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# Introduction: Our Perennial Question

It's hard to imagine this conference occurring at a more opportune time. Hundreds of us have gathered to discuss the work we call Lutheran worship. I would imagine that, like me, you have found that work to be exceedingly difficult recently. I'm sure you're as relieved as I am that we can all be here to ask what seems to be an important question: What do we do *now*?

For example, we have been dealing with pandemic lockdowns, sanctuary capacity restrictions, and mask mandates. We've been wrestling with how to encourage people to come to church, where to have them sit when they do, and how best to serve them Holy Communion. Some of us have grown accustomed to seeing only the top half of people's faces when we gather and don't expect that to change any time soon. What do we do *now*?

We also have been dealing with a political climate that has reached a fevered pitch. Just six months ago, on the day the Christians celebrated Epiphany, a mob stormed our nation's capitol in protest of our most recent presidential election. There are strongly held opinions within our congregations about the results of that election and a host of other politically charged issues. What do we do *now*?

In at least one way, the answer to that question seems obvious. Our church body is producing a new hymnal, and it will soon be in our hands! In addition to the new hymns and orders of service to explore (we've done that before), there will be a new volume called *Christian Worship: Psalter* and a new software platform called *Christian Worship: Service Builder*. As a result, we can give away our worn, red books. We can toss the stack of discs that store our digital worship files. We can uninstall *HymnSoft*. We can recycle our "Hymnal in a Box" and finally stop looking for that one card that has been missing for a decade. At least in some ways, we know exactly what to do *now*.

I'm sure you've figured it out. That *now* is no longer now. That *now* was three years ago, when this conference was originally scheduled and I was originally invited to deliver this address. I wish could tell you that, in the spring of 2021, I had forsaken my procrastinating ways and finished my assignment in advance of the conference being canceled so that I could simply copy and paste those paragraphs here. Instead, those paragraphs represent what I might have written had we gathered to ask this important question *then*. I include them here to illustrate what will surely happen if we ask the same important question *now*.

Our actual *now* is the time when Christian worship is about to enter its third millennium. *Now* is the time when Lutheran worship turns 500. *Now* is the time when our church body is preparing to celebrate its 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary. *Now* is the time when we plan to start 100 new missions within 10 years. *Now* is the time when we already have a three-year past with our church body's newest hymnal and a twenty-plus-year future still in store. *Now* is the time when the worship leadership in our church body is changing. One man who has been at the forefront of that leadership for several decades is retiring. Another is preparing to find out if an old text can fit a new meter ("Lord, ~~when~~ your glory I shall see..."). What do we do *now*?

*Now* is also the time when the world appears to be changing in unprecedented ways. *Now* is the time when our nation's political fever still has not broken and another contentious election looms. *Now* is the time when artificial intelligence seems to replace human beings at another task with each new day. *Now* is the time when our shared understanding of basic morality seems to change as rapidly. What do we do *now*?

*Now* is the time when, in some ways, the Christian faith seems to be in decline. Polling data suggests that droves of Christians are walking away from the faith.<sup>1</sup> Anecdotes suggest that Christianity is losing its influence in public life. *Now* is the time when, if it happens to fall on a specific date, Easter shares the spotlight with International Transgender Day of Visibility.<sup>2</sup> What do we do *now*?

*Now* is also the time, when in other ways, the Christian faith seems to be experiencing a resurgence. *Now* is the time when Richard Dawkins, arguably New Atheism's leading voice, came out as a "cultural

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see <https://news.gallup.com/poll/642548/church-attendance-declined-religious-groups.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> In 2024, both fell on March 31, and the White House issued a formal statement recognizing the latter but not the former.

Christian.”<sup>3</sup> *Now* is the time when celebrity psychologist and author Jordan Peterson, when asked whether a video camera outside Jesus’ tomb on Easter morning would have captured a human body walking out, answered, “I suspect so.”<sup>4</sup> *Now* is the time when, in a *New York Times* bestseller on teen mental health, secular sociologist Jonathan Haidt listed shared sacredness, embodied ritual, and regular prayer as important ways for people to fill the God-shaped hole in their hearts.<sup>5</sup> *Now* is the time when British comedian and actor Russell Brand was baptized in the River Thames. What do we do *now*?

Perhaps those questions seem more relevant and interesting than ones that might have been asked three years ago. However, will we change our tune once another three years have passed? Is there anything of value that can be said about Lutheran worship today that will not sound out-of-date tomorrow? If we determine that “What do we do *now*?” is a question worth asking, aren’t we destined to be asking it endlessly?

## An Answer in Theory: A Timeless Approach to Time

Whether we like it or not, it’s the only question we’ve been given to ask. As we carry out this work we call *Lutheran worship*, there’s only one way we can do it: in time. Contrary to what we might like to believe, we cannot stand above our circumstances or make decisions with a perfectly unbiased, bird’s-eye view. Such a “view from nowhen”<sup>6</sup> is an illusion. *Now* is all we have. Our situatedness—both in time and place—is a gift from God. We receive it rightly not with disdain or veneration but with gratitude.

Realizing this allows us to take a timeless approach to time. It allows us to approach the question, “What do we do *now*?”, in a way that remains the same whether it’s 2021, 2024, or even 1524. The way we go about answering the question doesn’t change even as the specific answers do. This timeless approach to time allows us to answer our question with neither arrogance nor despair but full of humility and hope.

### *An Approach to Our Past*

To ask, “What do we do *now*?”, admits that we have a past. The way to answer our question is not to resent our past or try to escape it. Our history is not something with which we have been saddled that prevents us from doing what we’d really love to do if only it weren’t weighing us down.<sup>7</sup> We wouldn’t be where we are, think how we think, or love what we love without our past. Should we attempt to forget it, we will only end up being strangers to ourselves in the present.

At the same time, the way to know what to do *now* is not to try to recreate the past. We mishandle our past when we treat it with a nostalgia that forgets its flaws.<sup>8</sup> To whatever degree we can look back at a specific moment of our past and see how Lutherans worshiped, the point is not to see that moment as an end unto itself. Rather, we benefit from the practices of that moment because they were reflections of deeper,

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<sup>3</sup> The statement that originally caught people’s attention was made during an interview conducted on a British news outlet in the spring of 2024 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zruhc7XqSxo&t=5s>). Since then, Dawkins has further clarified, “I’ve been a cultural Christian all along” (<https://unherd.com/watch-listen/the-god-debate/>).

<sup>4</sup> See Jordan Peterson’s conversation with Alex O’Connor (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T0KgLWQn5Ts>). Regardless of what one makes of Peterson’s message, his influence is impossible to ignore.

