

A Word for Sheepdogs

IN A WORLD THAT HAS LOST ITS STORY, people wander alone rootless and drifting, blazing solitary trails through a moral quagmire toward an uncertain future. As a result, narcissism rules supreme. Each individual invents his or her (now also “hir”) own identity out of the private shreds of personal preference and private desire. Many have appropriately observed that Christians are called to live rightly ordered lives in the midst of this moral desert and spiritual wasteland, pointing to the law’s third use (guide) as the remedy. Others promote a “virtues ethic,” calling for Christians to emulate Jesus in His character and to mirror His deeds of righteousness. Lucas Woodford advocates a fresh direction through our collective moral muddle. Avoiding both legalism and antinomianism, he demonstrates how proper use of both law and gospel enables us to faithfully preach the virtues of Christ. With copious illustrations from the great narrative storytellers, Tolkien and Lewis, Pastor Woodford challenges us to enchant our hearers week after week with yet another episode in the epic ongoing saga of God’s great love in Christ Jesus. Since by baptism into Christ hearers live in Jesus and He in them, the new life they live is not their own, but His. Wherever a preacher delivers Christ, He comes with all His gifts, transforming virtue from mere theological category or theoretical goal into blessed reality. This essay will stretch your intellect and captivate your imagination. Best of all it will not only equip your mind, but renew your heart and soul for what St. Paul called God’s gift of sheer unfathomable grace: “to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ.”

- *H. L. Senkbeil*



Preaching the Virtues of Christ: Telling the Story in the way of the Gospel for a Moral People Living in Immoral Times

Pastor Lucas V. Woodford

Epiphany 2
1-15-17

“The world is changed. I feel it in the water. I feel it in the earth. I smell it in the air. Much that once was is lost, for none now live who remember it.”(Lady Galadriel of Lothlórien)

THESE ARE THE WORDS of the fair Lady Galadriel, elf Lord of the grand forest city of Lothlórien. They are spoken as part of the prologue to the movie adaptation of J. R. R. Tolkien’s book, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*.¹ She speaks of the great evil that has enveloped all of Middle Earth, recounting the wicked history and deception perpetrated by the Dark Lord Sauron with the creation of his One ring of power. Though previously defeated ages ago by a last alliance of men and elves, his power is again returning as he seeks out the One ring. All of Middle Earth is now caught in the growing shadow of Sauron’s increasing evil power. His fiery glowing eye ominously watches from Mount Doom and his swelling orc armies of Mordor are ever threatening. The free peoples of Middle Earth are in grave danger. Who will rise to the occasion?

¹ True Tolkien fans will note that in the book the line was actually said by Fangorn to Galadriel, and with a very different context, (chapter 6 of book VI).

We live in a world that has lost its story.

It's a beloved classic story of good versus evil, one that follows individuals of noble character as they adhere to virtue and goodness and stand against great and terrible wickedness. The story explores hardship, temptation, the burden of sacrifice, and the influence of evil upon those who have assembled as the "Fellowship of the Ring" in an effort to journey to Mount Doom to destroy the One ring. Both book and movie are astounding displays of moral character and virtue fighting against the forces of evil. Both bring us into the depths of personal weakness and temptation, and into the utter darkness of despair. However, we're also brought to the heights of perseverance, selfless sacrifice, and the brightness of lasting hope. We encounter the importance of such classic virtues as bravery, kindness, wisdom, and courage, along with the significance of acts of good, both large and small, even by the most flawed of individuals, which culminate in a surprising, yet satisfying, triumphant ending.

The Loss of Story

But what does Middle Earth have to do with preaching? More than you might think. We live in a world that has lost its story.² The preacher is

² "[W]estern civilization has lost more than those laws, creed, and doctrines on which it was built; it has lost as well the sacred drama that gave flesh and bone to those 'naked' creedal statements. We need the truth, but we also need to know how to live in and through and by that truth. What we need, in short, are stories. Throughout most of the history of mankind, children have been taught good and evil, virtue and vice, honor and shame through the medium of stories: proverbs, parables, myths legends allegories, fables, etc." Louis Markos, *On the Shoulders of Hobbits: The Road to Virtue with Tolkien and Lewis*. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012) p.10. See also Robert Jenson, "How the World Lost Its Story," *First Things*

sent into her midst by the creator of that story—the triune God Himself—to proclaim the sacred drama and to remind the Church that she herself must be that story. Within her fellowship, there are to be individuals of virtue and character, people who rise to the occasion to confront evil with the goodness and hope of the triumphant victory given through Jesus Christ crucified and risen again.

At the most basic level, a preacher is a storyteller. He tells more than just the history of how we got to where we are; he proclaims who Jesus Christ is, what He's done, what He's doing, and what He'll do when He comes again. Like any good storyteller, a preacher literally weaves his hearers into the story of Jesus Christ.³ He tells the grand story of salvation,

(October 1993). "The story the Bible tells is asserted to be the story of God with His creatures; that is, it is both assumed and explicitly asserted that there is a true story about the universe because there is a universal novelist/historian. Modernity was defined by the attempt to live in a universal story without a universal storyteller. The experiment has failed. It is, after the fact, obvious that it had to: if there is no universal storyteller, then the universe can have no story line. Neither you nor I nor all of us together can so shape the world that it can make narrative sense; if God does not invent the world's story, then it has none, then the world has no narrative that is its own. If there is no God, or indeed if there is some other God than the God of the Bible, there is no narratable world." <https://www.firstthings.com/article/1993/10/002-how-the-world-lost-its-story> accessed 8-15-16.

³ "The true Christian is not just someone who believes certain things; he is someone who participates in a human-divine narrative; what many today refer to as a metanarrative or overarching story into which all our individual stories can be grafted and from which they derive their ultimate meaning. To those who participate in them, these stories provide not only models of virtuous and vicious behavior but a sense of purpose—a sense that our lives and our choices are not arbitrary but that they are 'going somewhere.'" Markos, *On the Shoulders of Hobbits*, p.11.

wrapping the fellowship of the saints into the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

The Death of Character

We too live in a time when we've witnessed the death of character.⁴ Lady Galadriel's words speak for us. Tolkien, of course, was a master at having his characters do this. Our world is changed. Much that once was is lost. We can certainly feel it in the water and in the earth. We can smell it in the air. By one description, we are "a civilization adrift on the stormy seas of relativism and existentialism" where the first "has robbed us of any transcendent standard against which we can measure our thoughts, our words, and our deeds" and "the second has emptied our lives of any higher meaning, purpose, or direction."⁵ In our time, the armies of Mordor amass against us: the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh conspire to bring darkness, sin, and chaos. The devil continues to perpetrate his devious garden lie that God's story isn't true and doesn't matter. Satan desires to keep all of us deceived, and so he dismisses our story, destroys our character, and undermines even the necessary language.

⁴ Already in 2000, noted sociologist and author James Davidson Hunter wrote in his book *The Death of Character*: "Character is dead. Attempts to revive it will yield little. Its time has passed... a restoration of character as a common feature within American society and a common trait of its people will not likely occur any time soon. The social and cultural conditions that make character possible are no longer present and no amount of political rhetoric, legal maneuvering, educational policy making, or money can change that reality. Its time has passed." (New York: Basic Books, 2000), xiii.

⁵ Markos, *On the Shoulders of Hobbits*, p.10.

That's why we can look around and see morality and virtue have not only been utterly rebuked, but they've been completely replaced. Transcendent and timeless truths — once always understood as good, right, and reverent — have been replaced by a triad of progress, consumerism, and egalitarianism, which have long been moored to an ever-changing formula of so-called affirmative values (as well as the more recent phenomena of political correctness). These are ultimately rooted in a narcissistic expressive individualism of empty self-fulfillment and relentless digital distraction.⁶ As a result, theologian David Wells has said we've become "morally obliterated" with the people of our time — not only "morally illiterate, but morally vacant."⁷ In fact, this moral oblivion has been spreading in our society for some time, even in the fellowship of the Holy Christian Church. Moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has been charting this for decades. Already more than 35 years ago he made the stunning recognition that even our "language of morality" has been lost.⁸ Yes, without question, much that once was is lost.

⁶ A few additional works to pursue regarding this cultural diagnosis include, but are certainly not limited to the following: *The Intolerance of Tolerance*, by D. A. Carson. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012); *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* by Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell (New York: Atria, Simon & Schuster, 2009); *iPod, YouTube, Wii Play: Theological Engagements with Entertainment* by D. Brent Laytham. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012). *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* by Robert Bellah et al., (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007).

