



I Gave My Life for Thee

A Lenten Reflection from Pr. Dennis D. Nelson

Lutheran CORE President and Director

“Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk” is a 2016 British-American war drama film that is based upon a novel of the same name. The story focuses upon the experiences of a nineteen-year-old Army specialist who is caught on camera dragging his wounded sergeant to safety during an intense fire-fight. His act of courage quickly escalates him and his unit to celebrity status. They are sent on a several-weeks-long nationwide victory tour, which culminates in the halftime show of a Dallas Cowboys Thanksgiving Day home football game.

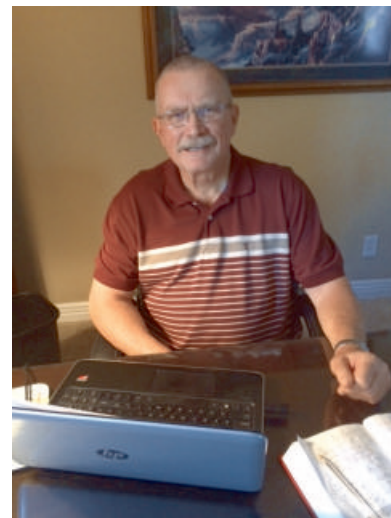
The film depicts the great disconnect between the people back home and the soldiers on the field. The people back home say that they appreciate what the soldiers have done — the risks they have taken and the price they have paid — but their actions reveal that they do not really mean it.

Frances Havergal’s most famous poem provides the words to the song, “Take my life that I may be consecrated, Lord, to Thee.” She wrote another one of her poems in 1858 while she was in Düsseldorf, Germany, where she saw a painting of Jesus. Above

*Is there a
disconnect
between my
words and
my actions?*

the picture were the words, “All this I did for thee; what hast thou done for Me?”

Moved by the probing question, she wrote the poem, “I Gave My Life for Thee.” But she was not happy with the poem, so she threw it into the fire. A draft blew the paper out of the fire.



Feeling that this might have been God’s doing, she took the slightly scorched paper, folded it, and sent it to her father in England. Her father composed a tune to match the words and had it published. The tune that you might know to go with the words was written years later.

In the poem, which has been set to music, Jesus says –

*I gave My life for thee, My precious blood I shed,
That thou might ransomed be, and raised up
from the dead.*

*I gave, I gave my life for thee; what hast thou
done for Me?*

In a later verse Jesus says –

*And I have brought to thee, down from My home
above,*

Salvation full and free, My pardon and My love.

*I bring, I bring rich gifts to thee; what hast thou
brought to Me?*

As we observe another Lenten season, it is a good time for us to ask ourselves, Do I show by my living and by my giving how grateful I am to Jesus and how much I love Him for what He has done for me? Or, like the people in the movie, “Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk,” is there a disconnect between my words and my actions?

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Pastoral Summit Addresses a Concern All Lutherans Share

by Pr. Dennis D. Nelson

I was interested to read the lead article in the monthly newsletter from the bishop of the ELCA synod in which I am rostered. He wrote:

As a wave of clergy retirements is occurring across the ELCA, where will their replacements be found? My Catholic bishop colleagues are increasingly importing their priests from Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Philippines. Is that the path we will follow? I keep hearing the words of St. Paul in Romans 10:14: "But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?"

I read that opening article and my first thought was, That is a concern we all share, and that is the reason why Lutheran CORE is holding the Summit on Pastoral Formation on June 21 at Grand View University in Des Moines. Responding to the concern that we have been hearing from many pastors and lay congregational leaders, who wonder where their congregation's next orthodox and outreach-oriented pastor will come from, we will be gathering ten leaders from four different Lutheran church bodies – ELCA, LCMC, LCMS, and NALC – to begin wrestling with the question –

How can we best raise up and support a new generation of Lutheran pastors who will be Biblical and confessional in their theology and missional/evangelistic in their perspective and practice?

The list of ten church leaders who have been confirmed as participants can be found in the January 2017 issue of our newsletter, CORE Voice, which can be found on our website, <http://www.lutherancore.org> [click here]

In this first phase, participants will be asking such questions as, What is the nature of twenty-first century culture and the twenty-first century church which contribute to this challenge? and, Why do approaches that have worked in the past not work today?