<sup>5</sup> Haidt 202-218

<sup>6</sup> “There is a kind of *temporal* dislocation...that is unrecognized because it’s buried and hidden by the illusion of being above the fray, immune to history, surfing time rather than being immersed and battered by its waves. Such temporal disorientation stems from the delusion of being ‘nowhen,’ unconditioned by time. Those who imagine they inhabit nowhen imagine themselves wholly governed by timeless principles, unchanging convictions, expressing an idealism that assumes they are wholly governed by eternal ideas untainted by history. They are oblivious to the deposits of history in their own unconscious. They have never considered the archaeological strata in their own souls. They live as if hatched rather than born, created ex nihilo rather than formed by a process” (Smith 4).

<sup>7</sup> “Like the gnostics of old, many Christians regard the history of Christ’s body and its doctrinal consensus as little more than the prison house for the soul” (Horton 167).

<sup>8</sup> “There is a sort of fascination with the past that is an act of deliberate forgetting: it’s called ‘nostalgia.’ Religious communities are particularly prone to this. Faith is ‘handed down,’ a matter of *traditio*, and hence faithfulness can be confused with preserving the past rather than having gratitude for a legacy meant to propel us forward. The most significant problem with nostalgia is not that it remembers but what it forgets” (Smith 38).

enduring principles that were useful for that time. As a Reformed author wrote to those of his faith tradition inclined to recreate the past, “We have to go back further and deeper than...Nashville..., until we find deeper waters. Then we need to launch our boat there, searching for lost cities below.”<sup>9</sup> For Lutherans, our city of choice isn’t Nashville, of course, but we have our own cities of nostalgia. Trying to transport some situated past into our situated present might be kind of cool in the same way that Civil War reenactments and Renaissance fairs are kind of cool. But we benefit more from the cities of our past by discerning the foundations on which they were built so that whatever we build rests on the same solid ground.

A properly grateful view of our past frees us to use certain time-tested forms of worship that are still useful for our day. It also frees us not to use others without indicting those who found them useful for their day. “We are growing in [a] compost of history that needs to be sifted: there is certainly refuse to leave behind, but also...fertile soil for [our] future.”<sup>10</sup>

## *An Approach to Our Present*

To ask, “What do we do *now*?” also recognizes that we have a present. The way to answer our question is not to deplore our present or try to outlast it. Yes, there are conditions of our modern world that we rightly lament. Yes, terrible messes have been made—messes we might tell ourselves could have been avoided had only people listened to us. But the solution is not to throw up our hands, convinced that our present is history’s most godless moment and all we can do is pray it will soon be over. Rather, we can properly lament the messes we didn’t have a hand in making and then get our hands dirty helping clean them up.

At the same time, the way to know what to do *now* is not to obsess over our present. At the risk of abusing the meaning of words, our present is unique, but it’s not *that* unique. Letting the present, perceived needs of people drive our decisions about how we worship has never been a wise strategy—just ask Moses’ brother Aaron.<sup>11</sup> When “thus says the Lord” is superseded by “market research shows,”<sup>12</sup> we have placed a weight on the present it cannot bear.

A properly grateful view of the present was responsible for one of those key events in Lutheran worship whose 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary recently passed. In his introductory remarks for the *Formula Missae* he composed for the church in Wittenberg in 1523, Martin Luther expressed hesitation over providing something novel simply for novelty’s sake.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, he embraced the present need to “dare something in the name of Christ.”<sup>14</sup> He took the risk of striking a match—with no way of knowing whether it would catch fire—rather than settling for the safety of simply cursing the darkness.

## *An Approach to Our Future*

Finally, to ask, “What do we do *now*?” acknowledges that we have a future. The way to answer our question is not to assume a future for Christ’s church so bleak that we use it either as an excuse for inaction or as a means of extortion. On the one hand, an overly pessimistic view of our future is fodder for those who lazily might wish to do exactly what we’ve always done exactly how we’ve always done it. On the other hand, the same

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<sup>9</sup> Horton 170

<sup>10</sup> Smith 41

<sup>11</sup> “There is accommodation and there is accommodation. When Moses confronted Aaron about the golden calf, Aaron replied, apparently even without the benefit of marketing surveys, ‘You know the people’ (Exodus 32:22 NKJV)” (Horton 145).

<sup>12</sup> Horton 223

<sup>13</sup> “I have used neither authority nor pressure. Nor did I make any innovations. For I have been hesitant and fearful, partly because of the weak in faith, who cannot suddenly exchange an old and accustomed order of worship for a new and unusual one, and more so because of the fickle and fastidious spirits who rush in like unclean swine without faith or reason, and who delight only in novelty and tire of it as quickly, when it has worn off. Such people are a nuisance even in other affairs, but in spiritual matters, they are absolutely unbearable” (Luther 19).

<sup>14</sup> “But since there is hope now that the hearts of many have been enlightened and strengthened by the grace of God, and since the cause of the kingdom of Christ demands that at long last offenses should be removed from it, we must dare something in the name of Christ. For it is right that we should provide at least for a few, lest by our desire to detach ourselves from the frivolous faddism of some people, we provide for nobody, or by our fear of ultimately offending others, we endorse their universally held abominations” (Luther 19–20).

pessimistic picture can become the compromising photo used to blackmail the Church into doing whatever the one who holds it thinks is the way forward. The Church that has Christ's promise of indestructibility (Matthew 16:18) ought to view with suspicion any prescription offered as the only alternative to certain death.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, the way to know what to do *now* is not to create some romanticized picture of our future that is painted only with hues of hubris.<sup>16</sup> Assurance about our future does not come from an arrogance that says, "We are the ones we've been waiting for."<sup>17</sup> Yes, Christ's Church will be just fine. But it will not be just fine because, at long last, its saviors have been born.

A properly grateful view of our future frees us to try new things and do some things differently, but not because this innovation and its innovators are the Church's last, best hope. It also frees us to keep doing old things and do other things the same, but not because doing anything else wouldn't make a difference anyway.

## *Picturing the Process*

This timeless approach to time has been called a hunt for sacred shades on eternal hills.<sup>18</sup> This life we live "under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:14, *et al.*) is always changing. As the scorching sun runs its course (and often returns to places it has been before), the shade provided by the splendid cedar God has planted (Ezekiel 17:22–24) moves with it. At any given moment, there are certain branches we run to for relief. That doesn't mean we cut others off. Chances are good we'll find our shade under them again if we just give it a few minutes.

To ask, "What do we do *now*?", is just this. Given our moment, what are the specific ways in which Christ's Church—his people gathered around his means of grace—offers people relief? What are those forms and facets of Lutheran worship we want to lean into in our day because they provide exactly what our day requires? What others might we stand at a distance from without sawing them off? As we ask our question, we do so aware that our answers will never be *permanent*.

Asking our question has also been compared to what you might do on a long trek through a cornfield.<sup>19</sup> In order to keep from getting lost in the tall stalks and endless rows, every so often you need to stop. You need momentary quiet so that the sound of something like a tractor driving down a nearby road can help you regain your bearings. This is the life we live in anticipation of the harvest. We can only ask "What do we do *now*?" as people who are in over their heads in that *now*. Our perspective will always be limited. As we ask our question, we do so aware that our answers will never be *perfect*.