⁷ *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 13.

⁸ *After Virtue*. second edition. (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1981, 2002), 2.

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A Proposal for Preaching the Virtues of Christ

Therefore, a preacher must tell and retell the story of the good news. But he must also catechize, instruct, and exhort his hearers with the moral language of that story even as he delivers the character and virtues of the central figure of the gospel story, our Lord Jesus Christ. A preacher narrates what a person receives along with both who a person becomes and what they by faith do once they are baptized into Christ. He repeatedly speaks the character and virtues of Jesus Christ into the lives of his baptized flock to build up their faith and give them strength to persevere in the faith. At the same time he is also providing the divine character to act in faith as moral beings as they confront the temptations of their sinful flesh and battle against the evils of this world.

To be sure, Christ won salvation for us by His shed blood upon the cross of Calvary, but in so doing He also displayed a completely perfect and virtuous life — a life He happily gives to us by faith through grace in Holy Baptism. His willing obedience to the Father, His patient suffering, His kindness to the outcast and downtrodden, His wisdom in the face of conspiracy, and His courage and valor in confronting sin, death, and the devil on our behalf, all exemplify His noble attributes that we also call virtues. However, the rather significant point of this is that the attributes of Christ do not exist simply for our adoration, imitation, or even our emulation. Rather they become ours by divine baptismal imputation and show the light of Christ in action, in our lives, as we live out our faith amid the darkness and temptations of this earth.

This brings us to the central issue of this essay. Too often preaching virtue degenerates into preaching the law as a guide and Jesus as an example rather than a genuine robustly Lutheran preaching of sanctification as the new obedience worked by the Holy Spirit through daily baptismal renewal. Therefore, given the particular shadows of evil that stretch across the people and culture of our times, how does a preacher actually preach the virtues of Christ in a distinctly Lutheran manner? How does he rightly divide law and gospel so that the character of Christ and His virtues can be received as the gifts that they are and be used in the freedom that faith provides, as well as prompt willing obedience and the joyful fruit of the faith? Even more, should a preacher aspire to use the third use of the law in preaching the virtues of Christ, or does he simply preach robust Lutheran sanctification? This, of course, all requires careful theological and homiletical reflection. For example, how do we preach Christ at work through believers by faith, rather than merely as an example to follow? How do we deliver the character of Christ in a way that engages the fellowship of believers as the created moral beings we are, but also repeatedly bestows upon them the righteous character of Christ who lived in the flesh?

There is much that lies behind God's storytellers preaching His story rightly, and much to benefit from the beloved stories of literature helping to skillfully shape a pastor's homiletical approach, content, and delivery. In fact, much can be said and has been said about various sermon structures, forms, delivery methods,

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and styles.⁹ These elements remain quite important, but are peripheral to the larger task of this essay. Rather, this paper will explore how a preacher can faithfully deliver the virtues of Jesus Christ for the moral formation and character development of His flock as they daily live out their baptism in service to their neighbor, and as they face the evil and temptations that plague our time and culture. This will all be done, of course, recognizing the chief aim of every sermon is always to proclaim the forgiveness of sins earned by Christ and the new life sinners have in Him (AC IV, V, & VI).

Baptismal Virtues Ethics

The specific approach being explored here aims to show how pastors can preach the new life in Christ through the baptismally-received virtues and character of Christ. Along the way, the use of classic works of literature will help us storytellers both understand and tell this particular aspect of the Christian story. As such, one distinct goal of this essay is to provide the theological framework to preach the character and virtues of Christ in a faithful Lutheran manner, one that remains in the way of the

⁹ For recent works see Timothy Keller's *Preaching: Communicating Faith in Age of Skepticism*. New York: Viking, 2015; also Edward O. Grimenstein's recent book, *A Lutheran Primer for Preaching: A Theological Approach to Sermon Writing*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 2016), as well as Woodford, "In Living Color: Narrative Rhetoric for a Lutheran Homiletic in the Digital Age" *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology*. Vol. XXIV, NO 3, Holy Trinity, 2015. pp.7-13. For a contemporary thorough analysis and practical checklist for preaching the fullness of both the law and the gospel, see Dean Nadasdy's very helpful piece, "Slamming Light Against the Sour Face: Questions for Law/Gospel Preaching," *Concordia Journal*. (January 1999, Vol 25, No. 1), p.30-41.

gospel, with an accompanying example sermon (see the appendix). To do that, the language and thought of virtues ethics will be employed, but in a decidedly Lutheran manner. Accordingly, a distinct baptismal virtues ethics will be put forward as the platform for preaching the virtues of Christ. And though a brief exploration of what comprises a Lutheran baptismal virtues ethic is provided, a completely developed endeavor goes beyond the scope of the essay, but has been developed elsewhere.¹⁰ For the time being, prior to the actual virtues ethics piece of this essay, a brief and simplistic introduction will have to suffice.

In short, virtues ethics is a complex philosophical subject that emphasizes the role of character and virtue in our moral being. Simplifying to the extreme, virtues ethics deals with human willpower and effort in the practice of virtues, and is seen to be the primary mode of moral transformation. In order to better understand this, it will be helpful to become familiar with a few basic terms. First, virtue and vice: A moral virtue is a settled disposition of a person to act in excellent and praiseworthy ways, cultivated over time through habit. The classic list of virtues includes:

1. wisdom
2. courage
3. justice
4. temperance.

They are accompanied by the three classic theological virtues of:

¹⁰ "Sanctification Revisited: Christ (and His Virtues) in Action: Sanctification as a Platform for Virtues Ethics," in *Take Courage: Essays in Honor of Harold L. Senkbeil*, 2017. Also see Woodford, "Vice, Virtue, and Baptismal Therapy in the Care of Souls," *Seelsoerger: A Journal for the Contemporary Cure of Souls*. (August, 2016, Vol. 2) p.34-65.

A moral virtue is a settled disposition of a person to act in excellent and praiseworthy ways, cultivated over time through habit.

5. faith
6. hope
7. love.

Correspondingly, a vice is an undesirable trait and wicked or immoral behavior, often called sin. The classic list of the oft called “seven deadly sins,” otherwise known as vices, is:

1. gluttony
2. lust
3. greed
4. anger
5. envy
6. sloth
7. vainglory/pride.

Next is the term ethics. Ethics is the moral principles that guide human behavior. It’s the system of knowledge that allows one to distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil, justice and crime, vice and virtue. When the study of virtues is combined with the study of ethics (again simplifying to the extreme), the concept of virtues ethics emerges.

We’ll dig deeper into these concepts later on, but first we need to identify what kind of theological storytelling preaching the virtues of Christ might be. When we deal with Christian morality and homiletical exhortation, many ears perk up to see what theological claims are going to be made. After all, there’s always a Samwise Gamgee listening nearby. But that’s not a bad thing, at least not as the story of *The Lord of the Rings* goes. That only means we’ll be sure to have a faithful and loyal companion coming along with us on this adventure.

Trouble in Rivendell: What Kind of Preaching Is This? The Third Use of the Law or Sanctification?

Perhaps this proposal is a tall order given the division among our Lu-

theran storytellers. Unrest remains about how preachers are to preach, especially when it comes to moral exhortation. Does a Lutheran sermon simply divide time between law and gospel, preaching first the law then the gospel?¹¹ Or can a

¹¹David Schmidt has a wonderful article that deals with this very issue, “Freedom of Form: Law/Gospel and Sermon Structure in Contemporary Lutheran Proclamation,” *Concordia Journal* (Vol. 25, no. 1, January, 1999), p.42-55. He makes the accurate observation that many Lutheran preachers have fallen into a pattern of preaching that simply divides every sermon into two sections, which he calls “Law then Gospel preaching” (p.42). It’s a form that dictates most every sermon and even pastoral approaches to the weekly pericopes. Often textual analysis simply becomes something where the pastor, “quickly locates a word or phrase that he can use in reference to Law and Gospel proclamation” (p.50) rather than letting the text dictate what is to be said. Schmidt is careful to note that Walther and Caemmerer did not in fact ever teach or practice this form, recognizing that “‘Law then Gospel’ form is neither Waltherian nor Caemmererian” (p.49). In fact, he even cites Walter who calls “such a topographical division... worthless” (p.48). Instead Schmidt concludes: “As the preacher reads the text, he does not read for a few words of Law and a few words of Gospel that can be simplistically transferred in preaching to his hearers. Rather, he reads the text for what the text says, what the text does, and how the text says and does it...As he prepares proclamation for his hearers, he does not simply formulate one part Law and another part Gospel. Instead, he considers how best to communicate and utilize structures based upon propositional development, textual exposition, or the experience of contemporary hearers in that task of communication. ‘Law and Gospel’ are properly distinguished in content and function, while communication is achieved through disciplined use of the freedom of form.” (p.55). Similarly, this critique of a “law then gospel” approach to preaching is also echoed by David Scaer, “For self-styled confessional minded preachers, the core meaning of a biblical passage is exhausted if, after bringing the people to their knees, they are lifted up by the gospel. In certain and perhaps most cases, the imposition of the principle curtains rather than helps determine what was on the

