

## A Word to Sheepdogs

WE AMERICANS, ON THE WHOLE, are perpetual optimists. Handed a half-empty glass, we prefer to call it half full. As a people we've endured some pretty hard times, from the dust bowl of the impoverished '30s through the terrible testing of WWII and – within the living memory of many of us – the unfathomable shock of "9/11." Yet, despite our collective and private calamities, we look to life's possibilities instead of looming disaster. Still that shared optimism is getting a little frayed around the edges. Pop culture shows an increasing fascination with dystopian themes. Zombies and tales of dysfunction, hunger and violent cataclysm are big box office hits.

What to make of this? Mark Barz does us all a favor. In this remarkable study he first leads us through a survey of dystopian literature and its rapid rise in popularity. He surfaces some possible reasons behind this development. But he has a better goal for conscientious *seelorsgers*. He leads us to ponder the not-so-farfetched possibilities of scenarios that could indeed unravel the world in which we've collectively grown all too comfortable.

Congregations and pastors are wise to engage in some long range planning to strategize for ministry in the future. Pastor Barz helps us narrow the focus to the essentials: how could we best care for souls in a world without electricity, cell phones or motor vehicles? What will Christians be called to do in an age of scarcity of food, clothing, and lodging? How will the church survive in a time of potential virulent persecution and shortage?

I urge you to read this captivating essay with an open mind and heart. Generations of Christians before us have faced this – and more – in confidence and hope. And by the grace of God, our posterity will continue to bear witness courageously to Him who says, "Sure, I am coming soon." The church's refrain is perpetually the same: "Amen, Lord Jesus; quickly come!"



*Dr. H. L. Senkbeil*

# Clarity in Chaos: The Care of Souls in a Possible or Probable Time of Dystopia

*Pastor Mark D. Barz*

*In the year 2525, if man is still alive  
If woman can survive, they may find  
In the year 3535  
Ain't gonna need to tell the truth, tell no lies  
Everything you think, do and say  
Is in the pill you took today...  
(Richard Evans, 1969<sup>1</sup>)*

*From all sin, from all error, from all evil;  
from the crafts and assaults of the devil;  
from sudden and evil death; from pestilence and famine;  
from war and bloodshed, from sedition and from rebellion;  
from lightning and tempest, from all calamity by fire and water;  
and from everlasting death: Good Lord, deliver us.  
(The Litany, circa 1529<sup>2</sup>)*

## Introduction

**I** CONSIDER MYSELF TO BE A REALISTIC OPTIMIST. I try to see things positively, to — as Luther so aptly instructed — “put the best construction on everything.”<sup>3</sup> However, a sobering and enlightening seminar<sup>4</sup> with Uwe Siemon-Netto in the summer of 2012 altered my perspectives. Siemon-Netto spoke on pos-

<sup>1</sup>As sung by Zager and Evans, from the album “*Exordium & Terminus*” (Latin for “beginning and end”). “In the Year 2525” reached number one on the Billboard Hot 100 in July 1969, and was number one on the UK Singles Chart in August and September.

<sup>2</sup>This ancient form of prayer has a long history within Lutheranism. Martin Luther said: “Next to the Lord’s Prayer the very best that has come to earth” is the Litany. Source: *Gathered Guests: A Guide to Worship in the Lutheran Church* (Second Edition), Timothy H. Maschke. St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 2009.

<sup>3</sup>This phrasing from Luther’s explanation of the Eighth Commandment is preferred by the author. Source: *A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther’s Small Catechism*. St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1943.

<sup>4</sup>Titled, “Faith, Calamity, Persecution, and Vocation,” a five-day summer extension course of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana at Grace Lutheran Church, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

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sible or probable disaster caused by an electromagnetic pulse<sup>5</sup> or other man-made design or destruction.

This would impact almost everything we use and rely on in daily living. An electromagnetic pulse (EMP) would change our homes and vocations, our trade and commerce, our food and travel, our banks and currency, our government and laws (at least, how they were both followed and enforced). Above all, such a calamity would — without a doubt — impact and change the visible church: our gatherings and structures, our communities and caregivers.

I came home from that event in Albuquerque convinced of three things: first, we Lutherans needed to learn more hymns; second, I needed to buy a different bicycle; and third, in the midst of hoarding and scarcity, Christians would be the first ones — and, possibly, the only ones — to share their food and water, their clothes and homes.

This paper will offer cultural and literary and political perspectives, biblical and Lutheran perspectives, and, finally, observations and suggestions for pastors and for the church in a possible (or probable) time of dystopia. Above all, I will strive to address the care of souls in such an imagined time with implications for

<sup>5</sup> Electromagnetic pulses (EMPs) are rapid but invisible bursts of electromagnetic energy. While they do occur in nature (especially in lightning strikes), an E1 EMP is one byproduct of a nuclear explosion. Such an EMP could take out a large electrical power grid. Simply stated, the lights go out. Anything that runs on electricity is shut down. Sources: “Nuclear Bombs Trigger a Strong Effect that Can Fry Your Electronics — Here’s How It Works” *BusinessInsider.com* (7 June 2017) and “What Is an EMP, and Could North Korea Really Use One Against the U.S.?” *Popular Mechanics Online* (28 September 2017).

the pastoral tasks in our changing and challenging present.

## Part 1: Imagination and Speculation

### Dystopia Defined

“My Three Sons,” “Leave It To Beaver” and “The Dick Van Dyke Show” are positive and amusing in their black-and-white depictions of family life in America in the 1950s and 1960s. But it’s not only marriages and families that have fractured over the past fifty years; so have our collective values, expectations and dreams.

The word utopia was, curiously, coined by a contemporary of Martin Luther. In 1516, a book was written and published by Thomas More. In this tale, More described an imaginary and ideal society, free from suffering and poverty. He named it “Utopia.” That invented word — originally expressed in Greek — means “no place.” There is, however, a close relationship to eutopia, another Greek word which means “good place.” It was only in the 20th century that “utopia” became a more common literary and political concept.

It is a benign word. It simply refers to “the perennial human impulse to imagine a flawless society, free of contradictions and conflicts.”<sup>6</sup> By contrast, “dystopia” is an imagined — and futuristic — place where everything is unpleasant; it is a “negative utopia” in which people lead dehu-

<sup>6</sup> *Utopia and Terror In the 20th Century*, Vejas G. LieleVICIUS. Chantilly, Virginia: The Teaching Company, 2003, 4.

manized and fearful lives.<sup>7</sup> Even more, in a dystopia, an illusion of utopia is often maintained by some, an elite, or a small cadre of leaders. Painting dystopian scenarios is not done simply to show how bad life can become, but to give this imagined reality emotional weight and impact.<sup>8</sup>

Let me assure you, I am not a “Prepper.”<sup>9</sup> I don’t sing along with Zager and Evans or with Barry McGuire.<sup>10</sup> I’m not addicted to dystopian fantasies. I am not worried about an alien invasion. I don’t lie awake at night fearing a zombie apocalypse. At the same time, it is prudent — if not necessary — for 21st century Christians to ponder a worst-case scenario. (I prefer and suggest “a more-devastating-case scenario.”)

Just as few could have foreseen the carnage of trench warfare at the Marne and Verdun and the Somme in the Great War or the destructive power of the two atomic bombs dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, so are we unable to imagine the devastating possibilities which may face humankind before the promised return of Christ in glory.

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<sup>7</sup> A further definition from Lielevicius: Dystopia is utopia as nightmare. *Utopia and Terror*, 150.

<sup>8</sup> “Christianity in Dystopia,” Peter Halabu. *Honors College of Oakland University* (August 2007), 5,9.

<sup>9</sup> “Preppers” is a colloquialism for those who are making specific plans and preparations for an apocalyptic event. Online communities and websites (of which there are many) include: [preppersurvive.com](http://preppersurvive.com), [urbansurvivalsite.com](http://urbansurvivalsite.com), [beprepared.com](http://beprepared.com), and [survivalist101.com](http://survivalist101.com).

<sup>10</sup> Four years before “In the Year 2525” was released, Barry McGuire charted “Eve of Destruction” with these words (written by P.F. Sloan): “And you tell me over and over and over and over again, my friend, You don’t believe we’re on the eve of destruction.”

## The Loss of the Dream

How did the American dream become an American nightmare? “You’ve come a long way, baby!” was the tagline for the newly-introduced Virginia Slims cigarette in the late 1960s. We have come a long way from the innocence of earlier generations to the jaded cynicism of the present. Trusting naivete has given way to despair.

Happy endings for television storylines that wrapped up and resolved everything in thirty minutes have been superseded by tense conclusions that entice us to return again and again and again. The wholesome — but, often, unrealistic — sitcoms of an earlier era have been replaced by increasingly bizarre reality TV and by captivating and, frequently, violent dramas, such as “24,” “Homeland” and “The Walking Dead.”

There is another side to the “they lived happily ever after” fairy tales turned into heart-racing, sweaty-palmed viewing. Our American culture has lost its dream.<sup>11</sup> The anticipated home in the suburbs with a minivan (for your 2.1 children) was foreclosed on when the real estate bubble burst in 2008. Savings earn inconsequential interest; stable employment with the same company for forty years is practically unheard of; pension plans — except for union members — are as ancient as vinyl records and Tupperware parties; and the volatility of the stock market and of oil and commodity indices makes long-term projections uncertain and unreliable. In a sense, we have woken up haunted by this: the

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<sup>11</sup> Insights in this paragraph were gained from “The Apocalyptic Strain in Popular Culture: The American Nightmare Becomes the American Dream,” Paul A. Cantor. *The Hedgehog Review*, 15.2, Summer 2013.

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Many in our culture are preoccupied with predictions of doomsday and depictions of destruction. Numerous novels and movies echo that theme. Does fiction imitate reality? Or might reality imitate — and go beyond — fiction? One journalist is boldly prophetic in stating: “As I steep myself in this genre, a literature that has a remarkable unity in its diversity, it becomes clear that we are (already) living in dystopia, a post-Christian world.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Why Dystopian Narratives?**

Why this fascination, even obsession, with darkness and dystopia? Why has there been an explosion of dystopian fiction, particularly for young adults? Is it because terrorism has proven that the whole world is no longer safe? Is it, oddly and contradictorily, a way to keep the realities of suffering and death at a distance by imagining the very worst?