What do we do *now*? Lutherans answered differently in 1524 than we will in 2024. Lutherans would have answered differently in 2021 than we will in 2024. Lutherans will answer differently in 2027 than we will in 2024. Nevertheless, the process by which Lutherans arrive at those answers endures. It's a process born out of seeing the *now* we've been given—fixed shelf life, inherent limitations, and all—as our gift from God.

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<sup>15</sup> In discussions about whether to provide so-called gender-affirming care to minors, the question is sometimes asked, "Would you rather have a living son or a dead daughter?" That same type of emotional blackmail sometimes appears in religious contexts. No matter what practice a person might be advocating, "Would you rather have a \_\_\_\_\_ church or a dead church?" is not a sound argument for doing it.

<sup>16</sup> "The mirror image of nostalgia is a rosy, idealist notion of 'progress,' a tendency to romanticize the so-called arc of history as the inevitability of our own virtue. In this respect, we tend to imagine our future selves as better versions of our present selves, perhaps because we are so blinkered about who we are now... Such romanticism about the future is like nostalgia in negative. It is not hope but hubris" (Smith 40–41).

<sup>17</sup> Though the expression did not originate with him, Barack Obama famously used it during a 2008 presidential campaign speech.

<sup>18</sup> The full quotation from Columbian philosopher Nicolás Gómez Dávila is as follows: "The pure reactionary is not a dreamer of abolished pasts, but a hunter of sacred shades on the eternal hills. The reactionary does not aspire to turn back, but rather to change direction. The past that he admires is not a goal but an exemplification of his dreams."

<sup>19</sup> "But in order to provide wisdom for how to live, we need to discern our seasonal location while *in media res*, in the middle of things. In this regard, discernment is more like echolocation than a God's-eye overview. We never get the luxury of being able to *transcend* our season, to rise above it and see the whole with some kind of spiritual drone. Discernment, especially *temporal* discernment, is more like being in the midst of a cornfield and achieving dead silence so that you might hear a truck's crunch on the gravel road or the faint babbling of the creek and thereby get your bearings" (Smith 128–129).

# Answers in Practice: Timely Proposals for Our Time

It probably would be wise to stop there. If I did, I might just leave everyone relatively content with what I've said, even if you'd have a nagging suspicion I didn't say much of anything at all. What I've said so far will be as applicable three years from now as it is today. What I've said so far is just theoretical and vague enough that all might be able to nod in agreement, certain any criticisms are not aimed at your church, your pastor, or you.

To continue would almost certainly be foolish. Based on my own words, in fact, it would be silly to apply this timeless approach to time by offering diagnoses and prescriptions for *our* time. It would guarantee that anything I say from this point forward will have an expiration date. Should someone read it after the sun has moved, they will surely find it unhelpful. It would also guarantee error. Already today, those who stand at different spots in the harvest field may find my vision foggy. To continue rather than stop would guarantee that some of you will disagree with and might even get upset by what I say.

Here goes nothing.

## *For Now, Lutheran Worship Is Christ-Centered.*

This seems a rather safe and therefore boring place to start. In fact, one could argue that nothing less risky could be said to the occupants of this room. Before you ask for your money back, let me beg to differ. It is certainly not controversial to suggest that Lutheran worship ought to be Christ-centered. What may be up for debate is *why* Lutheran worship needs to be Christ centered for *now*.

We live at a time when the inner self is sovereign. We are led to believe that our thoughts, feelings, and desires are life's supreme authority. If our inner self tells us something, everyone and everything else should conform. *Now* is the time when every Disney princess movie is about the main character's quest to let out what others have forced her to keep in. *Now* is the time when "you do you" is our functional national motto. *Now* is the time when it seems you need the clout and wealth of a J.K. Rowling to be able to say certain basic facts of nature out loud without fear of social and financial ruin—and even then just barely.<sup>20</sup>

Our preoccupation with our inner selves can take more than one form, however. We also live at a time when we are encouraged from little on to give constant attention to our inner well-being and to seek help the second something seems off. *Now* is the time when a teenage girl who *hasn't* received some sort of mental health diagnosis like all her friends might actually feel left out.<sup>21</sup> *Now* is the time when Bessel van der Kolk's book about trauma, *The Body Keeps the Score*, has lived on the *New York Times* bestseller list for hundreds of weeks in a row.<sup>22</sup> *Now* is the time when online and AI-powered therapy platforms are multiplying in order to meet the rising need, a goal one such platform defines as "therapy for all."<sup>23</sup>

Psychological wellness is certainly important. Therapy can certainly help. In fact, one can trace our propensity for inner self-reflection to figures like the apostle Paul, St. Augustine, and Martin Luther.<sup>24</sup> So perhaps we ought to throw our hat into the ring. If the present, perceived needs of people are likely to be psychological needs, wouldn't it make sense to use worship, especially the sermon, to draw attention to the way the gospel can meet those needs?

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<sup>20</sup> For example, see <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jeetendrsrehdev/2024/04/12/the-jk-rowling-effect-navigating-controversy-in-brand-behavior/>.

<sup>21</sup> Shrier 16

<sup>22</sup> 203 weeks in a row as of this writing. Opinions about van der Kolk's book vary. For our purposes, perhaps one fact is of particular interest: the book was written in 2014. The fact that its meteoric rise to popularity didn't occur until the early 2020s perhaps suggests it had more to do with changing times than changes in the science of trauma.

<sup>23</sup> See <https://www.talkspace.com/blog/therapy-for-all/>.

<sup>24</sup> "...the apostle Paul's development of the concept of the will is what facilitates the rise of inner psychological narrative as a means of reflecting on the self. In the fourth century, Paul's intellectual heir Augustine produced the *Confessions*, the first great Western work of psychological autobiography... Martin Luther...was an Augustinian friar...whose introspective angst played a key role in the birth of the modern age" (Trueman 45).

Before we do, we ought to be aware of the alarms some are starting to sound. *Now* is the time when secular voices are suggesting that our inward-facing orientation is the heart of our problem<sup>25</sup> and also our default way of being.<sup>26</sup> *Now* is the time when those same voices suggest that therapeutic techniques that take us further into our selves will only exacerbate the problem and that real solutions start with getting outside our selves.<sup>27</sup> *Now* is the time when our myriad of well-intentioned therapeutic solutions have been criticized using an old Polynesian proverb: We are standing on a whale, fishing for minnows.<sup>28</sup>

Much of this recent secular caution speaks in harmony with ancient divine revelation. A turn inward was both the cause (Genesis 3:5) and the effect (Genesis 3:7) of our first sin. The self-directed thoughts that secular neuroscience says spring from the Default Mode Network of our brain, God identifies as the evil inclinations that form our every thought from childhood only all the time (Genesis 6:5, 8:21). The same Paul, Augustine, and Luther who may be responsible for our propensity to self-analyze have also given us the very Pauline, Augustinian, and Lutheran analysis that being *incurvatus in se* (curved in on ourselves) is the heart of what's wrong with us.<sup>29</sup>

The solution for a humanity thus afflicted started with a Son of Man oriented away from self. From the moment he arrived, he was destined for a form of death designed to entomb someone in oblivion.<sup>30</sup> A Roman cross was diametrically opposed to one's inner self and therefore will be diabolically opposed by anyone whose chief interest is that self (Mark 8:31–33). The Son of Man paid this price painfully but willingly (Hebrews 7:9).