The plan is that many who participate in the first phase will then also be able to participate in a second phase – yet to be scheduled – as participants will develop a statement on how to do missional ministry formation, drawing upon the insights and ideas of the first phase.

The third phase – again yet to be scheduled – will be a conference that is open to all and which will equip the Church for doing missional ministry, including exploring how to create a congregational climate which will expect, appreciate, and support Great-Commission-minded pastors.

Please be in prayer with us for the effectiveness of the summit. In Matthew 9: 37-38 Jesus said, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest." The first thing we need to do if we agree that the Church in the future will need faithful, orthodox, and outreach-oriented pastors is to pray.

And as you pray may we also suggest that you consider giving a special gift to Lutheran CORE – over and above your current giving – in honor of 2017's being the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation. Please designate your special gift as being for the fund that will be supporting the pastoral summit, as a way to make sure that the Church will always have faithful pastors who will preach the Gospel of salvation by grace through faith.

You can click here to donate online.



Small Places with Big Missions: Neuendettelsau, Lisbon, and Houston

by *The Rev. Steven K. Gjerde, Vice-President of Lutheran CORE*

Could your congregation be a Neuendettelsau or Lisbon?

The rural village of Neuendettelsau in Bavaria was the home of the great Lutheran pastor, Wilhelm Loehe, and he didn't necessarily like it. He much preferred an urban scene, but the cities didn't prefer him — controversy marked his first several calls. Was he too visionary or just too difficult?

Whatever the case, all things happened in God's good providence. The state church of Bavaria landed Loehe in the village of Neuendettelsau — surely he couldn't do much damage there! In fact, he did much good. Through his work in the small German village, Loehe founded a mother house of deaconesses and supported several missionary endeavors in North America, Brazil, and Australia. His congregation and he stand as an example of how local gatherings of God's people can serve the universal mission of the Gospel.

A smaller but similar experiment unfolded on the prairies of Illinois in 1855. In that year, a seminary opened in the tiny burg of Lisbon (Kendall

County) under the leadership of P.A. Rasmussen, the man who succeeded Elling Eielsen as pastor for the free-church Lutherans in that area.

Rasmussen had graduated a few years earlier from the Missouri Synod seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and was still early in what would become a 44-year pastorate at West Lisbon Lutheran Church. His seminary attracted just three students, lasted for one year, and then closed. The seminary house continued to stand until just a few years ago, when it was torn down to make way for a picnic shelter and playground.

On the pages of American Lutheran history, the Lisbon venture receives little more than a footnote, yet it gives another example of how God raises up

“Degrees and knowledge are vitally important for ministry, of course. But equally important are the critical ‘people skills’ needed in ministry.”



Residents of Bonhoeffer House in front of the facility

servants of the Gospel in unexpected places and ways. Given the experience of today's Lutheran seminaries, this history may deserve a second look.

As noted in the last *CORE Voice*, today's seminaries struggle to fill the need for pastors. Some fail to produce winsome preachers who love Scripture and confess Lutheran orthodoxy. Others, while more faithful, remain small; many leave their graduates with large financial burdens. This situation may call for pastors and congregations to step forward as “seminaries in the field” that support ministerial candidates through apprenticeship and the daily intersection of theology and life.

One congregation that has taken up this yoke is First Evangelical Lutheran Church in Houston, Texas (FELC). A parish of the North American Lutheran Church led by Pr. Evan McClanahan, FELC hosts Bonhoeffer House, an intentional Christian community that houses, as McClanahan puts it, “a mix of students and young professionals who have ministry in their future.”

“The mission is to offer all of the training for ministry that seminaries do not or cannot,” McClanahan says. “Degrees and knowledge are vitally important for ministry, of course. But equally important are the critical ‘people skills’ needed in ministry.”

McClanahan also points to the need for students to develop a sound habit of prayer, evangelistic zeal, an engaging teaching style, and a firm knowledge of apologetics. “Through the weekly life of the house, we try to teach all of those skills to those

Small Places with Big Missions (continued from page 3)

who are serious about ministry.”

Like most good works, the house grew out of suffering. In 2011, FELC experienced a fire that started in the church’s sacristy and damaged its nave. This setback led to an insurance payment that not only financed the church’s restoration in 2013, but that also had enough left over to convert the unused parsonage into a house of studies inspired by Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together*.