Early apocalyptic and dystopian works were more abstract in dealing with a potential doomsday.<sup>13</sup> I suggest that in post-World War II years, political realities were an impetus for dystopian books and cinema. The so-called Cold War with its theory of “mutually assured destruction” prompted the fallout shelters with their stark yellow and black signs I remember from my childhood. The 13 days of the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 brought home the potential reality of nuclear devasta-

<sup>12</sup> “The Rise of Dystopian Nonfiction,” K. E. Colombini. *First Things*, February 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Some scholars consider Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville’s *The Last Man* (published in 1805) to be the first fantasy novel with an end-of-the-world scenario.

tion.<sup>14</sup> In the past two decades, other political, cultural, and environmental prompts have heightened the anxiousness of many. The rhetoric of “global warming”/“climate change,” has resulted in the perception (by some) of an ecological crisis. There is also a growing economic vulnerability — and a potential collapse of monetary systems — in the Western world because of globalization of commerce, information, and commodities.<sup>15</sup>

And what is the response of hopeful Christians to these hopeless narratives? This is simple, but not simplistic: we are all called to be ready to offer a gentle and respectful witness “to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15)<sup>16</sup>.

### **Reading and Watching**

As I approached this theme, I was genuinely surprised to discover how much contemporary story-telling is dystopian. I searched my memory bank for high school and college literature assignments. I searched online. I searched my own bookshelves. In all three places I saw numerous examples. I chose to focus on the literature — with some reference to movies and television shows with post-apocalyptic themes.

<sup>14</sup> More recent worries over nuclear attacks by and from Iran and North Korean — including the false alert in Hawaii in February 2018 — revealed both the panic over and the acceptance of a sudden catastrophic event.

<sup>15</sup> I am grateful to the Rev. Dr. John Kleinig for his perspective and insights on these events — and the perceptions of their significance and severity.

<sup>16</sup> Scripture references are (unless noted) from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®, copyright © 2001, by Crossways Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Here is an overview — listed in order of publication or release — of some dystopian story-telling that I have read or watched within the past six months. (Full bibliographic information is at the close of this paper.) My summaries will offer, when appropriate, reference to the “spiritual” — but not necessarily Christian — content of the work.

*Brave New World* (Aldous Huxley, 1932) is, perhaps, the most popular and the most prescient of utopian/dystopian tales. Children are bred and born in the “Fertilizing” and “Decanting” rooms to fill the proper castes. Christianity is treated farcically, as an irrelevance. For example, “Our Dear Ford” is the address to the “Greater Being” in the “Solidarity Services.” John (the) Savage is a key character; his experiences and thoughts mingle Native American religion, Scripture, and Shakespeare.

*A Canticle for Leibowitz* (Walter Miller, 1960) was written at the height of the Cold War. America is desolate and depopulated after the “Flame Deluge.” Communities of novices, monks, and abbots tenuously exist. “New Rome” holds the authority of the “Holy Church.” Latin is spoken and sung and quoted throughout. Twenty-six specially-chosen brethren are sent from the earth to preserve the faith. Holy space, holy fire, holy wind, holy water, and “Holy, Holy, Holy” are pertinent phrases used in prayer.

*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (Philip K. Dick, 1968) is set on the west coast of America after “World War Terminus,” a catastrophic nuclear battle. Because so few live animals exist, electronic models are cared for by people; hence, the title. Virtual humans (“androids”) can mimic humans — but not in their em-

pathy. A religion called “Mercerism” entices people to gain induced feelings of euphoria by gaining others’ emotions by gripping an “Empathy Box.”

*The Handmaid’s Tale* (Margaret Atwood, 1985) describes a portion of the United States as “Gilead,” now controlled by the self-righteous “Sons of Jacob.” They are still in armed conflict with armies of other aberrant Protestant “cults.” Biblical allusions and Scriptural quotations are ever-present, though almost always distorted. The handmaids are echoes of Jacob taking Bilhah as a wife and having children by her (Gen 30:1–5), but these young women are used as sexual and reproductive objects by the ruling men.

*The Last Ship* (William Brinkley, 1988) depicts a massive nuclear catastrophe that has left the world unsafe and uninhabitable. A U.S. Navy ship has managed to avoid the worst of the fallout and discovers a small island that becomes their home (think *Robinson Crusoe* greatly multiplied), even as many long for an unreturnable return. While a Roman Catholic priest is a significant character, there is little that is clearly and overtly Christian in the narrative.

*The Children of Men* (P.D. James, 1992) is set in depressed — but secure and comfortable — England. This country and the entire world are without hope as no children have been born for twenty-six years. The last generation born is known as the “Omegas.” The protagonist (Theo Faron) is invited to join a small band of dissidents — “The Five Fishes.” Miraculously and secretly, one woman in this covert group has conceived and is carrying an unborn child. She joins in daily prayers with the quasi-priest of the group to which the

leader responds, “What harm can it do?” As these fugitives try to escape the State Security Police, the child is born — in, of all places, a deserted cattle shed. At his mother’s request, Faron baptizes him, remembering words from a rite unspoken and unused for too many years. (Note: the movie — also titled *The Children of Men* [Directed by Alfonso Cuarón, 2006] — alters several key plot points, omits almost all of James’s references to Christianity, changes both the mother and the sex of the miraculous child, and does not include the baptism of the newborn.)

*The Giver* (Lois Lowry, 1993) is considered a classic in young adult literature. Though simply written, the narrative is compelling. Jonas, a boy on the cusp of his twelfth birthday, lives in a society with no pain, no hunger, no fear, no hatred, no war, and — this is not to be missed — no color. He is chosen to be the new “Receiver of Memory.” Learning from an old man, “the Giver,” Jonas will hold the community’s past and memories; and he will suffer and suffer for others in doing so. The unresolved ending is one of light and music and hope.

*The Book of Eli* (Directed by Allen & Albert Hughes, 2010) presents the United States as bleak, barren and violent. Curiously, singly-packaged handwipes are, because of their rarity, used as “currency.” There are no more books, for they are dangerous. Eli is carrying a satchel, a coveted treasure that he will let no one see or take from him. He believes he possesses “redemption” for mankind. The surprise is that Eli carries a true treasure in his head: he has memorized the King James Version and delivers this sacred gift (by speaking the memorized text) to a clandestine library at the end of his quest.

*The Road* (Cormac McCarthy, 1968) tells of a father and son trekking across an annihilated American landscape. The father pushes a broken shopping cart and carries a pistol as they search for food and shelter. He tells his son that they are carrying the “fire.” The father is dying, but remains fervent and focused on taking his son to the safest place and people. Though the setting and situation appear hopeless, this father wants this son to not lose hope.

As this brief survey demonstrates, almost every utopian/dystopian book or movie has some spiritual component. Occasionally it echoes the Christian faith (e.g. *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, *The Book of Eli*, *The Children of Men*). Frequently it distorts or denigrates the Christian faith (e.g. *Brave New World*, *The Children of Men*, and *The Handmaid’s Tale*). Sometimes it portrays the Christian faith as an anachronistic, antiquated relic (*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, *The Giver* and *The Last Ship*).

### Dystopia in Young Adult Literature

It’s a cultural phenomenon in this country, and in much of the Western world: the best-selling books to and the most-watched movies by young adults are dystopian in theme.<sup>17</sup> We may not yet be living in a dystopian age, but we are certainly living in a time of dystopias. Because of their widespread popularity, I’ll offer a brief review and a few comments about two trilogies: *The Hunger*

<sup>17</sup> Between 2000 and 2017, 39 mainstream dystopian or post-apocalyptic novels (often as part of a series) were targeted toward this demographic. A case could even be made that many of the “super-hero” genre of movies are also dystopian or post-apocalyptic in nature.

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*Games*<sup>18</sup> and *Divergent*<sup>19</sup>. I am most concerned to demonstrate, even in a small way, why these two series have had such an impact.

Each trilogy features a strong female protagonist. In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss Everdeen volunteers to be a “Tribute” in order to save her younger sister’s life.<sup>20</sup> The narrative focuses on humanity against oppressive government and defiance against control. The goal is survival. In *Divergent*, the protagonist is Beatrice “Tris” Prior, who — along with other teenagers in dystopian Chicago — strives to break free from her assigned faction. Survival and moral upheaval are at the center of their rebellion.

Why are these two series so popular? Why have they had such an impact? Why are they so imitated? Here are some possible explanations: adolescents — and those in “delayed adolescence” — are moving toward a greater ability to handle complex and more abstract concepts, including moral dilemmas. Adolescents are sensitive to real or imagined injustices and often want to test the limits of authority. (Witness the walk-outs and demonstrations after the Parkland High School massacre on Ash Wednesday 2018.) Adolescents

<sup>18</sup> This trilogy was written by Suzanne Collins and published as *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009), and *Mockingjay* (2010), selling 27.7 million copies (15 million as print books and 12.7 million as e-books). The worldwide earnings for the three movies were over \$2.3 billion.

<sup>19</sup> Veronica Roth is the author of this series, published as *Divergent* (2011), *Insurgent* (2012), and *Allegiant* (2013). Additionally, three movies were released in 2014, 2015, and 2016.

<sup>20</sup> It has been pointed out by many that the basic plot echoes the Greek myth “Theseus and the Minotaur.” *The Hunger Games* has transformed the ancient setting into a post-apocalyptic world.

and, increasingly, young adults are often filled with uncertainty about their futures; these dystopian narratives give them models of those who make significant choices with significant consequences. Theologically, these are opportunities to both challenge and comfort young adults from the clear voice of Scripture and with the caring voice of our Savior.

### **Birth and Death in Dystopian Narratives**

Beyond the spiritual component, three other themes are dominant in most dystopian literature. These are: 1) a controlling, oppressive government; 2) conception and childbirth; and 3) planned or violent death. I’ll speak to the first theme later, but will address the second and third at this point.

Fictional writers have imagined diverse but similar scenarios: something has caused infertility or a great reduction in the number of children. In *The Children of Men*, no child has been conceived since the last of the “Omegas” was born. In *The Last Ship*, the men have been rendered sterile by exposure to nuclear radiation, but the women crew members are matched and mated with surviving Russian submariners in hopes that pregnancies will happen. In *The Giver*, births are carefully regulated and counted and infanticide is practiced.<sup>21</sup> In *Brave New World*, sexuality has been separated from conception; the first is encouraged — even by the very young — while the second

<sup>21</sup> Sadly, truth is stranger and stronger than fiction. Since the infamous Roe v. Wade decision by our nation’s Supreme Court in January 1973, more than 60 million unborn babies have been sacrificed on American altars of choice and convenience. See <http://www.numberofabortions.com/>.



is both discouraged and controlled. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, a special “caste” of young women is chosen to be impregnated because the wives of the leaders are unable to conceive. As in *The Giver*, selective infanticide is the rule: a child deemed imperfect is not allowed to live and destroyed as a “shredder.”

