WINDOWS INTO THE WEDDING FEAST: Philipp Nicolai's *Wachet Auf* as a Model for Pastoral Care in a Crisis

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Dazed, a Lutheran pastor shuffles to his study. Sitting at his desk, he does what he has done on more days than he can remember. He pages through his Bible, stops to read a section, thinks for a moment, then scribbles some notes on the paper next to him. After this routine recurs a few times, he reaches for a devotional book and does the same thing—reads, reflects, writes. He is doing this, first, for his own sake. The words console his heart. He is doing this also for people who feel lost, as he does. Perhaps the thoughts he is jotting on his notepad will comfort other souls too.

To pastors who served during the coronavirus pandemic of 2020–21, such scenes may seem familiar: losing the sense of time passing, reading, reflecting, writing, communicating with their people. Pastors might not have recognized that they were living out a method of pastoral care used by Lutheran preachers before. Thanks to the Spirit working through the Scriptures, the pattern of reading, reflecting, and writing has proven to be consoling and encouraging for pastor and people alike in times of crisis.

One example of this model for pastoral care comes from a source many Lutherans will recognize. Known as the "King of Chorales," the hymn "Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying" holds a unique and treasured place in Lutheran hymnody and the hearts of many Lutherans. The imagery of the watchmen announcing the coming of the Bridegroom, a reference to Jesus's parable in Matt 25, vividly portrays the coming of Christ in glory. This essay argues that this hymn and its background reveal a pattern for pastoral care that pastors of every era can emulate in times of crisis. By examining the hymn from several angles, we will discover that through it, Nicolai is redefining the moment when a Christian meets Jesus as a moment of joy, not terror, and using this truth to comfort his people.

First, examining the poignant circumstances of the hymn's composition will deepen appreciation for it and its creator, Philipp Nicolai. Second, an overview of the hymn's narrative arc will outline the story Nicolai tells through its three stanzas—a story which he invites those who read, meditate upon, or sing the hymn to adopt as their

own. Third, a semiotic examination of the hymn and the book it comes from will reveal that Nicolai is building and reinforcing conceptual sign systems in the minds of Christians and then providing windows into those worlds to comfort those facing death. Finally, we will derive from Nicolai's devotional practice a method that has the potential to enhance pastoral care in times of crisis.

Philipp Nicolai and the Origin of "Wake, Awake"

Epidemics were an ever-present terror in Europe for over three hundred years. With the exception of only two years, "plague was present somewhere in Europe during every year from 1347 to 1670."[1] Likely it was the Bubonic Plague, the dreaded Black Death, that caused most of these outbreaks, though some descriptions of symptoms suggest other diseases in some instances.[2] A Jesuit record from Coimbra in Portugal provides a horrifying glimpse of a disease outbreak early in 1558:

> Everyone was terrified to see so much death in front of their own eyes, because you did not hear anything all day except the tolling of the bells for the dead, now here, now there. From one side you heard someone mourning, from another the office of the dead. If you walked through the streets you encountered nothing but the dead. Seven deaths in a day were not unusual, and five or six shared the same funeral since there was not enough time for everyone to have their own. While the husband was dying, the wife was receiving extreme unction, and the son was confessing his sins, because there was not enough time for everything. Entire houses became completely empty. If you went through the streets you encountered no one, and if by chance you encountered someone it was not a man but the figure of a man, because everyone was yellow and discolored, incapable of standing, and terrified of death. And the stench was so bad that, according to what was said, they found toads in the houses.[3]

We notice here the shocking pervasiveness and frequency of death and a disorienting fear of it for those who did not succumb. Additionally, and toward the larger point in this essay, we get a sense of the pressure on clergy who were trying to care for the diseased, deceased, and bereaved.

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[1]A. Lynn Martin, *Plague? Jesuit Accounts of Epidemic Disease in the Sixteenth Century* (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1996), 7.

[2]This is the central thesis of A. Lynn Martin's *Plague?* In some outbreaks, for instance, the buboes and petechiae typical of Bubonic Plague were not presenting symptoms.

[3]Martin, *Plague?,* 30. The reference to toads could be due to their strong medieval associations with death, since they were frequent in graveyards. Toads and frogs were sometimes thought to have demonic connections.

A plague came to the city of Unna in Westphalia in July of 1597, where forty-one-year-old Philipp Nicolai had been serving as a Lutheran pastor for only about a year. He provided a vivid account of the epidemic in his devotional book *Frewden Spiegel desz ewigen Lebens*, or *The Joy of Eternal Life*, published two years later.[4] He describes the experience as "an unforeseen thunderstorm" that "broke into my own dwelling," revealing the helplessness that he and Unna's citizens felt as the horror of plague suddenly attacked them. Nicolai pictured them walking about with "a trembling heart and failing eyes and a parched soul," wondering if they would live another day.

> The plague, with its fury and rage, fell upon the city like an unforeseen thunderstorm and tempest and soon left no house unharmed, and lastly broke into my own dwelling, and the people for the most part went about with shattered spirit and terrified heart as if they were blind and half-dead, so that someone could have applied to our situation what Moses writes in Deuteronomy 28[:65–67] with the following words. "The Lord will give you a trembling heart and failing eyes and a parched soul so that your life will hang before you. Night and day will you be afraid and unsure of your own life. In the morning you will say, 'Oh, that I might live until the evening!' In the evening you will say, 'Oh, that I might live until the morning!'—for the fear of your heart, which shall terrify you, and for that which you will see with your eyes."[5]

It is unclear to what extent the plague "broke into" Nicolai's dwelling or who was afflicted by it. Nicolai himself was spared, but death nevertheless surrounded him. A disorienting terror filled the hearts of those in his house: "the people for the most part went about with shattered spirit and terrified heart as if they were blind and half-dead." He only received news about friends and family when those friends fell ill and died. "So also for myself, nothing but sad news and sad messages came to my ears concerning some of my sisters, kinsmen, and in-laws killed and taken away by the plague."[6] Nicolai felt the plague's effects, not with some kind of professional detachment, but in a deeply personal way, as one engulfed by an "unforeseen thunderstorm and tempest."

Unna was hit hard. From July 1597 to January 1598, it is estimated that about 1,300 people died.[7] Nicolai recorded the scene: "It was said here in Unna in all the streets, and often for several days in

[4]Matthew Carver's 2021 English translation of this book was indispensable to this study. Philipp Nicolai, *The Joy of Eternal Life,* trans. Matthew Carver (St. Louis: Concordia, 2021).

[5]Nicolai, *Joy of Eternal Life,* xiii.

[6]Nicolai, *Joy of Eternal Life,* xiii.

[7]C. T. Aufdemberge, *Christian Worship: Handbook* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1997), 234.

a row, more than twenty—twenty-four, twenty-seven, -eight, or -nine, and up to thirty—dead bodies were laid to rest in the cemetery not far from my dwelling."[8] "During a single week in the month of August, no fewer than 170 people died, and Nicolai is supposed to have conducted burials for up to thirty victims per day in his churchyard."[9] King Hezekiah, the king who was helpless in the face of deathly illness, gave voice to Nicolai's own suffering: "Now I shall no longer see the Lord, even the Lord in the land of the living."[10] These quotations demonstrate Nicolai's feeling of helplessness and hint at the source of solace he would find for himself and the people he served.

As Nicolai witnessed the pestilence taking lives at a shocking rate, he sought comfort. First, his own soul needed consolation. As darkness enveloped him, he turned to what he knew from his upbringing in a Christian household, what he had heard and read in song and poetry, and what he himself had preached. Nicolai turned to the Scriptures. In particular, he focused on the scriptural teaching of eternal life. He wrote, "During that time, nothing was sweeter, fonder, or more pleasant to me than contemplating the precious lofty article of eternal life procured by Christ's blood. I let this fill my heart day and night, and I searched the Scriptures to see what they testified concerning it."[11] As Nicolai recalled compiling his reflections, he revealed that his meditations were aimed first at preparing his own soul in the event of his death. He hoped that the same meditations would also bring comfort to others touched by the plague.