Local congregations may keep in step with the Spirit and raise up preachers for the whole church.

“In God’s provision, funding was actually easy for once!” McClanahan notes. “We also had several congregations in our mission district donate (one very generously donated \$10,000) for the cause.”

Supported by this network of congregations, FELC originally intended Bonhoeffer House to serve as a house of studies within a more traditional seminary system. McClanahan describes midtown Houston as “an urban, evangelism target-rich environment” that can put distance-learning students of ministry in a fertile context to learn about sharing the Gospel.

As McClanahan explains it, FELC “wanted to offer a brick and mortar property at no cost to any other institution to be an intensive community for future ministers. We don’t believe online training is sufficient for pastoral students and we wanted to offer a community for those who were engaging online studies.”

To this end, the residents of Bonhoeffer House (it can house as many as 8 persons total) commit to meeting for Sunday dinner and Bible study, weekly experiments in evangelism, nightly Compline or Vespers, and service projects. Residents also share the daily chores of cooking and keeping house.

In time, the original vision of the house broadened from a “house of studies” role within the NALC system to a more local and ecumenical project. Christians from other denominations as well as other countries, such as Nigeria and Vietnam, have found shelter at the house as they pursue various roles in church and ministry. In McClanahan’s opinion, “This is the needed balance to real world, gospel-centered ministry.”

“Seminaries and church bodies think legally, and they think institutionally. They practically have to in this litigious age. What we offer is a nitty-gritty experience for the future pastor/minister.... Intensive relationships are the only way to discern if people are really called to the ministry.”

Walking in the tradition of Neuendettelsau and Lisbon, McClanahan and First Evangelical Lutheran Church demonstrate how challenges to the church can become opportunities for the gospel. Through apprenticeship and a common life of study, prayer, and work, local congregations may keep in step with the Spirit and raise up preachers for the whole church. For more information on Bonhoeffer House, you may find them on the net at <http://www.bonhoefferhouse.org/>

Do you have other examples of local communities raising up orthodox and evangelistic preachers? If so, email your example to Pr. Steven Gjerde at s.gjerde@dwave.net.

Encuentro Planned for September

An “Encuentro” on Lutheran Hispanic-Latino ministry is set for September 14-16, 2017 in the Chicagoland area.

Sponsored by Lutheran CORE and the Bilingual Ministry Resource Center, the parish and community “Encounter” will be hosted by First and Santa Cruz Lutheran Church in downtown Joliet. ([Facebook: First & Santa Cruz Lutheran Church](#)) Visits to Chicago ministry & cultural sites will be included.

“We are eager to again welcome lay and pastoral leaders for this time of engagement with our Lord’s Great Commission,” notes Lutheran CORE Board member and Encuentro coordinator, Pr. Keith Forni. He adds that presenters will represent both academic and parish ministry perspectives.

A Resource Fair will feature a variety of materials for Christian education, evangelism, worship and devotional life. Current and long-time practitioners in bilingual ministry are expected, as are those who are considering it in their congregational context.

Schedule updates and additional information can be received by contacting Pastor Forni by phone at (815) 722-4800, email Kforni@aol.com or check the Facebook page above.

Parents Are Crucial in the Faith Formation of High School Youth

by *Wes Latchford*

Spoiler Alert: Lutheran parents, I'm calling you out!

"The deplorable, miserable conditions which I recently observed when visiting parishes have constrained and pressed me to put this catechism of Christian doctrine into this brief, plain, and simple form. How pitiable, so help me God, were the things I saw: The common man, especially in the villages, knows practically nothing of Christian doctrine, and many of the pastors are almost entirely incompetent and unable to teach. Yet all the people are supposed to be Christians, have been baptized, and receive the Holy Sacrament even they do not know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments and live like poor animals of the barnyard and pigpen. What these people have mastered, however, is the fine art of tearing all Christian liberty to shreds.

— Martin Luther, 1529

Almost 500 years after Martin Luther wrote the above passage for his *Small Catechism*, like Luther I am still struck as coordinator for High School Faith Formation in our congregation by the lack of knowledge of the Lord's Prayer, the Creeds, or the Ten Commandments that exists in our teenagers and their parents.

Basic Biblical knowledge and understanding of the foundations of Christianity, along with fundamental Christian and Lutheran doctrine, is woefully inept. So much so that during one Confirmation class session, a middle school student asked in all honesty, "Who's Jesus again?"