These dystopian tales — though they are projected into the near or distant future and though many were written before legalized abortion and euthanasia — reveal significant changes in our present culture’s language about conception and birth. Prominent in contemporary expression is “reproduction,” as though children — born and unborn — are a product we can manufacture at our whim and by whatever means we use and choose. As others have articulated more eloquently than I, the language that has been lost in our culture — and that is unexpressed in dystopian literature — is procreation.<sup>22</sup> Our affirmation is that husbands and wives are blessed by God to share in His creative work when sexual intercourse results in conception, and rejoice (as does the church!) at a great gift when conception leads to the birth of a child.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> See a lengthy and insightful quotation by Oliver O’Donovan from *Begotten or Made?* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1984, p.39) cited in “Christians and Procreative Choice: How Do God’s Chosen Choose,” A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (September 1996), p.12. The reader is also directed to these additional Reports of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod: “Human Sexuality: A Theological Perspective” (1981) and “Response to Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust” (2012).

<sup>23</sup> The language in the Rite of Holy Matrimony is “God has also established marriage for the procreation of children who are to be brought up in the fear and instruction of the

We should not be surprised — though we may, rightly, be disappointed and dismayed — that fiction imagining a time of dystopia would depict such negative extremes regarding marriage and sexuality, conception and childbirth. In the same way, though at the other end of God’s creative continuum, dying and death are also problematic in most novels of dystopia.

Certain “policemen” are charged with seeking and stalking, determining and then killing false humans in *Do Androids Dream of Electronic Sheep?*<sup>24</sup> Though it appears much less violent, older people (or, those determined to be no longer useful and viable) are forced to commit mass suicide through “The Quietus,” a key to what I consider Faron’s “conversion” in *The Children of Men*. Infanticide in *The Giver* is depicted by Lowry as a “Release,” complete with a small civil ceremony before the young child is efficiently and unceremoniously discarded into the trash. Law-breakers — as determined by distorted biblical injunctions — are publicly executed at “The Wall” in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and the “handmaids” are also given the sordid task of “salvaging,” the term for group killing of one who has sinned against the pseudo-theocracy. In *Brave New World*, the elderly (those past the age of sixty) are not killed but drugged into a stupor. After they die, the phosphorus from their bodies will be used as fertilizer for plants and flowers.

Are these fictional scenarios too far removed from past or current reality? Certainly, there continue to be

Lord so that they may offer Him their praise.” *Lutheran Service Book Agenda*, 65.

<sup>24</sup> This novel is the basis of the often-violent post-apocalyptic movies “Blade Runner” (1982) and “Blade Runner 2049” (2017).

repressive governments that wantonly take the lives of their citizens. Genocide is not new; it will not likely end. Even more, the legalization or widespread acceptance and approval of euthanasia and assisted suicide in European countries and in the United States is a telling reminder that we already live in a time of dystopia.<sup>25</sup>

## Part 2: Dystopia as Reality

Novels are one thing; real life is another. And real life may mean the real loss of physical and financial security. Real life may mean that safety — personal, emotional and political — is lost or threatened. Real life may bring greater challenges to the visible Body of Christ. Real life may provide great opportunities for the Church to speak of real love, real sacrifice, real treasure, real hope and real safety.

### Four Challenges Facing the Church

There are four related scenarios that do and may challenge the visible Body of Christ. Three are real and present. One is imagined and yet possible. They are persecution, disdain, destruction and dystopia. Each one demands faith in Jesus Christ and faithfulness to be the church in and in spite of the particular age or

society in which she worships, witnesses and works.

Here are my own definitions. (Before offering them, I'll state this: some will choose to see the first two as opposite sides of the same coin. I will neither deny nor debate that.) Persecution is an overt effort to hurt, harm and kill Christians. Persecution was promised by our Lord Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount<sup>26</sup> and in his "Little Apocalypse" discourse.<sup>27</sup>

Persecution has been happening for 2,000 years. The Epistles of Peter, the letter to the Hebrews, and the revelation of Saint John all speak to the persecuted church of the first century. There has scarcely been a time since our Lord's incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension in which believers somewhere suffer because they remain steadfast in confessing the name of Christ.

Disdain is the word I've chosen to reflect an attitude toward Christians, the church, and the Scriptures, which has also been present for 2,000 years. This is apparent in the words of Pilate, "What is truth?" (John 19:20) and of Agrippa, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" (Acts 26:28, NIV). Modern disdain is the child of anti-materialism and rationalism fully realized in the Enlightenment. And disdain has become contempt in much of Western Europe and North America, especially (but not only) in the secular universities. Michael Knippa also points out that what is now happening in the United States is that Christianity is losing the predominance that it en-

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<sup>25</sup> As of this writing, the following states have legalized physician-assisted suicide: California, Colorado, Oregon, Montana (on court appeal), Vermont, and Washington, and the District of Columbia. Currently, nine countries permit euthanasia (Belgium, Canada, Colombia, India, Luxembourg, Netherlands,) or physician-assisted suicide (Germany, Japan, Switzerland).

<sup>26</sup> See Matthew 5:10–12.

<sup>27</sup> See Matthew 23 & 24; Mark 13:3–36; Luke 21.

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joyed for many years.<sup>28</sup> But this is not to be equated with overt and coercive persecution.

At the same time, I'm convinced that a distinction between persecution and disdain is valid. Persecution is palpable. Even though most Western Christians — especially those who live in the United States — have never seen or experienced it, we know (or, we think we know) what it looks and sounds and feels like. When and where persecution happens, it unites the “whole Christian Church on earth”<sup>29</sup> in concern and prayer. No Roman emperor is demanding believers to say, “Caesar is Lord” or to burn just a pinch of incense before his statue<sup>30</sup>, but our fellow Christians face death for their confession of our Lord's name in many parts of the world.

While persecution may be avoided by less-than-faithful words and actions, when under persecution the followers of Christ are strengthened by his word, his promises and his sacramental gifts.<sup>31</sup> Tertullian's affir-

<sup>28</sup> “No ‘Lions of Gory Mane’ – Persecution or Loss of Predominance in American Christianity,” Michael Knippa. *Concordia Journal*, 41.4, Fall 2015.

<sup>29</sup> From Martin Luther's explanation of the Third Article of the Apostolic Creed.

<sup>30</sup> Paul's words to the church in Corinth (1 Cor 12:3) to confess with Spirit-given faith that “Jesus is Lord!” are a reflection of the command that a Roman citizen must confess “Caesar is Lord!” And dropping only a pinch of incense into the fire burning in front of the Emperor's statue would free the Christian from the sentence of death for his treason against the state religion.

<sup>31</sup> The following account of the death of Polycarp is borrowed from a lecture by William Saunders:

Around 160 A.D., an 86-year-old man was burned at the stake in what is now Turkey, then Asia Minor. He had been a disciple of the Apostle John, and met with Ignatius journeying to Rome to be martyred — Ignatius himself had been a disciple of Peter and the

mation rings and remains true: “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.”<sup>32</sup>

The third scenario facing Christ's visible Body is danger. But this is not the danger of persecution. It is the danger and destruction that have entered our world through Adam and Eve. Consider, as only two examples, the dislocation of Russian and Germanic Lutherans to Siberia under Stalin<sup>33</sup> and of our brother and sister Lutherans from Liberia because of civil war in the late 1980s.<sup>34</sup>

Danger may be floods or fires or tornadoes or hurricanes. Buildings — including churches and schools

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others in Antioch. Thus Polycarp was a link to the Apostolic Age.

Polycarp was burned at the order of the Proconsul Statius Quadratus. The reason? Because he refused to burn incense to the emperor, Marcus Aurelius. As we might say, in the words of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, Polycarp was subjected to “coercion” in matters of “worship” in violation of his human rights.

Polycarp did not seek this end — he did not go out of his way to incur the wrath of the emperor — but neither did he refuse it. He accepted it with what we might call “a heavenly indifference.” From Polycarp's Acts, one of the early Christian classics, we learn his last words, words heard later, in respectful imitation, on Christian lips throughout the Empire — Quadratus: “I have wild beasts.” Polycarp: “Call them.” Quadratus: “I can have you burned to death.” Polycarp: “Do what you please.”

Source: “Why Do You Persecute Me? The Worldwide Struggle for Religious Freedom,” William Saunders. *A lecture delivered to the Family Research Council* (2007).

<sup>32</sup> Tertullian in *Apologeticus* (c. A.D. 197).

<sup>33</sup> “The Lutheran Church in Russia, with Special Emphasis on Ukraine: Intertwined with the History of Russia,” R. Reuben Drefs, undated online resource.

<sup>34</sup> See especially chapter 7 of *A House with Two Rooms: Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia Diaspora Project*, The Advocates for Human Rights. Saint Paul, Minnesota: DRI Press, 2009.

and the homes of disciples — may be damaged or destroyed. But battles will cease and wars will end. Waters will recede. Flames will be extinguished. Refugees will return home or resettle. Structures will be rebuilt. And the church's mission of proclaiming the gospel, of sharing Christ's gifts and of living out mercy toward our neighbors will resume. (And it may be enhanced, as the secular community has shared common loss from and grief because of the calamity.)

The fourth scenario is dystopia. This one is not yet real, but it may become reality. This one is imagined, but it may be and may bring unimaginable suffering and sorrow and struggle. What would happen to the church in a time of dystopia? What would be the same? What would be different? What would be the particular challenges for the church, her pastors and her people, when a dystopic government seeks to control her voice and her mission? To state it pointedly: could the church still be the church if the structures and systems and supplies she has relied on are lost or severely limited?

### **Past Situations of Christians in Times of Dystopia**

We are tempted to believe that ours is or will be the only time of testing and challenge. This is not only wrong, but it is self-absorbed arrogance. As we ponder anticipated, if not inevitable, dystopia, I invite you to consider four examples among many. Three are related in historical and pastoral ways; the fourth stands alone. This tangent is included to demonstrate that — in times of distress, danger, and dystopia — Christians strive to be faithful to our Lord

not only in their confession, but also by their actions.