The life of every son of man who follows him will have the same cross-shaped pattern (Mark 8:34). The one who wants to save his *psyche* will surely lose it. A willingness to lose it is the surest way to save it (Mark 8:35). If the wellness of our *psyche* is the goal, Lutherans can offer people more than minnows. We can even offer better than secular psychology's biggest whale. We have one like Jonah who spent three days in the belly of oblivion before the whale was forced to spit him back out (Matthew 16:40). We have the one who proved that true wellness for the self lives on the far side of that self's death.

And so for *now*, Lutheran worship is Christ-centered. Christ-centered worship makes the gospel the thing itself, not a means to some other end. Just as Christians have at various times been tempted to instrumentalize the gospel for other ends,<sup>31</sup> *now* is a time when we may be especially tempted to

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<sup>25</sup> “‘Self-consciousness,’ or what Peterson calls ‘self-reflection on the feeling state,’ and neurotic suffering are virtually indistinguishable, clinically and psychometrically. ‘Insofar as you’re thinking about yourself, you’re depressed and anxious,’ Peterson said. ‘There’s no difference between thinking about yourself and being depressed and anxious. They are the same thing.’... Anxiety and depression may be different aspects of the same habits of mind: excessive thinking about yourself. That doesn’t mean that anxiety and depression are your fault or that every anxious or depressed person can simply cure themselves. But it does suggest that for those visited by milder versions, there is the chance to reclaim the reins of mood by turning your focus away from yourself” (Shrier 152).

<sup>26</sup> Haidt 208

<sup>27</sup> Ibid 207-209

<sup>28</sup> Ibid 247

<sup>29</sup> All three have been credited with the famous Latin expression, either in its essence or in its exact wording. Regardless of who's responsible for it, experience is demonstrating that our obsession with self-discovery and self-expression is doing a great deal of harm. “[L]ike the child who has only ever had to choose between vanilla, chocolate, or strawberry and now stands transfixed in an ice cream parlor with hundred different flavors on offer, overwhelming choice has given rise to a sort of paralysis. In a world which no longer provides any road map to follow and where the choices for self-actualization are potentially endless, we may frequently find ourselves driving down dead-end streets or simply immobilized by the myriad options on offer” (Parler 51).

<sup>30</sup> “Criminals broken on implements of torture: who were such filth to concern men of breeding and civility? Some deaths were so vile, so squalid, that it was best to draw a veil across them entirely. The surprise, then, is less that we should have so few detailed descriptions in ancient literature of what a crucifixion might actually involve, than that we should have any at all. The corpses of the crucified, once they had first provided pickings for hungry birds, tended to be flung into a common grave... Oblivion, like the loose earth scattered over their tortured bodies, would entomb them. This was a part of their fate. Nevertheless, amid the general silence, there is one major exception which proves the rule. Four detailed accounts of the process by which a man might be sentenced to the cross, and then suffer his punishment, have survived from antiquity. Remarkably, they all describe the same execution...” (Holland 3-4).

<sup>31</sup> Examples include moral improvement, material prosperity, and social reform. Even sermons that may appear rich in gospel can still use that gospel chiefly for accomplishing some other goal that is the real point of the sermon. In one analysis of the preaching of his day, Luther lamented what he saw as a turn away from truly Christ-centered preaching for the sake of other ends: “The Epistles of Paul in which faith is taught are read only rarely, while the exhortations to morality are most frequently read. The Epistles seem to have been chosen by a singularly unlearned and superstitious advocate of works. But for the service those sections in which faith in Christ is taught should have been given preference” (Luther 23–24).

instrumentalize the gospel for the sake of its therapeutic benefits.<sup>32</sup> In a world where depression and anxiety are widespread, the Spirit's fruits of joy and peace (Galatians 5:22) taste especially sweet. But like any good gardener, we do not direct our effort to the ends of the branches where the fruit eventually hangs. Instead, we tend to the vine those branches are connected to whose life and health produces the fruit (John 15:5). The gospel directs us outside of ourselves to Christ. It isn't merely an instrument to take in hand as we journey inward hoping it will help.

Please do not misunderstand this as an apathetic response to the very real internal anguish felt by many in our pews and in our communities. Lutheran worship that is Christ-centered rather than therapy-centered and Christ-adjacent offers a world focused on mental health what can benefit it most. It allows us to engage with the “psychological man”<sup>33</sup> of our day on consistent grounds, no matter which form he may take. Both the one who wants his inner self to be able to define morality and reality and the one trapped in the turmoil of his inner being are directed away from self and toward Christ. In this way, we avoid sounding to our world like we offer “therapy for me but not for thee.” Lutheran worship that is Christ-centered ensures we do not become part of the problem we are hoping to solve. It offers people one hour a week—perhaps the only hour—when they are not asked to ruminate on how they happen to be feeling. Lutheran worship that is Christ-centered avoids giving the impression that our real goal is to help people feel better, thus giving them permission to go elsewhere if it can help them feel better better.<sup>34</sup> While there is a chance we—along with many others—might be able to make people feel slightly better than they did before, Christ-centered worship may be the only thing that still offers people something of value even if they don’t.

So for *now*, perhaps our great concern shouldn’t be biblical illiteracy broadly speaking, but that the Son of Man has become a man of mystery to our world. For *now*, the strength of Lutheran worship to be leveraged might not be that it offers people “the full counsel of God”<sup>35</sup> but that it orbits around the Son of Man again and again. For *now*, it may not be wise for preachers to think that a lectionary allows them to preach on a different text every Sunday for nine consecutive years. For *now*, it may be better to help people get to know Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, especially at a time when it’s possible fewer know their names than know the names of the four houses of Hogwarts.<sup>36</sup> As we do, we don’t to turn Jesus into a second Moses, another lawgiver who helps people on their quest for moral improvement. For *now*, it is just as wise not to make Jesus people’s second (or third, or fourth) therapist, who helps them on their quest for psychological wellness.