So if a parent and child aren't growing adequately in their Christian faith journey, it must be the church's fault, right? What a parent learned during their Sunday school days was good enough for them, so why shouldn't they relinquish the faith formation of their child to the pastor, Sunday school teacher, and Confirmation mentor? That's why there's Sunday school and Confirmation class in the first place. A parent's role in the faith formation of their children is simply to make sure they get baptized, take them to Sunday school and vacation

Bible school, and then get them through Confirmation. Once their teenager's confirmed, they can check off the faith formation block of their parental to-do list.

Well, not exactly. When you stood with your probably infant child at Baptism, you took a vow before God on behalf of your child: *To live with them among God's faithful people; bring them to the Word of God and the Holy Supper; teach them the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments; place in their hands the Holy Scriptures; and nurture them in faith and prayer; so that your children may learn to trust God; proclaim Christ through word and deed; care for others and the world God made; and work for justice and peace.* (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 228) Yet it appears that even with our promise to God and our genuine love of our children, only a minority of U.S. teenagers are naturally absorbing by osmosis the traditional substantive content and character of the religious traditions, including confessional Lutheranism, to which they claim to belong.

As a result, we as parents and faith formation teachers are now battling what Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton call Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD) in their book *Soul Searching: the Religion and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (2005). The MTD they identify has colonized many historical religious traditions and, almost

without anyone noticing, converted believers in the old faiths to its alternative religious vision of divinely underwritten personal happiness and interpersonal niceness. Kenda Creasy Dean, in *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*, argues that American teenagers have bought into MTD, not because they have misunderstood what the church has taught them, but precisely because it is what the church has

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Parents Crucial for Faith of High School Youth (continued from p. 5)

taught them.

How can you tell if your kids – or you – are subscribers to MTD? “The language, and therefore experience, of Trinity, holiness, sin, grace, justification, sanctification, church... are supplanted by the language of happiness, niceness, and an earned heavenly reward,” says

Albert Mohler in *When it came to the Moralistic Therapeutic Deism – the New American Religion* (*Christianpost.com*, April 18, 2005). One of the most disturbing findings of the *National Study of Youth and Religion* which was conducted

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between August 2001 and December 2015 was when it came to the most crucial questions of faith and beliefs, many adolescents responded with a shrug and “whatever.” Seriously – **Whatever!**

Lest you think that “Whatever” is good enough, in their article *Parents and “Sticky Faith” — Building a Lasting Faith in Young People* (*Lifelong Faith Journal*, Fall 2011), authors Kara Powell, Brad Griffin, Cheryl Crawford, and Chap Clap find that, “Various studies of young adult Christians have shown that by the time they receive their college diploma four years later, approximately 40 to 50 percent of them will have abandoned their faith. Even those actively participating in church youth groups in high school — approximately 80% in one study — aren’t immune.”

From their investigation, Smith and Denton conclude, “Most teenagers and their parents may not realize it, but a lot of research in the sociology of religion suggests that the most important social influence in shaping young people’s religious lives is the religious life modeled and taught to them by their parents.” Yes parents, you are still the most important social influence in your child’s life and faith formation. How you express and live out your faith is one of the primary influencers on your kids’ faith.

Attend church just a couple of times a month? Or a year? Too hungry to bother saying grace before meals, or if you do, it’s only at home? Don’t have family prayers any more because that was just

for when the kids were little, and mostly because it was cute to watch? Drop the kids off for Sunday school, then head to the grocery store, Starbucks, or back to bed? Teenagers are listening and watching carefully. They have been observing us in our church and the larger culture with diligence and insight. Compounding things is that they don’t understand or realize how much their church and Christian institutions have accommodated themselves to MTD and the dominant culture. They don’t sense the degree to which theological conviction has been sacrificed on the altar of individualism and a relativistic understanding of truth.

So, here’s the callout, Lutheran parents. It’s time to take our kids back from MTD. Let us as parents faithfully and diligently live out our baptismal vow to our children and our God. Let’s set the example of learning, teaching, and living out a historical-confessional, gospel-infused Christianity for ourselves and our youth. Let’s convey daily Christ crucified, died, buried, and resurrected in lieu of allowing ourselves to cater to a pragmatic, personal happiness, and “social-justice-organization-with-sacraments” form of Lutheranism.

