

Death and Resurrection: Disentanglement from the Culture

Seventeen years ago, I delivered a set of Reformation lectures on Luther and the Fanatics, tracing that theme from the tumultuous years of the Reformation to the era of Pietism and the influence of American Evangelicalism on twentieth-century Lutherans. In my first lecture I said that due to the inroads of American Evangelicalism, confessional Lutheranism was looking death in the face. Now whatever you may think about the validity of that brash statement, I believe you will agree that while the Lutheran Church is not exactly dead, it is starting to look a little pale around the gills. Yet I am not so sure I had the right diagnosis of the problem. I am not sure the problems we face today can be traced to classical theological distinctions. Now it seems that much of what is ailing us can be traced to cultural accommodation. My thesis is that we are going to have to first step away from our culture if we are to truly embrace it and connect it to Christ and his word.

I begin with a prophetic voice from more than sixty years ago. In 1949, Chad Walsh wrote this about a time in America most of us would consider “the good old days,” when all those boomers were being born, the economy was on the upswing, and the church was growing dramatically:

“Modern civilization,” which dates roughly from the Renaissance, is now on its last legs. This glum conviction is less startling than it would have been a few decades ago, when the doctrine of inevitable progress still had many adherents in both low and high places. Today the funeral bell is being rung by a whole army of philosophers and social scientists.

Perhaps we are headed toward barbarism, and the barbarism will be permanent . . . Most of the advanced thinkers point out (justly enough) that the impact of Christianity has been on the decline for the past several centuries, and from this (with much less logic) they frequently draw the conclusion that Christianity will shortly fade away completely. An opposite conclusion can be drawn. Perhaps the present sad state of Western civilization arises largely from the watering-down and outright rejection of

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Christianity. In that case, a return to Christianity may be the price a reluctant world will have to pay if it wants any civilization at all.¹

What I am proposing as the best way for Christians to face contemporary challenges builds on Professor Walsh's thesis: our problem is not so much the secularization of society as it is the secularization of the church. If that is true then the way forward is the way of the cross: first death, then resurrection. Perhaps the collapse of all things familiar and comfortable to us is not that disastrous. Perhaps it is the inevitable consequence of a church grown complacent and dependent on its addiction to the culture.

As my friend Robert Kolb has said, "The Eisenhower administration isn't coming back again anytime soon." Ward and June Cleaver and "the Beav" no longer define the American family—if they ever did. What many of my generation consider "the good old days" are gone for good, and maybe that is not so bad. The marriage between the culture and the church was ill advised in the first place and it is no longer tenable. Not so long ago community standards were largely reflective of Christian morality, but that day is long past. No longer can you look up and down the street to determine what is right and wrong. What passes for acceptable behavior among our neighbors is increasingly incompatible with the Christian life as outlined in the New Testament.

What to do? There is more than enough handwringing and fear mongering in our churches. Conservative biblical Christians find themselves increasingly out of step in a world that seems to have passed them by. Most agree that we cannot go on with business as usual. Statistics do not lie, and once you begin tracking the decline, panic sets in.

In 2012, the Pew Research Center published the results of a poll demonstrating that the number of religiously unaffiliated Americans had increased in the previous five years by 5 percent—from just over 15 percent to just fewer than 20 percent. One-fifth of the population—and one-third of adults under thirty—claimed no religious affiliation at all.² This decline is despite concerted and innovative evangelistic efforts in the last three decades to grow the church. It is enough to put the fear of God into you. You know what happens; perhaps you have seen it in your own congregations. People look around and see the greying heads in the pews and they panic. "This is a disaster! We've got to do something!" is the cry. There is no lack of eager would-be saviors of the church. They frequently prescribe radical surgeries or complete makeovers. "Change or Die" is their motto. Sadly, the outcome is all too predictable: the patient emerges from surgery or makeover looking remarkably like the surrounding culture.

I think we can agree that the challenges require our concerted and deliberate attention. I think we can also agree that the solution to those challenges is not to deconstruct and rebuild the church in the image of the world. The word of God, not the world, determines the mission. The missionary task of the church is to bring an eternal

biblical gospel to bear, tailored for the challenges unique to each generation.

A hasty cure based on an inaccurate diagnosis is always dangerous to the patient. A proper cure hinges on an accurate diagnosis. True in medical care, it is especially true when it comes to spiritual care. So first, let us assess the symptoms, and then I will propose a diagnosis. It may be that certain things need to die if there is to be a resurrection. In the second part of this essay, I will outline a treatment plan for an intentional and deliberate cure of what is ailing the church.

Diagnosis and Cure: Exploring the Symptoms

Students of the culture agree that there has been a tectonic shift in the foundations of civilization in the West. Not all agree on what to call this shift; it is no longer fashionable to speak of “the postmodern era.” Whatever you call it, something has changed dramatically. Anyone who has lived more than a few decades knows that assumptions held in common for generations have been shaken radically. To cite one example; I grew up in a world in which everyone held that there was such a thing as truth. They fought loud and long over what that truth was, but most everyone believed truth was out there, waiting to be discovered, and given enough data, human reason would be able to uncover that truth. Hardly anyone holds to that notion anymore. Objective truth is now viewed much like a daguerreotype in a world of flashy full-color digital imagery, a quaint vestige of bygone times.

The Loss of Virtue

What is left when you take truth out of the picture? What happens when human reason is banished from the marketplace of ideas? I don’t need to tell you; after all, we all live in a world that has lost its virtue, as David Wells reminded us fifteen years ago.³ When there are no commonly defined objective *virtues*, all that is left are subjective *values*. No wonder our culture is in moral free fall. Who can argue principles when all you have are values? Values, by definition, vary from one person to another, and one person’s values are as valid as another’s.

When reason is abandoned, all you have is emotion and volition. Our vocabulary reveals just how far we have come. Listen to your friends and neighbors; listen to yourself. Very few speak of opinions or thoughts; when asked for our perspective on important issues, what do we say? Not “I think,” but “I feel.” And who can argue with feelings? Everyone is entitled to feelings, after all. In our subjective age, feelings are largely all that is left. We live in a time in which almost everyone lives a life with no foundation other than one’s own values. We live as bundles of feelings, cast adrift to float on an endless sea of subjectivism.

