing the promises of God, we can be assured that the Holy Spirit worked faith in his tiny heart. And according to Christ, that faith saved him. Can we also understand, although dimly, that when Anyssa received Christ’s very body and blood at the altar, there Jesus was present also for little Jordan?

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon was preached on September 21, 2022, at Ascension Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, Indiana, at the funeral for the unborn child of John and Anyssa Scaer. It is included here as an example for pastors and as comfort for Christians who have suffered the same loss.

<sup>2</sup> All Scripture quotations are the author’s translation.

How close was Mary to Elizabeth when Mary extended her greeting to her? Did she speak loudly? Did she shout or even whisper? We don't know. But we know that John heard her just fine in the womb. Christ came near and proclaimed and was proclaimed by the greeting of Mary, even while still in the womb. John leapt for joy. He heard, and he believed. He responded with joy. The word of the Lord does not return empty or void, but the Holy Spirit continues to call, gather, and enlighten regardless of age. The kingdom of God belongs to this child, and we will have eternity to get to know him.

As we all await the resurrection of all flesh and the age to come to be with those who have died in the faith, we gain comfort in the here and now from God's word:

Psalm 119:28 says: "My soul weeps because of grief, strengthen me according to your word."

Lamentations 3:32: "For if he causes grief, then he will have compassion, according to his abundant lovingkindness."

Psalm 31:24: "Be strong and let your heart take courage, all you who hope in the Lord."

2 Corinthians 1:7: "Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort."

John 16:33: "Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows, but be of good cheer for I [Jesus] have overcome the world."

Psalm 139:13: "You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knit them together in my mother's womb."

Romans 15:13: "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

And so we move forward in hope. There is no timetable for grief. Others may expect you to "move on" when truly all you can do is move forward. You will never "get over" your loss, but with God's help you will get through it.

Know that although you are hurting now, you are not alone, and there will be joy in your life again. Moving forward doesn't mean that you are forgetting your baby. We will all have a special place in our hearts for Jordan Louis. As God leads you and us, we remember Jordan on his due date and other special days ahead. He will always be a part of us, but especially of you, Anyssa.

Remember, it takes time to heal a broken bone; healing your broken heart will also take time, and the healing process can be different for each person. Please give yourself time and grace as you move from one day to the next, all the while embracing the hope of Jesus on your journey as he cares for you. "Casting all your worries and cares on him for he cares for you" (1 Pet 5:7).

When Jesus heard that Lazarus was ill, he delayed going there for two days. Even though Lazarus had died, Jesus referred to him as taking a rest in sleep and that he

would go awaken him. When Jesus arrived at Bethany, it was Martha who questioned his delay, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:21). We might also question our Lord at this time. Why did you allow this, Jesus? Or, we might even blame ourselves. But let us fix our eyes on Jesus now. He delayed his coming because he knew the future. He knew he was going to die for the sin of the world and rise again to new life. That is why he said to Martha, “Your brother will rise again.” And then, prompted by the Holy Spirit, Martha confessed her faith, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” She responds, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world” (John 11:23–27). When Jesus came to the tomb, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out—and the man who had died came out” (John 11:43–44).

On the day of the resurrection of all flesh, Jesus will command all of us to “come out” of our resting places: you, me, and, of course, little Jordan. Until that day, cling to Christ. Hold on to his word and promises. Rejoice in his redemption for Jordan and for you, won for you through his death and resurrection. For Jesus has prepared a place for all who know and love him—even the smallest of the small. For to such belongs the kingdom of God. The peace of the Lord be with you always. Amen.

Gary Zieroth

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## Ancient Creation?

On July 12, 2022, NASA released the first pictures from the James Webb Space Telescope. “Webb will explore every phase of cosmic history—from within the solar system to the most distant observable galaxies in the early universe, and everything in between.”<sup>3</sup> The galaxies and stars in the Webb pictures represent the furthest objects from Earth ever recorded. As furthest from Earth, it is claimed that the light from these stars will have originated from those stars near the time of the big bang and taken billions of years to travel to Earth. These reports of the long existence of

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<sup>3</sup> “NASA’s Webb Telescope Launches to See First Galaxies, Distant Worlds,” NASA, December 25, 2021, <https://www.nasa.gov/press-release/nasas-webb-telescope-launches-to-see-first-galaxies-distant-worlds>.

the universe may create new doubts in the minds of many Christians. How can scientists affirm such huge time periods of the universe if God created the universe as detailed in Scripture?