Lutheran sermon have law, gospel, and then response?¹² Is there any room in Lutheran sermons for exhortation, catechesis, and instruction?¹³

mind of the inspired writer. Walther did not preach like this, as is obvious from his robust engagement with the biblical texts, but the law-gospel principle came to form the basis of 'Gospel reductionism.' Preach law and gospel and the preacher has license to say whatever he or she wants about the biblical text." "Walther, the Third Use of the Law, and Contemporary Issues" *Concordia Lutheran Quarterly*. (vol.75:3-4, July/October 2011), p. 338.

¹² A recent essay by Michael P. Middel-dorf on AC VI, "Concerning the New Obedience," asserts a preference for the place of response: "In my own teaching, I have generally moved beyond the two categories of law and gospel, to use three, law, gospel, and response. I like response better than the third use of the law since we still seem to be debating whether such a use even exists (cf. Article VI of the Formula of Concord). But the term 'response' does what AC VI does. It raises the question, response to what? Not my merits, but for God and because of Christ. This is where the new obedience comes from. It is the focus of much of Scriptures' teaching as will be highlighted briefly in the remainder of this article." "The New Obedience: An Exegetical Glance at Article VI of the Augsburg Confession," *Concordia Journal* (vol. 41, no.1, Summer 2015) p.203. However, it should be duly noted that the desire to put a response after the proclamation of the gospel fits better with Reformed theology, which holds that the regenerate believer must be prodded by law "in his laziness simply by reminding him of his duty." David Scaer citing Reformed theologian Michael Horton in Scaer's work for *Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics vol. III, Law and Gospel and the Means of Grace*, chapter 4, "The Third Use of the Law," (St. Louis: Luther Academy, 2008), footnote 44, p.81.

¹³ This is the very charge that Joel Biermann accuses the church of not allowing today (though he leaves it unsubstantiated). He uses it as the basis to make his case for a Lutheran virtues ethic that ends up being based upon the law. "An emphatic and unapologetic concentration on the declaration of free forgiveness for the sake of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is a hallmark of Christian faith—but it can also lead to a denigration and dismissal of any

What about the third use of the law, does that have a place in Lutheran preaching?¹⁴ Or, as some have ques-

concrete or specific articulation of the way of life for Christians. In the name of 'gospel freedom,' it is sometimes insisted that the only acceptable norm for the Christian is the gospel of love, and that any attempt to spell out more clearly the content of that love is a faithless capitulation to morality and works righteousness. One purpose of this book is to consider this problem as a theological problem." *A Case for Character: Towards a Lutheran Virtue Ethics*. (Concordia: St. Louis, 2014), p. 3. To elaborate, his concern stems from the alleged rise of antinomian Lutherans. Though there may be a hint of truth to his claim, his lack of evidence is a severe detriment that unfortunately is all the more amplified by this stunning broadside against the historic Lutheran law/gospel approach to the scriptures: "Although the law/gospel dynamic might be assumed to be the authentically Lutheran framework, it is not only incapable of managing all the realities and challenges of life and doctrine but, used as an overall framework, it is finally detrimental to the vitality of Lutheranism" (p.117-118). Offering such an overt affront against the hallmark of confessional Lutheranism is no small occurrence. It is only one of the reasons his effort falls short of representing a truly Lutheran virtues ethic.

¹⁴ Prior to the most recent debates on the third use of the law that began in our synod in the early 2000's, a very thoughtful essay that deals directly with this question is "Using the Third Use: Formula of Concord VI and the Preacher's Task" by Jonathon G. Lange in *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology*. (Vol. 3 no.1, January 1994), p.19-25. His final conclusion certainly acknowledges the third use of the law, but cautions preachers who think they can wield it in the manner they desire: "Careful attention to the terminology and distinctions of Article VI demonstrates that the third use was not set forth as a particular way for the preacher to wield the law. This, of course, does not deny that there are many different approaches to law preaching. For instance, the law can be preached as imperative or prohibition, as exhortation to holy living or as a positive description of the new creation to name just a few. However, the Formula denies support for the notion that any one of these methods corresponds either exclusively or even predominantly to any particular use of the law.... A preacher is not called to use or apply the law according to

tioned, does it truly even exist as a proper homiletical use of the law?¹⁵ What about the power of the gospel? If we cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to Him (Small Catechism, Third Article), and if the gospel is the power for our daily and eternal living, should we not therefore more rightly focus on predominantly preaching the gospel for sanctified living (Walther's thesis XXV)? Even more, just exactly what is the role of sancti-

its various uses. That task is left to the Holy Spirit to accomplish as he will wherever the law is preached in its full force. Any attempts to speak of the third use as if it were the preacher's use are contrary to the intended sense of the Formula. The wording of the Solid Declaration must stand unqualified, that 'it is just the Holy Ghost who uses the written law for instruction' (SD VI, 3). Only in this way will one make proper use of the Evangelical Lutheran doctrine of the third use of the law." p.23.

¹⁵ Lutherans Werner Elert and Gerhard Forde are two recent individuals accused of denying the third use of the law. Scott Murray's book *Law, Life, and the Living God: The Third Use of the Law in Modern American Lutheranism*. (St. Louis: Concordia, 2001), sparked a recent massive resurgence of interest in the third use of the law that continues to be heavily debated today, and in many ways lies at the heart of this essay. A whole symposia was held on the "Law in Holy Scripture" with the essays compiled into book form, *The Law in Holy Scripture*, Charles A. Gieschen ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 2004). A whole issue of *Concordia Theological Quarterly* (July/October 2005, Vol. 69:3-4) was dedicated to essays on the third use of the law. A formal response by Scott Murray to his critics was eventually also published, "The Third Use of the Law: The Author Responds to His Critics," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* (April 2008, Vol. 72:2), pp.99-118. Ed Engelbrecht then presented works that clarified Luther's use and understanding of the Third Use of the Law: "Luther's Threefold Use of the Law," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*. (January/April 2011, Vol. 75:1-2) pp.135-150, and then putting out an entire book on the matter, *Friends of the Law: Luther's Use of the Law for the Christian Life*. (St. Louis: Concordia, 2011).

fication in preaching?¹⁶ Is it different than the third use of the law?¹⁷ Fi-

¹⁶ In his article, "Notes on Preaching Sanctification," Richard Warneck makes some helpful observations about the balancing act that goes on in preaching sanctification (i.e. going to one extreme of moralism or the other of antinomianism), but notes that it is ultimately always rooted in the gospel: "Preaching sanctification is ever Gospel preaching! God has called Christians to holiness (1Thess. 4:7), but not before He calls them to repent and believe the Gospel. Christian Ethics cannot be reduced to a set of moralisms such as Pascal's saying, 'All the good maxims have been written. It only remains to put them into practice.' What good are all the 'good maxims' if the debt of sin still burdens the conscience and life? Christian living, therefore, is a corollary of the forgiveness of sin. St. Paul expresses it this way. The death which Christ died to sin once for all means that Christians should consider themselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 6:10,11). Righteousness and holiness are joined and never separated." *Concordia Journal*, ((Vol. 25, no. 1, January, 1999), 56-57. Of course the works of Harold Senkbeil are crucial for understanding the fullness and role of the Gospel in sanctification: In his first book *Sanctification: Christ in Action*, Senkbeil aptly and simply calls sanctification "Christ in action" among us: "[W]hen speaking about power for the sanctified life, we dare never stop speaking about Christ." (Milwaukee, Northwestern, 1989), p.121. In his second book *Dying to Live: The Power of Forgiveness*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1994), he expounds on this even more saying: "[T]he work of every Christian in the world is actually the work Jesus Christ is doing in and through that Christian," p.161.