> Following this, I recorded my meditations day by day with pen and ink and found that I (God be praised) had success in the enterprise, being well cheered at heart, joyful in spirit, and completely at peace. I gave my manuscript the name and title *Joyful Mirror of Eternal Life* and undertook to leave behind this *Joyful Mirror*, which I composed as a testimony of my peaceful, joyful, and blessed Christian departure, whenever God should summon me from this world; or, if He should spare my health, then out of due Christian love to use it to serve other troubled Christians to whose homes also He sent the plague, and in this way to visit them with tangible comfort.[12]

Nicolai's *The Joy of Eternal Life* is a compilation of reflections on this "precious lofty article of eternal life." First, the book's production was spiritually therapeutic for Nicolai himself. Second, he left it as an artifact that could accomplish similar consoling for Christians in

[8]Nicolai, *Joy of Eternal Life,* xii.

[9]Aufdemberge, *Handbook,* 800.

[10]Nicolai, *Joy of Eternal Life,* xii–xiii.

[11]Nicolai, *Joy of Eternal Life,* xiii.

[12]Nicolai, *Joy of Eternal Life,* xiii.

other times and places. The conclusion of the lengthy subtitle of *The Joy of Eternal Life* says as much: "Written for the Blessed and Living Comfort of All Afflicted Christians, Who in Various Ways Are Made to Dwell as Exiles in This Vale of Tears."[13]

Nicolai's devotional practice bears some similarities to one Martin Luther had employed. The crisis in Luther's case was not his own survival but the church's. In 1530, when his friends and colleagues were in Augsburg appearing before the imperial diet, Luther was cloistered in Coburg Castle for his own safety. There, between receiving updates from Augsburg and writing his counsel to Melanchthon and others, he meditated on the Scriptures. Years later, Matthias Flacius, using Luther's correspondence and other sources, compiled Bible verses upon which Luther had reflected while at the Coburg. Published as "Sayings in Which Luther Found Comfort,"[14] this collection of quotations and reflections resembles in miniature what Nicolai would produce as *The Joy of Eternal Life*. Luther selected passages that spoke to his immediate circumstances. The verses that comforted him speak of God sustaining his people as they bear the cross and of Jesus defending his church against attacks. Luther reflected on such passages, then shared his reflections in his correspondence. Similarly, Nicolai centered his searching of the Scriptures on the theme of eternal life, then wrote down the product of his study. In each case, a minister of the gospel, wounded in spirit and filled with anxiety, engaged in concentrated meditation on a teaching of the Bible, first for his own comfort and then to uplift others around him.

In his youth, Nicolai had become acquainted with another Lutheran who had turned a time of crisis into something spiritually generative. Born in 1556, Nicolai was the son of a Lutheran pastor; the Scriptures were in his ears from infancy. As he grew, his schooling took place in several locations including Mühlhausen, where he became acquainted with the poetry of Mühlhausen native Ludwig Helmbold, a prolific Lutheran hymnwriter. Among Helmbold's enduring hymns is *Von Gott Will Ich Nicht Lassen*, which has survived to the present day in numerous English translations.[15] Helmbold wrote this hymn in 1563 to encourage his friends and family members when an outbreak of disease infected over four thousand residents of Erfurt, where he was serving.[16] Years after Helmbold's hymn, Nicolai, a Lutheran pastor in similar circumstances, would provide comfort to sufferers through hymnody.

[13]Nicolai, *Joy of Eternal Life,* cover page.

[14]Martin Luther, "Sayings in which Luther Found Comfort, 1530," *LW* 43:167–79.

[15]One example is the WELS hymnal *Christian Worship: Hymnal* published in 2021. This hymn of Helmbold is number 826, "From God Can Nothing Move Me."

[16]Aufdemberge, *Handbook,* 739.

A similar devotional practice recurred not long after Nicolai authored *The Joy of Eternal Life*. In 1611 Lutheran theologian Johann Gerhard finished his *Handbook of Consolations*, a compilation of devotions addressing spiritual struggles, including those believers experience when death is near. "Gerhard had recently endured the death of his newborn son. As he writes the *Handbook*, he is grieving the loss of his son and praying for his wife whose health is failing. Gerhard finished his work on May 1, 1611. His wife died before the month was over."[17] Only twenty-nine years old at the time, Gerhard had already experienced and witnessed suffering and loss. He had endured long bouts with severe illness, including the plague, during his youth. Gerhard's *Handbook*, then, followed in the tradition of Luther and Nicolai. During moments of crisis, they searched the Scriptures for comfort, then passed along the fruits of their study for the consolation of Christians to come.[18]

A common thread in all these instances is how a pastor's devotional reading and study, which began as something personal and internal, generated encouragement for others. In each of these cases, the pastor or theologian could have said, "I will search the Scriptures to comfort my soul, and other Christians ought to do the same," leaving those they served to read and study on their own. There probably were Christians who were already seeking refuge in the written word during their moments of crisis, while others struggled. So, recognizing that it was difficult for many Christians to derive comfort from the Bible when they did not know it well, these pastors not only internalized the Scriptures for their own relief but also shared their reflections to instruct, inspire, and give solace to others.

Nicolai sought to do this through *The Joy of Eternal Life*, consisting of several hundred Scripture citations and allusions, with Nicolai's reflections interspersed. He also includes lengthy quotations from *Meditationes*, which he attributes to Augustine. (Later research has cast doubt on Augustine's authorship, however, and so the current edition of *The Joy of Eternal Life* notes "author unknown" for these citations.) In the latter sections of the book, Nicolai quotes several of Luther's sermons, some transcribed by Johann Mathesius, an early

[17]From the introduction to Johann Gerhard, *Handbook of Consolations: for the Fears and Trials That Oppress Us in the Struggle with Death,* trans. Carl W. Beckwith (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009), xii.

[18]A contemporary parallel is Mark Paustian's essay, "*I Am Convinced:* A Devotional Appropriation of Romans 8 to the Life of the Pastor." The author shares deeply personal reflections spurred by Romans 8 for the sake of helping and healing fellow pastors. http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/handle/123456789/6669. He also refers to John Donne, who composed works of enduring comfort during the 1623 plague outbreak in London.

biographer of Luther, and by Basilius Faber, who was among the first to begin compiling Luther's works for publication.[19]

One recurring theme, especially in the book's latter half, is the bride-bridegroom and wedding imagery found in Matt 25. One of many examples follows.

> The elect soul is the royal bride and Jesus Christ is the royal Bridegroom and heavenly Adam. After her blessed departure from this world, she is brought to Him quickly by the heavenly hosts, that she may be with Him. And just as it seems very magnificent, joyful, and prestigious when a stately bride is conducted with great, joyful solemnity to her bridegroom in an exceedingly beautiful pleasure garden in the beautiful, pleasant season of spring, when the noble nightingale is heard everywhere—so, when a child of the light falls blessedly asleep in the Lord, his life of paradise begins immediately after death, in that the noble soul, just as in a royal pleasure garden, escorted by many hundred thousand of angels, comes to its most beautiful Bridegroom, the Lord Christ, with whom it finds sheer joy of paradise, life of paradise, pleasure of paradise, and glory of paradise and is refreshed with his fervent love.[20]

Note that Nicolai has redefined the moment of death as a joyful union with Christ, the Bridegroom, a subject we will explore further.

At the end of this devotional work, Nicolai appended four hymns, all relating in some way to the joy of eternal life.[21] Whether intentional or not, Nicolai combined the devotional techniques of Luther and Ludwig Helmbold noted above. Luther compiled and commented on Scripture passages, while Helmbold composed hymns. Included among these four hymns at the end of *The Joy of Eternal* Life is *Wachet Auf, Ruft Uns Die Stimme,* which we will examine more closely:

[19]Nicolai, *Joy of Eternal Life,* 256, notes 135 and 136.