Scripture states, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). Christians believe this by faith. In the face of foundational and beautiful science, such as the images from the Webb telescope, we as Christians often feel foolish when stating our faith in biblical creation. But is our faith foolishness? Is it not, in fact, the world that has chosen folly? “For the wisdom of this world is folly with God” (1 Cor 3:19). We cannot expect respect from those who are foolish to God.

Well-known contemporary Chinese artist Ai Weiwei has created many works of art based on old or ancient materials. In his creation of *Han Dynasty Urn with Coca-Cola Logo* (1993), Weiwei painted the Coca-Cola logo on a two-thousand-year-old urn. This work is considered a contemporary statement decrying the influence of modern globalism on Chinese culture. But is this creation contemporary art or an antiquity? Certainly if analytical dating techniques were used, the scientists would declare the urn ancient, yet clearly Weiwei created this piece of art in 1993. Thus it is a mixture of old and new.

So it is with God and creation. He is omnipotent and thus able to do anything. In the creation of Eden, he certainly did not create only new plants (that is, seeds), but mature trees: “And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food” (Gen 2:9). So the creation was not chronologically “new” but filled with animals and plants which were mature and of varied ages. A mature redwood would appear hundreds of years old, yet a mature insect may be only a few hours old—all were present in the newly created Earth. Likewise God created the heavens, the new universe, in a mature form. Genesis tells us that the stars were made on the fourth day of creation, but there was no wait for the light to travel light-years till they were visible on Earth. God created the stars *and* their traveled light at the same time so that the stars could be seen from the vantage of Earth *on the fourth day*.

Therefore, do not fret at the new pronouncements of the validation of the age of the universe in terms of billions of years. God is indeed omnipotent, and his creative force was more than a child’s nursery story, but the source of a vast universe with far more complexity than mankind can imagine. Science and engineering are indeed giving us fascinating new views of the created universe, both pictures and measurements of faraway galaxies and the intricacies of the human body, but these are discoveries of what God has already made rather than proof that the biblical

creation is false. “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1).

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## 2 Corinthians 5:20: Ambassadors for Christ<sup>4</sup>

Through words and lives of all believers, the kingdom of God is realized. Paul says we are living letters on whose lives the love God in Christ is written (2 Cor 3:2). At the same time we cannot diminish the divinely established role of the pastor as the guardian of the congregation. To understand the unique role that Paul himself and the other apostles had and that now our pastors have, careful attention should be given to 2 Corinthians 5:20, “We are ambassadors for Christ.”

“We are ambassadors for Christ,” says our text (2 Cor 5:20). Who? “We.” Who is this “we”? It’s not just Paul the apostle, but also Pastor Timothy (2 Cor 1:1). The letter is from them to the Corinthians. “We are ambassadors for Christ.” The apostles and the pastoral office are the “we” in this verse. But many people take “we” to mean not Paul, Timothy, and pastors who share their vocation. They understand it to mean “me and all Christians.” They think *everyone* is an ambassador toward everyone. “Every citizen an ambassador,” is perhaps what they mean. But that’s not what an ambassador is in the real world, and it’s not Paul’s meaning here. What ambassadors do is this: they represent the monarch officially, toward citizens and foreigners alike. They aid citizens in foreign lands; they help foreigners come to our country, negotiate treaties, and bring official messages from the monarch to any and all. Not all sons of the kingdom are ambassadors, just as not all members of the family are fathers. So also, not all Christians have the ambassadorial office. As Paul says elsewhere, “Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers?” (1 Cor 12:29). If the “we” means “all Christians,” then who is the “you”? “We are ambassadors for Christ. . . . We implore *you*.” It’s a common problem. People often misidentify the “we” because they are not aware that God has established a special ambassador office within his church. It would be as if a group of people had no idea what the vocation of husband, wife, father, or mother is, and when they came to a Bible passage dealing specifically with fathers, they would apply it to themselves no matter what their

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<sup>4</sup> This sermon was preached February 23, 2023, at Kramer Chapel, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne.

vocation. “*We* are ambassadors for Christ”: the apostle Paul, Pastor Timothy, and those who have the same vocation.