¹⁷ One who has written much about both sanctification and the third use of the law and held them up together over his long academic career is Dr. David Scaer. He offers deep theological reflection, historical insight, and practical considerations. Yet, he also demonstrates how hard it is to find a pleasing and final answer for everyone as to how the two are connected. In one instance he writes: "Believers see the law's perfection in Christ, who comprises the gospel's content, and the law, now fulfilled in Christ, directs the Christian's life (third use). The third use of the law is the description of the reality of Christ's life taking form and shape in the life of the Christian. In grammatical terms, the imperative of command becomes the indica-

nally, as Lutherans confess that the gospel is truly the power of conversion and the life of faith, shouldn't the gospel proclamation be the basis for new life and the fruit of faith in believers? Suffice it to say space

ative, describing what already exists." *Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics vol. III, Law and Gospel and the Means of Grace*, p.83; In another place he connects the two more precisely. "Sanctification," *Concordia Journal*. "In our fallen condition the law always accuses, but it is diagnostic in bringing us to our senses about our estrangement from God. In this sense the law as accusation is an act of mercy so that in the gospel we recognize that God has already supplied in Christ a solution of our wretched condition. Though the formula outlines the law's three functions, law in itself is God's unchanging will according to which we human beings are to conduct ourselves in this life (VI, 16). As sinner, one is condemned by the law, but as believer one comes to see the law differently and loves it and by faith intuitively does the positive things the law requires and so in the sense of the third use Christians fulfill the law. This is sanctification." (Summer 2015, Vol. 41, no. 3), p. 244; And still yet in another he even more intricately connects the two: "[I]n Lutheran theology the sinner is caught between two realities: the same God who rejects him accepts him in Christ. He believes but is never relieved from divine accusation. Conversion is a one time occurrence but its experience of going from unfaith to faith is repeated each day. He never moves far from Baptism but each time the old man is drowned the new man comes forth.... As sinner he remains subject to divine wrath (Second Use), but as a believer his works are not motivated by the Law's threats but by faith (Third Use). Sanctification is characterized not so much as absence of moral blemish (which is impossible), but by the freedom to do good works to assist and help the neighbor. He begins again to live that life destined for him in paradise (the 'First Use') and helps others as God in Christ did (Third Use). Good works are those God destined for him in creation and done by Christ and then by the believer. Sanctification is rooted in creation and redemption and displays both." "Third Use of the Law: Resolving the Tension," in *You My People, Shall Be Holy: A Festschrift in Honour of John W. Kleinig*. Ed. John R. Stephenson & Thomas M. Winger. (St. Catherine's, ON, Canada, 2013), p.250.

does not afford for a thorough analysis of each question. But the issue of moral exhortation invokes countless interrelated doctrinal considerations, the chief of which are the third use of the law and sanctification, both of which do not have universal agreement in meaning or practice within our Lutheran circles.¹⁸ Simply put, complex issues surround the desire to preach the virtues and character of Christ.

Thankfully, the use of story will help us sort our way through. In fact, the "fellowship of the ring" that first gathered at Lord Erlond's house in Rivendell (he is one of the mighty elf rulers of old), incurred much arguing and infighting about the best way the fellowship should undertake and deal with the One ring of power. Likewise, Lutherans have done their fair share of theological arguing and infighting about all the foregoing questions, especially as all of the above footnotes demonstrate. In fact, it could

¹⁸ The above footnotes demonstrate the issues on the third use of the law, but there also remains a lack of agreement about sanctification throughout larger Christianity, as well as within Lutheranism. Arguments go back and forth about the true emphasis of sanctification. Is it an activity that primarily deals with our moral behavior and its practical implications (i.e. virtues ethics and progressive sanctification)? Or is it an activity that primarily deals with the ritual sacramental reception of Christ's holiness and virtues (i.e. an ethics of holiness, "Christ in action" in us)? The whole of Senkbeil's work in *Sanctification: Christ in Action* contrasts the Lutheran position of sanctification over and against the American Evangelical perspective. However, for a formal evaluation about the broader differences see *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*. ed. Donald L. Alexander. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988) And for a brief overview of some Lutheran differences, see Woodford, "Holy God, Holy Things, Holy People: Pastoral Care in Proximity to God's Holiness." *Seelsoerger: A Journal for the Contemporary Cure of Souls*. Vol. 1 No. 1, p. 105-135.

probably be said that many are still arguing at Rivendell.

The Way Forward

Yet, in Tolkien's story there emerged a way forward. There was one who, though small and meek (the hobbit, Frodo), humbled himself and willingly bore the burden of their quest to vanquish evil. Likewise, I believe there is a way forward amidst our Lutheran theological unrest. When it comes to the direction preachers should take regarding homiletical exhortation and character formation, the story of our humble Lord Christ and His baptismal gifts point the way forward. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo the ring bearer took upon himself a load to which all others would likely succumb, and in the end he even did so himself. Were it not for the role Gollum was to play (Tolkien was a genius here), all would have been lost. But not so with Christ our Lord; He bore our burden all the way to the cross and grave, and now risen and ascended on high, He desires that we receive everything He won for us. Of course, to make sure that happens, He ordained the preaching office to administer all His good gifts of grace (AC V).

Accordingly, one way to say it is that preaching the virtues of Christ is simply narrating what our Lord has already given out to us in Holy Baptism. As will be demonstrated, the life Christ lived is the life He gives to us in baptism. The righteous acts He performed, the holy life He lived, and the virtues He displayed are all imparted to us through the water and the Word of Holy Baptism that unites us to Jesus (Gal 3:27). As with all His good gifts, His virtues are received by faith and put into action by faith.

Preaching the virtues of Christ is simply narrating what our Lord has already given out to us in Holy Baptism.

To preach in the way of Jesus is, of course, to go in the way of the gospel. And since it is the gospel that produces the fruits of the faith, good works, and even our moral life, the preacher can be freed to proclaim the character of Christ and the virtues of Christ as a gift of Christ for the moral life in Christ. Therefore, the virtues of Christ in the life of the believer are a tremendous gift of faith to build up and direct the life of the believer. Understanding the role that Christ's virtues can play in the life of the believer will invariably aid the preacher in shaping a more visceral and vivid sermon. We consider that role now.

The Role of Christ's Virtues in the Life of the Believer

Fans of J.R.R. Tolkien are often also fans of C.S. Lewis. In his children's book series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, he creates fantastic adventures full of vice and virtue, with grand battles of good versus evil. "Lewis's Narnia, like Tolkien's Middle-earth, is far more than a land of imagination; it is a place where honor and chivalry stand poised in mortal combat with the life-denying, faith-denying, hope-denying forces of evil."¹⁹ Both Lewis and Tolkien create stories that teach virtue and deliver virtue to their readers by their very immersion in the story. They both write in such a way that the vocabulary of character and virtue is learned and witnessed, even evoking and stirring up great emotions within the reader. In short, they are stories that enact virtue in the imaginations of readers. Likewise, the gospel story that is narrated and proclaimed by a preacher will not only enact the virtues of Christ

¹⁹ Markos, *On the Shoulders of Hobbits*, p.14,

in the imagination of the hearers, but by the power of the Holy Spirit at work by faith, the virtues of Christ can be enacted in the daily life of the hearers as they witness them in the text of Scripture and have them vividly drawn out in living color by the proper yet evocative preaching of Holy Baptism.²⁰

Consider the character of Aslan, the great lion of Narnia and Son of the Emperor beyond the Sea. He is one of the central recurring figures in the seven books of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In the first novel written by Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (later editions unfortunately put this book as second in the series order), there comes a point in time when Aslan is set to leave all of his followers and willingly, but quietly, go off to the White Witch to bear the guilt and penalty for the treachery of another. He has interceded for a young boy named Edmund Pevensie, and is going to undertake the death penalty in his place. (Here Lewis makes Aslan an obvious Christ figure.) But before Aslan leaves, he makes sure that his followers are equipped and ready for the battle that he knows will soon follow after his death.

Thus, prior to his departure, Aslan instructs another young boy, Peter Pevensie, on the coming battle. He is the noble, older brother of Edmund, and was just recently knighted by Aslan for valor. Aslan prepares him and instructs him on what to do,

how to fight, where to go, and how to lead his troops into battle. Chosen and knighted by Aslan, Peter is set in place. Now he must trust Aslan's word and act as the knight Aslan has made him to be. Though there is much he does not know, and more yet that he fears, Peter is chosen by Aslan to lead his army, and act in His stead. Peter knows Aslan has the power to defeat the White Witch, and does not quite understand why Aslan will not be with them in the fight, but nonetheless faithfully obeys Aslan's bidding and sets to work, while also waiting until Aslan should choose to return.