[20]Nicolai, *Joy of Eternal Life,* 228.

[21]An avenue for further study would be a comparative study of the four hymns, one of which has been continually sung since its composition, *Wie Schön Leuchtet der Morgenstern*, "How Lovely Shines the Morning Star." *Wie Schön* resembles *Wachet Auf* in its use of bridal imagery. The subtitle of *Wie Schön* indicates that Nicolai drew inspiration for the hymn from Psalm 45, which includes the picture of a bride in lovely wedding adornment being brought to the king. See *the Joy of Eternal Life*, 271–86, for the four hymns.

1 *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*
Der Wächter sehr hoch auf der Zinne,
Wach auf, du Stadt Jerusalem!
Mitternacht heißt diese Stunde,
Sie rufen uns mit hellem Munde:
Wo seid ihr klugen Jungfrauen?
Wohlauf, der Bräut'gam kömmt,
Steht auf, die Lampen nehmt!
Halleluja!
Macht euch bereit
zu der Hochzeit,
Ihr müßet ihm entgegengehn!

"Wake, awake, for night is flying,"
The watchmen on the heights are crying,
"Awake, Jerusalem, arise!"
Midnight hears the welcome voices
And at the thrilling cry rejoices:
"Oh, where are all you virgins wise?
The Bridegroom comes—awake!
Your lamps with gladness take!
Alleluia!
With bridal care
Yourselves prepare
To meet the Bridegroom who is near."

2 *Zion hört die Wächter singen,*
Das Herz tut ihr vor Freuden springen,
Sie wachet und steht eilend auf.
Ihr Freund kommt vom Himmel prächtig,
Von Gnaden stark, von Wahrheit mächtig,
Ihr Licht wird hell, ihr Stern geht auf.
Nun komm, du werte Kron',
Herr Jesu, Gottes Sohn!
Hosianna!
Wir folgen all'
zum Freudensaal
Und halten mit das Abendmahl.

Zion hears the watchmen singing,
And all her heart with joy is springing;
She wakes, she rises from her gloom,
For her Lord comes down all-glorious,
The strong in grace, in truth victorious;
Her Star is ris'n, her Light is come.
Now come, O Blessed One,
Christ Jesus, God's own Son.
Hail! Hosanna!
We enter all
The marriage hall
To eat the Supper at your call.

3 *Gloria sei dir gesungen*
Mit Menschen- und mit Engelszungen,
Mit Harfen und mit Zimbeln schon.
Von zwölf Perlen sind die Pforten
An deiner Stadt, wir sind Konsorten
Der Engel hoch um deinen Thron.
Kein Aug hat je gespürt,
Kein Ohr hat mehr gehört
Solche Freude.
Des sind wir froh,
i-o, i-o,
Ewig in dulci jubilo.

Now let all the heav'ns adore you;
Let saints and angels sing before you
With harp and cymbal's clearest tone.
Of one pearl each shining portal,
Where, dwelling with the choir immortal,
We gather round your radiant throne.
No vision ever brought,
No ear has ever caught
Such great glory;
Therefore will we
In victory
Sing hymns of praise eternally.[22]

[22]German text: public domain. The English translation here, designed to be fluent English poetry, is from *Christian Worship: Hymnal* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2021) #486. In *The Joy of Eternal Life,* Matthew Carver presents a more literal, prosaic English translation of the German on pages 275–76.

A New Story for Christians Facing Death

When the plague came to Unna, a story was written, and Nicolai summarized it. We quote again from his preface to *The Joy of Eternal Life*:

> The people for the most part went about with shattered spirit and terrified heart as if they were blind and half-dead, so that someone could have applied to our situation what Moses writes in Deuteronomy 28[:65–67] with the following words. "The Lord will give you a trembling heart and failing eyes and a parched soul so that your life will hang before you. Night and day will you be afraid and unsure of your own life. In the morning you will say, 'Oh, that I might live until the evening!' In the evening you will say, 'Oh, that I might live until the morning!'—for the fear of your heart, which shall terrify you, and for that which you will see with your eyes."[23]

The story in which the residents of Unna were implicated was one of constant fear of death. People were disoriented, feeling "blind and half-dead" because they did not know if they or their loved ones would live another day. "Night and day, you will be afraid and unsure of your own life." How would the story for each person resolve? The only options seemed to be their death, the death of their loved ones, or both.

It was during this time, however, that Nicolai, through his own study of the Scriptures, was reminded that there was another option. There was a different story with a different resolution, and his parishioners and readers could be a part of it. He presented this story in *The Joy of Eternal Life* and the hymn at its conclusion, "Wake, Awake."

Stories often begin by introducing a conflict of some kind, and so it is with "Wake, Awake." The conflict is signaled by the first words of the first stanza, called out by the voice of the watchmen: "Wake up!" The parable to which the hymn alludes (Matt 25:1–13) gives the reason: though it is midnight, the Bridegroom is arriving, and it is time for the bridesmaids to meet him and join the procession. "Are you ready?" the watchmen ask: "*Wo seid ihr klugen Jungfrauen?*" "Where are you, wise virgins?" The Bridegroom's arrival requires readiness and immediate response. Is this what the Bridegroom will find?

The first stanza features the watchmen's cry and the conflict: "Wake up! The Bridegroom is coming! Prepare for the wedding feast!" The perspective shifts in the second stanza, first to the response of the wise virgins. The watchmen called for immediate action, and the wise virgins—here referred to collectively as Zion, the church—responded with joy. They have arisen eagerly and joined the procession to the

[23]Nicolai, *Joy of Eternal Life,* xiii.

wedding feast. Subsequently, the focus of the stanza shifts to the Bridegroom himself. He is the Beloved *(Freund).*

The third stanza begins with a call to praise: "Let *Gloria* be sung to you," voices and instruments combining to exalt God. The stanza evokes images from Revelation of the glorified city of God. The last line of the hymn begins with *ewig*, "eternally." While the initial conflict ("Wake up!" Will those waiting for the Bridegroom be ready?) has found a resolution (the wise virgins arise with joy and welcome the Bridegroom), the final resolution is in eternity, in ever-increasing and never-ending joy that goes beyond all comprehension. The story has moved from crisis to joy, from the darkness of midnight to the Light and Star that are Jesus, from time into eternity.

As the hymn progresses, Nicolai invites those meditating on the hymn into the story. He does this in the first stanza by subtly having the hymn singers identify with the bridesmaids being called on to respond to the watchmen. Note the first-person pronoun in the German text: *Sie [die Wächter] rufen* ***uns*** *mit hellem Munde*, "They [the watchmen] call to us." So, when the watchmen say, "Hallelujah! Make yourselves ready for the wedding," they speak to all Christians meditating on the hymn. Again, we note the insertion of a first-person pronoun in the second stanza: ***Wir*** *folgen all',* "We all follow to the wedding hall." So, just before these words, when the second stanza records the joyful cry, *Nun komm, du werte Kron', Herr Jesu, Gottes Sohn!* ("Now come, worthy Crown, Lord Jesus, Son of God!") who is speaking? Is it the wise virgins or the singers of the hymn? It is both; they are the same. Throughout the third stanza, "we" are the ones speaking. We, the singers of the hymn, will be "companions of the angels" (***wir*** *sind Konsorten der Engeln*), and we are happy (*des sind* ***wir*** *froh*) because this eternal joy awaits us.