“For Christ” they are ambassadors. The word “for” in English can mean a number of things, such as, “These flowers are for you,” or “I’m working for Taco Bell,” or “He is an ambassador for the king.” The English word “for” is broad in its meaning. Now these ambassadors are not doing it as a gift for Christ, or in order to do something nice for Christ, like “these flowers are *for* you.” Rather, they are ambassadors *on behalf of* Christ, or “in the stead of Christ.” That’s what the Greek here means. “We, in the stead of Christ and on his behalf, implore you.”

“God making his appeal through us.” These ambassadors are not mere couriers or mailmen. They do not just give you the Bible and say, “Read this message.” Instead, they are ambassadors, and what it means is this: “God is making his appeal through them.” When they persuade people (v. 11) and teach and reprove and correct and train in righteousness and warn and console in conformity with Scripture (2 Tim 3:16; Rom 15:4), God is making his appeal through them, in the present tense. They’re not just couriers. The ambassador office does more than if you just read the Bible: it applies the message to *you*. It says to *you*, “Be reconciled to God.” The ambassador office is there to *apply* it to you.

Of course, the office does not give the message its power. The gospel itself is the power of God unto salvation (Rom 1:16). Now if the power for salvation is in the gospel itself, why do we need the office? To which I might also ask: If the power to heal is in the medicine itself, why do we need the pharmacist? Precisely because of the application. The message is applied to you by the ambassador office, like the right medicine for your particular condition is applied by the physician and pharmacist. The gospel without the ambassador office would be like the telephone game. The message would quickly get distorted. To prevent this, God has put the message in written form, and has also established the ambassador office to ensure that it is preached and believed aright. God directs us both to the message and to the teaching of the ambassador office.

Why? Because, as Paul says, “God is making his appeal through us.” The ESV rightly makes this a participle: “God making his appeal through us,” just as it is in the Greek. But most English Bibles take it as contrary-to-fact: “*as though* God were making his appeal through us.” They would say, “But he’s not.” We say, “But he is!” This passage, 2 Corinthians 5:20, is why we can rightly say in our Small Catechism: “I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, . . . this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord



dealt with us Himself.”<sup>5</sup> He *does* deal with us himself, but he does so through means, through the called ministers of Christ. It is the same as when Paul and Timothy say, “God is making his appeal through us.” God has entrusted to Paul and Timothy the message of reconciliation and therefore they are ambassadors, and therefore God is making his appeal to you through them.

This is a comfort. God has not left you alone in the world without an ambassador. So many people want to find God speaking in the here and now, just as the ancient Greeks sought oracles. People look to omens, visions, and the desires of their own heart, thinking that God wants to speak to them through these things. People look for God to tell them what job to take, what school to attend, what car to buy, what spouse to marry. But what they hear is not what God in the Bible has told us is the message he has for us. But at the present time, God is actually speaking to you through his ambassadors. And what they say is, “Be reconciled to God.” Sorry if that’s not the message you were looking for! But it’s the message God is revealing to you in the present time.

“Be reconciled to God.” God has already reconciled the world to himself through the merit and death of Jesus. “One has died for all, therefore all have died” (2 Cor 5:14) in such a way that God does not count their trespasses against them. The reconciliation is total and universal. All people have been reconciled to God through Christ.

And yet the reconciliation must be applied. And so God makes his appeal through the ambassador office, saying: “Be reconciled to God.” How can he say this if the full and total reconciliation of the world already happened in Christ’s death? How can he then say, “Be reconciled to God”? He can say both of these things, because the reconciliation has been earned by Christ, and now it is being applied to you specifically. For example, a peace treaty has been signed, ending a war, but some units did not get the message and are still fighting. The peace needs to be proclaimed to them, and they need to believe it and stop fighting. So also here: the reconciliation of the world has been achieved, and now it is proclaimed to you so that you will believe it and have it. He does not say, “reconcile yourself to God,” nor “reconcile God to yourself,” nor “appease and propitiate God.” Rather, “be reconciled.” It’s like saying, “Believe the peace treaty. Stop fighting!” Or, “Let me apply this reconciliation to you.” Or, “Stop running away! Stop rejecting it!” Or, “Repent, and believe the gospel.”