The first is the Lutheran Church in Germany under Nazism. Though many evangelical churches and pastors cooperated with and were co-opted by Adolf Hitler and National Socialism, not all were compliant. In the early years of the Nazi regime, there were strong voices — of both laity and pastors — who spoke against the radical German Faith Movement<sup>35</sup> and the rising intolerance toward Jews and Judaism. While certain names may be known to many (e.g. Werner Elert, Hermann Sasse, Paul Althaus, Martin Niemoeller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer), there were other courageous “protestants.”<sup>36</sup> Significant among these were Johann Gerhard Behrens, a Lutheran pastor in Stade, Lower Saxony, and Carl Goerdeler, a Lutheran layman who was the mayor of Leipzig.

Pastor Behrens was publicly ridiculed for his “anti-state” words and actions. Early in the years of National Socialism, Behrens boldly declared in one sermon: “This is my job ... not that I am silent like a ‘dumb dog,’ but that I open my mouth to testify to the truth.”<sup>37</sup> For his condemnation of Hitler and Nazi anti-semitism, Mayor Goerdeler was first imprisoned and then executed.<sup>38</sup> From his death cell, he wrote: “It is important to know that in the face of this infamy many German families displayed a powerful spirit of neighborly love, protect-

*This one is imagined, but it may be and may bring unimaginable suffering and sorrow and struggle.*

<sup>35</sup> *Lutherans Against Hitler: The Untold Story*, Lowell C. Green. St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 2007, 145.

<sup>36</sup> This word is used in the sense of protesting.

<sup>37</sup> I am still searching for the exact source.

<sup>38</sup> Green, 149.

ing their persecuted fellow citizens and giving them shelter.”<sup>39</sup>

The second historical perspective focuses on the Germanic Lutherans and Catholics in post-World War II Yugoslavia. Following the defeat of the Ottoman Turks at the Battle of Vienna in 1683, the Holy Roman Emperor invited and encouraged settlement from German principalities into areas of Hungary and Austria. Beginning in 1712, many German farmers and tradesmen were part of this Danube-Swabian migration. They colonized and tamed uninhabited swamp-land, transforming — over time — a wasteland into one of the world’s greatest breadbaskets.<sup>40</sup>

Unfortunately, near the end of the Second World War, and for more than three years afterward, these Danube-Swabians, branded as ethnic-Germans, were punished by the totalitarian regime of Josef Broz Tito. Tens of thousands died by forced labor and in concentration camps.<sup>41</sup> But these Christians — the major-

<sup>39</sup> *The Fabricated Luther: The Rise and Fall of the Shirer Myth*, Uwe Siemon-Netto. St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1995, 143. (Lowell Green also relates that Werner Elert shielded as many as fifty students who were being pursued by the Gestapo. p.149.)

<sup>40</sup> *In the Claws of the Red Dragon: Ten Years Under Tito’s Heel*. Wendelin Gruber; Frank Schmidt, Translator; Anton Wekerle, Editor. Toronto, Ontario: St. Michaelswerk, 1988, 9.

<sup>41</sup> Manfred Siller, a member of Crown of Life Evangelical Lutheran Church in San Antonio, Texas, was born in Yugoslavia. In personal conversation, he has shared with this writer that, from the age of four to seven (1945-1948), he and his family were imprisoned near the town of Rudolfsgnad under Tito’s communistic rule. (The Lutherans in this camp were served by a Pastor Kunz.) The escape of Manfred’s family to Austria was nothing short of miraculous. A guard was bribed by dollars that were rolled tightly and pushed into the corrugation of the cardboard boxes

ity were Roman Catholic, but many were Lutheran — were served by courageous priests and pastors.<sup>42</sup> The author of *In the Claws of the Red Dragon* was one of them. Prisoners were visited, sometimes secretly and quietly. Prayers were said. Confessions were heard. Christ’s body was given sacramentally.

One sign of their strength under persecution was their willingness to suffer together. The rich image of 1 Corinthians 12:26–27 is evident in this conversation:

Father Gruber said to one laborer: “You’re very close to the Hungarian border here. Why have you not tried to escape?” / “Yes, to take off from here, that would be something!” the man mused. “See that farmhouse and barn... that, and a hundred yokes of the very best farmland used to be my property.” / Gruber asked, “Why do you hesitate? The sooner you leave, the better!” / To which the farmer replied, “Look here. Today no family can count on getting its daily bread, and we Swabians have become one big family. The same fate has ... befallen all of us. That means we must stick together! One can’t just leave, but must do whatever he can to help.”<sup>43</sup>

The third is the case of Slovakian pastor and bishop Pavel Uhorskai,<sup>44</sup> who was imprisoned and tortured in his native Czechoslovakia in the late 1940s and the early 1950s. As a young pastor, Uhorskai was a fervent servant to the youth of the Lutheran of care packages, finally, delivered into this camp.

<sup>42</sup> Gruber, 110.

<sup>43</sup> Gruber, 84.

<sup>44</sup> *Uncompromising Faith: One Man’s Notes From Prison*, Pavel Uhorskai; Jaroslav J. Vadjia, Translator. St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1992.

Church in Slovakia in his roles of chaplain and catechist. However, after the communist takeover of 1948, he was arrested, tortured, imprisoned and stripped of his preaching license. In his book, Bishop Uhorskai<sup>45</sup> recounts his own story, but also confesses the faith and faithfulness of other Lutheran pastors who were persecuted or martyred in those difficult post-World War II years.

The fourth and final situation is of Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod layman George (“Bud”) Day. As a teenager, Day enlisted shortly after Pearl Harbor, served in the Korean War, and — while a United States Air Force pilot — was shot down over North Vietnam in 1967. Captured and recaptured and tortured, Day was a prisoner of war for five years. Yet his faith in Christ and his trust in God never wavered.<sup>46</sup> He didn’t just survive the Hanoi Hilton, Colonel Day continued to pray and witness and hope during days that were darker than most soldiers have ever experienced.

### The Two Kingdoms

In every setting, in every land, at every time, Lutheran citizens ask this question: “How do we live out our dual citizenship in the two kingdoms?” But in a time of dystopia — as in a time of persecution — the question (but not necessarily the answer) will be clearer and more challenging: “If the left-hand kingdom is

<sup>45</sup> After his many trials and challenges, Uhorskai was elected and installed as Bishop General of the Slovak Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic in November 1990.

<sup>46</sup> “10 Minutes With ... Colonel Bud Day,” Jeni Miller. Blogpost Interview *Lutheran Witness Online*, August 9, 2012.

oppressive or opposed to the Christian church, how do we live faithfully in God’s right-hand kingdom?” As that question is asked, Gene Veith offers this caution and clarification: “One kingdom must not and cannot be swallowed up by the other: not the earthly realm by the spiritual, and not the spiritual by the earthly.”<sup>47</sup>

Lutherans offer this insight to the rest of the visible Church on earth: the two kingdoms work together but meet and carry on the conflict in different ways, with different weapons. Martin Luther, in “On War Against the Turk,” articulated those means in this way: “Christianity [goes to war] with...repentance, confession, and prayer; the emperor with his military power.”<sup>48</sup>

It is possible, even likely, that the “Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ”<sup>49</sup> will continue to be reviled and compromised by the left-hand kingdom. If this is true in the “tolerance is God” post-modern culture of the West, it is all the more possible in a non-imagined time of dystopia. Under such a worldview, all religions are equally valid and any faith that is not “inclusive” will be rejected or persecuted. Evangelism — in the biblical sense — would be outlawed and punished.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Veith, 29.

<sup>48</sup> “On War Against the Turk,” Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works (American Edition)*, Vol. 46, 184.

<sup>49</sup> The phrase, from Revelation 11:15, is used by George Friedrich Handel in the “Hallelujah” chorus in *Messiah*.

<sup>50</sup> I am grateful to Gene Veith for these insights gleaned from *Christianity in an Age of Terrorism*.

*If the left-hand kingdom is oppressive or opposed to the Christian church, how do we live faithfully in God’s right-hand kingdom?*

## Part 3: Caring for the Souls of the Redeemed

### The Care of Souls Now

This is what pastors in Christ's church do: they care for the souls of those called, gathered, enlightened and sanctified by the Holy Spirit through the gospel. This is also what pastors in Christ's church do: they boldly and winsomely preach and teach so that more will share and celebrate their place among those redeemed by the cross.

While the care of souls involves and includes visiting — in moments of normalcy and in times of crisis — the saints of God in homes and hospitals, in care centers and prisons, the ministry of the Great and Good Shepherd's under-shepherds is also in preparation for and in anticipation of what may or will be experienced.

Pastors baptize into the Triune Name, catechize young and old, hear confession and speak freeing absolution, proclaim the good news with faithfulness and clarity, consecrate bread and wine so that those who hunger and thirst for Christ's righteousness will be fed and filled, and speak the Lord's blessing at the close of the divine service as well as in personal pastoral care and conversation.

This will not change or end. This must not change or end until the return of Christ in glory. And this will not change or end if a time of dystopia precedes our Lord's Parousia.

### The Care of Souls Then

What might happen? Worldwide or widespread warfare or a biological attack with a "dirty bomb" result-

ing in death and devastation. What might happen? An electromagnetic pulse that destroys and debilitates commerce and communication, structures and systems. What might happen? Blessings we have taken for granted may be lost or severely limited. The church — against which the gates of hell will not prevail (Matt 16:18) — may be compelled to persistently prevail without safe and sound buildings, without hymnals and organs, without projectors and screens, without the ecclesiastical structures of circuits and districts and synods, without universities and seminaries and libraries. Pastors may no longer have and may no longer be dependent on computers and cell phones.

Yet there might be blessings — even great blessings in these losses! Certainly, the first-century church was able to function without all the tools and trappings of our wired and connected society, yet "the Word of the Lord grew" (Acts 19:20, RSV) as the gospel was spread by apostles and missionaries who traveled by foot, by cart, by horseback and by boat from Jerusalem, across Judea, throughout Samaria and to the ends of the known and explored world. And, when new parts of God's creation were discovered, the message of Christ's cross and resurrection were carried with and by those pursuing new frontiers. Indeed, the history of the Lutheran Church in the United States — which began before thirteen British colonies first formed "these United States of America"<sup>51</sup> — offers ample evidence that the

<sup>51</sup> The earliest reference to Lutherans in North America is from a Jesuit missionary along the Hudson River in 1643. Source: *The Lutherans in North America*, E. Clifford Nelson, Editor. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress Press, 1975.