The narrative of the hymn presents a crisis by asking each Christian, "Are you ready to meet Jesus when he comes?" For those living in Nicolai's day, this moment of crisis could have arrived when the plague entered their city. The calls of the watchmen in the hymn would have directed their attention not only to Christ's final advent in glory, but more immediately to the moment of their death, whenever that might occur. (Recall Nicolai's description of those in Unna during the plague, wondering each morning if they would live until evening.) Nicolai's story would have reframed and redefined death for them. In the narrative of the hymn, death for a Christian is no longer separation—from family, life, and joy—but the opposite. Death now means not separation but union with Christ, the loving Bridegroom. Therefore, Christians can meet death with celebration rather than sadness. It is not the entry into a graveyard but into a *Freudensaal*, a "joy-hall," where a feast is commencing. Pastor Nicolai is inviting Christians

into the world of the hymn, inviting them to place themselves into this new, true story and live with joy, not dreadfully, even when surrounded by death.

Signs and Symbols as Windows

Not only does "Wake, Awake" reframe the believer's death by telling a new story, but also through potent signs, symbols, and images. Each of these symbols and images, in its own way, acts as a window into a larger world, and Nicolai uses these semiotic worlds to renew the hope of Christians facing death.

We now note several such windows in "Wake, Awake" and the larger conceptual worlds into which they provide access. As we do, we perceive that Nicolai is tapping into elements of a rich devotional tradition. The use of hymnody, meditation on the images in the Scriptures, historic *ars moriendi* literature, elements of bridal mysticism—all these Nicolai weaves into his devotional practice. Then he utilizes them as he provides spiritual encouragement for others, tapping into the unique power of each.

Joyful Wedding Feast

In *The Joy of Eternal Life*, Nicolai provided this title for the hymn: "Hymn of the voice at midnight and of the wise virgins, who go to meet their heavenly Bridegroom (Matthew 25)."[24] The first stanza begins with a thematically related reference to Isa 52:8.[25] Then the poetry, shifting to Matt 25, reflects the parable's message: be spiritually prepared for Christ, the Bridegroom, to return at the end of time. Notably, though, the stanza speaks only of the wise virgins. The darker edges of the parable are omitted; the foolish virgins and their sad fate (being locked out of the feast) are not mentioned. Instead, the stanza emphasizes the joy of going out to meet the Bridegroom. The command to prepare—a sobering one in the parable, given the foolish virgins' failure to prepare—is issued, but the command is positive in tone (*Macht euch bereit zu der Hochzeit*, "Make yourselves ready *for the wedding*") and it is preceded with a celebratory word of praise (*Halleluja!*).

This stanza's celebratory tone is consistent with Nicolai's use of the biblical wedding metaphor as a source of joy throughout *The Joy of Eternal Life*. When Nicolai, for the first time in the book, invokes the Matt 25 parable explicitly, he emphasizes preparation in anticipation

[24]Nicolai, *Joy of Eternal Life,* 275.

[25]"Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy. When the LORD returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes" (NIV).

of the Bridegroom's arrival.[26] Shortly after that, Nicolai clarifies what he perceives as the main point of the wedding feast as metaphor for eternal life.

> But where wedding feasts and nuptial honors are mentioned, we properly understand such terms in no other way than as the great, honorable day of a bridegroom with his bride, as well as the glad company of honorable and finely dressed people who join the bride and groom in being merry, eating, drinking, and singing and having hearts filled with joy.[27]

In another wedding feast reference, Nicolai evokes images of Eden and piles up favorable terms as he pictures a nuptial feast there. This, he says, is how a believer ought to picture the end of temporal life—as the entrance to the feast. Note that he even brings readers back to Eden:

> How else can or should an elect soul view his blessed departure from this world (if it has overcome sin and death in faith) except as a wonderfully comforting life of paradise, where it is brought to the heavenly Adam as a newborn Eve and celebrates sheer heavenly joy and a heavenly wedding feast with Him? Surely it will and must feel precisely as if you had left this valley of sorrow by temporal death and suddenly entered a beautiful pleasure garden for a wedding feast, where for indescribably joy, pleasure, beauty, splendor, majesty, and glory all things live, laugh, leap, and dance so sweetly, so prettily, so powerfully, and so comfortingly that no man on earth can describe it.[28]

Though it is not usually evident in English translations, forms of the word "joy," *Freude*, occur three times in the hymn, and the third instance of *Freude* is followed by *froh*, "happy." The imagery of a joy-filled feast reveals Nicolai's strategy for applying pastoral care to people at the time of death: to reframe the moment of death as the moment a joyful celebration begins. References to the wedding feast metaphor frequently occur in the last two sections of *The Joy of Eternal Life*.[29] When Nicolai refers to the *Hochzeit,* the wedding feast, these references in "Wake, Awake" appear as more than passing illustrations of heaven.

[26]"In the second passage [Matt 25:1-30], this life of paradise is called a wedding feast, at which Christ rejoices with His elect children of light, who have fallen blessedly asleep in the Lord, and to it He has also summoned from this valley of sorrow all who await his coming with believing hearts as if with burning lamps. For He compares Himself with a bridegroom who knocks at midnight and whom His godly Christians go out to meet like wise virgins with burning lamps and go in with Him to the wedding feast, and he exhorts us to constant readiness and expectations of His coming." Nicolai, *Joy of Eternal Life*, 208–9.

[27]Nicolai, *Joy of Eternal Life*, 209.

[28]Nicolai, *Joy of Eternal Life*, 210.

[29]Pages 208–68 in the 2021 English edition of *The Joy of Eternal Life*. Examples of the wedding feast metaphor can be found on, e.g., pages 214, 215, 228, 230, 232, 235, and 254.

Nicolai is transporting readers of *The Joy of Eternal Life* back into the semiotic domain he has more fully developed earlier in the work, namely, the wedding as the place of bliss and perfection.

Ars Moriendi

Preparing for death with a spirit of joy was a theme of the Lutheran versions of *ars moriendi* books in the decades leading up to "Wake, Awake." The *ars moriendi* had long served as booklets to help Christians prepare for death. By Nicolai's time, though, this tradition had been adapted by Lutherans and reformed in light of the gospel of full forgiveness, which results in the believer's certainty of salvation as death approaches. Luther himself had set the pace for this reform. His "Sermon on Preparing to Die" in 1519 emphasized gospel comfort conveyed to the dying through word and sacraments, as opposed to the medieval *ars moriendi* that focused on the individual's responsibility to repent as death drew near. Austra Reinis, who conducted rhetorical and theological analyses of Luther's "Sermon on Preparing to Die" and subsequent Lutheran *ars moriendi,* observes how Luther appeals to both intellect and emotion in cultivating a spirit of joy in the heart of the dying believer—a different approach than the old *ars moriendi* had employed.[30]

The Joy of Eternal Life and its concluding hymns, including "Wake, Awake," then, served as *ars moriendi* in the Lutheran sense of the term. In its original context at the end of the devotional work, the hymn is a brief, poetic *ars moriendi*. The hymn helped singers mentally access the scriptural meditations in *The Joy of Eternal Life* and in that world of consoling literature. It appealed with poetry and metaphor to intellect and emotion, helping the believer picture his departure from this life as the joyful beginning of an extravagant, celebratory feast with Christ, the Bridegroom.

The Supper

The Joy of Eternal Life and "Wake, Awake" display another Lutheran innovation in the *ars moriendi* tradition, visible in stanza two of the hymn. Note the words *Hosianna! Wir folgen all' zum Freudensaal / Und halten mit das Abendmahl*. The Lutheran innovation is the prominence of the sacraments for the comfort of the dying. Reinis explains:

> Also in contrast with the *Ars moriendi* is the connection that Luther establishes between the devilish temptations and the deathbed sacraments. While the *Ars moriendi* tersely instructs the dying person to receive the sacraments without dwelling on their significance, Luther offers consolation in reflection on the meaning of the sacraments. He teaches that the sacraments are a visible sign of the victory of Christ and the Christian over the temptations. As such, they offer assurance to the dying person of the certainty of his salvation. Such consolation based on the meaning of the sacraments represents an innovation on Luther's part and is a significant departure from the *Ars moriendi*.[31]

[30]Austra Reinis, "Reforming the Art of Dying: The *ars moriendi* in the German Reformation (1519–1528)" (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 2003), 140.