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<sup>5</sup> Small Catechism, Confession, “What do you believe according to these words?” Quotations from the Small Catechism are from *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation*, copyright © 1986, 1991 Concordia Publishing House. All rights reserved.

My dearly beloved brothers and sisters: God is making his appeal to you. Be reconciled to God. "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (v. 21). Especially now, let us all listen closely to his ambassadors as God makes his appeal through them. This message is applied to you. God is speaking to you right here, right now. The peace treaty has been signed. God wants you back. Amen.

Benjamin T. G. Mayes

### **Social Media and the Christian Church**

Technological advances have impacted society and each one of us in profound ways. How should the Christian church respond to the advent of the internet, cell phone proliferation and usage amongst Christians, and social media usage amongst Christians? Are these technological advances a blessing or bane to the Christian church?

Christianity is a relational religion. God initiates the relationship. He calls people into the Christian faith through word and sacrament ministry. God then gathers believers together to be the body of Christ here as the church militant. Christians are not meant to live out their lives as isolated individual units but rather as important members of a greater whole. From the very beginning of Christianity, groups of Christians were formed into congregations of people working together to support and encourage one another in service to God and their neighbor above themselves. This grouping of people into congregations was not done in such a manner that the group did not have a leader or head. Pastors, that is, under-shepherds of Christ, were sent out to preach, teach, and gather people into congregations. Initially Jesus chose the twelve apostles to do the gathering, teaching, and preaching. The apostles appointed elders (pastors) to serve the churches.

Part of responsible pastoral care is that the pastor visits the flock of believers entrusted to his care. Christian sheep need a Christian shepherd. Shepherding of the sheep requires that the pastor not only preach and teach the word of God to the sheep, but also that he knows the sheep intimately and admonishes the sheep when necessary as well as comforts the sheep in their time of need.

With the above understanding of pastors as under-shepherds of Christ, these questions need to be contemplated:

1. Does social media lend itself so that the complete pastoral work of a pastor can be carried out?
2. Is social media something that the Christian church should be involved in, given the predominantly negative nature of social media?

3. What are the long-term ramifications for the Christian church if it does not participate in social media?
4. Does social media provide an opportunity for local congregations to gain members?
5. If the LCMS is engaged in social media, what cautions should be considered concerning its use?

In 1977, Clifford G. Christians wrote about his concern regarding the burgeoning field of electronics and the effect it was having on people. One wonders what he would say today about the internet and social media. His warning concerning electronic media is insightful. He stated: “Electronics as a technological form encourages us to accept life as an infinitely malleable confluence of factors. It promotes style at the expense of substance. The electric noösphere works us over like a giant chiropractor and gradually creates a world with centers existing everywhere, margins nowhere.”<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that Christians sees the problem of electronic technology as one that does not enable in-person relationships and involvement. He states: “I resist strongly any short-term, enthusiastic faddishness which becomes a substitute for long-term conviction, authentic vision, and personal involvement.”<sup>7</sup> Admittedly Christians is writing about oral communication, but the point that he makes about the oral word is the intimacy involved in proclaiming God’s word. He also states that he sees the electronic media form of evangelism as lacking in intimacy:

Verbal vows, morally compelling and sincerely meant, are a distinctive mark of the Christian life as they were in pre-print societies. Our careful attention to them—in marriage, church membership, professions of faith, adult baptisms, and elsewhere advances something momentous in an electronic age devoid of believable words and lasting commitments. Singing, learning prayer at a parent’s knee, discussing, and sharing as groups, communication within families, individualized instruction, testimonies, personal witness, intimate prayer together—every possible face-to-face relationship should be promoted with all the vigor and imagination God can provide us.<sup>8</sup>

In response to our first question posited above, namely, “Does social media lend itself so that the complete pastoral work of a pastor can be carried out?” the answer is a definitive “no.” Baptism and Holy Communion require in-person interaction of

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<sup>6</sup> Clifford G. Christians, “Communications and the Church’s Outreach (1): An Historical Perspective,” *Reformed Journal* 27, no. 2 (February 1977): 20.

<sup>7</sup> Clifford G. Christians, “Communications and the Church’s Outreach (2): An Historical Perspective,” *Reformed Journal* 27, no. 3 (March 1977): 11.