The Flight from Reason

The price of moving our common understanding of reality from truth to perception and away from reason toward feeling is social fragmentation and moral decay. In his recent book *Conscience and Its Enemies*, Robert P. George identifies three essential pillars of human society; the removal of any one of them spells cultural chaos and social

disaster. Firstly, “respect for the human person—the individual human being and his dignity.”⁴ When life is not respected, be that life in the womb, the elderly, or those unable to contribute significantly to the collective community, that life is easily discarded, as we have seen not just in Nazi Germany, but also in the supposedly enlightened West with the acceptance first of abortion, then assisted suicide and euthanasia, and now infanticide.

George’s second pillar of decent society is the institution of the family.

The family, based on the marital commitment of husband and wife, is the original and best ministry of health, education, and welfare. Although no family is perfect, no institution matches the healthy family in its capacity to transmit to each new generation the understandings and traits of character—the values and virtues—on which the success of every other institution of society, from law and government to educational institutions and business firms, vitally depends.⁵

Notice here that George is not raising any of the vital biblical arguments in favor of sexual chastity and marital faithfulness; his is a natural law argument. He points out that as this second pillar collapses, the social consequences are immense. We are beginning to see the rise of a complex and astronomically expensive network of social welfare constructed to salvage the wreckage from the denigration and demise of the family.

The third pillar and hallmark of a healthy society is, according to George, “a fair and effective system of law and government.”⁶ When law and government are built on a foundation of personal feelings and self-interest instead of reason and objective fairness, the results are evident, not only in the halls of congress, but through all of our society, right down to the meetings of our county commissioners and township boards.

The subjectivism we deplore in governmental policy is nothing other than the social and political consequence of our collective worldview, which George calls “expressive individualism.” Classically, the liberal arts were designed to constrain and master basic impulses and desires of individual human passion for the cause of the common good. This educational ideal was designed to free—to *liberate*—the individual to contribute to society as a genuinely free person. When, on the other hand, human passion gains the upper hand, that person is a slave to impulses.⁷

The Debacle of Individualism

Ask anyone who has given his or her baser inclinations free reign, and you will see for yourself. Whether it’s a cocaine addict looking for another hit or a porn junkie locked in a private hell of remorse, self-loathing, and sexual self-destruction—expressive individualism initially promises freedom, but ultimately delivers bondage.

It’s exciting to declare independence from the expectations of others and cultural norms, but the result isn’t pretty. When your companions are comprised of me, myself, and I, you live in a very small world.

Individualistic thinking is not a novelty. It's as old as the garden of Eden and is a temptation to every generation. Yet what arose in 1960s America has tainted each succeeding generation, from the Boomers to the Gen-Xers to the Millennials, and now Generation Z. Individualism, and specifically, to use George's term, *expressive* individualism, is very much with us and, in my way of thinking, has had a devastating influence on the life and mission of the contemporary church. This living for self and fixation on personal feelings and well being that characterizes the secular culture may have blossomed in Sinatra's "I did it my way" sentiments, yet it has not only come to full flower, but has gone to seed in the American church.

The Movement from Christ to Christian

You can find examples of this movement in much of the preaching in pop Christianity today. The mission of the Christian takes over for the mission of Christ. The sacrificial death and substitutionary atonement of Jesus is eclipsed by the gospel of progress, happiness, and self-improvement. Whether it is sermons on how to have good sex or how to live a life of fulfillment and service, the cumulative effect is devastatingly clear: the self has been substituted for God. The improved Christian has taken over the spotlight from Jesus Christ crucified. The work of the Christian has taken over for the work of Christ; sanctification—more precisely, a false view of sanctification—has taken over for justification. Works have been substituted for faith, and the law—a pale and anemic version of the law—has been substituted for the gospel. "How to" has taken over for "repent and believe." "What would Jesus do?" has taken over for "what has Jesus done?"—or more precisely, in terms of the efficacious word and sacrament: "what is Jesus doing?" We do not serve a dead hero, after all, but a living Lord, who comes among us daily to nourish us by his word.

The important thing to note as we look at challenges to contemporary Christians is that we have imported far too many of the assumptions of our secular culture into the church. We have abandoned teaching in favor of coaching. We have abandoned teaching truth and focused on self-improvement programs. We seem to be driven more by polls and approval ratings than we are by the word of God. We have embraced the expectations and norms of our culture and begun to remodel the church in the image and likeness of the world—and in that world, expressive individualism takes precedence over everything else.

Nearly a generation ago I was shocked one Sunday morning to have a member of our congregation come up to me after church and say: "Pastor, we've heard all about Jesus and his cross; we already know the gospel; give us something we can use." I had to do a quick internal analysis of that particular sermon: had I given the law short shrift, perhaps? Had I fallen into minimalizing the gospel by perhaps falling into trite mantra-like expressions? But no, that was not the case. Here was a woman, well-catechized and well-placed in terms of influence in our church, who genuinely believed that the transforming gospel of Christ crucified and risen had no discernible application to her daily life. She believed that helpful hints for daily living were more important than the

forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation daily and richly dispensed in Christ's name and stead in his church. Clearly, I had some teaching to do.

What Goes Around Comes Around

Ironically, the pulse of the contemporary church resonates to the beat of the world. Rather than having something transformational to bring to the world, today's church seems fixated on remodeling itself to look more and more like the world, albeit with a spiritual veneer. From its mission approach to its preaching to its worship and teaching, the American church seems to have adopted the culture's focus on expressive individualism, which threatens—tsunami-like—to engulf and submerge it in a sea of subjective self-interest. Twenty years ago, David Wells highlighted the irony of how conservative Christianity had begun to resemble the creed of the classic Christian liberals of the early twentieth century:

It is not difficult to see how the marketers of Evangelicalism might begin to resemble the old liberalism, the gospel that H. Richard Niebuhr once described as 'consisting in a god without wrath bringing people without sin into the kingdom without judgment through a Christ without a cross.'⁸

More recently, the Australian Broadcasting Company documented the nearly identical statistical decline of active churchgoers in Christendom worldwide not only in liberal church bodies, but also among conservative and evangelical churches. Citing recent demographic studies among Christians in America, Australia, and the UK, Christopher Brittain documents a downward trajectory in habits of church attendance across the theological spectrum.⁹ The sole statistical exception to the decline is in the Global South, where the growth of Christianity is apparently led primarily by pentecostal churches of the neo-pentecostal persuasion, which emphasize a single charismatic leader, the witnessing of miraculous signs, and the "prosperity gospel" that teaches that financial reward is a sign of God's blessing.