Nicolai reveals this sacramental emphasis first in the word *Hosianna* in stanza two of "Wake, Awake."[32] Even clearer is the sacramental reference at the close of stanza two: *Wir folgen all' zum Freudensaal / Und halten mit das Abendmahl*, more literally rendered, "We all follow to the hall of joy and join in celebrating the Supper." *Abendmahl* had—and still has—the connotation in German not of a general evening meal but *the* meal, i.e., Holy Communion.[33] References to the Supper are not plentiful in *The Joy of Eternal Life*, yet the few that are there reveal Nicolai's beliefs. For instance:

> While on earth we eat the body of our Lord Christ and drink His blood both spiritually in faith and sacramentally with the external mouth in the most worthy Supper, yet hereafter in the heavenly paradise the elect soul no longer sees and tastes in faith nor through a glass darkly, but manifestly, how pleasant and kind its Bridegroom is. It eats of the tree of life which is in the paradise of God and hears the pleasant, gracious voice of its King to all the elect: "Eat, O My beloved ones, and drink My joy and be drunk."[34]

The *Hosianna* and *Abendmahl* language of the hymns, then, can be viewed from a semiotic perspective. Sacramental references in the hymns can be seen as metonyms that open a window to the sign system Nicolai has been cultivating throughout the body of *The Joy of Eternal Life.* Throughout the work, particularly in the final two major sections, Nicolai repeatedly portrays eternal life as meeting and feast-

[31]Reinis, "Reforming the Art of Dying," 138.

[32]Lutherans would have recognized this word from the Sanctus, a canticle sung in connection with Holy Communion. In the canticle's *Benedictus Qui Venit* section, worshipers echo the words from Ps 118, including "Hosanna," which people shouted when Jesus entered Jerusalem. In the context of the Communion liturgy, "Hosanna" implies that as Jesus came then, he comes now in the Supper.

[33]This sacramental reference *(Abendmahl)* in stanza two is missing in many English hymnals, primarily, it seems, because translator Catherine Winkworth did not include it in her translation. The English translation above, from the 2021 WELS hymnal, seeks to restore the sacramental reference.

[34]Nicolai, *The Joy of Eternal Life,* 232. There appears to be a discrepancy in the translation of the last line. The Scripture reference at the end of the citation is Song of Songs 5:1b. That verse in the 1545 Lutherbibel: *Eβt, meine Lieben, und trinkt, meine Freunde, und werdet trunken!* This is how the verse is quoted in the 1909 edition of the *Freudenspiegel,* but Matthew Carver evidently translated *Freude* (joy) instead of *Freunde* (beloved ones). Perhaps the 1607 edition, from which he was working, has this reading. Regardless, the sense of the citation remains essentially the same.

ing with the Bridegroom. Then, with words like *Wir folgen all' zum Freudensaal / Und halten mit das Abendmahl*, Nicolai invites readers and singers of the hymn back into that sign system, envisioning the celebratory feast in heaven.

Given the circumstances of the hymn's writing—that is, Nicolai's plague experience—and the context of the hymn's placement at the end of his devotional work on eternal life, it seems likely that the *Abendmahl* reference here is also meant as a double entendre. The Supper as *viaticum*, or "medicine of immortality," is an image that Lutherans, following the lead of church fathers, had been employing since at least the days of Martin Chemnitz.[35] The Supper provided the antidote to death; thus, receiving the Meal was a preparation for death and the eternal life that lay beyond. The reference to the *Abendmahl*, then, could be urging readers to envision two scenarios: Christ, the Bridegroom, meeting a dying Christian first in the sacrament, which would prepare the dying believer to meet Christ in the eternal feast of heaven.[36] Such a reading is consistent with this reference to the Supper in *The Joy of Eternal Life*:

> *How a Christian is to prepare and ready himself for eternal life.*
>
> As long as a Christian lives on earth, he is to concern himself only with the realm of faith, adhere to the revealed will of God, hear diligently the preaching of the Gospel, go to the Supper, make confession, believe, pray, conduct himself as a Christian—this is what he is to carry on until death and then not doubt that the soul will depart this life and the realm of faith into the realm of sight…[37]

[35]See the essay by Gaylin Schmeling, "Johann Gerhard: Theologian and Pastor," appended to Gerhard's *Sacred Meditations,* translated by Wade Johnston (Saginaw: Magdeburg, 2008), 278.

[36]Gerald Krispin has a different view of the sacramental references in "Wake, Awake" and "How Lovely Shines the Morning Star," as contrasted with the paucity of such references in the main body of *The Joy of Eternal Life.* See Gerald Krispin, "A Mirror of Life in the Face of Death: A Study in the Pastoral Care of Philip Nicolai," *Logia* 7, no. 2 (1998), 18. Krispin's view seems to be that the entirety of *The Joy of Eternal Life* is about the believer's communion with Christ. Since, during this life, the believer communes most closely with Christ in the Lord's Supper, references to such communion in *The Joy of Eternal Life* should be interpreted primarily not as pictures of heaven but as pictures of the sacrament. Put another way: Nicolai meant for first readers to read about heaven and think of the Lord's Supper. However, the more natural reading reverses the direction—that as Nicolai referred to the Supper in his hymns, he meant for his readers to think of heaven. Krispin maintains that the main picture of unity Nicolai had in mind was Christ uniting himself to believers in his Meal and that the sacramental allusions in his hymns revealed this intention. This seems unlikely. To be sure, Nicolai thought of the Supper as one key to a vibrant, Christian spirituality and, therefore, a consolation in death; his hymns' allusions to the Supper indicate that he valued the sacrament highly. They also portray eternal life as the eschatological fulfillment of the Supper. It could be that Nicolai included few sacramental references simply because of his overall strategy for preparing Christians for death: to present, over and over, narrowly focused meditations upon the joys of the life to come. Such a strategy is not, as Krispin implies, "an introspective journey into the experience of Christ within the soul." Instead, it is Nicolai repeatedly pointing his readers outside themselves to the promise of the gospel and to the final fulfillment of that promise.

Song of Songs

To reinforce that death for the Christian means union with Christ, Nicolai includes another important metonym, usually not reflected in English translations, in the second stanza of "Wake, Awake." The word is *Freund*, as in *Ihr Freund kommt vom Himmel prächtig. Mein Freund* is the Lutherbibel's standard translation of the Hebrew דּוֹדִי, "my beloved," throughout the Song of Songs.[38] Luther was open to viewing the bride-bridegroom relationship in the Song as a picture of Christ and the Church, or of Christ and the individual Christian.[39]

Not coincidentally, references to the Song of Songs occur in *The Joy of Eternal Life* close to many of Nicolai's depictions of eternal life as a wedding feast.[40] Nicolai points to the Song not so much as a picture of the soul's communion with Christ in life but more as a picture of the eternal life the believer will enjoy with Christ after death. Nicolai's view of the Song is evident in the following—one of his many depictions of the Christian soul meeting Christ after death:

> Here straightaway and in its full vigor commences that blessed joy and heavenly pleasure spoken of with pregnant words in Solomon's Song of Songs. There the soul comes out of the realm of faith and into the realm of sight, and there its confidence which in this world is set on its heavenly Bridegroom, along with its blessed hope, becomes a noble light and radiance so that it there rises as the dawn and as the beautiful moon in the midst of the holy angels and looks with opened eyes upon its dear Beloved and Redeemer.[41]

[37]Nicolai, *Joy of Eternal Life,* 254.