Be the parent who does not settle for a minimalist approach to your child’s faith formation. Be the vital part of the process of lifelong faith formation at all stages of your child’s faith development, seek to foster faith and a deeper spirituality within your homes, and advocate for Biblical authority and confessional fidelity among churches of your local Lutheran community.

Wes Latchford is a “stayer-still” in the ELCA and lay coordinator for High School Faith Formation at Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Virginia Beach, VA. Married to the same wonderful woman for 22 years and counting, he’s the proud father of two amazing daughters: a college sophomore and a high school senior. He feels called to help parents better embrace their roles as the primary faith educators for their families, and to be faithful to Christ’s Great Commission, the authority of the Scriptures, and the Lutheran Confessions.

Be the parent who does not settle for a minimalist approach to your child’s faith formation

No Response (As Usual)

by *Pr. Dennis D. Nelson*

A pastor colleague from the ELCA synod in which I served a congregation before retiring sent me information about the annual bishop's colloquy in that synod. The material describing the event began with this question: "What does it mean for pastors (and their congregations) to practice public advocacy on political issues?" It then continued, "How can we avoid needless polarization among our communities, calling everyone to a Gospel-based ethic of neighbor-love? How do we listen for and to the voices at the margins of the church, and how can their witness strengthen us?"

How will that event avoid needless polarization? And who are the voices at the margins of the church that need to be listened for and to because they can strengthen the witness of the synod? The next paragraph answers those questions. "Come hear perspectives from some of those who have been guiding these conversations in the ELCA. Representatives of the Sanctuary movement, #BlackLivesMatter, and #DecolonizeLutheranism will be with us."

Hearing about that event, I sent an email to the office of the synod of the bishop who will be holding that colloquy — the synod in which I used to be rostered. Here is the text of what I sent.

"I would like to offer my opinion of the program

Jocelyn Chavez, Rest in Peace!

Lutheran CORE extends its sympathy and the hope of the Gospel to the family of Jocelyn Chavez, wife of NALC General Secretary Mark Chavez. Jocelyn was recently called from this life after a long and increasingly debilitating illness.

Those of us who have appreciated Mark's leadership in renewal at the WordAlone Network, Lutheran CORE, and the North American Lutheran Church owe a deeper debt to Jocelyn than most of us probably realize. Mark shared that when he received a phone call asking him to interview for Director of WordAlone, he intended to decline the invitation. But when he told his wife, she asked why he couldn't at least talk to them. The rest, as they say, is history.

We thank God for her witness as a wife, mother, and spiritual support to Mark and to their large family. May she rest in peace, and may light perpetual shine upon her!

for the 2017 Bishop's Colloquy. In the description of the event, which a fellow pastor emailed me, it asked, 'How can we avoid needless polarization among our communities?' And yet the topics of black lives matter and decolonize Lutheranism are very polarizing.

"It also asked, 'How do we listen for and to the voices at the margins of the church, and how can their witness strengthen us?' The voices at the margins of the church are the voices of those with a traditional, conservative, and orthodox viewpoint. For years I have felt that there has been no desire to listen to those voices. The presence and witness of people with a traditional, conservative, and orthodox viewpoint would strengthen the ministry of the synod. But for years those people are the ones who have been marginalized and minimized.

"I think it would be more honest to say — *Black Lives Matter* and *Decolonize Lutheranism* is our agenda; not that we want to avoid needless polarization and listen for and to the voices at the margins of the church."

As expected I have received no reply. And why should I expect to receive a reply? After all, I am not one of the acceptable "voices at the margins of the church" that would strengthen the witness of the synod if they would listen for and to us.

Weekly Devotions and Sermon Starters

Are you aware of the weekly devotions that can be found on [the blog on Lutheran CORE's website](#)? Three members of the board contribute them.

Pr. Nelson posts a devotional based upon one of the following Sunday's readings on Tuesdays. Pr. Steve Gjerde, vice president of the board, writes a devotional based upon one of the previous Sunday's readings in the Missouri Synod lectionary series, which is posted every Wednesday. Pr. Brett Jenkins, another member of the board, writes a devotional based upon one of the following Sunday's readings or another timely topic, posted every Friday.

A link to these devotionals is then posted on a number of different Facebook and twitter accounts.