Despite the broad theological divide between liberals and conservatives, they have a remarkable affinity. While classic liberalism capitulated to the intelligentsia of its day, modifying biblical teaching to accommodate scientific and philosophical reasoning, conservative evangelicalism has adjusted its compass to the trends of pop culture, packaging its teaching and church life to appeal to a customer base informed by marketing, advertising, and entertainment. Meanwhile, the neo-Pentecostals are adjusting their message to appeal to the individual as well, promising wealth and self-promotion to converts. Brittain advises churches across the theological divide to quit focusing on cultural trends and the fashionable dictates of expressive individualism:

For conservatives, the task is to stop interpreting the demise of liberal congregations as a victory for evangelical Christianity, and to explore what might be learned from the fact that liberal Christianity's roots lie in the attempt to adapt and respond to cultural diversity and modern individualism.¹⁰

On the other hand, liberals need to ask themselves what they have to hand on to succeeding generations. Brittain writes, “. . . liberals need to give greater attention to why the doctrines and traditions of Christianity should matter to someone not already familiar with them.”¹¹

The lesson of the ages remains true today for Christians on either side of the theological divide: the church is always one generation away from extinction. You could say the church is engaged in a perpetual relay race, passing on what we have received to those who come after us. Liberals are in danger of dropping the baton altogether, abandoning the faith once delivered to the saints. But conservative churches face a formidable challenge as well: accommodation and modification of the faith to reflect the cultural individualism of our time. Our culture presents a notoriously fluid target, shifting with every passing fashion. The maxim holds true: “If you marry the culture, you are destined to become an early widower.”

The New Babylonian Captivity of the Church

Confessional Lutherans are keenly aware of what happened in October of 1517. Not many of us easily recall what happened three years later, however. Having been threatened with excommunication by Pope Leo X earlier that year, in October of 1520 Luther published the second of his major treatises delineating the cause for his break with the church of Rome. In “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” Luther outlines scriptural objections to the sacramental theology of the Roman church, which had carried the church of Christ into captivity just as surely as the Babylonian Empire had carted off the Jews into captivity. Enslaving the church in a hierarchical scheme of priestly ordination, the papacy imposed aberrations into the Mass: first, by withholding the cup from the laity, second, by the doctrine of transubstantiation, and third, by making the Mass a perpetual sacrifice for the sins of the living and the dead rather than a sacrament for the remission of sins in Christ’s body once given and blood once shed at Calvary.¹²

The formidable challenges to the contemporary church could well be viewed as comprising a new kind of Babylonian captivity. The strange thing about this captivity is that it is not enforced or imposed on the church from without, but chosen and embraced from within. We are in many ways our own worst enemies. The culture we live in presents challenges to the Christian unprecedented in living memory, but the challenge lies not outside the church, but inside the church. What I describe as the new Babylonian captivity is what we have done to ourselves, namely, the strange fascination with our contemporary culture evident across denominational and confessional lines.

I have shown how expressive individualism has prevailed in our world and now is the governing principle that defines reality across political and geographic borders, ethnic and language divisions, and social and economic status. People everywhere take it as axiomatic that there is no overarching truth, and that every person has the inherent right to exercise freedom of choice in any ethical decisions, since truth is in the eye of the beholder. Further, all of these truths, some of which may be diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive, are equally valid. In the end, therefore, reason devolves into feeling and each person is his or her own authority.

The ensuing chaos is of course both predictable and tragic. Yet we as Christians have come to the kingdom for precisely such a time as this. We are not going back to the Eisenhower administration any time soon. Sadly, too many confessional Lutherans sound as if they come straight from the 1950s and the neat and tidy world of *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver*. It is time that we address not that world of sixty years ago, but the world we live in now. For too long we have been content to reminisce about days gone by and shake our heads sadly at the developments around us. No wonder that to a watching world we often come across sounding like nostalgia freaks.

I suggested earlier that the way out of the mess involves diagnosis and then prescription. We have labelled our problem a kind of “Babylonian captivity,” but we have not yet defined the disease. Let us take a careful look at some of the symptoms of this bondage to the culture that has the contemporary church so paralyzed and depleted.

Symptom 1: How the Church Lost Its Story

Over the last four or five decades, there has been a loss of the importance of the biblical narrative. This loss is perhaps nowhere better delineated than in an essay by Robert Jenson in 1993, just as the pervasive influence of the Enlightenment and the age of reason was starting to crumble. In his essay, Jenson dramatically posed the church’s mission challenge as a contemporary version of what the church faced in a parallel time, the cultural tumult and collapse of late antiquity.

As the church once lived and conducted her mission in the precisely *post-Hellenistic* and *post-Roman-imperial* world, remembering what had vanished but not knowing what if anything could come next, so the church must now live and conduct her mission in the precisely “post”-modern world.¹³

The consequence of living in a postmodern world, Jenson contends, is that the church now faces a missionary task in a world that has lost its story. The Christian West no longer has a living memory of the story of the Bible, namely, a Creator who is the author of creation and therefore the narrator of all history, who provides continuity and meaning to the purpose of humanity. The age of reason tore man from his creator and called into question the authenticity and importance of the Bible. Jenson writes, “The entire project of the Enlightenment was to maintain realist faith while declaring disallegiance from the God who was that faith’s object . . . Modernity was defined by the attempt to live in a universal story without a universal storyteller.”¹⁴

Now, twenty years past the collapse of modernism, the church is still scrambling to find footing in a world without a story. Because the church’s members were raised in a culture that collectively had lost its connection with the God who gives meaning and purpose to the world, the church herself has a hard time recovering the content and meaning of the biblical narrative, to say nothing of unpacking that meaning for the ethical and moral challenges that surround us. It appears that not only has the *world* lost its story, but also the *church* has lost her grip on that story as well—or at least is suffering from chronic amnesia. This loss of the Christian story and biblical narrative is the first of the symptoms of our collective disease.

Symptom 2: From Eternal Verities to Personal Fulfillment

There has been a shift within the church, almost a conscious decision, to turn away from the eternal truths of the word of God and focus on human fulfillment. It is tragic, it is inexplicable, and it is suicidal. It has all the appearances of a death wish considered from the perspective of Scripture and the history of the church catholic. Yet it is palpable and demonstrable.

Last year Tullian Tchvidjian, pastor of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church and grandson of evangelist Billy Graham, wrote an op-ed piece in the *Washington Post* deploring the capitulation of evangelical churches to expressive individualism in the culture. He pointed out that the frantic activism that has been imported into the life of the church has not only failed to stem the tide of defections from the pews, but has gutted the central tenet of the faith once delivered to the saints, namely God's "one-way love" in his Son Jesus Christ.