Baptized into Christ

Peter's task is akin to the life and task of every baptized believer. Christ paid the price for our treachery and sin through His cross and death, and therefore won the ultimate victory for us. But even so, He does not leave us unequipped to face the evil battles and temptations of the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh that come to us constantly until the day He returns in His resurrection glory. We've been baptized into Christ, and are therefore united to Christ (Gal. 3:27). We are sent out by Christ, in His name, with His baptismal sign and seal fortifying us and freeing us to act with the courage, the valor, the wisdom, and the patience of Christ Himself. By faith we receive the gifts of salvation, and by faith we enact the virtues of Christ, and walk with His character.

Therefore, preachers must not only be equipped in storytelling, they must also be conversant in character building, but of the character and virtue that baptismally flows from Jesus Christ. Yet, to do so in a Lu-

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²⁰ In other places I have written on how the preacher can deliver the gospel "in living color" by preaching the pathos (emotion) and vividness (imagination) of a text, something that I have labeled "evocative transference." See Woodford, "In Living Color: Narrative Rhetoric for a Lutheran Homiletic in the Digital Age," *Logia*.

*When a
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theran manner the preacher must understand that the “distinction between law and gospel is a particularly glorious light” which serves “to divide God’s Word properly [cf. 2 Tim 2:15] and to explain correctly and make understandable the writings of the holy prophets and apostles.”²¹ In other words, the preacher tells the whole story, addressing all its characters, while also delivering the virtues of Christ to the very people listening to the story. Yet, how he can do so theologically has not been fully answered. Therefore, attention is now given to the theological framework for preaching the virtues of Christ.

**Receiving the Virtues of Christ
in the Way of the Gospel:
A Baptismal Virtues Ethics
Approach²²**

One of the central characters of the final book of *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* is Aragorn. He is a Ranger, a powerful warrior who roams the wild of the North, protecting the Shire from the rising power of Mordor. He possesses great courage and skill in healing. But he is also the true heir to the throne of Gondor, the last in the lineage of men with great strength, yet also a line with a history of profound weakness. His identity has been kept secret for some time, known only to himself and the elves.

²¹ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article V: Law and Gospel, 1.

²² This section borrows from the concept and content of another parallel project published in a festschrift, *Take Courage: Essays in Honor of Harold L. Senkbeil*, “Sanctification Revisited—Christ (and His Virtues) in Action: Sanctification as Platform for Virtues Ethics,” (2017), in which I explore the connection of virtues ethics and sanctification, and propose the concept of a Lutheran baptismal virtues ethics. Again, important to understanding this section are the basic concepts of virtues ethics as noted above.

Part of the reason is that Aragorn fears the great failure of Isildur, his forefather, who failed to destroy the One ring when he had the chance, keeping it instead for himself, only to be deceived and finally murdered by its power. But when the Fellowship of the ring assembles, Aragorn must begin facing and walking the path of his true identity, both to honor who he is as well as for the good of his friends, and all Middle-earth.

Dead, yet Alive

When a Christian is baptized he or she is given the identity of Christ: “[F]or in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal 3:26-27). Even more, in baptism every Christian becomes an heir of God. They are bestowed with the identity and character of Christ Himself, guaranteeing them a divine inheritance, but also setting them on the path of their true identity in Christ—a son of God. As such, the riches of this baptismal gift are abundant, a lavish washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, a gift of justifying grace, full of the hope of eternal life (Titus 3:5-7), which is for the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. But this new identity also directs the Christian into a daily battle as one who lives out their identity in the character and virtues of Christ. Borrowing from Tolkien helps to tell this story.

In *The Return of the King*, there comes a time when Aragorn must finally embrace the fullness of his true identity and face the great evils of his time in the power and confidence of that true identity. Tolkien once again masterfully draws the

reader into the virtues and character of Aragorn himself. In this case, one instance in particular goes to the core of Aragorn's identity, and helps exemplify the baptismal identity and moral implications for the virtuous life of Christians.

Walking the Path of the Dead

Tolkien suggests that the single greatest act of courage performed by Aragorn is not displayed in the battlefield or in the Mines of Moriah or before the Black Gate of Mordor. "Above and beyond all his other noble deeds, Aragorn shows the greatest fortitude, the greatest endurance when he rides willingly the Paths of the Dead and calls upon the cursed spirits of those who had betrayed his great ancestor, Isildur, at the end of the Second Age."²³ Their assistance is needed to defeat the armies of Sauron. Only the one with the identity of the heir of Isildur and true king would be able to face them and live, and then also command them to fulfill their broken pledge, which would release them of their eternal curse. However, as Aragorn approaches, though the spirits cannot harm him physically, "they threaten to unbalance his mind with dread and prostrate his spirit with terror. All that is within Aragorn dissuades him from treading this fearsome path; yet he takes it nonetheless, for it is his appointed path, and 'no other road will serve' (V.ii.766)."²⁴

In a like manner, the baptismal life is one that calls us to willingly walk the path of the dead, but in the confidence and character of our baptismal identity. This certainly carries with it moral implications for our dai-

ly living as the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh constantly threaten to unbalance our minds with dread and prostrate our spirit with terror. The Small Catechism helps us understand this path when it confesses what the baptized life truly entails:

It indicates that the old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

The baptismal identity as an heir of God—a son of God—who is united to Christ, gives us a spiritual way of life, which is also an ethical way of life. Walking the path of the dead refers to putting to death all of our sins and evil desires, where the new man, the one united to Christ, then emerges to live with the character and virtues of Christ as we face temptation, affliction, and adversity. In other words, where dangerous passions and "evil desires" disorder life, lead to sin, and defile our life, the ethic of baptism calls every sinner to repentance and prayer. This means that a man not only confesses his sin, but that he turns away from that sin and "evil desire" in sorrow and contrition. His sinful thoughts, behaviors, and vices are stopped, confessed as wrong, wherein that sinner then pleads for mercy and forgiveness. Here the sinful self is spiritually crucified and buried with Christ, that is, he is spiritually drowned and killed. All of this certainly has moral implications. This most certainly involves behavioral changes and actions that flow from the virtues of Christ and the fruit of the faith (Gal 5:22-23). As an aside, most Christian virtues ethics give little or no treatment of

The baptismal life is one that calls us to willingly walk the path of the dead, but in the confidence and character of our baptismal identity.

²³ Markos, *On the Shoulders of Hobbits*, p. 71.

²⁴ Ibid.

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repentance and prayer as the important habit to the moral and spiritual life. Yet, they are an utterly essential part of the Christian faith and way of life.²⁵

Therefore, the central habits of what I call baptismal virtues ethics are the spiritual acts of prayer, contrition, and repentance. These habits are at the root of the virtuous life. Borrowing a psychological term, they lead to the actualization of the virtues of Christ. Theologically put, they lead to the enactment of the virtues of Christ. In other words, the same faith that enacts contrition and repentance also enacts the virtues of Christ. The law is at work, accusing the sinner, condemning the sinner, and driving the sinner to repentance and the death of his sinful self. But because the sinner is also baptized, he is a beloved and precious child of

²⁵ To be sure, there are other various Christian approaches to virtues ethics. Some prominent differing perspectives to consider are: 1) the abundant works of Stanley Hauerwas, in particular his work *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*. (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1981) and his work *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998); 2) the Roman Catholic perspective given by Pope John Paul II's *Veritas Splendor* and Pope Benedict XVI's *Deus Caritas Est*. However, a more accessible and helpful aid to understand these teachings is offered by Romanus Cessario, O.P. in his book *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics* second edition. (Notre Dame, Notre Dame Press, 2009); and 3) the insightful Lutheran perspective from Gilbert Meilander in *The Theory and Practice of Virtue*, (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1984). For an additional differing Lutheran perspective one can also cautiously consider Joel D. Biermann's, *A Case for Character: Towards a Lutheran Virtue Ethics*. (Concordia: St. Louis, 2014). As noted above, his final conclusion ultimately focuses on the law as impetus for the virtuous life. This is problematic and conflicts with a gospel powered view of the Lutheran theology of sanctification.