[38]There are fifteen occurrences of *Freund* in the 1545 Lutherbibel's translation of Song of Songs. For a few examples, see Song 1:13, 5:10, and 6:3. *Freund* is the term for "beloved" that Nicolai consistently used in the German version of *The Joy of Eternal Life.*

[39]Christopher W. Mitchell, *The Song of Songs* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2003), 483. Luther's interpretation of the Song of Songs was symbolic, though his view of the symbolism was not fixed. He sometimes saw the bride figure as representing God's people and the groom figure as representing Christian magistrates. He often thought of one or the other figure corporately, representing a group of people. "Yet," Christopher Mitchell notes, "Luther also allows for the individual interpretation and often moves from one to the other: 'For the whole book is as it were a conversation between God and His people, or between the conscience and the Word.' Luther therefore is at least partially amenable to the view that the Song involves the love between God and the individual Christian's soul."

[40]See pages 228–36 in *The Joy of Eternal Life.*

[41]Nicolai, *Joy of Eternal Life,* 228.

Being forever with the Bridegroom means eternal radiance and companionship—the opposites of the darkness and loneliness of death. Images that connote this joy, like "light" and "in the midst of the holy angels," are reflected in "Wake, Awake": *Ihr Licht wird hell. . . . An deiner Stadt wir sind Konsorten der Engel hoch um deinen Thron*. "Her Light becomes bright. . . . In your city we are companions of the angels high around your throne." Nicolai's bridal imagery, then, evokes the depictions of intimacy, love, joy, and companionship in the Song of Songs. By signaling this connection, Nicolai communicates that at a Christian's death, a new, eternal era of closeness and joy between the Christian soul and Christ will commence—a reason for the dying to rejoice and not to fear. *Freund* is one of the connection points. Its occurrence in the hymn functions as a window into the vivid, evocative language of Song of Songs, which Nicolai and his readers would have thought of as a portrayal of the soul's intimate connection to Christ in heaven.[42]

Retooled Bridal Imagery

The abundance of wedding metaphors and references to Song of Songs in *The Joy of Eternal Life* and "Wake, Awake" likely owes itself partly to an additional source, a sign system of its own: bridal mysticism in Christian devotional literature. Present in the writings of many mystical authors of medieval Europe, the bride-bridegroom metaphor had been used to portray intimate closeness, for instance, the intimate union of the persons within the Holy Trinity and the believer's spiritual union with Christ.[43] Luther had been familiar with the works of Bernard of Clairvaux, who had often employed the language of bridal mysticism.

Theodore Bell notes, however, that Luther adapted Bernard's bridal imagery for his own purposes: "The bridal theme provides him [Luther] with words to express the mutual affection in the relationship of Christ with the believing soul and of Christ with His church. Where there is any resonance to the themes of the mystics, Luther

[42]A related note: I do not take issue with the translation of *"Freund"* as "Lord" rather than as "Friend" or "Beloved." "Lord" is an acceptable English translation. One reason is that "Lord," like *Freund,* consists of only one syllable, as opposed to "Beloved," which would be problematic considering the meter of the poetry. Another more important reason that *Freund* need not be translated as "beloved" relates to semiotics; "beloved" does not connote for English speakers today what *Freund* connoted for Lutherans in Nicolai's day. Translating *Freund* as "beloved" would be attempting to provide a window into a sign system that does not exist in the minds of most present-day English-speaking Lutherans.

[43]See, for example, Paul E. Szarmach, ed., *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 74, 168, 177, 180.

interprets them as referring to faith and the word of God."[44] Bengt Hoffmann suggests that it was bridal imagery that provided Luther with an emotional yet justification-centered way to express the believer's relationship with God: "According to Luther the 'experience' which belongs to faith and constitutes an inextricable part of God's address to man in justification, exceeds all other kinds of experience. Precisely bridal metaphors proved useful to bring this theological insight home."[45] From Luther's writing, Hoffmann provides an example that demonstrates how Luther expressed the faith of the believer using imagery from the Song: "However, true faith states this: 'My beloved is mine and I embrace him with gladness.'"[46]

Nicolai's use of bridal imagery was not, therefore, a new incarnation of the bridal mysticism of Bernard or other mystics but a Lutheran retooling of bridal language into a faith-centered metaphor.[47] Nicolai sought to express the connection between Christ and the Christian with his use of bridal imagery, and his purpose in doing so was to provide comfort in death. Krispin helpfully summarizes Nicolai's approach. After mentioning Luther's use of the bride-bridegroom metaphor to express the "great exchange"—Christ, as bridegroom, giving his righteousness to sinners, his bride—Krispin explains how Nicolai had a similar goal in using this imagery throughout *The Joy of Eternal Life*:

> In a similar manner, Nicolai comes to use the bridegroom-bride image to provide solace for those who feel that death has or will leave them destitute by reminding them of the Christ who has bestowed upon them all things eternal, indeed, who has gone

[44]Theo M. M. A. C. Bell, "Luther's Reception of Bernard," *CTQ* 59 (October 1995), 262.

[45]Bengt R. Hoffmann, *Luther and the Mystics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), 156.

[46]Quoted in Hoffmann, 156.

[47]Lutheran theologian Johann Gerhard regularly employed bridal imagery to depict the relationship between Christ and the believer. In 1606, seven years after *The Joy of Eternal Life,* Gerhard published his *Sacred Meditations.* In Meditation XXIII, he refers to the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25 (Gerhard, trans. Johnston, *Sacred Meditations,* 100). In Meditation LXI, he refers to Christ as the Bridegroom depicted in Song 5:10 (Johnston, 174). In Meditation LXVII, he depicts Christ, whom the believer will see in eternity, as the one with sweet voice and lovely face in Song 2:14 (Johnston, 196). Gerhard also used the bridal metaphor in his 1522 *Explanation of the History of the Suffering and Death of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (trans. Elmer M. Hohle, Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 1998). The foreword to that work begins, "In the Song of Solomon [chapter] 7, the spiritual Bride of Christ (that is, the true Christian Church and each particular true member of the same—each believing soul) is described as follows" (Hohle, 1). Gerhard later connects Christ with Song chapter 1: "This Friend and beloved Bridegroom of the Church is Christ the Lord" (Hohle, 17). He speaks of the soul as "spiritual bride" (Hohle, 83, 301). See also Gerhard's aforementioned *Handbook of Consolations* (trans. Beckwith), 50–1 and 51n59.

> before them to prepare their eternal home. . . . Therefore, Nicolai never loses sight of Luther's essential emphasis in the application of the language of bride-mysticism to expound upon the doctrine of justification: the absolute dependence upon Christ the bridegroom for his gifts. . . . Nicolai's use of mystical language is therefore for the most part a metaphor by which he sought to provide solace and comfort to those who grieved a death or themselves were near the grave.[48]

The description of Christ, the *Freund* or Beloved, in stanza two of "Wake, Awake" supports this reading: *Von Gnaden stark, von Wahrheit mächtig*, "strong with grace, mighty with truth." Christians see the Bridegroom as resplendent (*prächtig*) not merely because they are experiencing an immediate communion with him, but rather because he is the one who "became flesh" to save them, the Son of God "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

Reinforcing this "Lutheranizing" of bridal imagery is stanza three of the hymn. The opening words call forth a doxology: *Gloria sei dir gesungen* / *Mit Menschen- und mit Engelszungen,* / *Mit Harfen und mit Zimbeln schon.* Nicolai then pictures heaven itself by alluding to Rev 21:21, the gates of the heavenly city, each gate made of a single pearl. He envisions glorified believers consorting with the holy angels—a picture he has painted several times in the body of *The Joy of Eternal Life.* With an allusion to 1 Cor 2:9 ("No eye has seen, no ear has heard . . . what God has prepared for those who love him.") he removes any limitation from the joy that every glorified soul will experience; *solche Freude,"* "such joy," will exceed all imagining. Yet even here, there is a subtle reminder that this feast to come is grounded in an incarnational reality. The stanza begins and ends with Latin: *Gloria . . . in dulci jubilo*. *Gloria* echoes the Bethlehem angels' *Gloria in altissimis Deo* in Luke 2:14.