The hub of Christianity is not "do something for Jesus." The hub of Christianity is "Jesus has done everything for you." And my fear is that too many people, both inside and outside the church, have heard our "do more, try harder" sermons and pleas for intensified devotion and concluded that the focus of the Christian faith is the work that we do instead of the work God has done for us in the person of Jesus.¹⁵

This performancism, as Tchvidjian calls it, has spread throughout evangelicalism, and continues to make inroads in ostensibly Lutheran churches. It's as though the Reformation didn't happen; the justification of the ungodly has been set aside in favor of the perfection and growth of the saints. The sad truth is that the message of personal happiness and success heard in the pulpits of America today is the practical equivalent of the worst kinds of moralism promulgated in the Roman church of Luther's day, albeit cloaked in secular wrappings and shorn of much of its spiritual veneer.

Symptom 3: From Chastity to Decadence

Just a few minutes in front of any TV, computer, or movie screen will tell you that we've come a long way since the days of Mae West and Sophie Tucker (as if anyone can still recall those femme fatales). Sex sells, and it is used to sell everything: from overpriced clothing for hormonally driven teenagers to overpriced sports cars for old men trying to recapture their lusty youth. Increasingly our culture seems to be stumbling in a mad rush to out-sensualize the sensual and to deconstruct and redefine human sexuality in every conceivable decadent way. We can trace the devolution from Janet Jackson's infamous "wardrobe malfunction" at the Super Bowl some years ago to Miley Cyrus and Robin Thicke's "twerking" at the Video Music Awards, and eclipsed by Beyonce's sixteen-minute medley of sexually graphic lyrics with choreography to match. Apparently, there are no limits to how low you can go in degrading the human body and its sexual function.

We cannot blame the advertising or entertainment industries; they would not be doing these things if they did not meet with eager customers. We could talk about

the multibillion-dollar pornography industry and its devastating impact in the church and among clergy. We could talk about the millions of child sex-trafficking victims. As alarming and tragic as these developments are in themselves, they are above all symptomatic. We need to pay attention to these developments not merely as examples of moral decay, but as underlying spiritual decay and emptiness. The impact of the sexual revolution on social structure and basic humanity should tell us something about the world we live in. As I have written elsewhere, before we can ever clean up the world, we must weep for it.¹⁶ What can be sadder than that the most intimate aspect of our bodily existence, designed by our Creator to imitate and reflect the union of Christ and his beloved bride, the church, should become an expression of personal indulgence and self-gratification rather than union and self-disclosure between husband and wife? What could be more heart-rending than ripping sex from its marital context in a permanent one-flesh relationship and making it a solo performance as in pornography, or loveless and anonymous, as in “friends with benefits”?

If we trace sexual practices from the sexual revolution until now it should not shock Christians that large numbers of faithful churchgoers see no problem in redefining marriage to include same-sex relationships. After all, if sex is divorced from its context in human procreation and generations of married heterosexuals have come to define their marital relationship principally as an emotional bond and view their sexual union primarily in terms of orgasm and their own personal pleasure, what possible reason might we have to forbid same sex couples the same privilege?

The sexual disaster unfolding in our society and increasingly among those who bear the name of Christ is but another symptom of what has happened as the church has capitulated to expressive individualism and built its corporate life around the gratifications of the individual. We have sown to the wind and reaped the whirlwind.

Such is the inevitable result of the secularization of the world, some will say. Remember, my contention is that the challenges we encounter as Christians are not so much the consequence of the secularization of the *world* as they are the result of the secularization of the *church*. Mary Eberstadt, journalist and research fellow at the Hoover Institute, argues that the decline of the church in the West is paralleled by the decline of the family. Like a double helix, the two are intimately related, she contends. As the church regains its teaching regarding marriage and the family, the church will have an impact on the culture around it. Ours is not the first era when Christian sexual mores conflicted with the prevailing culture, Eberstadt reminds us:

In the largely pagan world where Christianity first took root, as Roman writers themselves reported, infanticide was common; abortion was hardly unknown; births to unmarried couples abounded; divorce was a rather obvious solution to marital unhappiness, at least for men; and in certain classes, homosexuality was a familiar fact of life. All of these were behaviors and customs that Christianity then pronounced to be sins.¹⁷

Despite opposing accepted values of the day, in the apostolic era and the generations following the church grew dramatically. The church captured the hearts, minds, and imaginations of the pagan world with the transforming story of God's intervention in this world in the person of Jesus Christ, who demolished death and brought life and immortality, transforming sexuality along with every other dimension of human existence.

There is hope, in other words. All is not lost in our time of decay and decadence. Corporately, we in the church have been in this position before. If we can rise above our addiction to cultural individualism, we can address this challenge effectively. Above all, if we remain faithful to our Lord, he will remain faithful to us, for he cannot deny himself.

Symptom 4: From Soul to Self

Our survey of the impact of expressive individualism on the life of the church would not be complete without the fourth and final symptom: the shift from the divinely created soul to the self-constructed ego, or as it's more popularly called, the "self."

You likely won't hear the word "soul" used much these days. It's another of those words that has gone out of fashion. Even in the church we seem to find the word awkward and a bit embarrassing. Yet it's a big word in the Bible. The psalmist writes, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name" (Ps 103:1). The mother of our Lord, upon being greeted by her cousin Elizabeth, calls out in thanksgiving, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Lk 1:46-47).

Biblical anthropology is a complex topic and exploring the meaning of the word "soul" in the Bible is beyond the scope of this essay. However, I will provide my own working definition of the term. Perhaps the most important thing to remember is that biblically a "soul" is not something you *have*, but something you *are*. In other words, the soul is not a substance that resides somewhere above the hypothalamus, but rather is the person in relation to God. At the creation of Adam, the Lord God took the dust of the earth and formed it into the shape of a man, then breathed into his nostrils his own divine *ruach*, or Spirit, and Adam became a *nephesh hayah*, a "living soul." That is, he was of the stuff of the earth with a fleshly body, but being made in the image and likeness of God he partook of the life-giving Spirit of God in his totality. Thus, when the psalmist or the Virgin Mary speaks of "my soul," they mean themselves, body, soul, and spirit, in relation to God.

Since the Enlightenment, the biblical view of man has shrunk considerably. To paraphrase Jenson, the whole project of the Enlightenment was the attempt to live in a narratable world without a narrator, that is, without a relationship with God the Father, maker of heaven and earth. When the world shrinks to exclude everything spiritual, all that is left is the material. Accordingly, the view of humanity shrinks along with the view of the world. A human becomes a biological organism without origin, purpose, or direction—a bundle of impulses and desires, motivated by internal goals.