God in Christ and an heir to the kingdom of God (Gal 3:26-27). In that very confidence and faith (those two things also being virtues from Christ) he enacts other virtues of Christ—patience, longsuffering, wisdom, courage, humility—and faces the evils, temptations, and afflictions of this world. Day by day the baptized Christian walks the path of the dead and engages the world with the moral character of Christ, for the good of the neighbor, and the glory of God's kingdom.

Delivered from the hands of the Evil One by the cross of Jesus, our Lord baptismally equips Christians to live with moral integrity, as well as the eternal destiny of a Heavenly Kingdom. The preacher therefore is called to narrate and deliver these gifts Sunday after Sunday, year and after, calling Christians to begin each day in their baptism by walking the path of the dead, while trusting in Jesus who conquered death. Each week the preacher breathes the ultimate story of good versus evil into our lives, while simultaneously narrating the virtues of Christ into action in our lives. This is certainly doing things in the way of the gospel, and much different than the classic way of developing personal virtue.

In the classic tradition of virtues ethics, a person must exercise their own willpower and practice the various habits that lead them to acquiring the various virtues. As a person continually practices a particular habit, they finally actualize their potential by awaking within them the virtues that were previously dormant or unrealized. In so doing, they are said to create a whole new being within themselves. This approach, again, emphasizes the role of human will-

power and effort as the mode of acquisition. However, a baptismal virtues ethics asserts God is an active participant in the process. The enactment of virtue in the Christian is not a purely human act of willpower to behave morally. Christ is at work and in action within us.

What is more, the perspective taken here recognizes the utterly depraved nature of the human soul, which cannot draw goodness or virtue from within the self (Gen 8:21). We are completely dependent upon Christ and His gifts of grace. This means we're dependent upon Christ for virtues, character, and identity. Yes, we're created with the capacity to be virtuous beings, but sin has so destroyed that ability that apart from Christ, we'll always ultimately fail at being moral. Therefore, sinners need rescuing, renewing, and recreating. This is the work of Holy Baptism.

Subsequently, by baptism Christ enacts His virtues within us, not by magic or some secret, but through the washing and renewal of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5-8). As the sanctified life flows out of baptism, so the virtuous life flows out of baptism. Luther brings this out in his Large Catechism:

Every Christian has enough in Baptism to learn and to do all his life. For he has always enough to do by believing firmly what Baptism promises and brings: victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sin, God's grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with His gifts.

Thus a Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism, begun once and continuing ever after. For we must keep at it without ceasing, always purging whatever

pertains to the old Adam, so that whatever belongs to the new creature may come forth. What is the old creature? It is what is born in us from Adam, irascible, spiteful, envious, unchaste, greedy, lazy, proud—yes—and unbelieving; it is beset with all vices and by nature has nothing good in it. Now, when we enter Christ's kingdom, this corruption must daily decrease so that the longer we live the more gentle, patient, and meek we become, and the more we break away from greed, hatred, envy, and pride. This is the right use of baptism among Christians. (LC, Fourth Part: Baptism, 41, 66-68).

Therefore, baptismal virtues ethics begins with the faith given in baptism, which apprehends the whole of Christ and all His gifts. Christ never gives Himself out in parts or pieces. One either gets all of Him, with all of His gifts, or nothing at all. An example of this is when Paul tells the Corinthians, "It is because of [God] that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption" (1 Cor 1:30). Mixed in with the "righteousness," "holiness," and "redemption" of Christ is the cardinal virtue of wisdom: Christ "has become for us wisdom from God." Accordingly, I think it's fair to conclude that the virtues of Christ are most certainly also included in the baptismal gifts of Christ. This makes it readily apparent that the gospel, rather than the law, operates as the power and force behind baptismal virtues ethics.

To be clear, the law can certainly describe that life, demand that life, and guide one in that life, but it cannot give that life. That power comes from

To be clear, the law can certainly describe that life, demand that life, and guide one in that life, but it cannot give that life. That power comes from the gospel alone.

The one and same law with all of its uses is always present regardless of one's desired use and/or homiletical presentation of the law.

the gospel alone. Therefore, the preacher does well to preach the virtues of Christ in the way of the gospel, as a gift, by grace through faith, rather than as a demand for his hearers to imitate and adulate. Again, the law can certainly instruct in Christian character, virtue, and habits, and certainly has its place and uses. In fact, the law has three uses that will be described below. But first a brief word of caution: It should be noted that a preacher cannot wield each use of the law individually apart from the other uses according to his own particular theological or homiletical desire. The one and same law with all of its uses is always present regardless of one's desired use and/or homiletical presentation of the law. Those uses might be described accordingly:

1. The law *proscribes*—it forbids things that are contrary to God's will and dangerous to human life;
2. The law *prescribes*—it teaches what is pleasing to God and what He demands;
3. The law *describes*—it shows what God in Christ accomplishes in the life of the forgiven sinner by His Spirit through the baptized life.

Again, the law is utterly powerless to produce what it demands, proscribes, prescribes, or describes. The law cannot deliver character, virtue, or habit. That's why we need the gospel to justify, sanctify, and deliver everything the law demands.

Jesus Christ delivers the fulfilled demands of the law to us in His own person. He did this through His life, death, and resurrection, not to abolish the law, but to fulfill the law (Matt 5:17). He did so with perfect obedience to the Heavenly Father,

never once sinning, and yet He was innocently put to death for our sins, to suffer the wrath of God in our place. That's a part of the story the preacher must also clearly tell. Jesus fulfilled the law in our place. By faith in Christ, then, we receive the righteousness of One who fulfilled the law, as if we fulfilled the law ourselves. Therefore, to say Jesus gives us the fulfilled law along with His righteousness and holiness is not out of line.

In fact, that point is quite significant. The righteousness that Jesus gives to us by faith includes all of His own virtuous acts, deeds, desires and passions, along with the whole fulfilled Law He accomplished for us in our place. As Paul says, "Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes" (Rom 10:4). Christ is all in all. He supplies all that we need. We are no longer under the law or slaves to the law, but in Christ we are under grace (Rom 6:14).

The Christian, then, believes we have access to moral character, virtue, and a holy, righteous identity through Jesus Christ. This is more than a mere mental thought, or intellectual exercise designed to encourage someone to act like Jesus. This is an exercise of faith, an exercise that believes what Jesus has given us and clearly acts upon it. As Paul said, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal 3:27). Plain and simple, baptized believers have put on the virtues of Jesus. Consequently, baptized into Christ "we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph 2:10).

Faith calls us to believe the gospel and trust that Jesus not only gives us His forgiveness, righteousness, and holiness to secure our standing before the Heavenly Father and gain eternity in heaven, but that He also gives us His character, His identity as a son of God, and His virtues to take as our very own and lead us in a moral life, in this culture, at this time, here on this earth. Thus, the preacher does well to preach the virtues of Christ in the way of the gospel.

**Preaching the Virtues of Christ:
Always Remember the Story**

Now that a theological foundation for preaching the virtues of Christ has been established, we can consider what that might sound like in a sermon. A few final thoughts will be provided before concluding with an example of a sermon manuscript.

In C.S. Lewis's *The Silver Chair*, the fourth book in *The Chronicles of Narnia* (as he originally wrote them), Aslan has a young girl named Jill memorize four signs (or clues) before he sends her into Narnia. They are to help her and Eustace (a cousin to the Pevensie children) to find the lost Prince Rilian. Once he was satisfied with her recitation of the signs, Aslan gives Jill a final warning:

Remember, remember, remember the signs. Say them to yourself when you wake in the morning and when you lie down at night, and when you wake in the middle of the night. And whatever strange things may happen to you, let nothing turn your mind from following the signs. And secondly, I give you a warning. Here on the mountain I have spoken to you clearly: I will not often do so down in Narnia. Here on the mountain,

the air is clear and your mind is clear; as you drop down into Narnia, the air will thicken. Take great care that it does not confuse your mind. And the signs which you have learned here will not look at all as you expect them to look, when you meet them there. That is why it is so important to know them by heart and pay no attention to appearances. Remember the signs and believe the signs. Nothing else matters.²⁶

The preacher is sent to bring to remembrance the signs and story of God's salvation. He is to narrate, recite, and proclaim again and again the greatest story that's ever been told. That's what the Lord has called him to do with all deftness, skill, and passion—he preaches the law and the gospel. He must do so over and over again because it's so easy for our minds to become confused, for the lies to seem true, and the air of this world to seem thick and distorting. The signs of God's Word (both Old and New Testament) can seem so clear one day, and Jesus Himself so close, but then when the burdens, temptations, and afflictions of life strike, they become blurred and distant. It's why Paul reminds us: "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known." (1 Cor 13:12).