In the same spirit, *In dulci jubilo* is familiar as the title of a Christmas hymn, commonly translated in English as "Now Sing We, Now Rejoice." This macaronic, German-Latin hymn originated in the fourteenth century. We know that Nicolai knew of this hymn because he had recommended in *The Joy of Eternal Life* that Christians sing it on their deathbeds:

> In the same way, keep yourself in the ship of the Gospel and your Christian Creed, trust Your Savior, and in the throes of death let your heart (and, if possible, your tongue) be filled with the sound of the joyful hymns of Christmas and Easter: "From heaven above to earth I come," "Now sing we, now rejoice," "We praise You, Jesus, at Your birth," "Christ Jesus lay in death's strong bands,"

[48]Krispin, "A Mirror of Life," 16.

> etc. Oh, that is exceedingly great balm to the suffering heart! And, oh, how blessed are the people who can shout for joy in this way![49]

This encouragement to sing informs a reading of the first lines of Stanza Three of *Wachet Auf.* Dying believers should sing not only to praise God, but also to be comforted by the very words they are singing. As they sing, even with faltering breath, "the joyful hymns of Christmas and Easter," they preach to themselves: "The Son of God became flesh and conquered death, and so I triumph, even in death!" The vision of eternal life Nicolai puts before his readers is not ethereal or immaterial but grounded in incarnational reality.

The bridal imagery in "Wake, Awake" connotes a vibrant discourse: Scripture's teaching that Christ is intimately connected to his people by faith, and for that reason, death leads to an eternal feast. Nicolai's employing of this imagery, therefore, becomes a force multiplier; not only does the poetry of the hymn itself convey comforting signs, but it also subtly points to the larger ways that Nicolai has used bridal imagery throughout *The Joy of Eternal Life* to provide consolation to dying and bereaved Christians. The hymn's image of a wedding opens a window to an infinite vista: the ultimate feast and celebration that every believer will experience with Christ, the Bridegroom, in glory.

This is not an exhaustive list of the evocative signs, symbols, and images in the hymn; those who meditate upon this hymn will find more windows than those commented upon here. The biblical allusions in the hymn are numerous, and the semiotic power of the hymn is enduring. Even those who have sung the hymn countless times can continually plumb new depths of insight and comfort. Pastor Nicolai used these symbolic windows to access larger worlds of meaning for the comfort of his own soul and of those who would read and sing his work. Our souls, too, experience the joy and comfort that he found in his devotional practice.

A Model for Pastoral Care in Times of Crisis

"Wake, Awake" was the product of a unique cultural moment. The plague outbreak, the recent renovation of the *ars moriendi*, and the Wittenberg Reformation's exaltation of the gospel and the Scriptures—all these factors combined to imbue "Wake, Awake" with a unique, consoling potency for its first listeners and singers. Much of this power is rooted in the timeless Scriptures, and so it has endured even after Nicolai's cultural moment has passed. Other facets of the hymn, such as the potency of bridal imagery, are more time-bound.

[49]Nicolai, *The Joy of Eternal Life,* 198. *In dulci jubilo* is referred to here with the title "Now Sing We, Now Rejoice."

Our cultural moment differs from Nicolai's in important respects. Sudden death from plague outbreaks—even the coronavirus pandemic that began in 2020—is not the immediate threat it was in 1599. Christianity is not part of the fabric of American culture as it was in Nicolai's Westphalia. Even in Christian churches, many do not know the core narratives and theological truths of the Bible, and so the semiotic power of many biblical images and metaphors cannot be assumed. Therefore, we cannot derive a one-to-one analog from Nicolai's practice of spiritual care, as if to say, "Exactly as Philipp Nicolai did, so you should do."

Yet we recognize in Nicolai and what he composes a general pattern that could be useful:

- A particular cultural moment or crisis occasions a use of devotional resources at hand centered on a particular scriptural teaching that is replete with images and metaphors.
- The one immersed in this devotional practice appropriates this sign system for his own consolation and strengthening.
- Then he creates an artifact that embodies the product of his study, and he shares it for the benefit of others in crisis. This artifact both builds conceptual sign systems in the minds of those who receive it and helps them access those sign systems for their comfort.
- The artifact endures, providing future opportunities to access the scriptural sign systems it builds.

In the body of *The Joy of Eternal Life*, Nicolai is sharing the fruits of his own deep study of the teaching of eternal life, a study he undertook in response to the plague outbreak in Unna. As he shares, he is building scriptural sign systems in the minds of his readers, or he is reinforcing and expanding them if they already exist. It is as if he were saying, "You know about eternal life, but let me put that vision before your minds' eye over and over again so you can see its beauty from many angles." He repeatedly uses wedding imagery to describe eternal life, and in so doing, he brings various aspects of it (e.g., that upon death, one meets the loving Bridegroom, that a laughter-filled celebration begins, etc.) to life for his readers. Then, in the hymns in the appendix of the book, he employs language with metonymic force to summon these sign systems again, touching the intellect and emotions of his readers for their comfort in the face of death. By framing these metonyms in hymnody, he gives them enduring power. He is enabling his readers to access their consoling power each time they sing or meditate on them. In short, Nicolai cultivates sign systems so that he can later tap into their power as he cares for souls.

Pastors can employ a similar method to enhance their spiritual care. For instance, rather than teaching biblical themes and motifs to increase general biblical literacy, they can approach teaching biblical themes with a more focused purpose: to build a library of vivid and spiritually communicative images in the minds and hearts of their people so that they can then access those images in their future preaching and pastoral care. How does this differ from the larger project of building biblical literacy in a congregation or group of Christians? Isn't this what a regular program of preaching and teaching, guided by lectionary and curriculum, does routinely?

It is similar and, to be sure, these methods are invaluable in the spiritual growth of any group of Christians. What I have in mind here, however, is something that arises from a particular moment in the life of a pastor and the group he serves. The model Nicolai presents is also deeper and more intentional. David Schmitt advocates the cultivating of a "scriptural imaginary" in the minds of Christian people.[50] A "scriptural imaginary" implies a Christian becoming filled with the stories, images, concepts, poetry, and pictures of the Scriptures. David Lose advocates going beyond addressing biblical *literacy,* "as if knowledge of biblical quotations, places, and names were the issue. Rather, we need to develop in our congregations a meaningful familiarity with the biblical story such that it can inform, shape, and assist our daily living. We struggle, that is, not simply with a lack of biblical knowledge but rather with an impoverished biblical *imagination*."[51]

Lose goes on to encourage the fostering of "biblical fluency," which goes beyond biblical literacy to encompass not only knowledge but also "the ability to think—without thinking—in the target language" of the Scriptures.[52] Mark Paustian encourages something similar: "I have advocated not only asking of a biblical text, 'What does this teach?' When that task is exhausted, I also like to ask, 'What does it *do* to you?' for the sake of an experience of the beautiful diversity of the Scripture's forms that is not confined to the intellect alone."[53] Nicolai's presentation of the many facets of eternal life seeks

[50]David R. Schmitt, "Discerning Devotion: Devotion and Discipleship in a Discontented Age," presentation to 2019 Theological Symposium at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, https://scholar.csl.edu/theo/2019/Schedule/2/. The reference to "scriptural imaginary" occurs at approximately 40:10. Schmitt is working with Charles Taylor's concept of "social imaginary" and David Lose's "biblical fluency" (see below).

[51]David J. Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads: How the World—and Our Preaching—Is Changing* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 85. Emphasis added.

[52]Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads,* 103. Note that the use of terms like "imaginary" does not mean to imply that the truths and stories of Scripture are "imagined" in the sense of being fictional; rather, the use of "imaginary" and "imagination" here simply refers to how the truths and real events of the Bible touch the human imagination.