Seventy years ago, C. S. Lewis showed what happens to human society when humans fend for themselves without a creator. Lewis showed, in other words, what happens when humankind loses its soul: "We make men without chests and expect of

them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.”¹⁸

In other words, when we deliberately strip humans of their spiritual dimension, they can no longer be fully human. This is where individualism has left us as a culture. Humanity has been debased, and has little or no capacity for the classic virtues. In the name of personal freedom, we have created a world in which human beings are captives to their own desires. “Well, there you have it,” you might say. “That’s the price of secularization.” Maybe so, but how tragic it is when that same individualism rides rampant in the conscious life of the church. How catastrophic it is when the church herself becomes secularized and expressive individualism sits in the driver’s seat in the church’s life and mission. When the church has lost connection with Christ her living head, she loses her soul.

There are more than enough examples of churches trying to reinvent themselves in the image and likeness of the world in an effort to gain attention and favor in the eyes of a populace less and less attracted to the gospel. Here is an example of what can happen when the church loses sight of who she is and caters to expressive individualism.

A YouTube video recorded several years ago at an Anglican church in Ontario continues to make the rounds on the internet. Titled “A Cat, a Hat, and a Eucharist,” the video presents highlights of a service designed around Dr. Seuss’s *The Cat in the Hat*. The presiding priest, decked out as—you guessed it—the cat in the hat—saunters down the aisle for the procession mimicking the mischievous cat, then proceeds to serve up the liturgy in the doggerel rhyme of Dr. Seuss. For example, this is the eucharistic prayer:

This bread we share is my body you see
Take it and eat it in memory of me.
And after they ate, he picked up a drink
And said, “There’s more in here than you think.
This is my blood that I give for you.”
And for those who think their life is through
Because they sin, they should be living.
And remember our God is always forgiving.¹⁹

The audacity of those who dreamt up this travesty is beyond comprehension. One responder at the YouTube website wrote, “Isn’t blasphemy against the Holy Spirit an unforgivable sin? This is sickening, worldly, and blasphemous . . . Makes Joel Osteen look like John Calvin.”

We may laugh, but we also weep. These are perilous times for the church, and the forces that gave rise to this travesty are also at work among us. We need to watch and pray that we enter not into this temptation. More than that, like good spiritual physicians, we must be alert to the symptoms to accurately diagnose the ailment. Only then can we faithfully and effectively treat the deep spiritual disease that has infected the church’s lifeblood and so bring the light and life of Christ to a world enslaved by darkness and death.

Diagnosis: Acedia

Having explored the symptoms of our contemporary sickness, I propose a diagnosis so we can intentionally treat it. It seems to me that what we have here is a classic case of *acedia* one of the seven deadly, or cardinal, sins; often translated as “sloth.”

The ancients saw much more in *acedia* than mere laziness. They saw beneath sloth to its underlying cause: disappointment with and spiritual disaffection from God’s divinely ordained gifts, be they in the realm of creation or redemption. Acedia’s deadening and deadly effect can be easily inferred; when numb to Christ’s saving work and the Father’s gracious gifts by which he makes us and preserves us, Christians sink into boredom, apathy, and then, despair. More than sixty years ago, British playwright and Christian humanist Dorothy Sayers powerfully evoked the spiritual emptiness of acedia and its often tragic end:

The sixth Deadly Sin is named by the Church Acedia or Sloth. In the world it calls itself Tolerance, but in hell it is called Despair. It is the accomplice of the other sins and their worst punishment. It is the sin which believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and only remains alive because there is nothing it would die for.²⁰

More recently, Christian writer Kathleen Norris has opened the semantic domain of this ancient term for modern scrutiny. In her journal, *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer’s Life*, she tells of her lifelong struggle with clinical depression, that she has come to recognize as something far more pernicious: the persistent and chronic temptation of acedia.

I believe that such standard dictionary definitions of *acedia* as “apathy,” “boredom,” or “torpor” do not begin to cover it, and while we may find it convenient to regard it as a more primitive word for what we now term depression, the truth is much more complex. Having experienced both conditions, I think it likely that much of the restless boredom, frantic escapism, commitment phobia, and enervating despair that plagues us today is the ancient demon of acedia in modern dress. The boundaries between depression and acedia are notoriously fluid; at the risk of oversimplifying, I would suggest that while depression is an illness treatable by counselling and medication, acedia is a vice that is best countered by spiritual practice and the discipline of prayer.²¹

The prevailing boredom with holy things that we see in the contemporary church is the telltale sign of *acedia*. The first petition teaches that what God has made holy cannot be sanctified by us; our duty is to keep God’s sacred things holy among us. God’s word must not only be taught faithfully in all its truth and purity, but those who receive that word are to live holy lives in conformity to it. Anyone who teaches or lives contrary to God’s word profanes and defiles God’s holy name.

Now, consider again the symptoms regarding the challenges of our age:

1. How the church lost its story, despising and rejecting its identity as curator of God's sacred mysteries.
2. The move away from eternal verities toward personal fulfillment; exchanging the truth of the gospel for the dictates of expressive individualism.
3. The move from chastity toward decadence as the church increasingly apes the sexual promiscuity of her pagan neighbors.
4. The move from soul to self as the church endorses the faulty view that each person must construct reality out of his or her own impulses.

Singly and collectively, these signal an abiding disaffection of all that God has declared sacred, boredom with all things holy. This boredom betrays the machinations of the evil one, who with his allies, the fallen world and our own sinful nature, does not want us to hallow God's name or let his kingdom come—a turning of our backs on all that God has declared to be good and holy and true. That is exactly what *acedia* is: not caring about those things that demand our utmost care. Listen again to Norris as she unpacks the tragedy of this predicament:

At its Greek root, the word *acedia* means the absence of care. The person afflicted by *acedia* refuses to care or is incapable of doing so. When life becomes too challenging and engagement with others too demanding, *acedia* offers a kind of spiritual morphine: you know the pain is there, yet can't rouse yourself to give a damn.²²

There is another side to *acedia*; the narcotic effect that covers the pain and struggle of life. The standard definition of *acedia*—sloth—doesn't describe the hectic pace of contemporary life. We live in a whirlwind of electronic stimuli that demand our attention. We are constantly busy; we can't possibly be accused of being slothful or lazy!