*The gospel can be shared and souls cared for without all that we moderns and we Westerners assume are necessities.*

gospel can be shared (and can still be shared) and souls cared for (and can still be cared for) without all that we moderns and we Westerners assume are necessities.

### **What Must Pastors Do and Be? Learning from the Past**

What will, what must, pastors do in a time of dystopia? It begins and ends with this: pastors must and will stay with their flocks.

The Black Death swept from Asia to the west throughout the mid-fourteenth century, killing — by some estimates — 25 million people, a full quarter of the population of Europe. The bubonic plague finally struck Wittenberg, Germany on August 2, 1527. Though he was not the pastor of the Stadt- und Pfarrkirche St. Marien, Martin Luther joined in caring for the souls of the dying and the grieving. Elector John actually ordered Luther to evacuate, to move to Jena with his family for the duration.<sup>52</sup> Pastor Johann Bugenhagen and his family did move — as they shared lodging for a time with Luther and his family in the Black Cloister, Martin and Katie's home.<sup>53</sup>

Out of this ordeal came a rich letter of pastoral care, of advice and encouragement. "Whether One May Flee From A Deadly Plague" was written by Martin Luther to Johann Hess, a Reformation leader in Silesia. This open letter was finished in the first part of November 1527. It was promptly published and quickly received widespread distribution.<sup>54</sup>

Here is one of Luther's key points to Hess — and to the Church today: "Those who are engaged in a spiritual ministry such as preachers and pastors must ... remain steadfast before the peril of death." This is true because "when people are dying, they most need a spiritual ministry which strengthens and comforts their consciences by word and sacrament...."<sup>55</sup> However, Luther did not make unrealistic or arbitrary demands. He tells Hess: "If someone is sufficiently bold and strong in his faith, let him stay in God's name; that is certainly no sin. [But] if someone is weak and fearful, let him flee in God's name...."<sup>56</sup> In an earlier but similar letter to Nicholas von Amsdorf — dealing with the same dread calamity — Luther concludes by writing:

So there are battles without and terrors within, and really grim ones; ... Commend us to the brethren and yourself to pray for us that we may endure bravely under the hand of the Lord and overcome the power and cunning of Satan, be it through dying or living. Amen.<sup>57</sup>

### **Now, Before Then**

We live in this time of inbetweenity. From Christ's ascension until his promised return in glory, the church worships, works and witnesses. The question has been the same for 2,000 years — even as we stand at

*It begins and ends with this: pastors must and will stay with their flocks.*

<sup>52</sup> An Introduction to "Whether One May Flee From A Deadly Plague," Martin Luther, *Luther's Works (American Edition)*, Vol. 43, 115.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 116. Note: von Amsdorf was a colleague of Luther's on the faculty at the University of Wittenberg until he was called to serve a parish in Magdeburg in 1524.



the brink of possible dystopia: “How should we then live?”<sup>58</sup>

I’ll offer two perspectives. The first is from several evangelical and orthodox thinkers. (Those are meant to be adjectives, not labels.) Consider some insights, challenges and encouragements from Anthony Esolen, Rod Dreher and Eric Jacobson.

In *Out of the Ashes*, Esolen contends that drab is the enemy, though it is a favorite and telling color of our times.<sup>59</sup> As he speaks of popular dystopian books and movies, he observes and laments: “Our young people are not only starved for nature. They are starved for beauty.”<sup>60</sup>

This is not only true in America, it is true in the “civilized” West. And it goes back centuries. For there is irony in that the Enlightenment destroyed much great art, shattering beautiful stained-glass windows and whitewashing over wonderful frescoes. Sadly, “what the harbingers of the *novus ordo saeculorum* did not get around to destroying they slandered.”<sup>61</sup>

What has been lost — not only in and because of the “Age of Reason” — is not only in the visual arts. Dystopian narratives reveal and reflect the loss

of “holy imagination.” One antidote to *Brave New World* and *The Hunger Games* is greater attention to the writings of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. These authors did not ignore the brokenness and ugliness of the fallen world. However, they imagined creative and insightful ways of offering hope, even when all seems dark and distorted. For there is hope now because the final battle has already been fought and won.

How should we then live? Esolen urges: by not pursuing “progress,” but by living on a pilgrimage. As *Pilgrim’s Progress* asserts and reveals: “Christian is not Christian unless he is on the pilgrimage.”<sup>62</sup> Pilgrimage involves self-denial; progress promises self-indulgence. Pilgrimage is the way of the cross; progress supposes to eliminate suffering.<sup>63</sup> And Jesus is himself the way we must travel (Matt 4:18–22; John 14:6).

Esolen writes:

The pilgrim knows we have no lasting home on earth and turns his gaze toward heaven above; the progressive believes we have no lasting home in heaven, and turns his gaze toward earth, to make it a paradise by means of technology and sheer brute force. ... The pilgrim calls upon God; the progressive calls upon other men, whom he suspects or despises, then he calls up on technology, including the technology of government, and finally, when all of that breaks down, he calls upon wickedness itself.<sup>64</sup>

The challenge Esolen places before us is to live the mark, the character

<sup>62</sup> As quoted by Esolen from *The Pilgrim’s Progress from This World, to That Which Is to Come*, written by John Bunyan in 1678.

<sup>63</sup> Esolen, 183.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 183–184.

*Dystopian narratives reveal and reflect the loss of “holy imagination.”*

<sup>58</sup> A phrase popularized by Francis Schaeffer in the 1970s, especially with the writing of *How Should We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture*, Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Co, 1976.

<sup>59</sup> *Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture*, Anthony Esolen. Washington, District of Columbia: Regnery Press, 2017, 35.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p.37. This reality stands in contrast to significant men (though they were not pastors) among America’s founding fathers who saw, experienced, were formed by and articulated beauty and “Nature and Nature’s God.” Source: “By Starlight Undiminished,” Mark Helprin, *First Things* (November 2017).

<sup>61</sup> Esolen, 34.

of Christ<sup>65</sup>, to live and show this in every aspect of our lives, in “our play, our work, our family life, our reading, our schools, our dances, our flirtations, our care of the sick, our neighborhoods, our bearing of children, our last moments as we bid the world farewell.”<sup>66</sup> This is how we live now; this is how we must live then.

Dreher has written *The Benedict Option*, a diagnosis of and a prescription for Christians now living in a “post-Christian world” (his phrase), in a culture of death. His words are, at times, harsh. His words are, at the same time, insightful and inspiring. Dreher is convinced that believers must come out of exile in “Babylon” and choose to “be separate, sometimes metaphorically, sometimes literally”<sup>67</sup> or our faith will not survive past two more generations.

While he doesn’t speculate or project a dystopian scenario, Dreher speaks to the culture we know, the culture that is typified by selfishness and isolation, materialism and hedonism, the culture that may have trapped and enslaved the church. But living differently is not merely about the survival of Christians and a Christian sub-culture. Dreher asserts: “If we are going to be for the world as Christ means for us to be, we are going to have to spend more time away from the world”<sup>68</sup> — in corporate prayer, in intense spiritual training and as intentional community. For “we cannot give the world what we do not have.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>67</sup> *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*, Rod Dreher. New York, New York: Penguin Random House, 2017, 18.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 19.

Dreher summons the church now to regain a distinctive Christ-like culture, taking back what belongs to the Body of Christ. For example, he contends that worship has become a consumer activity, as many have falsely believed that ancient and inherited forms are less than authentic. He believes that the work of God in our lives — individually and corporately — is diminished and shallower and slower to grow when we ignore how our spiritual ancestors in the faith talked and prayed and lived and worshiped.<sup>70</sup>

Is the future brighter? Not in certain ways that are the world’s measurements. Christians in the postmodern West need to prepare to be poorer, more marginalized and of less influence in and on the culture. And what are believers willing to suffer because they bear the name of Christ?

In the end, it comes down to what believers are willing to suffer for the faith. Are we ready to have our social capital devalued and lose professional status, including the possibility of accumulating wealth? Are we prepared to relocate to places far from the wealth and power of the cities of the Empire, in search of a more religiously free way of life? It’s going to come to that for more and more of us.<sup>71</sup>

Eric Jacobsen is not as well-known as Esolen or Dreher. In *Sidewalks in the Kingdom*, he writes and reflects on “new urbanism” as it impacts and intersects with the Christian faith. It may be an over-simplification on my part, but Jacobsen critiques urban sprawl and the American love af-

*Christians in the postmodern West need to prepare to be poorer, more marginalized and of less influence in and on the culture.*

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 192.

fair with the car.<sup>72</sup> Our drive to drive that grants “freedom,” has resulted in isolation and independence from others. Consider: HOV (“High Occupancy Vehicle”) lanes in many cities require only two people in the car or pickup or SUV. And endless suburban neighborhoods (I live in one) with cookie-cutter house after house often segregate young from old, singles from families, the abled from the physically-challenged.

Jacobsen doesn’t begin to hint at a post-apocalyptic America, but he does accurately describe an individualistic culture and then observes:

If we are inconvenienced or annoyed by living, working, and playing in the company of our fellow human beings, perhaps we need liberation from our selfishness and our willfulness rather than [*the assumed freedom of*] a massive home on a two-acre lot.... Living in close proximity to our neighbors forces us to make compromises of our needs and wants — sometimes allowing us to learn the difference between the two.<sup>73</sup> [The italicized words are this writer’s.]

His book intrigued me, prompting me to consider how living in a city center or, even, in a small town can be a step toward Christian community. And this alternation in lifestyle may not be by choice. This may be compelled if structures and systems (highways, bridges, cars, fuel, tires, traffic signals) are lost or severely limited. Even more, these close communities may be a necessity for both safety and dependence. And these

<sup>72</sup> I’m old enough to remember the jingle: “See the U.S.A. in your Chevrolet!”

<sup>73</sup> *Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith*, Eric O. Jacobsen. Ada, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2003, 28.

communities — connected by “sidewalks in (and for) the kingdom” — may provide the space and the place for witness and mercy.

### Witnessing of and to Death

What do Christians say? How do we speak the call of Scripture and the voice of our Lord to a culture that is both preoccupied with death and, yet, in denial about or ignorant of the three interconnected realities: spiritual, physical and eternal death?