<sup>8</sup> Christians, “Communications (2),” 13.

the pastor with the congregant. Conducting a funeral for a member of one's congregation is not satisfactorily done via a virtual-reality connection.

Having noted the reality that a pastor cannot give complete pastoral care through social media, the next question needs to be addressed: "Is social media something that the Christian church should be involved in, given the predominantly negative nature of social media?" Today's social media is a 24/7 influx of communication. This sort of communication can be addictive. It can be misused and has been misused. The 24/7 connectivity has had its effect on us. Vassa Larin posits: "The advent of the Internet, along with mobile devices that ensure our 24/7 connection with it, has changed us and continues to change us. And by 'us' I mean not only all of humanity in general, but more specifically the smaller 'us' that are church communities."<sup>9</sup> She further states the downside of internet connectivity by noting:

But the Internet's chaotic flow of information is challenging not only because it is 24/7 and from everywhere, but also because, in our "post-truth" world, it is sometimes only half-true or even patently false. . . . Our online "desert" is often crawling with little and big lies—not just the ones we might tell about our individual selves in social media posts, but also those we might perpetuate collectively, as a society, as a nation, or even as a Church.<sup>10</sup>

Part of the negative aspect is that we are dealing with Web 2.0. Initially the internet was a Web 1.0 situation. It was mainly static information that one could access, very much like looking up something in an encyclopedia. But due to interactive platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and so forth, Web 2.0 has come into existence. Web 2.0 is characterized by the interactivity that is now commonplace on the internet. This interactivity can promote relationship development. But the interactivity can also have an extremely negative downside. *Ad hominem* attacks can occur via the interactivity, and they often do occur. David Dunaetz reminds us of a sobering negative reality that has been noted with the influx of smartphones and the internet connectivity provided by them: "Since around 2012, when Americans and Europeans with smartphones first outnumbered those without smartphones, teen depression and suicide rates have increased dramatically, especially among teenage girls. Our technology-inspired cultural transformation has a dark side that can produce many undesired effects."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Vassa Larin, "Monastic Martyria or Witness in the Internet Age," *The Wheel* 21 (2020): 46.

<sup>10</sup> Larin, "Monastic Martyria," 48.

<sup>11</sup> David R. Dunaetz, "Evangelism, Social Media, and the Mum Effect," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 43, no. 2 (April 2019): 144.

The Christian must be prepared to receive negative responses to witnessing to the truth of God's word on social media platforms. The response can be vicious and unrelenting. Larin, in her discussion of witnessing in the electronic age, states:

When speaking or posting today on our politically correct social media, a truth-embracing Christian will be painfully aware of—and “anxiously concerned” about—walking a tightrope. One false move and you just might lose your Facebook “friends,” your academic position, your church appointments, or—in the case of a celebrity—your TV show, your film or stand-up career, and so on. “False moves,” by the way, include not expressing sufficient indignation about someone else's “false move”; or using the wrong pronoun for a transgender person; or having done so in a tweet eleven years ago; or calling non-Orthodox churches “churches”; or even touching on issues like female ordination or same-sex marriage; or being photographed with someone who has touched on these issues; or going to an academic conference that discusses them.<sup>12</sup>

Christopher Coyne, in his article entitled “Digital Growth: Nurturing the Seed of Faith in a Distracted Society,” points out that there can be positive effects of using social media while at the same time warning of some of the negative effects. Coyne states:

There are, however, risks and downsides to our digital-media formation: isolation, a loss of real embodied community, a preference for the virtual over the real, the development of nasty subcultures of anger, hatred, gossip, detraction, bullying, violence and, most significantly, pornography, which now makes up most of the traffic on the cyber highway. The Christian preacher in the present era must not only seek to evangelize within the digital culture but must evangelize the medium itself, making it more about the good news than the dark territory it can become.<sup>13</sup>

The point that Coyne makes concerning evangelizing the medium itself is interesting. Perhaps a better way to state it is that the Christian can be salt and light to a world of unbelievers on social media. The reality is that the majority of people in the world are involved in social media. Even in impoverished nations, cell phones abound. Certainly in the United States, cell phone usage and internet connectivity are the norm. Cell phone usage is second nature to young people in this country. M. Peter Singh describes young people as “digitizens.” He states: “Digitizens can also be