[53]Paustian, *"I Am Convinced,"* 31n223.

not only to present information but also to spark imagination. So do the words of "Wake, Awake." This is not a theologian presenting an outline of a scriptural doctrine—though that certainly has value, and Nicolai, on other occasions, engaged in such work. Rather, in his devotional book and hymn, we find a once-dying man waving his arms with abandon, directing wasting souls to an open window through which they will see images that will make them new. This is Nicolai, the child of God and the pastor, attending to a unique moment in his life and the lives of those he serves, listening to the Scriptures as they speak to that moment, then prioritizing some sign systems that address the unique struggle of the hour.

One way for pastors to do this is to think of preaching and teaching as building sign systems and accessing them to address spiritual needs. First, consider an example of this within the general ministry of the Word in a congregation. Jesus as the Lamb of God is a scriptural metonym, an image that connotes a larger world of meaning. Building an awareness of "Jesus the Lamb" helps cultivate the "scriptural imaginary." Pastors can envision the future use of this sign as they preach and teach it. At times, they may choose to concentrate on *building* this sign system in the minds of their listeners. They could do this by focusing on developing aspects of the "Lamb of God" sign system as they preach and teach. This could mean, when opportunities arise in group or individual ministry settings, expounding the meaning of lamb's blood in the Exodus Passover account, the prophecy of the Suffering Servant in Isa 53, John the Baptist's pointing to Jesus as the Lamb of God, the appearances of the triumphant Lamb in Revelation, and the liturgical use of this motif in the *Agnus Dei*. Their purpose on these occasions is to serve people with the Word, of course, but also to cultivate in people's minds a rich sign system, a "scriptural imaginary."

At other times, however, preachers may concentrate on *accessing* the scriptural imaginary they have cultivated. In a sermon with the aim of comforting listeners who are burdened by guilt over past sins, the preacher may call upon the sign system he has been cultivating: "Remember the Lamb! Jesus is the Lamb who has died in your place. He has already removed your sin. The Lamb who was slain for you now lives, and he is here to give you his forgiveness right now." The pastor, having built the sign system of the Lamb of God over time, could send a brief text message to a parishioner struggling with guilt: "Remember the Lamb." Or, in the mold of Nicolai, a pastor could point a struggling sinner to a hymn,[54] either one sung in public worship or one an individual could meditate on.[55] Picture a note from the pastor that includes the words of a hymn: "'This Lamb is Christ, the soul's great friend.'[56] The Lamb is Christ, *your* soul's great friend." Or, "'Before the Son we'll stand, made faultless through the Lamb.'[57] *Faultless*—that's how Jesus thinks of you!" In his preaching and teaching, the pastor has built the sign system; he can now access it to communicate the gospel's comfort, opening a window to a scene that the Holy Spirit will use for the care of a soul in need.

Think of this pattern also in a more specific set of circumstances. Imagine a time of conflict within a congregation: church members in sharp disagreement, with wounds inflicted and suffered. The pastor turns to his Bible; bewildered, he does not know what else to do. He is transported to the early days of the New Testament church, where factions and fighting seemed to threaten the survival of the family of God. He reads and reflects on 1 Cor chapter 1, then chapters 12–14; then Eph 4 and Rom 14. He notes the frankness with which the apostle acknowledges division and conflict. He also perceives that Christ, in his grace, continued to dwell among his fractured people. He sees that the Spirit did not cease equipping the saints—and these believers remained saints, despite their sins—with gifts to serve one another in love. And one image stands out to him: the body of Christ. That image is a metonym, a window into the reality that all believers, even when in their weakness they are clashing with one another, are nevertheless part of one body.

[54]Hymns are portrayed in these scenarios as tools for *accessing* sign systems since their concisely expressed metonymic words and phrases function naturally as small windows into larger sign systems (e.g., *Freund* in "Wake, Awake," as discussed above). However, hymns can have a place also in the *building* of sign systems. For instance, a pastor could conduct a Bible study using the text of "Wake, Awake" as an outline. By delving into the scriptural allusions of the hymn and the imaginative language used in connection with them, Christians would be building conceptual sign systems like "Jesus as Bridegroom" in their minds. When pondered and studied, this is the effect that richly worded hymns often have: they build the "biblical imagination" in the minds of those who spend time reflecting on them. Subsequently, on returning to those same hymns, the hymns' words can now serve as concise metonyms, access points through which worshipers return to the larger conceptual worlds they have become acquainted with.

[55]Frank Senn indicates that many Lutheran hymns, including those of Nicolai and Paul Gerhardt, were intended first for personal or group meditation—hence the location of "Wake, Awake" at the conclusion of a devotional work. "Hymnody flourished anew, especially in Germany, during the seventeenth century, but more for use in home devotions than in church services. This includes the mystical hymns of Philipp Nicolai (1556–1608), 'Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying' and 'How Brightly Shines the Morning Star.'. . . They mark the transition to the seventeenth century's warmer lyrics and fresh melodies, which were used in domestic settings before they found a place in public worship." Frank C. Senn, *The People's Work: A Social History of the Liturgy* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 255.

[56]"A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth," Paul Gerhardt, trans., *The Lutheran Hymnal* #142; alt. *Christian Worship: Hymnal* #422.

[57]"There Is a Higher Throne," Keith and Kristyn Getty, *Christian Worship: Hymnal* #885.

So, the pastor lets these words about the body of Christ soak into his own soul. He keeps coming back to them over several weeks. And as he does, he begins purposefully to share his thoughts with his people. Sometimes, when he speaks with individuals, he more directly applies words about the body to their current conflicts. At other times, he addresses the whole congregation, not calling out particular people, but seeking to build in all their minds this picture: they are the body of Christ. "One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (Eph 4:5). He highlights this image in his preaching and teaching, making brief but intentional comments that draw people's attention to their oneness in Christ, to their diversity of gifts, opinions, and experiences that coexist with the unity they have in the Spirit. In semiotic terms, he strives to build the conceptual sign system of "body of Christ" in the imaginations of his people. Then he accesses that sign system in concise but impactful ways. Brief notes in the worship folder highlight words of hymns that are chosen with a purpose: "one Lord, one faith, one birth,"[58] and "Love in Christ is strong and living, binding faithful hearts in one."[59] The words hit home. Similar notes remind worshippers to pay attention to one section of a standard prayer, causing it to stand out: "For the peace of the whole world, for the well-being of the church of God, and for the unity of all, let us pray to the Lord." Mention in the sermon of the Lord's Supper includes a reminder that receiving this Meal together is a way that believers both express their oneness and nurture it. In all these ways and more, the design learned from Pastor Nicolai is at work: in a time of spiritual crisis, prioritizing a scriptural sign system, intentionally fostering the growth of that sign system in the minds of Christians, then accessing it via brief but effective metonymic language.

Pastors already do this intuitively. They preach and teach the images present in the Scriptures and then later call upon the vivid sign systems they have taught. But Nicolai's example of *The Joy of Eternal Life*, concluding with "Wake, Awake," has demonstrated how pastors can respond to a particular moment, purposefully aim at cultivating a "scriptural imaginary," and then tap into it in their pastoral care. Increased intentionality can transform passing references to scriptural images and motifs into well-aimed words that penetrate listeners' hearts and generate ongoing spiritual strengthening, especially in times of crisis.

[58]"The Church's One Foundation," Samuel J. Stone, *Christian Worship: Hymnal* #855.

[59]"Love in Christ Is Strong and Living," Dorothy R. Schultz, *Christian Worship: Hymnal* #726.

Sometimes, the heart of a struggling pastor needs rejuvenation. He needs the Spirit, working through the Scriptures, to fill his heart, mind, and imagination with vivid pictures of hope and joy to take the place of the story of despair and sadness that has enveloped him. We learn from Pastor Nicolai that the Spirit can do just that, using the true story and evocative images of the Scriptures. And the pastor, his hope renewed, can use the same Scriptures to rejuvenate the faith and reinvigorate the imaginations of his people.