Words and actions from a previous time of challenge guide us. The Lutheran reformers were confronted by common and widespread death. (I have spoken earlier and specifically of the Plague.) Our Lutheran ancestors also dealt with a Roman Catholic devotional approach called *ars moriendi* (the “art of dying”). Sadly, there was no gospel in this practice of piety, only uncertainty about worthiness before God in the face of certain punishment in purgatory and hell.<sup>74</sup> There was also the common superstition in much of Germany of the “wandering dead” or “wandering spirits” — souls returning after death to appeal to the living for masses and vigils to speed them out of their fateful stay.<sup>75</sup>

In response to these teachings and fears, Martin Luther and others modified — make that, “evangelicalized” — the liturgical burial practices and funeral preaching. Robert Kolb writes:

The new evangelical church orders prescribed singing songs of joy and hope in the resurrection which Christ shares with His peo-

<sup>74</sup> “The Reformation of Dying and Burial,” Robert A. Kolb, *Concordia Theological Quarterly* (81:1&2), January/April 2017, 78-79.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

ple. Slowly, the funeral sermon began to assert itself as the centerpiece of the burial rites....<sup>76</sup>

Luther's funeral sermons called for repentance in view of God's ultimate judgment on every person's sin, but — even in the face of death — proclaimed forgiveness toward life and salvation won by the cross of resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>77</sup>

One of Luther's former students, Johann Spangenberg, strongly exemplified evangelical pastoral care through preaching. In 1548, shortly before he died, Spangenberg published *A Book of Comfort for the Sick and on the Christian Knight*. He pointed dying Christians to the comfort of God's salvific work in Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper so they could cast all their "concerns, burdens, fears, and tribulations into the lap of the Christian church"<sup>78</sup> and, so, to Christ Jesus himself. Another student of Luther, Andreas Poach, was a pastor in Erfurt. In recalling his pastoral care at the deathbed of Matthaus Ratzeberger, he preached that this dying man had his wife read Psalm 22 to him and, as its profound words pointed to our Lord's crucifixion, stated: "That is our redemption."<sup>79</sup>

Early in the next century, another writer spoke to fears and trials and death. Johann Gerhard, a parish pastor and a theological professor, wrote to give counsel to his fellow pastors and fellow Lutherans. His *"Handbook of Consolations"* was written in 1611, even as Gerhard grieved the deaths of his newborn son and of his wife. He addressed his words to all "those with a contrite,

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 88-89.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 88-89 (quoting Poach).

broken, and troubled conscience"<sup>80</sup> in order to give "consolations for death and for the trials of death."<sup>81</sup>

Death is always contrary to God's creative intention and design. Death is always near. This was so for the Reformers, just as it is so for believers in the 21st century. Death is always the enemy. But the Church has spoken and will continue to speak with Christ's own voice in times of persecution and dystopia: "I am the Resurrection and the Life" (John 11:26) and "I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:4).

### The Theology of the Cross

"CRUX sola est nostra Theologia."<sup>82</sup> Martin Luther could express this insightful truth in no other way: "The CROSS alone is our theology."<sup>83</sup> Others have written tomes on this great insight. I will attempt to offer some application of this theme as it relates to the care of souls in a time of dystopia.

Reflecting on the Lutheran Church in Russia under atheistic communism, Paul Muench observes: "Suffering is pain ... Suffering came into the world

<sup>80</sup> *Handbook of Consolations: For the Fears and Trials that Oppress Us in the Struggle with Death*, Johann Gerhard; Carl L. Beckwith, Translator. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009, 5.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>82</sup> The capitalization — even in Latin — is Luther's! *The Theology of the Cross for the 21st Century*, Alberto L. Garcia & A. R. Victor Raj, Editors. St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 2001, 8.

<sup>83</sup> The original quotation in German is from *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: 5.176.32-33) as referenced by Steven Hein in *Where Christ Is Present: A Theology for All Seasons on the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation*, John W. Montgomery & Gene E. Veith, Editors. Irvine, California: New Reformation Publications, 2015, 194.

*What does  
God always  
do? He works  
in hidden  
ways; He  
works to  
reveal His  
gifts and His  
grace through  
these hidden  
ways.*

because of sin ... Suffering becomes positive not because the Christian suffers but because of what God does.”<sup>84</sup> What does God do? What does God always do? He works in hidden ways; He works to reveal His gifts and His grace through these hidden ways. While “Man hides his own things in order to conceal them; God hides His own things to reveal them.”<sup>85</sup>

And the hiddenness of God, in pain and struggle, in disdain and danger, in persecution and dystopia, is proof that the cross is our theology. For there is no glory, there can and will be no human glory in the loss of much or all of that on which we have built our hopes and our foundations. Recall the broken-hearted words of the disciples on the way to Emmaus on Easter afternoon: “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21). Yet the theology of the cross “is a realistic faith that recognizes hardship, frustration, and failure, transfiguring them with the grace of God.”<sup>86</sup> It is the deepest expression of God’s truth and revelation.

God is present, though he is not seen in the ways that we expect or that we would have designed. He is hidden in swaddling clothes in a manger. He is hidden in nakedness, wearing only a spiked crown on the cross. He is hidden in his word and sacraments — whether in an ornate stained-glass-filled sanctuary or in a humble metal-framed church that looks

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<sup>84</sup> “*The Witness of the Cross in Post-Marxist Russian*” by Paul Muench in *The Theology of the Cross*, 150.

<sup>85</sup> “The Spiritual Life of the Christian: Cross and Glory,” Steven Hein in *Where Christ Is Present*, 197.

<sup>86</sup> *Christianity in an Age of Terrorism*, Gene E. Veith. St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 2002, 34.

more like a warehouse. God could be hidden — in a time of dystopia — when believers are gathered in the basement of a collapsed home or in a secluded barn or in a hidden cave. And he will make himself known when the gospel is proclaimed and confessed by those baptized into our Lord’s death and resurrection. For “All newborn soldiers of the crucified, bear on their brows the seal of Him who died.”<sup>87</sup>

Though he was not writing directly about the theology of the cross, Luther summarizes it well in these words from his introduction to the Revelation of St. John:

If only the word of the Gospel remains pure among us, and we love and cherish it, we shall not doubt that Christ is with us, even when things are at their worst. As we see here in this book, that through and beyond all plagues, beasts, and evil angels Christ is nonetheless with His saints, and wins the final victory.<sup>88</sup>

### “Lord, Have Mercy” — Challenges in a Time of Dystopia

Almost every depiction of a dystopian society has a negative perspective on government. Those who study this literary genre consider *We*, written by Yevgeny Zamyatin, to be the first 20th century dystopian novel. This story, by a Russian writer, is clearly a protest against Marxism-Leninism and the rise of communism. Restrictive, repressive regimes are depicted (or invented) by many

<sup>87</sup> George Kitchin (1827-1912) in *Lutheran Service Book #837*, stanza 3.

<sup>88</sup> *Luther’s Works: Word and Sacrament I* (American Edition, Volume 35), H. Theodore Bachman, Editor. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Muhlenberg Press, 1960.

other dystopian writers.<sup>89</sup> In more recent narratives, one is more likely to read of a total collapse of government structure leading to anarchy or isolated autonomy.

How might the kingdom of the left-hand (which is still God ruling through appointed leaders<sup>90</sup>) impact or inhibit the care of souls? Under what conditions would it be necessary to practice civil disobedience? Might we be compelled to break certain laws — whether under a disdainful state or a persecuting state or a dystopian state — in order to gather for worship or Bible study?<sup>91</sup> Will those who confess the name of Christ face the temptation of compromise by burning even a pinch of incense to the Emperor?<sup>92</sup> Will pastors find it necessary, following Acts 4:18–20 and 5:29, to face arrest and imprisonment rather than silence their proclamation? Will they disobey men and obey God in order to bring the gifts of God in word and sacraments, in care and mercy, to their scattered flocks and to those who have not yet heard the Shepherd’s gracious voice (John 10:16)?

The church under persecution — in the past and in the present — provides a model for the care of souls. There may be underground (quite literally!) churches. There may be clandestine communities rather than congregations with LED signs

<sup>89</sup> *Brave New World* and *1984* are the most overt examples.

<sup>90</sup> See Romans 13:1-4 and Isaiah 44:28; 45:1.

<sup>91</sup> Farshad is a newer Christian — and a brand-new Lutheran — raised under Islam in Tehran, Iran, now living in San Antonio, Texas. He heard, believed and confessed the gospel while in Iran, but was in danger of being betrayed to the police (the Ministry of Intelligence) when he met with other believers to learn more about following Christ.

<sup>92</sup> <https://www.theopedia.com/polycarp>

announcing their presence and their programs. There may be secret Bible studies to both strengthen present believers and to instruct new converts. There may be divine services held in homes — even in rotating homes so that there is no disclosure of where and when the visible Body of Christ is gathering. There may be baptisms without Midwestern or Lee County, Texas baptismal dinners. And there may be less frequent celebrations of the Lord’s Supper because there are fewer pastors and less access to unleavened bread and grape wine.

But there must and there will be evangelism, a bold telling of the mighty deeds of God (Acts 2:11), so that the Holy Spirit might breathe faith into the hearts of new Christians. And there must be ongoing acts of mercy for the broken and hurting among us and around us, even as the Bride of Christ is profaned and broken and hurt by sin and error and evil, by the crafts and assaults of the devil, by pestilence and famine, war and bloodshed, sedition and rebellion.<sup>93</sup>

Matthew Harrison expresses it this way: “The Kyrie is both a confession and a proclamation of truth about us and the world in which we find ourselves.”<sup>94</sup> In the praying — silently or aloud — and the chanting — alone or corporately — of the Kyrie, the Church is confessing that Jesus Christ, God enfleshed for us, is the only source of mercy, received and shared, in our otherwise merciless life in the wilderness.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>93</sup> “The Litany,” *Lutheran Service Book*, 288-289.

<sup>94</sup> *Christ Have Mercy: How to Put Your Faith in Action*, Matthew C. Harrison. St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 2008, 20.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

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Two books on “mercy” have recently been published by The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Both are rich with insight and encouragement for the present time and in the facing of the unknown future, dreary or deadly or dystopian.<sup>96</sup> These offer help for the care of souls in a possible or probable time of dystopia.

Caring for souls must be incarnational care. It is care within the Body of Christ for those given bodies and whose bodies are suffering. This mercy is because of and through the grace of the Embodied One. This incarnational care has strong implications for how the bodies of Christians must be treated — even if a dystopian government would burn them to recover the phosphorus for fertilizer as in the dystopian society Huxley imagined in *Brave New World*.