Please help us get the word out about these resources. We desire that they be an inspiration to all who read them, and also a source of ideas, thoughts, illustrations, and images for pastors as they prepare for the following Sunday's sermon.

Why We Need Each Other, Part 2: Friendship or Discipleship?

by *Pr. Brett Jenkins, STS*. Part 1 was published last time and can be accessed by [clicking here](#)

For the first time in Christian history, subjective experience has been elevated to an authority rivaling if not surpassing “Scripture and plain reason” among a great many self-professed Christians. Moral boundaries are drawn, and only then are Biblical cases made to justify them. If the moral cases are not made on the basis of either Scripture or plain reason, on what basis are they made?

They are made on the basis of personal relationships with people who have made moral choices that in any other era would have placed them at or beyond the margins of the Church. “I know people who _____, and I cannot believe that they don’t have the love of God within them. I cannot believe they’re not saved.” Variants of this sentiment are frequently heard as all the justification needed for wholesale reinterpretation of the Bible, Christian doctrine, and Christian morality. One woman at a church I served went into a long diatribe with me about how her son-in-law, an articulate atheist who blogged against Christianity, was most certainly Christian because he was a kind man.

The Tragedy of Human Life

The tragedy of human life in classical Christian perspective is not that the most depraved go to hell, but that all of humanity is headed there apart from the mercy of God in Christ because even the best of us — despite all the love, loyalty, and even self-sacrifice we can demonstrate — have within us pride, jealousy, gluttony, and all the other vices; Mahatma Gandhi was a great philosopher and political leader who led his people to independence through nonviolent means... he also beat his wife, ruling his homestead through the violence he decried politically. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., carried on numerous extramarital affairs, a slave to his own lust while he dreamed of a world wherein all could be “free at last.”

In Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, the most tragic moments occur not when the poet encounters people in torment for sins we all agree are damnable, but when he encounters friends, mentors, and father figures burning on a pyre of their own making, people who clung to their sin as foundational to their identities when they should have clung to Christ. Dante often engages these people in lively conversations redolent with warm human affection, and it is clear those forever tormented by their shape of their own sins are not “totally depraved.” Indeed,

human life is a tragedy not because the wicked go to hell, but because the so-nearly-righteous do so for lack of a saving relationship — one of faith, wherein Jesus Christ is their “all in all” — with God.

No sin — not the smallest amount — can abide the holiness of God, so no creatures of mixed composition can enter eternal life. Humans “must be perfect as their Father in heaven is perfect” in order to abide in that state we call life eternal. What makes human life a tragedy is that we are designed for eternity, but not fit for it.

The Love of God

The process of growing into Christian maturity has been understood throughout most of Christian history as the process of moving from analogy to doxology. We begin as children by understanding “God is love” through our own experience of love in this world. As we grow up — particularly as we learn to see our parental and mentor figures as people with feet of clay — our affection may not diminish for them, but our regard *should*. Finally, as we grow in emotional maturity, experiencing the betrayals of love, trust, and friendship that are endemic to the human condition, we are to come to understand that the love of God is *nothing like* human love, which, however much it may hint at the nature of divine love, is always conditional, incomplete, and impoverished.

“There are few whom I love in this world, and even fewer of whom I think well,” declaims the fictional Elizabeth Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice*, doubtless channeling the voice of her creator, Jane Austen, a keen observer of the truth of human nature. It should be no surprise to us that Austen reserved her deepest scorn in that book for the cleric whose views of love were romantic and whose moralism was rooted in human relationships rather than the divine narrative.

God’s Love Over Human Love

While faithful Christian interpretation of the Bible does not properly involve choice (more on

What makes human life a tragedy is that we are designed for eternity, but not fit for it.

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Why We Need Each Other (continued)

this next time), spiritual maturity and proper ordering of the Christian life does. While we may begin to learn about the love of God by experiencing the love of people, we cannot end there, assuming the love of God is akin to the love of people. “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8) The love of God is not just for the unlovely, it is for the unlovable. It is for those God knows will betray, blame, and take His place, *even after they are claimed by Christ* through the Gospel.