Yet precisely these phenomena are indications that we suffer from *acedia*. The busyness of our lives is a dead giveaway that the solid and lasting things of the kingdom of God have lost their luster among us. Dare I say it? The frenzy with which much of the church busies herself with things peripheral to the kingdom in a frantic attempt by her own ingenuity and effort to make God's name holy or make his kingdom come is a sign that something is radically wrong. The church has lost connection with Christ, her living head; she has listened to the siren calls of this world; she has succumbed to the prevailing culture instead of what Christ Jesus created her to be.

Our hectic lives are examples of the narcotic effect of *acedia* among us, the "spiritual morphine" that Norris wrote about. All this activity is a way of coping with pain. It masks a deep and abiding psychosis that infects our culture on all levels. Richard Leahy, a psychologist specializing in anxiety and its treatment, has written, "The average high school kid today has the same level of anxiety as the average psychiatric patient in the early 1950s."²³ That should tell you something; we are not designed to live the way most of us live. Something has gone profoundly wrong in our world, but we need to step back a bit to see it clearly.

Beneath the beehive of activity we find an empty core, the “spiritual morphine” of acedia at work. The late Russian author and Nobel laureate Alexander Solzhenitsyn in his Harvard commencement address of 1978 characterized the formerly Christian West as a “world without a center,” that is, its pursuit of individualism and personal pleasure betrayed that it had lost its first love. Toward the end of his life, he described the frantic pace of life as a symptom of deep psychosis. He wrote, “the psychological illness of (our age) is this hurriedness, hurrying, scurrying, this fitfulness—fitfulness and superficiality.”²⁴ We would expect this frenzied superficiality in a secularized culture, but that we find the same frenzy and superficiality in the church indicates that the church has become increasingly secularized; acedia is alive and well among us.

Treatment: Recovering the Corporate Life

So where do we go from here? If the problem we face is not the secularization of society but the secularization of the church brought about by importing expressive individualism into the church, then we simply cannot face contemporary challenges individually.

It is time revive and recover the third article of the Creed; to live corporately and communally in a world of expressive individualism. Rather than contributing to the fracturing of human community we Christians need to concretely demonstrate how God sets the solitary in families. We need to show how the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies people one by one through the gospel, and then draws them into communion in his holy church. Luther put it this way:

Just as the Son obtains dominion by purchasing us through his birth, death, and resurrection, etc. so the Holy Spirit effects our being made holy through the following: the community of saints or Christian church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. That is, he first leads us into his holy community, placing us in the church’s lap, where he preaches to us and brings us to Christ.²⁵

The frantic busyness of our world is a symptom of the pain and isolation everywhere; a loneliness epidemic that also threatens the fellowship of the church. We are so busy we can’t connect through genuine conversation. Technology provides, at best, a parody of that community of the holy Christian church in which sorrows are diminished and people uphold and encourage one another in the bond of Christian love and compassion. According to St. Paul, the church is not an organization, but an organism: the very body of Christ. And the church’s members are linked together in a “communion”—an intimate organic unity that transcends external institutional associations:

But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (1 Cor 12:24–27)

We are not created to live solitary lives; we are not redeemed to live solitary lives. And we are not sanctified all by ourselves either, thank God. That is what we learn in the third article. As the Holy Spirit sanctifies me by the gospel, so he sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. And in that communion—that fellowship, or organic union—I experience not merely the forgiveness of my sins, but balm for my burdens and strength in times of temptation.

In his devotional for the gravely ill Frederick, Luther wrote:

The faith of the church comes to the aid of my fearfulness; the chastity of others endures the temptation of my flesh; the fastings of others are my gain; the prayer of another pleads for me.

Therefore, when we feel pain, when we suffer, when we die, let us turn to this, firmly believing and certain that it is not we alone, but Christ and the church who are in pain and are suffering and dying with us. Christ does not want us to be alone on the road of death, from which all men shrink. Indeed, we set out upon the road of suffering and death accompanied by the entire church. Actually, the church bears it more bravely than we do . . . All that remains for us now is to pray that our eyes, that is, the eyes of our faith, may be opened that we may see the church around us. Then there will nothing for us to fear, as is also said in Psalm 125: “As mountains are round about it, so the Lord is round about his people, from this time forth and forever.” Amen.²⁶

Prescription: Treatment Plan for Evangelization

I offer some specific suggestions to face contemporary challenges, all of which flow from the corporate life of the church. If the problem is the pernicious growth of expressive individualism in both society and church, if boredom with holy things and frenzy that we find in the church are symptoms of the disease acedia, then we need a treatment plan.

Make no mistake about it; every aspect of this plan is in fact a plan for evangelization. For too long we have seen the ministry of the church and the mission of the church as distinct compartments, outreach and inreach, making disciples and keeping disciples. Yet the life of the church revolves around the central article: the justification of the ungodly by grace through faith in the Son of God, who is the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. Like the hub of a wheel, the church’s corporate life is an extension of the good news that God was in Christ reconciling the whole world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.

In America we have embraced an idea from Arminianism and frontier revivalism, that bringing people to Christ is a one-time event that centers on getting them to decide for Jesus. Thus, evangelism belongs at the front of the Christian mission, but discipleship is Christians living their lives in God’s kingdom. The rise of secularization and individualism in society and church means that we need to return to the early Christian model of being and doing church. *Every* aspect of the church’s corporate life is evangelization, an extension and expression of the living Christ present at work in his church.

Jesus, his cross, and resurrection are at the center of mission and ministry. The apostolic mandate to Timothy is one pointed example:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. (2 Tm 4:1–5)

Proclamation and Ministry

Preaching has fallen on hard times. Many see this as a failure of technique and style. Preachers today know how hard it is to get people accustomed to visual communication to sit still and listen. Preachers need to learn all they can about effective rhetoric and communication techniques. However, as important as it is that preachers know *how* to speak, it's more important that they know *what* to say. That is, they need to *proclaim* the gospel, not merely *explain* it.

John Kleinig tells of a pastoral conference in Australia in which the presenter was exhorting the pastors to be more Christ-centered in their preaching. “Brothers, we must always be sure to preach about the gospel,” he said. Just then the venerable Herman Sasse got up, shuffled his way to the microphone, and said: “Gentlemen, I have preached sermons for most of my life, but I have *never* preached *about* the gospel; I have *always* preached the gospel.”

Listen carefully to much of preaching today and I'm afraid you will hear more preaching *about* the gospel than preaching *of* the gospel. There may be a lot of references to the love of God, but precious little of the entire forgiveness of sins in the shed blood of Jesus Christ his Son, crucified and ascended, yet present in his word and sacraments for our forgiveness, life, and salvation.