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<sup>12</sup> Larin, “Monastic Martyria,” 49.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher James Coyne, “Digital Growth: Nurturing the Seed of Faith in a Distracted Society,” *America* 215, no. 11 (October 17, 2016): 16.

referred as the ‘iGeneration’ or described as having been born with ‘digital DNA’ having begun to fuse their lives into technology and they seek online spirituality.”<sup>14</sup>

Young people engage one another through cell phones and social media apps. This is also happening for a great portion of congregational members. In order to answer the second question posited at the beginning of this article, it is important first to consider the third question: “What are the long-term ramifications for the Christian church if it does not participate in social media?” In the case of the Missouri Synod Lutheran context, the majority of churches are participating on the internet and to some extent on social media. And that is good. The mode of communication has changed. The internet phenomenon is no less society-changing than the printing press was in the time of Martin Luther. To not participate on the internet and social media platforms is to stick one’s head in the sand and to miss the boat, so to speak. Good can come out of social media engagement. Unfortunately, the majority of congregations’ websites are designed to serve the members of the congregation and are not developed for reaching out to the non-churched. These websites essentially function like the telephone book ads did years ago, when congregations paid to have their phone book listing. They are Web 1.0 type of websites imparting information only and not inviting any type of interaction or relationship building opportunities. This type of website is about as effective as the old phone book listings were in bringing prospective members into congregational membership.

It is important that pastors and their congregations be involved in witnessing for Christ via the means that are available to them. It has been noted that social media platforms are the new agoras of ages past. The agora in ancient Greece was a place of political discussion and social interaction.<sup>15</sup> Today, digital agoras function in a comparable way, providing places for conversation, collaboration, work, and learning.<sup>16</sup> I maintain that it is possible for these digital agoras to be places where Christian witnessing can occur with the understanding that these digital agoras will not replace the in-person relationships that must occur for a person to be fully obedient to God’s word (cf. Heb 10:24–25) and to receive fully the means of grace which God desires to give to a Christian. The digital agoras are places to initiate a discussion with people concerning the true God and what he desires to give to them. They can be places where relationships begin and develop somewhat, but they never will replace the need for a physical gathering into local congregations of true

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<sup>14</sup> M. Peter Singh, “Social Media: A New Location for Christian Mission to the Digitizens,” *In God’s Image* 38 (June 2019): 55.

<sup>15</sup> Justine Renu F. Galang and Willard Enrique R. Macaraan, “Digital Apostleship: Evangelization in the New Agora,” *Religions* 12, no. 2 (February 2021): 1.

<sup>16</sup> Calvin Chong, “Exploring Innovations, Impacts, and Implications of New Communications and Media Development,” *Journal of Asian Evangelical Theology* 18, no. 2 (September 2014): 100.

believers in the triune God. The other difficulty with digital agoras is they are not located in a particular location but are located in cyberspace. Thus, you can engage people who may not live near the congregation that one is a member of or that a pastor serves. Vashti Murphy McKenzie highlights the opportunity of engaging a person digitally as well as pointing out the lack of the physical locality of such engagement. She states: "Let's face it, the majority of teens, 20 somethings and 30 somethings are having conversations every day in the digital world. If we do not engage them in conversation, we will not have a chance to lead them."<sup>17</sup>

The question of time invested in a digital agora becomes important. Engaging a person or persons via social media takes time. What is the best usage of a pastor's time as far as engaging people locally or in cyberspace? I suggest that there must be a measured approach to engaging people via social media. The pastor would be best suited to spend more time actually engaging people in-person and not so much online. I am not advocating that a pastor should not be involved in social media at all. A pastor should share the gospel of Jesus Christ both in cyberspace and with people in his locality where he serves. He is, after all, the *pastor loci*, of the community where his congregation is located and to where he has been called. I reiterate that a measured approach in engaging people via social media should be practiced, especially in light of the warning that David Petersen has given in his recent theological observer entitled: "A Warning and a Strategy about the Dangers of Digital Media."<sup>18</sup>

Petersen points out that the amount of screen time engaged in by a person via television, computer usage, cell phone usage, and digital gaming is not neutral in its effect upon individuals. Too much screen time can negatively impact an individual. Petersen wisely points out that pastors should limit their usage of digital media: "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."<sup>19</sup> Further, pastors should warn their parishioners about the negative effects of too much screen time.<sup>20</sup> Petersen does not advocate that pastors and parishioners should completely disengage from the usage of digital media. He sees two usages of digital media that can be beneficial: (1) advertising the church

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<sup>17</sup> "Multimedia Ministry: AME Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie," *The Christian Century* 129, no. 6 (March 21, 2012): 10.