What do we say (what do preachers say) in a time of crisis or calamity, disaster or dystopia? Carl Fickenscher’s counsel is simple: we say no more and no less than God’s word of hope. We speak the certain promise of Jesus: “I am with you”<sup>97</sup> (Matt 28:20). We speak prophetically, in the sense that we apply God’s written and revealed word to the challenges and questions particular to that day or that setting. We speak

<sup>96</sup> The books are: *Mercy in Action: Essays on Mercy, Human Care and Disaster Response*, Ross E. Johnson, Compiler and Editor. St. Louis, Missouri: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, (2015) and *The Mercy of God in the Cross of Christ: Essays on Mercy in Honor of Glenn Merritt*, Ross E. Johnson & John T. Pless, Editors. St. Louis, Missouri: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (2016). These had sat on my bookshelf for months without a single page turned or a solitary sentence highlighted. No more! Though each one deserves a full review, I will leave that to another writer at another time.

<sup>97</sup> “Sharing the Gospel in Time of Suffering,” Carl C. Fickenscher II in *Mercy in Action*, 154.

of Christ crucified as sacrifice for every sin — even the sins of those who mock and hurt the church. We speak to those baptized into Christ — and to those yet to be baptized into his dying and rising — so that, together, we will confidently sing:

Death, you cannot end my gladness:  
I am baptized into Christ!

When I die, I leave all sadness  
To inherit paradise!

Though I lie in dust and ashes  
Faith’s assurance brightly flashes:

Baptism has the strength divine  
To make life immortal mine.<sup>98</sup>

How do we then live? We can bear the uncertainty and the unpredictability, the ebb and flow of history — and of the speculative “history” depicted in dystopian literature — by entrusting our days and times to God who is hidden within it<sup>99</sup>, and who is hidden in Christ’s church.

### Vocations as Signs of Care

God works through vocations. He gives life through the vocations of husbands and wives. He gives discipline and nurture through the vocations of fathers and mothers. He feeds and heals through the vocations of farmers and bakers, doctors and pharmacists. And God works in the vocations of family and of the church’s ministry to care for the precious sheep of the Good Shepherd.

How does the church prepare for a possible or probable time of dystopia? By affirming the vocations God has given to us. Parents are

<sup>98</sup> Erdmann Neumeister (1671-1756) in *Lutheran Service Book #594, stanza 4*.

<sup>99</sup> A paraphrase of some strong words of Heinrich Bornkamm, quoted by John Pless in “Theology of the Cross as Pastoral Care in Times of Disaster” in *The Mercy of God in the Cross of Christ*, 286.

*How does the church prepare for a possible or probable time of dystopia? By affirming the vocations God has given to us.*

to teach their children “the Lord’s Prayer, the Apostolic Creed, and the Ten Commandments” and to “place in their hands the Holy Scriptures and provide for their instruction in the Christian faith.”<sup>100</sup> If this is true in “normal” times, it is even truer as we face uncertain days. Fathers will be priests in their homes to ground their families in the truths of God’s word and in the gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation found in Christ Jesus alone.

In addition, husbands and wives will sacrifice to care for and protect their children. They may choose to retreat from the culture in order to do this. Brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, will also care for and serve each other as distress or danger or dystopia are faced. Generations may need to share a home — a simpler home — in order to provide necessary food and protection when the world as we know it has devolved into chaos.

### Lessons to Learn and Remember

What can we learn from the persecuted of the past and the present? First and foremost, we can learn from the vast cloud of witnesses (Heb 12:1) — the millions of believers before us, the souls of those already in our Lord’s glorious presence — to be faithful, even to the point of death (Rev 2:10).

Second, we can learn to give high value to the community of believers. Though it may be difficult or dangerous or impossible to gather for public worship, Christians can still offer

<sup>100</sup> These phrases are borrowed and slightly adapted from the liturgy of Holy Baptism from *Lutheran Worship*, The Commission of Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1982, 200.

encouragement to each other in spoken, silent, written, visual and non-verbal ways. The places of assembly may be far different from those we know now, but different and unusual places may be consecrated by their use not by a formal rite of dedication.

Third, pastors will still and always be needed to serve the Body of Christ. Though these men may not have or be able to have a visible and public status — they may be compelled to work at other jobs to support themselves and their families — they will strive to care for the souls of God’s people with our Lord’s Means of Grace: preaching, teaching, baptizing, absolving and serving the Holy Supper. And these pastors will be providers of spiritual care in the face of despair and death, speaking hope and comfort from God’s word.

The following story was told to me over twenty years ago by a member of Crown of Life Lutheran Church. He was convinced that he had read it as a commentary in a national news-magazine some years before. This is how I remember his telling:

During the dictatorial rule of Idi Amin in Uganda (1971–1979), the Anglican Mission Society of England sent a letter to their office in Kampala. “What shall we send you?” they asked. “What do you need the most?” they queried. They assumed the reply would be something for children or Sunday School leaflets or even Bibles. But the answer was this: “Send us clerical collars. Send them quickly. That way we will know who our pastors are when we are being rounded up to be shot.”<sup>101</sup>

<sup>101</sup> I have been unable to corroborate this anecdote.

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### Holy & Hopeful Imagination

I'm going to imagine — and ask you to imagine with me — what the localized church may look like and what her pastor may or must do to care for souls in a time of dystopia.

As I wrote near the beginning, one of my three “A-ha!” discoveries when I drove home from New Mexico in 2012 was that I should obtain a different bicycle and an ample supply of tubes and patch kits. My bike, you see, is a skinny-tired, steel-framed, road-racing Trek. It's served me well for almost thirty years. But, if there are no cars (or cars but no fuel), I may need to cycle in order to gather with God's people for word and sacrament ministry. I need a bicycle with wider tires, and with a frame that can carry certain goods with me.

I wonder if this might be the reality: only a handful of believers across San Antonio can gather on a Sunday for the divine service. So, on Mondays, I will have to pedal to a cluster of confessing Christians fifteen miles to the west on the edge of Leon Springs. On Tuesday, I will do the same by riding twelve miles north toward Bulverde. And, on Wednesday, my journey will take me almost twenty miles east near Converse<sup>102</sup>.

But how will we worship? How will I read and proclaim the word of God? Will books be lost or destroyed or banned? How will we pray? Will I and we have committed prayers — and Psalms — to our hearts? How will we sing both the liturgy and hymns? We will need to know hymns. Doubtless, there will be some in the community of the faithful with better memories. Perhaps these saints will be our

<sup>102</sup> These are all communities or smaller towns surrounding San Antonio, Texas.

“hymnals.” They will recall certain hymns, sing them for us, and teach them to us.<sup>103</sup>

This may be so, but the church in a time of dystopia must know a sufficient number of hymns. When I returned home from the Siemon-Netto seminar in Albuquerque, I did not go out and purchase a new bike, but I did offer this challenge to the adult Bible class at Crown of Life in San Antonio: “Name the ten hymns that all Lutheran-Christians should know.” (And I meant: “That Lutheran-Christians should know *all of the words by heart*.”)<sup>104</sup> I did not ask for lists of their ten personal favorites; rather, I asked God's people to consider those hymns that would proclaim Christ, confess the faith and the key Scriptural truths we affirm, and lead us through the church year.

The responses were gratifying. People gave serious thought to what we all should know well so that the Church's song could continue to echo — even if we have no hymnals to hold and no instruments to lead our singing.

Obviously, we need more than ten hymns. My opinion is that the number could be forty. This would be the new *Kernlieder* of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.<sup>105</sup> Could these

<sup>103</sup> An individual may be or serve as the “choir,” for the role of the choir in the church's worship is not to sing *for* the congregation as though they are performers and the assembly is the audience. The role of the choir is to sing *for* the congregation, to sing in *our* place, to give voice to *our* corporate song.

<sup>104</sup> “It was my Oma who taught me the great Lutheran hymns (during World War II in Leipzig, Germany)” Uwe Siemon-Netto said to me in a phone conversation in March 2018.

<sup>105</sup> *Kernlieder* is German for “core songs.” These paragraphs reference and reflect ideas shared with and by Pr. Gregory Truwe (phone

hymns be sung in “unison” with confessional Lutherans from around the globe, though they are sung in a variety of languages? I would pray so!

And this should begin happening now, in anticipation of challenging times ahead. And, if a time of dystopia never happens, the Church will be blessed by putting more of her songs into the hearts of Christ’s followers, which will serve well in corporate worship, in family devotions and in personal piety. Even more, the care of souls facing impending death — and their loved ones — would be enriched. I have often said (although I’m sure I borrowed these words from another Christian): “I want my loved ones to sing me into heaven.” Of course, I will not choose how and when I will die. But my prayer is that my children and my grandchildren will be near me, singing the church’s song and the church’s songs as I take my last breath before my soul is called to be in Christ’s presence.

### **What Must Pastors Do and Be? Preparing for the Future**

The future — whatever the future is — will bring different challenges and different opportunities to the visible Body of Christ. This may be through the disdain of a post-Christian culture. This may be through direct persecution from within our country or by invaders. This may be through disastrous, apocalyptic events, leaving the world in a dystopia until the Parousia.

When everything has changed, what must remain the same? When ev-

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conversation), Pr. Richard Stuckwisch (unpublished document), Rev. Prof. Paul Grime (phone conversation), Kantor Matthew Machemer (phone conversation) and Kantor Phillip Magness (e-mail exchange). [See also Appendix A.]

erything has fallen apart, what will hold the Body together? It will be our faithful God faithfully speaking in his word and faithfully keeping his promises.

But what will the pastors do — the pastors who are yet alive and able-bodied and, yes, bold in Christ? What will they be? What must they do? What strategies of evangelizing, catechizing, gathering and caring for souls must continue?

First, these pastors will be signs of Christ and of His presence in and for his church. They will visually and verbally represent Jesus. When they are seen in bleak and barren places, pastors will demonstrate and declare that the Shepherd has not forgotten his sheep. They will demonstrate and declare that the Shepherd is still caring for wounded sheep. They will demonstrate and declare that the Shepherd wants his sheep — and those not yet in his flock — to hear his gracious voice.

Second, pastors will continue to be what the Apostle Paul calls them in 1 Corinthians 4:1: “stewards of the mysteries of God.” They will continue to proclaim the mystery of the word made flesh (John 1:14) and the mystery of reconciliation of all through the cross (Eph 3:3–6). They will continue to baptize young and old into the Triune Name. (And so will lay Christians if and when pastors are not present or alive.) They will continue to hear confession and pronounce absolution, perhaps often at the deathbeds of prisoners and those soon-to-be martyred. They will continue to bring the treasure of Christ’s forgiveness with the bread and the wine of the Lord’s Supper so that hungry and thirsty souls will taste his body and blood and see

*The Church  
will be blessed  
by putting  
more of her  
songs into  
the hearts  
of Christ’s  
followers.*

and rejoice in this foretaste of the feast to come.