Tullian Tchividjian says the hub of Christianity is not “do something for Jesus,” but “Jesus has done everything for you.” Yet since we Lutherans believe, teach, and confess an efficacious word that does exactly what it says, we dare never settle for merely explaining what Jesus has done for sinners. We proclaim that Jesus is still present personally with his church on earth through his word preached and sacraments administered that sins might actually be erased, sorrows lifted, and wounds healed. Among us, it is the same as in the synagogue in Nazareth where Jesus first announced the text from Isaiah regarding liberty for the captives, sight for the blind, and freedom for the oppressed and then began to preach saying “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4:21).

The pastoral office, the church's ministry, is the ministry of Jesus Christ risen and alive, not dead and departed, you see. We do not preach about Jesus, we preach Jesus present among us with his gifts. That is the first and perhaps most important part of our treatment plan for the church's acedia.

Catechesis for Faith and Life

The magnificent cathedrals of Europe constructed during the Middle Ages might be called archaeological artifacts from the age of faith. They are architectural gems that leave visitors stunned with their jaw dropping, otherworldly beauty. The story they enshrine in stone and stained glass is the story of the God of the Bible, who created the universe, redeemed his church with the blood of his Son, and sanctifies his people by his Spirit. Yet the story that gave rise to these edifices is largely unknown to the visitors—many of them descendants of people who built these great sanctuaries.

As Robert Jenson puts it, we live in a world that has lost its story. The collective Christian memory is fading fast. It's not surprising that the biblical narrative should lose its luster in the world after two centuries of attack by modernist anti-spiritual world-views, but the church has lost her story too. Obsessed with the self and self-improvement, the postmodern church often capitulates to expressive individualism.

But this is a great moment of opportunity for the church to be the church once more. Modernism has collapsed; the age of reason is over. People are absolutely captivated by spiritual matters. They are so enamored by spirituality of all stripes that they embrace everything spiritual that promises self-fulfillment and enhancement.

This is an opportunity too great to miss, Jenson suggests. While it's true that people today live in a world without a story, the church invites refugees from a broken world to citizenship in the kingdom of heaven; and in so doing the church gives them her story as their own:

If the church does not *find* her hearers antecedently inhabiting a narratable world, then the church must herself *be* that world. The church has in fact had great experience of just this role. One of many analogies between postmodernity and dying antiquity—in which the church lived for her most creative period—is that the late antique world also insisted on being a meaningless chaos, and that the church had to save her converts by offering herself as the narratable world within which life could be lived with dramatic coherence.²⁷

I suggested at the beginning of this article that in order to connect with this culture, we must first step back from it. By that, I mean we must be careful not to be so hobbled by the mad pursuit of expressive individualism that the church becomes a pale copy of the culture, with a thin spiritual overlay. After stepping back to observe and analyze, then it's time to step forward and engage, as Jenson suggests, to *be* the narratable world that cultural refugees lack.

We have the tools to do that; they are the Scriptures, Creeds, and Confessions of the church by which is taught the faith once delivered to the saints. To evangelize the world and catechize the faithful, we need to be a *teaching* church once more. The Catechism, “the layman’s Bible,” as Luther called it, needs to be dusted off and used once again to learn the vocabulary of faith by heart. We can only speak of what we have heard and seen, after all. The language of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer is our mother tongue, and we need to learn it again so we can

speaking concerning our hope in Christ. From cradle to grave, baptized believers need to be immersed in the divine saga of God's creation, redemption, and sanctification.

In a world that loves story, what story is more captivating than how God's Son came among us disguised in human flesh to woo and wed his beloved bride, to claim her as his own so that they might live happily ever after in righteousness, innocence, and blessedness? That's a story that puts Cinderella and her prince to shame. Only it's not a fairy tale. It's no fiction at all, but God's own truth. And there's nothing boring about it. What Dorothy Sayers wrote about the English church during the height of modernism holds true for the postmodern church in America as well:

We are constantly assured that the churches are empty because preachers insist too much upon doctrine—"dull dogma," as people call it. The fact is the precise opposite. It is the neglect of dogma that makes for dullness. The Christian faith is the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man—and the dogma is the drama.

It would not perhaps be altogether surprising if, in this nominally Christian country, where the creeds are daily recited, there were a number of people who knew all about Christian doctrine and disliked it. It is more startling to discover how many people there are who heartily dislike and despise Christianity without having the faintest notion what it is. If you tell them, they cannot believe you. I do not mean that they cannot believe the doctrine: that would be understandable enough, since it takes some believing. I mean that they simply cannot believe that anything so interesting, so exciting, and so dramatic can be the orthodox creed of the Church.²⁸

Do you see the possibilities? What would happen if we used the Catechism and the Creed not just to prepare people for communion, but also to train young and old for life-long baptismal living, to give them words to confess the faith to those who ask the reason for the hope that is in them, to provide them a pattern for daily self-examination, daily drowning of the old Adam, in preparation for the daily resurrection of the new man?

What would happen if our worship services were not places where people go for a few helpful hints for living with a few jokes thrown in for good measure, or a spiritual pick-me-up, but an audience with the living God? What would happen if we began to take liturgy as more than form and ritual, as enacted reality, holy ground where we actually come into the presence of God to receive his gifts, then to praise him in word and song, with bodies and souls? If we are to effectively treat *acedia* in all of its manifestations in the church, it is time we pay more attention to the catechesis of worship, preaching, and teaching.

Prayer and Meditation

When God speaks to us, there is nothing more natural than to speak back. In that sense prayer is as natural as respiration; first we breathe in and then we exhale. God always takes the initiative. He addresses us in his word and then we speak as we are spoken to. In this sense prayer—or the lack thereof—is indicative of the relation-

ship between God and his people. As respiration is a sign of biological life, so prayer is a sign of spiritual life. Lungs without breath are dead lungs.

If one of acedia's symptoms is boredom with holy things, we need to do more than treat the symptoms. I am sure the Anglican rector who inaugurated the Cat in the Hat Eucharist was trying to create interest and excitement among his people, but he went about it all wrong. Sacrilege does not undo boredom with holy things; rather, it desecrates and defiles what God has made holy. So rather than treating the boredom, let's treat the cause of that boredom—that is, let's treat acedia.