Ultimately, this is what happens to Jill and Eustace in the story. At several points they lose sight of those signs, and things become muddled in their minds. Jill forgets to recite them every night. This takes them off course and they're forced to experience things in life that they'd

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²⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (New York: Harper Collins, 1953, 1981), p.27.

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much rather not. They overlook the signs, barely escape being eaten by cannibalistic giants, and nearly miss their chance to save the Prince. But providence intervenes (Lewis is a master of this), and by the brave and wise Marshwiggle named Puddle-glum, they finally clear their minds and prevail in rescuing the Prince.

Delivering Christ

Here is the point: the preacher is there to proclaim to his people, Remember. Remember. Remember the story of Christ! Even more, the preacher delivers Christ. His shed blood, His words of grace, His gifts of righteousness, holiness, and all of His virtues. The preacher delivers them to us.

In a world where “much that once was is now lost,” it’s easy to lose sight of the signs and become lost in the vast and overwhelming darkness of our time. It can be easy for people living in a morally vacant and characterless society to forget the signs of Christ. They are being drowned out by lies and deceit. We are baraged on all sides by the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh. But the preacher is sent to preach the story of Jesus Christ again and again, and in so doing to enact the virtues of Christ among his hearers. So what might this sound like?

Consider someone who desires courage and self-control (the classic virtues of fortitude and temperance). Bearing up under the pressures of this decaying culture with a resolute and faithful witness to Christ isn’t easy. However, Christ gives us the virtues we need to bear up under the weight and scorn of the unbelieving world (Luke 12:12, 21:15). Just as Jesus was mocked, beaten, and

bloodied, and His suffering paraded out in front of everyone, so baptized believers put on the very virtues He displayed while He suffered—not magically, not secretly—but the same way He gives all of His good gifts: by faith. Faith calls us to receive His courage and self-control, and then put it into action in our lives. The point is to look to Christ for strength, to see what Christ has placed upon us and made us to be, to see who we are in Christ, and then to act upon it by faith. After all, faith is a living, busy, active thing.

Consider another example: Perhaps someone is seeking justice. Here we must be sure to distinguish between the desire for justice, and the desire to be a just person. This becomes significant in a society filled with the continual loss of religious liberty, and the injustices that continue to occur to U.S. citizens who are Christians (i.e. bakers, florists, and photographers). Even so, by faith we look to the cross and see Jesus enduring the just punishment we deserved. Yet, we also see His self-control, His courage, and His love, which have all been baptismally imparted to us. Therefore, with the hope that comes with Christ’s resurrection and ascension, Christians walk by faith and put this justice, self-control, love, and hope into action, even if it means suffering and loss. We are united to that part of Christ’s life as well. As the Scriptures say: “We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body” (2 Cor 4:10-11). The virtues of Christ do not guarantee the trouble-free life, rather they

mean the life united to Christ and His cross.

In sum, this essay presents a description of how the virtues of Christ are received in the way of the gospel, what the virtues of Christ in action look like, and how to preach the virtues of Christ for a moral people living in immoral times. In a world that has lost its story, Lutheran preachers tell the story of Christ, while also narrating the virtues of Christ into the lives of the baptized. In a society that has experienced the death of character, Lutheran preachers announce, proclaim, and deliver Christ and His character to His people. Preachers recognize the reception of the virtues of Christ are part of the regenerative effects of the gospel upon the Christian as opposed to the coercion of the law. By using a Lutheran baptismal virtues ethics, a theological foundation for preaching the virtues of Christ is clearly established. In short, the attributes and virtues of Christ do not exist simply for our adoration, imitation, or even emulation, but they become ours by divine baptismal imputation to show the light of Christ in action in our lives as we live out our faith amid the darkness, temptations, and afflictions of this earth. To be baptized into Christ is to be united with Christ and His virtues.

Finally, an example of a sermon I preached using this approach is provided below for your consideration. ❏

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Appendix: Sermon Example—Proper 7, Galatians 3:23-4:7, June 19, 2016

“Baptized into Christ”

How do you identify? Are you a male or are you a female? If you’re filling out a questionnaire at the doctor’s office and they ask you your gender, what do you mark off? How do you identify yourself—as a boy or a girl, a man or a woman? That seems like a pretty harmless question. And three years ago it was, but not anymore. Now our world has changed. Now we’re living in the midst of a vast moral revolution, the likes of which human civilization has never faced before.

This uprising is more subtle and more dangerous than the revolutions faced in previous generations. It’s a revolution of ideas, one that’s transforming the entire moral structure of meaning and life that human beings have recognized for thousands of years.

It begins with simple questions like, “How do you identify?” Or, “How do you define yourself?” If you’re a Facebook user, and filling out your profile settings, you could choose from the traditional male and female, but you now also have some 50 other options to choose from, including things like “cisgender,” “transgender” and “intersex.” Biological facts and objective truth are being hijacked by absurdity. The rule of law is being set aside and trumped by feelings and emotions.

This past May, the New York City Commission on Human Rights is-

sued some “legal enforcement guidance” for the New York City Human Rights Law, which now “requires employers and converted entities to use an individual’s *preferred* name, pronoun and title regardless of the individual’s sex at birth, anatomy, gender, medical history, appearance, or the sex indicated on the individual’s identification.”

In other words, now a 5'8" Caucasian/white male can self-identify as a 6'5" Chinese woman simply because that’s his preference. And if you don’t call him by his preferred pronoun at your place of business, whatever that may be, you can be fined up to \$250,000! This absurdity has now come to the point that we, quite literally, have the pronoun police—which, in New York, allows you to choose from 31 official different options.

How do we navigate the culture of our times? How do we bear up under all the madness, the chaos, and the absurdity of these times? What actions do we do? What words do we say? Where can we find courage and hope?

A simple place to start is your own identity and character. Not simply your maleness and femaleness, but your identity in Christ. The Apostle Paul told the Galatians to start there as well. Listen:

²⁶for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.²⁷For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:26-28).

At first thought some may think, “*Oh great!? Is Paul removing gender identity too?*” In fact, it’s quite the opposite. There were plenty of social divisions during Paul’s time. Jews and Greeks did not associate with one another. Jews deemed themselves as superior, and the Greeks as inferior. Likewise, with the slave (which, at that time was not simply on account of race or ethnicity, but established on economic terms as well, which meant white people were likely slaves too). In any case, a slave was deemed inferior to the freeman.

But Paul was tearing down these social divisions. In Jesus Christ they were all the same in their standing before God, and therefore they were to treat one another accordingly—to love one another accordingly—because they all had the same equal standing before God.

Did you catch verse 26? **For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.** Paul is not removing proper gender identity. Rather he is affirming the certainty and specificity of the God-created sexes of male and female, most especially as he notes that Jesus Christ came into the flesh as a male, and was *biologically, socially, and prophetically* called the Son of God.

Paul was saying that whether you are a male or a female, when you are baptized into Christ, you have put on Christ, the Son of God, and you yourself—whether you are male or female—become a “son” of God because you are clothed with the very Son of God. Paul’s not being a chauvinist. He’s not being sexist. He is being apostolic, pastoral, and pro-

phetic—merely speaking what Jesus has given him to say.

So what does this mean for you today? The same as it did back then—you, who are baptized, are clothed with Christ. It means society does *not* give you your identity. Nor does your own sinful heart give you your identity. Jesus gives you your identity. That means things like your looks, your bodily figure, or your clothes do *not* give you your identity. Things like your car, your money, or your house don’t give you your identity. Jesus gives you your identity.

This is so important for you, your children, and all the people of our culture to hear. Your sexuality does not give you, or your child, or your grandchild their identity. Society wants you to flaunt your sexuality, be it what they call heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or transsexual. Society wants us to celebrate it, revel in it, and be free with it.

But the Bible doesn’t recognize “sexual orientation.” So when we speak, we want to speak as the Bible speaks. As such, the Bible doesn’t acknowledge the humanly created notion of “sexual orientation,” nor does it acknowledge any notion about being transgender. Rather the Bible speaks only of sexually moral and immoral acts; it speaks only of the God-created genders of male and female.

Of course, this means the moral revolution will take down and tear down any institution, social norm, or person who speaks against it or calls it for what it is—perversity, decadence, and sin. Whether that’s me or you, or the Christians down the road, they want to silence our voices.