Though ads on talk radio intrigue me, they do not convince me. I do not have plans to purchase a dehydrator to preserve food for our family or lay in a 25-year supply of nutrition.<sup>106</sup> Perhaps that's denial; perhaps it's proof that I am not fully convinced that a time of dystopia is impending. However, I am closer to beginning to stockpile an ample supply of unleavened hosts and bottles of grape wine. And the first and the last object I will grasp in hand before our sanctuary is locked or leveled will be the silver chalice. This will be my blessed burden carried on the road. This is so that — even in the potential loss of so much in a time of dystopia — the precious body and blood of Christ will be served to strengthen his surviving and struggling disciples.

I will do this trusting the promise of our Lord in His Word:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?

... I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:35,38,39).

What is the clarity the church — and her pastors — bring into the present chaos and the possible or prob-

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<sup>106</sup> "Enjoy the comfort in knowing you have the essential foods your family will need to survive an emergency or natural disaster!" So boasts the ad copy for the *Nutristore 1-Year Premium Food Kit* available from Costco for a mere \$6,000 (9 March 2018).

able future chaos? We do and must speak beauty to brokenness. We do and must speak hope to despair. We do and must speak peace even in danger. We do and must speak God's promises in uncertainty. We do and must speak and bring God's gifts when all is lost. And we do and must and will pray as we sing:

Lord, give us faith to walk where  
You are sending,

On paths unmarked, eyes blind as  
to their ending;

Not knowing where we go, but  
that You lead us —

With grace precede us.<sup>107</sup>

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. ☩

*The Rev. Mark D. Barz  
is pastor of Crown of  
Life Lutheran Church in  
San Antonio, TX  
pastor@crownoflifesa.org*

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<sup>107</sup> Stephen P. Starke (b. 1955) in *Lutheran Service Book #667, stanza 5*.

## Appendix:

### “A Proposed List of ‘Core Hymns’ for a Time of Dystopia”

As noted early in this paper, I have come to the conclusion that, in anticipation of persecution and/or dystopia, individual Christians and the visible church must put more hymns in our hearts and in our heads.<sup>108</sup> Why? We may not have hymnals when we gather to devote ourselves “to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42).

Holding on to these spoken and sung treasures will certainly challenge the Church in North America and in Europe where our cultures have long neglected and all-but-forgotten the oral transmission of story. This is, unfortunately, also an issue in parts of the world considered less-developed because of the omnipresence of cell phones and tablets.<sup>109</sup>

The ‘Core Hymns’ that I propose are not a formal *Kernlieder*. Instead, I have chosen a variety from the rich repertoire of ancient and modern hymnody, including gifts given to the

<sup>108</sup> This is not to discount the importance of memorizing Scripture, the *Small Catechism* and the liturgy of the divine service (as well as certain Prayer Offices) by all the living saints. A greater responsibility clearly lies with pastors as they care for the souls redeemed by our Lord. In addition to hymns and the common liturgy, Christ’s under-shepherds should commit to memory the Baptismal Liturgy, Individual Confession and Absolution, the Commendation of the Dying and the Committal Service.

<sup>109</sup> In an e-mail conversation, Phillip Magness shared this observation with me from his times of serving the Church in west Africa: “African memories are stronger (oral tradition, less media, cultural traditions) and so I experienced plenty of times where they either learned things *par cœur* quickly (“by heart”) or showed that they had taken things to heart”

Western Church from Christians in Africa.<sup>110</sup> This list is not definitive; it is offered as a starting point for discussion, praying, and planning.

May the church’s song echo long, may it steal “on the ear the distant triumph song,”<sup>111</sup> giving voice to praise and proclamation, confession and consolation.

Note: All forty hymns (and their numbers) are from the *Lutheran Service Book*.

#### Advent:

“Savior of the Nations, Come”  
[332]

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”  
[357]

#### Christmas:

“Of the Father’s Love Begotten”  
[384]

“Let All Together Praise Our God”  
[389]

#### Epiphany:

“O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright” [395]

“The Only Son from Heaven” [402]

#### Transfiguration:

“Jesus on the Mountain Peak”  
[415]

#### Lent:

“On My Heart Imprint Your Image”  
[422]

“My Song Is Love Unknown” [430]

#### Holy Week:

<sup>110</sup> This insight on the task of missionaries is worth considering: their role is to “make clear that the Church is a colony of heaven and not a colony of one of the western peoples.” *A Faith for This One World*, Lesslie Newbigin, New York, New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1961 (p.10) as quoted by Rebecca Bartelt in “Bold in Confession, Humble in Methodology” (see Bibliography).

<sup>111</sup> William W. How (1823-1897) in *Lutheran Service Book* #677, stanza 5.

“When I Behold Jesus Christ”  
[542]

“The Lamb” [547]

**Easter:**

“Christ Jesus Lay in Death’s  
Strong Bands” [458]

“At the Lamb’s High Feast We  
Sing” [633]

“I Know That My Redeemer Lives”  
[461]

**Ascension:**

“A Hymn of Glory Let Us Sing”  
[493]

**Pentecost:**

“O Day Full of Grace” [503]

**Trinity:**

“Holy God, We Praise Thy Name”  
[940]

**End Times:**

“Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying”  
[516]

“For All the Saints” [677]

**Redemption:**

“Dear Christians, One and All, Re-  
joice” [556]

“Salvation Unto Us Has Come”  
[555]

**The Word:**

“Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your  
Word” [655]

“Thy Strong Word” [578]

**The Church:**

“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”  
[656]

“The Church’s One Foundation”  
[644]

“Lord Jesus Christ, the Church’s  
Head” [647]

**Mission:**

“Lift High the Cross” [837]

“O God, O Lord, of Heaven and  
Earth” [834]

“Listen, God Is Calling” [833]

**Baptism:**

“God’s Own Child, I Gladly Say It”  
[594]

“See This Wonder in the Making”  
[593]

**Lord’s Supper:**

“What Is This Bread?” [629]

“O Lord, We Praise Thee” [617]

**Commandments:**

“These Are the Holy Ten Com-  
mands” [581]

**Confession:**

“Your Heart, O God, Is Grieved”  
[945]

**Creed:**

“We All Believe in One True God”  
[954]

“We Praise You and Acknowledge  
You, O God” [941]

**Prayer:**

“Hear Us, Father, When We Pray”  
[773]

**Death & Burial:**

“No Saint on Earth Lives Life to  
Self Alone” [747]

“Lord, Thee I Love with All My  
Heart” [708]

## Bibliography

### A Word about the Bibliography:

As this paper reveals, I began this project by reading (and watching) a variety of post-apocalyptic novels (and movies). However, the narratives often pointed me toward theological issues and insights. In addition, historical perspectives were offered by a number of sources with which I was familiar or became newly-acquainted.

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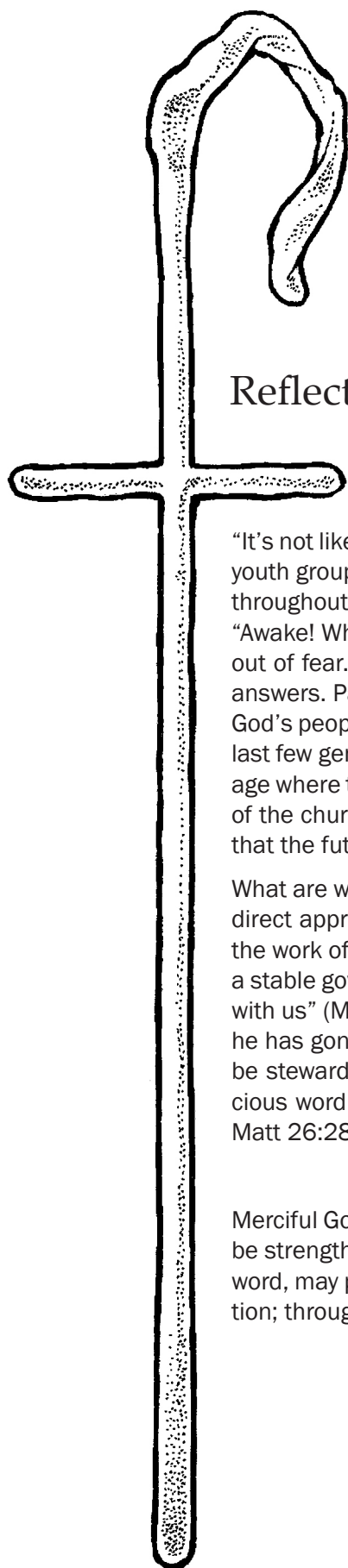


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## Reflection

“It’s not like it used to be,” an elder of the church quips at a meeting, while looking at youth group and Sunday school numbers. These words are proclaimed continuously throughout our congregations, partly as a lament, like the words of the psalmist, “Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord?” (Ps 44:23–24). At the same time, we speak out of fear. Fear of what is to come for the church and the fear of not knowing the answers. Pastor Barz provides us with a broad overview of the fears in the hearts of God’s people by looking at what is preached in media, literature and our culture. The last few generations look to the future not with hope, but a desire to live in a simpler age where there was optimism, stronger marriages, stronger families, a positive view of the church and a seemingly stable world. But we live in the reality for the church that the future might hold with it disdain, persecution, danger and dystopia.

What are we to do as Christian people? Pastor Barz gives us hope. In a simplistic yet direct approach, he encourages us to go back to the basics. The care of souls and the work of the church does not depend on statistics, a positive view from culture or a stable government, but clings to the simple promises of Christ. That he is our “God with us” (Matt 1:23) and he will provide through everything, even suffering, because he has gone through it himself (Phil 4:19). Whatever is to come, we will continue to be stewards of the mysteries of God (1 Cor 4:1), in the proclamation of his efficacious word (Rom 10:17) and providers of his grace in the sacraments (1 Pet 3:21; Matt 26:28). Lord have mercy!

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Merciful God, we ask that you would shower your grace upon all believers in Christ to be strengthened in faith, no matter the circumstance, that we, being people of your word, may persevere in all things and cling to your gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

*Pastor Brady Finnern*