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<sup>32</sup> None of what follows is to devalue therapy. Brad East draws a line between churches whose gospel proclamation may provide therapeutic benefits and churches whose goal has become to provide those therapeutic benefits: “A church is not therapeutic if it endorses therapy and counseling offered by licensed professional as one among a number of potentially useful tools for people in need... The question is not whether mental health is real (it is), whether medication is sometimes worth prescribing (it is), or whether therapy can be helpful (it can be). The question is whether mental health is convertible with spiritual health. The question, that is, is whether the work of therapy is synonymous with the work of the gospel; whether the task of the counselor is one and the same as that of the pastor. Answer: It is not” (East).

<sup>33</sup> The term was originally coined by sociologist Philip Rieff in his 1966 book, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*. Rieff traced the development of humanity for “religious man” to “political man” to “economic man” to its most recent iteration, “psychological man.” According to Rieff, ““Religious man was born to be saved, psychological man is born to be pleased.” See Trueman 44-50.

<sup>34</sup> “The more, however, a congregation becomes therapeutic, in its language, its liturgy, its morals, its common life, the more God recedes from the picture. God becomes secondary, then tertiary, then ornamental, then metaphorical, then finally superfluous. The old-timers keep God on mostly out of muscle memory, but the younger generations know the score. They don’t quit church and stop believing in God because of a lack of catechesis, as if they weren’t listening on Sundays. They were listening all right. The catechesis didn’t fail; it worked, only too well. The twenty- and thirty-somethings were preached right out of the gospel—albeit with the best of intentions and a smile on every minister and usher’s face. They smiled right back, and headed for the exit sign” (East).

<sup>35</sup> Some who argue for lectionary-based preaching cite this as its strength. Others argue for series-based topical preaching on the grounds that it accomplishes the same goal better. The expression comes from Acts 20:27, where Paul is giving his farewell address to the Ephesian elders. Earlier in Acts we hear how in Ephesus, “[Paul] took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.”<sup>10</sup> This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:9-10). If your people come to listen to you every day for two years, I would hope that you would have offered them the full counsel of God by that point. If we are talking about the weekly gathering of believers and the attendance rate at your congregation is less than 50% in a given week, maybe the full counsel of God shouldn’t be the main goal.

<sup>36</sup> Burton 69

Rather than church being one more place where all signs point inward, Christ-centered worship lets “the main events of Jesus’ life become the main events in [ours].”<sup>37</sup> In the process, it “expose[s] our felt needs as trivial, in order to give us new ones that are far greater, and then to satisfy those beyond our wildest dreams.”<sup>38</sup>

## *For now, Lutheran worship is prodigal.*

If my first proposal would appear, on its face, to upset precisely no one, my second proposal is likely to upset absolutely everyone. This has nothing to do with the fact that all of you are Lutherans. Rather, it is due to the fact that you are Americans who live in the year 2024.

Because you do, you have been conditioned to believe that human ingenuity can (and eventually will) overcome every limitation placed on us by our bodies and our environments. You have been conditioned to value efficiency as possibly the highest good and waste—especially of time—as possibly the greatest evil. Judging by appearances, Americans living in 2024 have been successful in achieving these ambitions. *Now* is the time when it is estimated that Amazon would lose \$1.6 billion in annual sales if its front page loaded one second more slowly.<sup>39</sup> *Now* is the time when, unless your children are old enough to drive, they have never known a world of “appointment TV” but have always enjoyed their entertainment on demand. *Now* is the time when you can have interests as niche as being an adult male fan of *My Little Pony* and still find an online community so large that it has its own name (“the Bronies”), its own annual conventions (where attendance is ten times larger than this one), and its own documentary film.<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps this is great news for Christ’s Church. If the internet can help “Bronies,” just think what it can do for Christians. Rather than being limited by our geography, *now* we can reach people anywhere.<sup>41</sup> Rather than people having to show up under one roof during one hour, *now* we can reach people anytime. Sporting events, birthday parties, and children’s naps don’t have to prevent us from reaching people any longer.<sup>42</sup> The money we spend spreading the gospel can go farther than it ever has.<sup>43</sup>

Efficiency is certainly worth striving for. Pushing the bounds of our limits for the sake of the gospel is a worthy endeavor. Jesus made the most of the time he was given (John 9:4). Paul was no couch potato (2 Corinthians 11:23). Nevertheless, even well-intentioned efforts can have consequences. *Now* is the time when, in spite of our hyper-connectedness, social isolation is estimated to cost the U.S. Medicare system \$6.7 billion annually.<sup>44</sup> *Now* is the time when our screen-saturated lives have caused terms like “skin hunger” and “touch deprived” to become commonplace in the medical field. *Now* is the time when “paid cuddler” is a career field the members of the Honors Choir can consider entering.<sup>45</sup> Speaking of careers, *now* is the time when the biggest threat to many jobs is not that AI will replace them but that a global playing field guarantees a tiny group will succeed and countless others will fail.<sup>46</sup> *Now* is the time when even secular voices are talking about

<sup>37</sup> Paustian 74

<sup>38</sup> Horton 60

<sup>39</sup> Burkeman 163.

<sup>40</sup> The term “Bronie” is a portmanteau of “brother” and “pony.” Their female counterparts are known as “Pegasisters.” Stephen Bullivant uses Bronies as a case-in-point for the way the internet fragments local communities and forges online communities of people scattered all over the globe with especially niche interests (Bullivant 118ff).

<sup>41</sup> Seattle-area pastor Judah Smith once tweeted about his church when it started a new online initiative: “We have a new location, and that location is everywhere.”

<sup>42</sup> In his book *Hybrid Church*, James Emery White has this telling comment about the way their church’s online offerings engage families with young children: “The majority of people are watching when their children are asleep or napping. (We schedule some of our services with that in mind.)” (White 96).

<sup>43</sup> The logic advocating online evangelism efforts is sometimes expressed this way: Why spend millions to reach thousands when you can spend thousands to reach millions?

<sup>44</sup> Crouch 12

<sup>45</sup> Alberry 34

<sup>46</sup> “[S]taying clear of automation isn’t the only career challenge. In this global digital age, aiming to become a professional writer, filmmaker, actor, athlete or fashion designer is risky for another reason: although people in these professions won’t get serious competition from machines anytime soon, they’ll get increasingly brutal competition from other humans around the globe according to the aforementioned superstar theory, and very few will succeed” (Tegmark 122).

the importance of *sabbath*, noting that “the value of time comes not from the sheer quantity you have, but from whether you’re in sync with the people you care about most.”<sup>47</sup> *Now* is the time when Netflix, the company most responsible for killing appointment TV, seems determined to bring it back from the dead.<sup>48</sup>

All of this is due to the fact that the opposite of efficiency is not always inefficiency. It can just as easily be a word that, thanks to the late Timothy Keller, many Christians know describes God. In his book about Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son, Keller proposed that the father is the one properly called prodigal.<sup>49</sup> To be prodigal is to be extravagantly generous in a way that appears wasteful.<sup>50</sup>