But don't lose heart, when you are united with Jesus Christ, you have the virtues of Jesus covering you and empowering you. As He was mocked and made fun of, beaten and bloodied, and His suffering paraded out in front of everyone to see, so you have put on His virtues that let Him endure such suffering. Baptized into Jesus, you have His courage put into you. You have His self-control put into you. To live by faith, is to put these gifts of Jesus into action amid the life you are living here and now. We don't look within ourselves, we look outside of ourselves by faith to Jesus.

Paul says, ²⁶**for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.** These words are spoken to you and every baptized sinner who struggles with the temptations of the flesh. ²⁷**For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.** ²⁸**There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.**

This declaration is a reminder to every one of us to look with eyes of compassion upon all sinners who are not the same as us, be they heterosexual or homosexual or transsexual. They, too, are ones for whom our Lord Jesus Christ shed His precious blood.

Paul tears down the dividing wall of hostility and declares that those who are baptized into Christ—regardless of your social standing, the sin you struggle against, or the sin and lifestyle you are still trapped in—you are claimed as God's very own. Christ has washed you. He has renewed you. You are clean. You are freed

from your sin, and now leave your sin behind.

You have been bought with the blood of Christ the crucified. You are His and He is Yours. You are a new creation, created in Christ Jesus to do the works that He has prepared for you (Eph 2:10), and to live the holy life that He gives to you.

But I know what you are thinking. The headlines are there in front of us every day, and the news is in our face every night. The moral revolution of our culture marches on. So what difference does all this faith talk make for me here and now?

How does it help me bear up under this mess, and amid these temptations? How does it give me words to say or actions to do? How will it change society and give me any hope? Once again, I point you to where Paul points you. Start with your baptism, with your baptismal identity and character, and what it means to be united to Jesus. The small catechism helps us understand what the baptized life is all about. Let's read it together: (Fourth Part),

"What does such baptizing with water indicate? It indicates that the old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever."

Your baptism points you to daily repentance. Before we can start pointing fingers at society, shaking our fists at all of the evil and wicked ways, baptism calls us to repent and put away all our sins and all of our evil desires. Not once a week. Not

just on Sundays, but daily, where the old sinful self that contributes its own wickedness and evil sins to society, is drowned in your baptism and the new self emerges to live in Christ.

Yes, baptism unites you to Jesus and calls you to look with the eyes of faith at what Christ has given you when He clothes you. He not only gives you His forgiveness, righteousness, and holiness to secure your standing before the Heavenly Father and gain eternity in heaven, but He gives you His character, His identity, and His virtues to take as your very own and lead you in your life, amid trials and temptations, in this culture, at this time, here on this earth.

You want wisdom? Christ imparts His wisdom to you. You are called to think with the mind of Christ, to hear His Word, and put that wisdom into action. You want courage? Jesus bestows His courage upon you. See it with the eyes of faith. Put it into action by faith. If you are having a hard time seeing how this works, consider the identity of a soldier.

When a man enlists to become a soldier he goes in with his own identity, but when he comes out of boot camp, like my younger brother, he comes out with the identity of a United States Marine. That was also the case with Dakota Meyer. On September 8, 2009, he was a corporal in the US Marines serving in the Iraq war. But on that day he saved 36 men under heavy Taliban fire. In fact, his act of selfless heroism has made him the first living US Marine to receive the Medal of Honor during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Here's how it happened.

A group of American soldiers were training some Afghan forces when they were ambushed. Dakota heard the ambush light up the radio. He wanted to go to their aid but his commanding officer refused to let him go, four times! They say it was too dangerous. His fellow soldiers remained trapped, many injured, and others already dead. "Those were my brothers," he said, "I couldn't just sit back and watch." So not once, not twice, not three times, but five times he and Humvee driver Staff Sergeant Juan Rodriguez-Chavez drove directly into fierce battle, bullets flying, smoke swarming, and RPG's exploding, and one by one picked up the injured, trapped, and even deceased brothers in arms.

The epitome of courage and valor, Dakota stood exposed on the top of the Humvee manning the turret gun the whole time, fighting off enemies, and taking heavy fire. During the chaos and madness, and his multiple on-foot rescues, the Humvee was riddled with bullet holes and shrapnel, and Dakota sustained injuries to his arm, and yet he still pushed forward, facing death, ready to give his life because that is what a soldier does. He went in with one identity, but came out with the identity of a United States Marine and all the virtues and character that go with it.

²⁷For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. My friends, you go into the waters of Holy Baptism a weak and unworthy sinner, but you come out with the identity of Jesus Christ and all the virtues that go with Him!

Just as faith believes you are made righteous before God and will be able to stand holy before Him and

live with Him in all eternity, so faith believes you are made ready to stand with courage and fortitude, to bear up under the battles and temptations of our time and culture, and even to face death, because that's what a baptized child of God does. You go into the waters of baptism afraid and timid, but you come out united to Jesus, full of faith and bursting with hope! You are baptized into to Christ. Amen.

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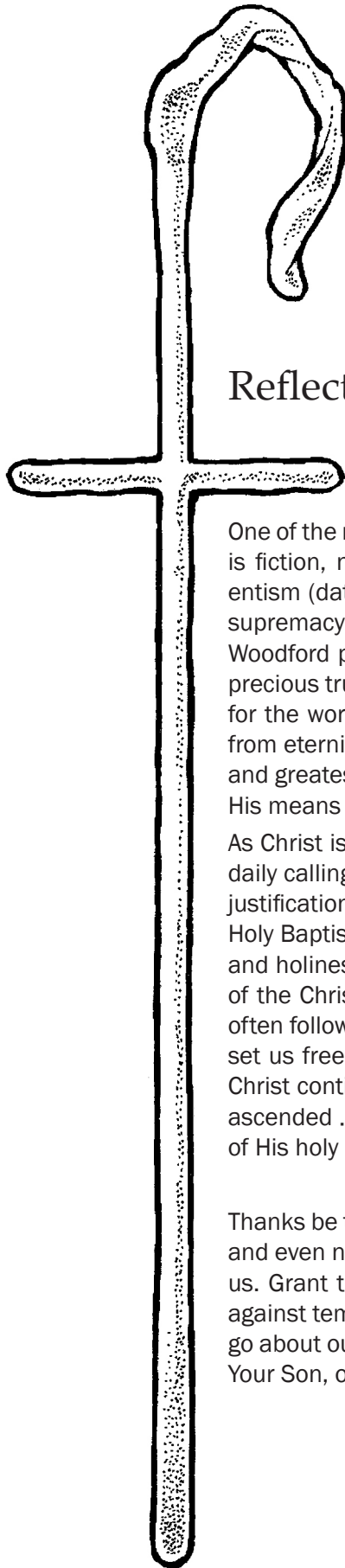
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"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal 2:20)

Reflection

One of the many tragedies of our age is the assumption that anything called a "story" is fiction, no truer than fables: of course, when one lives in a culture where scientism (data is truth!) and postmodern thought (there is no truth!) seek co-existing supremacy, it can be no other way. True, many stories are fictional; but as Pastor Woodford points out, such stories as those of Middle Earth and Narnia still impart precious truths. Why? Because they reflect the greatest story, God's redemptive love for the world in Christ. This is a true story that is greatest in span, for it continues from eternity to eternity; greatest in import, for it is about the salvation of the world; and greatest in effect, because the risen Christ still visits and cares for His people in His means of grace.

As Christ is not static until the Last Day, neither are His people; they go about their daily callings doing good works. However, it is not that the Lord has done His part in justification, and now it is our turn in sanctification. Rather, we are joined to Him in Holy Baptism, and thus crucified with Christ. He now lives in us, imparting His grace and holiness as well as His ethics and love for others. No wonder then that the life of the Christian is the life of repentance, constantly confessing our sins (for we so often follow the old Adam's lead and avoid doing good), and rejoicing that Christ has set us free to be His hands, feet, and voice to those around us. Thus, the story of Christ continues in the Church: not in the sense of, "Meanwhile, while the Lord was ascended ..." but, "The Lord continued His work on earth in part through the works of His holy people."

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Thanks be to You, Almighty God, that You have given Your Son to redeem us from sin, and even now send forth Your Holy Spirit to sanctify us so that He might dwell within us. Grant that we might live as those made holy for the sake of Jesus. Defend us against temptation, thwart every attack of the evil one, and grant us a faith eager to go about our callings in service to You and our neighbor; for the sake of Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord. Amen.

- Pastor Timothy J. Pauls