<sup>18</sup> David Petersen, "A Warning and a Strategy about the Dangers of Digital Media," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 83, no. 3-4 (2022): 351-370.

<sup>19</sup> Petersen, "A Warning and a Strategy," 353.

<sup>20</sup> Petersen, "A Warning and a Strategy," 353.

on congregational websites and Facebook pages, and (2) connecting with shut-ins.<sup>21</sup> I am suggesting that digital media can be used for more than just advertising and shut-ins connection. I am advocating that digital media can be used to share the gospel message with unbelievers in order to begin to build relationships, and that digital media has value in staying connected particularly with younger people who are using texting as a primary form of communication.

Indeed, social media platforms may be the best way to stay connected with the youth in a congregation and to reach out to prospective youth. According to a 2021 census in *Common Sense Media* measuring tweens (eight- to twelve years old) and teens (thirteen to eighteen years old), “about three in 10 of all 8- and 9-year-olds have their own phones; among 12- to 13-year-olds, about seven in 10 do; and among those age 14 or older, about nine in 10 have their own phones.”<sup>22</sup> Considering this data, it is advisable that LCMS congregations provide their pastors with smartphones so the pastors can communicate with the youth in their congregations and with youth they are engaging in evangelism endeavors.

This leads to the fourth question of consideration posited above, namely, “Does social media provide an opportunity for local congregations to gain members?” In the context of LCMS congregations, there is no evidence to my knowledge that cyber-space interactions have led to a substantial number of people joining an LCMS congregation. That is not to say that there have not been people from the local community who have seen a church’s website or watched a church’s Divine Service broadcast and then joined the congregation. There has been this response. However, the numbers of new members brought into membership via digital means are not tremendous to my knowledge. Further study is warranted to ascertain if social media engagement and internet presence of a congregation have a felicitous effect within the local community with effectiveness measured by new converts and/or new members in a congregation.

Finally, the last question to be considered is this: “If the LCMS is engaged in social media, what cautions should be considered concerning its use?” The reality is that many in the LCMS are engaged in social media, and they have been engaged for some time. What further guidance, therefore, should be offered for its use?

Social media can be an avenue of eighth commandment breaking. Where this has occurred, repentance is in order. False and partially false narratives about synodical, district, and congregational happenings have occurred via social media. This is not appropriate, and repentance is needed. Luther stated things in a most concise and beautiful way: “Put the best construction on everything.” Putting the

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<sup>21</sup> Petersen, “A Warning and a Strategy,” 354.

<sup>22</sup> Victoria Rideout et al., *The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens*, 2021 (San Francisco: Common Sense, 2022), 22.



best construction on everything must be practiced by all Christians, both laypersons and clergy alike, if LCMS Christians are to be light and salt in the darkness that so pervades social media platforms today.

Social media can be very divisive. Websites dedicated to a certain type of person abound. Private chat rooms and groups abound. How do these sorts of gatherings encourage one to serve God and one's neighbor above oneself? How do they promote unity within the LCMS? There is only one way that unity in the LCMS is gained. Unity in doctrine and practice come about only through the Holy Spirit working through the means of grace to bring us all into consensus or *concordia* as our forefathers in the LCMS stated it.<sup>23</sup> This was vitally important to our LCMS forefathers, as evidenced by so many institutions and congregations in the LCMS bearing the name "Concordia."

In conclusion, Christians and pastors may use social media to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with others. A measured approach to social media engagement and local in-person engagement should be practiced. Christians and pastors engaging others through social media platforms should be prepared for *ad hominem* attacks and negative feedback. Christians and pastors should not engage in *ad hominem* attacks, gossip, or false narrative promotion.

Social media as an online agora offers the opportunity for sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ, but it cannot supplant actual in-the-flesh engagement with members of the parish and with evangelism prospects who might join the local parish.

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<sup>23</sup> Latin *Concordia* also means "concord" and was featured prominently on the title page of the 1580 Book of Concord.