In Jesus’ parable, the father’s prodigality is put to use in order to convince his younger son that he is still a son and not a servant. He doesn’t just *say* this. He *shows* it with the ring, the robe, the sandals, and the feast. In similar fashion, our Father prodigally dispenses his grace in both word and deed.<sup>51</sup>

Another detail of the parable is worth noting, however. In the heartwarming scene of reconciliation, the father never addresses the son directly. He says plenty *about* him. He says nothing *to* him. Far from diminishing the impact of his words, this only increased it. The son saw a father who was willing to acknowledge his sin and announce his forgiveness in front of others rather than keeping it private to spare family embarrassment. The servants and friends saw a man who was willing to air the family’s dirty laundry so that he could announce he had washed it clean (Luke 15:24). The display of the father’s grace was enhanced by the fact that his words and deeds were all done in public.<sup>52</sup>

This required the father (and everyone else) to be prodigal in another way: with their time. The father didn’t say, “I know all of you are busy, so I’m going to put out a nice spread and you can grab a plate whenever works for you.” Instead, he synchronized time: “Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate” (Luke 15:22–23). In order for his words and actions to have their full effect, he gathered everyone in the same place at the same time.

And so for *now*, Lutheran worship is similarly prodigal. It gathers the sons and daughters of God to be convinced once again that their relationship with God is one of gift and not of merit. It brings them into contact with the Father’s prodigal words and deeds in a prodigally public way. Both the wayward rebel and the dutiful daughter or son get to witness God’s grace being served to the other (and in fact join in the work of serving it to the other), and both benefit.

Please do not hear this as a plea to let pass the seemingly infinite gospel opportunities presented us by our online, on-demand world. This is not an invitation to inefficiency but to prodigality. Lutheran worship that is prodigal demonstrates that our standards for serving sinners with the gospel are higher than “better than nothing”—a phrase sometimes used to describe online engagement with the gospel.<sup>53</sup> The costly physical

<sup>47</sup> Burkeman 193. Burkeman calls time a “networked good.” It isn’t the kind of commodity that money is, where the more you have of it the better. Instead, it’s the kind of commodity like an iPhone is. There’s nothing particularly beneficial about having twelve of them. You just need one; and you need everyone else to have one too.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. <https://www.npr.org/2024/05/10/1250386835/netflix-john-mulaney-everybodys-in-la-tom-brady-roast>

<sup>49</sup> Keller, Timothy. *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith*. New York: Penguin, 2008.

<sup>50</sup> “This isn’t to say that we should be inefficient for the sake of being inefficient. That is no less inhuman than being efficient for the sake of efficiency. Prodigality simply means a way of being in the world that takes for granted God’s existence, goodness, and providence, freeing us from the Responsibilities of Self-Belonging so that we can joyfully attend to what is present. It is prodigal because from a contemporary perspective it appears to be wasteful; you are not primarily focused on whether or not you are ‘winning,’ ‘benefiting,’ or ‘progressing’ through the action” (Noble 151).

<sup>51</sup> “God is superabundantly generous in his grace: First, through the spoken Word, by which the forgiveness of sins is preached in the whole world... Second, through Baptism. Third, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar” (Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article IV).

<sup>52</sup> Yes, this is just a parable, but it’s something Jesus did in real life as well. When a sinful woman anointing Jesus received condemnation from a Pharisee, Jesus turned toward *her*, looked at *her*, and said to *her*, “Your sins are forgiven.” But that was not until he had first looked at Simon and said to *him* in her hearing, “Her many sins have been forgiven” There’s an additional important detail in the “stage directions” Luke provides. After telling a brief parable to Simon, Jesus turns toward the women before continuing to speak *about* her (not *to* her)—likely looking her in the eye as he did (Luke 7:44).

<sup>53</sup> “Absence abounds in contemporary life. Complete digital connectivity has led to a dreadful disconnection with the people and places around us. Tablets and smartphones, emails and tweets, news and newsfeeds are constantly pulling us away from the here and now... We are here but seldom present. The rare times we find ourselves fully present and engaged occur when we are with someone else who is fully present and engaged with us: a deep conversation with a companion, a challenging discussion about a favorite book, or partaking of a wonderful meal with a loved one... In these rare moments, you stop checking your phone, contemplating your schedule, or worrying about what is going on at work. The undivided attention, full focus, and complete presence of another person is powerful” (Veith and Sutton 145–146).

spaces we create and the perhaps costlier temporal spaces we carve out are the fatted calves that show sinners we will spare no expense for them. Lutheran worship that is prodigal shows we are glad to share the Father's feast with the senile, the sick, the stinky, and the cranky children who have missed their morning nap.<sup>54</sup> Our prodigality is a defiant refusal to concede to a global playing field and thus let happen to churches and pastors what Instagram does to teenage girls.<sup>55</sup>

So for *now*, we should make sure there isn't any disdain in our voice when we speak about the "one hour a week" some Christians spend with God. For *now*, perhaps we ought to stress the importance of Christians spending time with Christians in the Word even more than we stress the importance of them spending time in the Word alone. For *now*, even if we're not quite ready to bring back the kiss of peace, the church ought to be a place full of handshakes and hugs and all the attendant risks that come with them. For *now* it might be less important to emphasize the passive role we play in our services (i.e. we gather to receive God's gifts rather than to offer him ours) and more important to emphasize the active role we play (i.e. the gifts we receive from God are distributed through all the people who have gathered). For *now*, we might want to turn down the microphones (and use them as little as possible) so that a whole host of faces rather than a few come to mind when Christians picture those who share the gospel with them. For *now*, we might at least think about doing the unthinkable: cutting the cord on our livestream.<sup>56</sup> For *now*, we ought, if nothing else, demonstrate clarity in the way we speak about whatever offer via the cloud so that it doesn't cloud the fact that we'd much prefer to serve people prodigally.

We'd be in good company. The servants and friends who dropped everything to celebrate with the father stand for the angels in heaven who drop everything to rejoice when one sinner repents (Luke 15:10). We join with them when Lutheran worship is prodigal. By setting aside this sacred time, it is we who are set aside.<sup>57</sup> "Like operatives launching a mission in a spy thriller, coordinating their watches so they're all on the same time, the people of God synchronize their soul clocks...to the solar time of the Son."<sup>58</sup>

### *For now, Lutheran worship aims at the heart.*

In my modest proposals of escalating offensiveness, we have arrived at the summit. This final one is sure to upset you most, both because you are a Lutheran and even more so to the extent that you embody the sober, straight-laced stereotype associated with our German and WELS heritage.