As the staggering divorce rate, church splits, and family estrangements make clear, human love has its limits; God’s love does not. The shocking import of the phrase *simul justus et peccator* is that in the end, we do not possess enough freedom to save ourselves, because we do not possess enough love to do so; my love is always at least partially self-preserving. In contrast, God’s love is utterly self-emptying, looking always *and only* to the good of its beloved. Indeed, this kind of love is what theologians understand as the internal life of the Holy Trinity: The love the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have for one another, which is why we can truly say, “God is love.”

For us, who can only look on such love with awe, the first and proper response is praise of God. The next is to desire the renovation of our own hearts in the image of this love. Paradoxically, what this requires of us is a revoking of the allegiances of our all-too-human loves. As Dr. Jonathan Sorum recently taught me, quoting the work of an Italian philosopher, vocation requires *revocation*. If we are to live as Christians, imbued to any degree with the love of God, we must first see all other allegiances and loves as secondary, relationships that must be ordered (that is to say, directed) by the love of God in fealty to His Word.

Ordered and Reordered Priorities

This is why Jesus would say, “Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake.” (Matt. 10:21-22) The reordering of our loves with strict reference to God will be met with hostility by those who feel their claims ought to be greater or who would dictate to us the shape our love must take toward themselves.

Because the mature Christian realizes that his human love is nothing like the love he or she *ought*

to bear for those around them, they will seek the reordering of their love through the Word of God, and hence they will esteem the Holy Scriptures above the claims of social constraints, even the constraint of being “ecumenical” or seeking Church unity as defined by Christian culture of this historical moment.

This means that alliances between Christians of different confession will be entered into carefully and tentatively because such Christians will take their doctrinal commitments seriously, especially the doctrine of loving their neighbor and fellow Christians. As the pastor of a mission congregation seeking temporary lodging in an existing church, I find I have far more trust in those churches whose pastors ask me hard doctrinal questions than those that do not; they want to love me rightly as a Christian brother and are asking the questions, “How much disagreement can we have — and on what issues — and still see that we are both bowing to the authority of Scripture? Does this brother in Christ need a home for his congregation or does he need my Christian witness to challenge him to greater faithfulness?”

I am not prescribing a formula for us to settle such questions, but I am suggesting that as we make alliances for the sake of evangelical witness both locally and nationally, traditional Christians will take the love of God seriously enough to ask the hard questions and wrestle our way to some provisional answers. If it is actually lived out on an ongoing basis, the language of mutual appreciation and critique employed in some ecumenical agreements could serve as a starting point on issues not too close to the center of our confessions.

What *is* at the center of our confession of faith is the love of God, distinct from human love and unknowable apart from the Word of Scripture, and so we will hold the authority of Scripture in the very highest regard as the only reliable source of our knowledge of God and His chosen means for bringing about the transformation of our love through faith.

More on the authority of Scripture in the next installment.

Rev. Brett Jenkins, STS is the pastor of Abundant Life Lutheran Church, a mission congregation of the NALC, and the author of the Faith Conservationist podcast and blog:
www.FaithConservationist.org

Coming Events

LCMC Leadership Conference, April 30-May 2, Lutheran Church of the Master, Elkhorn, Nebraska. "Discipline by Design." [Click here for information](#) or call 734-788-7476

Pro Ecclesia Conference, June 5-7, Loyola University, Baltimore, MD. Topic: "Repentance and Forgiveness." This is an ecumenical conference for clergy and laity. Among other presenters, Carl Braaten will deliver the banquet address. [Click here for more information](#).

Ancient Evangelical Future Conference, "Medieval Wisdom — 500 Years after the Reformation." June 8-9, Trinity School for Ministry, Ambridge PA. [Click here for information](#).

Lutheran Week, "Holding Fast, Being (Re-)Formed," **August 8-11, 2017**, Sheraton Music City Hotel, Nashville, Tennessee.

Encuentro on Lutheran-Hispanic Ministry, Joliet, IL, September 14-16, 2017. Presenters will represent both academic and parish ministry perspectives. A Resource Fair will feature a variety of materials for Christian education, evangelism, worship and devotional life, and there will be visits to Chicago-area ministry and cultural sites. Sponsored by Lutheran CORE and the Bilingual Ministry Resource Center. Contact [Pr. Keith Forni](#) or [Facebook: First and Santa Cruz Lutheran Church](#).

LCMC Annual Gathering, [October 8-11, Hilton Minneapolis](#). Hold the dates!



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