If we are in need of a deeper sense of the holy, we need sanctification, and according to Scripture, all things are sanctified by God's word and prayer (1 Tm 4:5). That is, we receive the Holy Spirit by means of God's word, and then we converse with him by means of his Spirit. So while prayer has both God's command and promise and is as vital to spiritual life as our breath is to our physical life, it is also essential in the treatment of acedia. Therefore, one of the most effective things we can do in confronting contemporary challenges effectively is to teach people to pray.

Prayer, while a natural part of the Christian life, doesn't come naturally. We wouldn't have the Our Father, after all, were it not for the fact that one of Jesus's disciples asked him one day after he had finished praying: "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." (Lk 11:1). And so the Lord Jesus instructed them in the best possible way. He didn't lecture them on the principles of prayer, but he began to pray, inviting them to pray with him. "Our" in Our Father does not just include our brothers and sisters in the faith, you see, but the Son of God himself.

But what to pray? If people are to pray in every circumstance, they need to learn the art of meditation also. "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer," the psalmist writes (Ps 19:14). To meditate does not mean to think hard; rather, to borrow from John Kleinig, it is a form of "relaxed concentration." He writes:

By entering into meditation, we give ourselves to what we see, hear, imagine, or feel. We are mentally at attention, mindful and receptive to something that comes to us. In meditation, something happens to us, something is given to us. In meditation, we stop acting as thinkers and doers and vacate the stage for somebody or something else to occupy that space. Someone else or something else becomes the center of our world. We receive what is said, done, or given to us.²⁹

And so prayer begins in a receptive posture. First we listen to God speaking, and then we speak back to him. Therefore meditation is the heart of prayer. In our busy world, we could use a bit more peace and quiet. How much better if we were to regularly be still and listen carefully to hear God speak in his word; how much better if we were to hold our hearts still from fretfulness, hurt, and fear so that we could be more receptive to God as he gives himself to us in his word. How refreshing it is when we are constantly doing, to simply sit still and to simply *be*; to be the Father's beloved child, enthralled to hear what he has to tell us.

This requires some discipline, of course—to create space in our harried, frenzied world takes some doing. But it can be done, and the reward is great. Jesus instructed his disciples to practice their personal prayer not in the marketplace or even in the temple, but to enter into an enclosed space where they could be still, meditate upon God’s word, and then pray.

Because our world is filled with constant stimuli, it is important to find a quiet spot for meditation—the church’s sanctuary, a room in our own house, a quiet path perhaps, or even driving our cars. To be quiet is the first step, then to listen—to listen not to the wild, racing feelings of our own hearts, but to the sure and certain promises of God’s word. So, like children, Luther reminds us, we begin by reciting the Creed or the Lord’s Prayer, a psalm, or some text of Scripture. It’s important that we speak out loud so that the ear can hear and the heart believe an objective word that cuts through the stream of conflicting thoughts that flow through our harried hearts and minds.

In such prayer, formed and framed by the Spirit of God by his word, there is peace in the midst of turmoil, as Isaiah writes, “You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you” (Is 26:3).

Conclusion: When Worlds Collide—Learning From Augustine

These are stressful times for Christians. Uncertainty is everywhere, giving rise to mischief as church leaders scramble to connect with a world that seems to have come unglued, and fear is often the result. But we need not fear. Our Lord promises that the very gates of hell will not prevail against his church, and that he will be with us always, to the very end of the age.

Besides, we have been in situations like this before. As the Roman Empire was collapsing in ruins, there were many who blamed the new state religion, Christianity, for its collapse. The comfortable world that had provided ease and security for a thousand years was unraveling. In the year 410, Barbarian invaders had sacked the city of Rome, which many had believed would stand forever, and her monuments lay in ruin. The adherents of the pagan gods were looking for someone to blame, and Christians were an easy target.

We should have some sympathy for these ancients, for in many ways we live in a world much like theirs. The familiar and comfortable is vanishing and something radically different is taking its place. I joked about the Eisenhower administration, but I think we all know the tug of nostalgia and a longing for something simpler and more predictable, less threatening and tumultuous, more comfortable and secure. But such is not our lot.

We live in a time between the age of reason and whatever will come next much like that of late antiquity, when the classic age was collapsing in ruin and the early Middle Ages were beginning. That was the church’s moment in the sun, one of its best times for vigorous mission and growth. It wouldn’t be too long before those Germanic hordes that had sacked and looted the city of Rome would themselves become Christians.

These times between the collapse of one worldview and the dawn of another are frequently epochs of great opportunity for the church. Rather than shrinking with fear for what is coming in this post-Christian era, it's time to rise to the challenge. We can learn a great deal from Aurelius Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in North Africa. Over thirteen years he drafted an apologetic for Christianity that still stands as a classic: *City of God*.

In his book, St. Augustine tells of two cities: the city of man, transient and passing; and the city of God, transcendent and lasting. Here is an important lesson for us as we struggle to discover how we should respond to contemporary challenges, especially since we, like the citizens of the ancient Roman Empire, are much too comfortable and attached to our culture. We need a more objective vantage point. We, like Augustine, need to step back from our culture to sort out what belongs to the city of man and what belongs to the city of God.

Simply put, here amid the kingdoms of this world we have no continuing city. That's why we dare not become attached to the passing values of any human culture. We await a city with foundations built by God. The city of God, that is, his eternal kingdom built on the person and work of his Son, rests securely though all the world is shaken. Thanks be to God, his kingdom comes all by itself without our prayer, but we pray that it may come among us also. Our heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit so that by his grace we believe his holy word and lead godly lives both here in time and there in eternity.

Late antiquity and late modernity have much in common. For those ancients as well as our contemporaries, things comfortable and familiar are gone, apparently never to return. Ahead is only uncertainty and confusion. Yet the church perpetually looks beyond the current shadows of uncertainty and confusion to the dawning light of eternity. She has the promise of her living Lord to sustain her: "I will never leave you nor forsake you." In Christ Jesus her Lord the church in every age has a hope and a future.

As we search for vitality in the church's life and mission in our own tumultuous age we can draw inspiration from St. Augustine in the closing words of *City of God*. To shed light on their present darkness he points the faithful to their glorious future, to an end without ending, to that time when they would know God's eternal kingdom no longer by faith but by sight:

The seventh (day) shall be our Sabbath, which shall be brought to a close, not by an evening, but by the Lord's day, as an eighth and eternal day, consecrated by the resurrection of Christ, and prefiguring the eternal repose not only of the spirit, but also of the body. There we shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise. This is what shall be in the end without end. For what other end do we propose to ourselves than to attain to the kingdom of which there is no end?³⁰

Endnotes

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