To suggest that Lutheran worship would aim at the heart might, if nothing else, sound odd at a time when people of faith seem to be taking so many shots to the head. We live at a time when secular materialism seems to have triumphed. Religious belief seems to have been exorcised from the public square. *Now* is a time when faith is treated like a sort of "intellectual pornography, a dirty and disgusting thing that people should be allowed to do only in the privacy of their own homes or in the seclusion of houses of worship."<sup>59</sup> *Now* is the

<sup>54</sup> "When cleanliness and bodily order become required for entrance into our communities, as they clearly are in most evangelical churches, then we have adopted a standard inhospitable to those whose bodies either might intrude at inopportune times (such as infants and the elderly) or who lack the grooming that an affluent society has transformed into a requirement. Crying babies are not a distraction from connecting with God—they are a tangible reminder of our embodied lives (and that Jesus himself once cried as a baby)" (Anderson 94).

<sup>55</sup> What MIT professor Max Tegmark calls "superstar theory" (see footnote 46), Matt Anderson calls "pastoral porn." "Today, with the ease of access and prevalence of content, we border on the edge of cultivating a generation of Christians addicted to what we might call "pastoral porn." While listening to gospel preaching is a good thing, it establishes unrealistic expectations for preaching that have already made it difficult for pastors who are younger or from small towns. To pick a figure at random, I suspect Tim Keller became Tim Keller the way anyone gets good at anything—through practicing for hundreds of hours in front of a patient and loving audience. Who knows whether the next generation will have a similar tolerance level, especially if just down the road they're showing Tim Keller archived sermons every Sunday" (Anderson 213).

<sup>56</sup> Plenty have made the case, most notably Episcopalian minister Tish Harrison Warren. Cf. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/30/opinion/church-online-services-covid.html>

<sup>57</sup> "The Lord's Day is the festival of the new creation to be treasured, a day not only that we set aside but that sets us aside. As children of this day, we proclaim that we are not our own but are bought with a price—the very rationale given in Deuteronomy. It is a weekly Easter Day, transforming our identity and relation to this age by that power of the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead" (Horton 199).

<sup>58</sup> Smith 93

<sup>59</sup> Bird 42

time when a Roman Catholic NFL kicker has faced harsh criticism for saying Roman Catholic-y things in a commencement speech at a Roman Catholic college.

As a result of these intellectual assaults on our faith, it's easy to feel as though we are constantly on our back foot. Even if our houses of worship are the only places where our voices can be heard, we can use those voices to demonstrate, as Paul did, that what we believe about Jesus is "true and reasonable" and that we are not insane for believing it (Acts 26:25). In response to the secular world's offense, maybe our best bet is to bolster our defense.

Even as we keep our apologetic arrows sharp, however, we need to be aware that what many people are wondering about the Christian faith is not whether it is true and reasonable, but whether it is beautiful and good. As secular materialism reaches full bloom before our eyes, it allows us to see that its fruit is quite rotten. On the flipside, the so-called "cut-flower culture"<sup>60</sup> we inhabit has started to whither. We live at a time when secularism has not just appeared to displace religious belief but has been forced to replace it with something of its own—and has been shown to be woefully unequal to the task. *Now* is the time when more are concluding that "what we mistake for secularization is religion going undercover,"<sup>61</sup> and that secular religions are almost always more cruel and less forgiving than the Christianity they replace. *Now* is the time when Richard Dawkins was stripped of his 1996 "Humanist of the Year" award 25 years after the fact because of statements that were heretical to the accepted orthodoxy of transgender ideology.

As a result, Christianity is getting a fresh look. *Now* is the time when influential public figures like Tom Holland, Douglas Murray, Jordan Peterson, and Alex O'Connor are expressing deep appreciation for the Christian faith, regardless of whether they are convinced of its truth. *Now* is the time when Rosaria Butterfield, a former lesbian and gay rights activist is a widely read Christian author. According to her, she was converted not because her intellectual arguments were dismantled, but because the small Christian community that welcomed her at their table opened the Psalter to sing in four-part harmony and "something deep inside me came alive."<sup>62</sup> *Now* is the time when activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Muslim-turned-atheist and disciple of Richard Dawkins, has converted to Christianity.<sup>63</sup> She now defends the faith against the likes of Dawkins in open debate and says that Christianity's value is the reason she also believes its truth.<sup>64</sup> *Now* is the time when novelist Paul Kingsnorth has journeyed from atheism to Buddhism to Wiccan and now to Christianity, claiming he has finally found not just truth but "a truth I would surrender to."<sup>65</sup> Even the skeptics like Dawkins are being forced to face the fact that their critiques of Christianity are based entirely on a Christian foundation.<sup>66</sup>

As people who swim in the sea of secular materialism, it might surprise us to hear that the heart is often the lead blocker for the mind on its way to Christ. It should not. The same thing happened with Jesus' first disciples. Yes, they all (especially Thomas) needed evidence that Jesus was alive. And yet, even after the reports of multiple eyewitnesses, they remained unconvinced. What was the problem? Why were they able to look at Jesus square in the face, touch his now-trademarked hands and feet, and still not believe? They were *slow of heart* (Luke 24:25). They doubted *in their hearts* (Luke 24:38). Their unbelief did not come from confusion or skepticism but from joy and amazement (Luke 24:41). It was not a failure of intellect but of imagination. Jesus' resurrection was too big to fit within the atrophied walls of their hearts. Those hearts needed to be stretched back out. With the help of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms, Jesus was up to the task (Luke 24:27,44–45).

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<sup>60</sup> The term was coined by sociologist Will Herberg to describe a society severed from its Judeo-Christian roots that may still survive on the benefits of those roots, but only for a time (like a bouquet of flowers).

<sup>61</sup> Watkin 520

<sup>62</sup> Butterfield 75

<sup>63</sup> Ali's much-publicized announcement can be found at <https://unherd.com/2023/12/why-i-am-now-a-christian-2/>.

<sup>64</sup> A transcript of "The God Debate" that included Dawkins and Ali can be found at <https://unherd.com/watch-listen/the-god-debate/>.

<sup>65</sup> <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2021/06/the-cross-and-the-machine>

<sup>66</sup> Tom Holland makes this case in his book *Dominion*. For example, Christianity and the Bible are often criticized for their attitudes and actions toward women and slaves. Aside from frequently misrepresenting the biblical positions on these issues, such criticisms can only be made using the moral framework provided by Christianity itself.

And so for *now*, that's where Lutheran worship takes aim. It uses bodily ritual and artistic beauty to form people's beliefs and behaviors as much as it informs them.<sup>67</sup> It recognizes that this so-called "soft apologetic" aimed at the heart is just as important as the "hard apologetic" aimed at the head.<sup>68</sup> It recognizes that, before someone can be convinced that something is true, they may need to be shown why they should want it to be true.<sup>69</sup>

Please do not misunderstand this as an invitation to emotional manipulation. Even when our target is the subjective, the arrows we shoot must be fashioned from material that is objective: the gospel promises of God and the historical events on which they are based. Just as no one is convinced not to be anxious by being told not to be anxious or not to be afraid by being told not to be afraid,<sup>70</sup> no one is filled with joy simply by being told something is joyful. No one is filled with awe simply by being told something is awesome. No one is filled with amazement simply by being told something is amazing. Christian ritual, art, and music are designed to fill people's hearts with all these things and more. They become Christian propaganda, however, when their object becomes their subject.<sup>71</sup> Rather than pop music, properly understood as "not simply the popular music of our day but a style all its own in history—the product of a convergence of many streams: marketing/advertising, the triumph of the therapeutic, and entertainment as stimulation,"<sup>72</sup> the music best designed to reach human hearts is folk music, properly understood as the music of the people, having "both musical and lyrical character and depth..., given not so much to self-referential expressiveness but to storytelling."<sup>73</sup>

So for *now*, Lutheran worship ought to be seen as an hour for formation as much as it is an hour for information. For *now*, we need to realize how everything we do during that hour shapes what people love as much as everything we say teaches people what to believe. For *now*, even one of those hundred men planning his very first service in one of those hundred new missions ought to measure the value of what fills that hour not in terms of days or weeks or years, but in terms of decades and generations and lifetimes. For *now*, we ought to give thanks for those in our church body who once found reason to say, "We are from the Wisconsin Synod, *wir machen kein 'show'*" even if we might choose to wear a different badge of honor in our day. For *now*, we ought to study the Scriptures mindful not only of the fact that they tell the story of real human events that took place in real human history, but that it's a divinely beautiful story told in a divinely beautiful way.<sup>74</sup> For *now*, we need to make sure our preaching of Christ's death and resurrection not only demonstrate that both happened, but why the acquittal given to humanity in Christ has opened the floodgates of forgiveness that can wear away the jagged edges of our cancel-culture world. For *now*, our analysis of music needs to go a little deeper than a quick heresy check but instead needs to be able to tell what a song is doing in addition to what it is saying.

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<sup>67</sup> Paul Kingsnorth has said, "You can't argue people out of something they haven't argued themselves into" (Brierly 221). This applies equally whether someone is trying to convince an unbeliever to believe or a believer to disbelieve.

<sup>68</sup> "Someone has written of the possible ways the church may respond to culture—to consume or to condemn, to critique or to copy—as the many valid gestures the body of Christ can perform. But our best settled *posture* as we respond to the surrounding culture is to create. We must perpetually produce better cultural creations that are entirely us, that are all our own. Again, think of this as the 'soft apologetic' we are sending out into our world—not an apologetic of evidence and argument, but of beauty, mystery, and yes, *nostalgia*" (Paustian 145)

<sup>69</sup> Philosopher Blaise Pascal said (paraphrased): "Make good men wish Christianity were true, and then show that it is."

<sup>70</sup> The Bible (and Jesus himself) regularly says both. Whenever it does, an objective basis for the subjective command is given, e.g. Matthew 6:25ff, Matthew 10:26.

<sup>71</sup> "Do not let music be a diva craving the attention of the crowd for itself. Let it be a John the Baptist that points away from itself to Jesus" (Paustian 145). "So what's the Buzz about? Nothing. Or, more precisely, it's about itself. The music video is about (i.e., an ad for) the product: the album. The evening news need not be about noteworthy events in the world but merely about the event of 'reporting' it. Advertising need not be about products but merely create a consumer experience. And when the Buzz comes to church, worship need not actually be about God and what he has done, is doing, and will do to and for us but only about itself. 'Let's just praise the Lord'" (Horton 193).

<sup>72</sup> Horton 183

<sup>73</sup> Ibid 185

<sup>74</sup> I'm guessing you'd be surprised at the number of people in your pews who are familiar with the biblical lectures of men like Jordan Peterson and Jonathan Pageau (for example, see <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL22J3VaeABQAppIsV0MmKYhGeFGjsy-dS>). While their interpretive approach certainly differs from ours, they demonstrate the artistic beauty of the biblical narrative. Their popularity demonstrates how much this approach resonates with people.

In our so-called post-Christian world, some will remain unconvinced. But even those who don't believe might see the goodness and beauty of the Christian faith on display in Lutheran worship and understand why "a man might be glad to believe."<sup>75</sup>

## Conclusion: Our Perennial Answer

Again, I wouldn't have written any of that in 2021. It's not because times have changed that much but because the assignment I was originally given was different. The topic I was given in 2021 had to do with whether we were looking at the sunrise or sunset of our church body and its worship. I suppose I did end up talking about the sun a bit.

For this conference, the assignment was to adapt my January 2023 keynote at the WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership, entitled "Our Lutheran Moment," to make specific applications to worship. I'm not sure how well I fulfilled that assignment. Regurgitating tends to leave a bad taste in my mouth. Plus, everything I said *then* is *now* "so 2023."

But the assignment I was originally given, the assignment I was later given, and the assignment I eventually sort of made up for myself are really three different versions of the same assignment. The meta-question behind all three is simply this: "Do we have an answer?" Whether the felt needs of our society are wholesome morality, secrets to prosperity, social reform, or mental health... Whether new technologies are emerging that hold promising possibilities for our use or whether their abuse is leading us to ponder putting them down... Whether it seems Christianity is in decline or resurgence... Whether the faith is accused of being irrational, evil, or just plain irrelevant... Whether the shades of red we see on the horizon signal sunrise or sunset for our little church body... Whether our hymnal is brand new or ready for replacement... Whether our worship leaders are wise veterans or the green rookies who learned from them... Do we have an answer? Is Lutheran worship able to offer whatever our moment requires?

This is the real question. And this is why the answer to the one we started with, "What do we do *now*?" is not found in Luther's *Formula Missae* of 1523, the "Service of Word and Sacrament" in *Christian Worship* '93, or any setting of "The Service" in *Christian Worship* '21. It's not found in a Gerhardt chorale or a Getty hymn. It's not found in the black Geneva your father wore or the white alb your son wears. It's found in the hallmarks of our Lutheran heritage that shape this work we call *Lutheran worship*. It's found in the proclamation of justification by grace through faith, the proper distinction between law and gospel, the doctrine of the means of grace and the priesthood of all believers, and the theology of the cross. Armed with the faith that only the Spirit can teach and that, by God's grace, has been shaping Lutheran worship for 500 years, we have every reason to be confident that our meta-question has been settled. No matter what year it happens to be when we ask, "What do we do *now*?", God has given us all we need to be ready with an answer.

For *now*,

Jonathan P. Bauer  
July 25, 2024  
Festival of St. James the Elder, Apostle

*O gracious God, we remember today your servant James, who readily followed the calling of your Son, Jesus Christ, and was first among the Twelve to suffer martyrdom for his name. Enable the leaders of your church to forsake all false and passing allurements and follow him alone, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

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<sup>75</sup> Horton 17, quoting Dorothy Sayers.

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