

## What Is Contemporary Critical Theory?

submitted by [Pr. Dennis D. Nelson](#), Lutheran CORE Executive Director



### In This Issue:

- Is there such a thing as truth?
- Why do we need to be able to respond to Critical Theory (CT)?
- Why don't CT proponents seem concerned about authority or loyalty?
- How have revisionists ended debate?
- Does same sex marriage have God's blessing?

*Background Notes: One of the dangers and difficulties of discussing almost any issue these days is how easily any discussion can become highly divisively politicized. It is not the intent of Lutheran CORE to speak either for or against any political party or candidate. The political views of the friends of Lutheran CORE cover a very wide spectrum. In this discussion of Contemporary Critical Theory we are neither endorsing nor speaking against any political candidate or party. We are discussing an issue which we feel is critically important for Christians to be aware of and be prepared to deal with.*

*The First Reading for September 6 was from Ezekiel 33, where God compares the role of the prophet to the role of a military sentinel. Verse 6 says, "If the sentinel sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any of them," God will require the blood of the people at the hand of the sentinel. In the same way, verse 8 says that if the prophet does not warn the people, God will require the blood of the people at the hand of the prophet.*

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# The Christian Alternative to Critical Race Theory

by [Pr. Brett Jenkins](#), Dean, NE Mission District of the Atlantic Mission Region, NALC, & former member of the board of Lutheran CORE



Critical Theory—in particular, Critical Race Theory—has recently captured the Church’s attention, and in some corners of the Lord’s vineyard it seems, more significantly, Her *imagination*. Springing from the same philosophers and theorists (Foucault, Derrida, etc.) who brought us post-modernism, Critical Theory seems to be suddenly taking the whole Western world by storm.

This is an illusion. Though all but Liberal Arts majors would likely be unfamiliar with the Frankfurt School or even the phrase “Critical Theory,” everyone who has received an undergraduate education in the last thirty years has been familiarized with (and in many cases, indoctrinated into) its basic terminology and the categories of meaning by which it makes sense of the world. For instance, for every one of my acquaintance at my own undergraduate alma mater of Penn State, the obligatory “professional writing” requirement for non-English majors was used by the professors as an opportunity to force-feed undergraduates Critical Theory. As an example, a business writing class for music majors taught participants to write personal reflections on books like *Stone Butch Blues*, a lesbian coming of age story, instead of memos, letters to parents, and departmental requisitions. Even if you think the exposure salutary, it demonstrates the tactics of Critical Theory, which, as its exponents readily affirm, “contains an activist dimension. It tries to not only understand our social situation but to change it, setting out not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies but to transform it for the better.”<sup>1</sup>

Solid introductions to Critical Theory by both

its proponents and opponents are now widely available, and I encourage the reader to consult at least one of each to familiarize themselves with its outlines; otherwise, as commentator Phil Blair demonstrated in his [response to a recent Christianity Today article](#), we may find ourselves employing it unbeknownst to ourselves.

## Heresy

Though articles abound that are critical of Critical Theory (hereafter referred to as CT) from a Christian perspective, as mine is, I hope to explore the topic from an at least slightly different perspective; I propose that while CT may properly diagnose some elements of our cultural ills, it necessarily *misaddresses* these maladies because it is in fact a secularized Christian heresy.

## The Critic Is Often Right About What Is Wrong, But He Is Nearly Always Wrong About What Would Be Right.

I want to start by acknowledging what CT—and progressive ideologies more generally—often get right. One of the functions of the people in a society that are typically deemed “liberal,” “left,” or “progressive” is to point out injustices when they accumulate. Any meritocracy (where achievement or talent is rewarded with social and/or economic upward mobility) periodically and predictably accumulates inequity and unfairness at its margins. At a biological level, talent and giftedness are inborn traits that often run in families. Sociologically, families pass on habits and knowledge that maximize (or minimize) inherent capacities for greater achievement and reward. The greatest patrimony that a family passes on in a meritocracy is not their wealth—though that certainly has undeniable advantages—but rather their knowledge and skills in accessing or leveraging the power structures of the meritocracy.

This does not mean that a meritocracy is inherently immoral. (What would we want, a system where *lack* of talent, industry, and skill is rewarded?) But it does mean that for all the good it may produce, it is a system that can put real people at a

**Critical Theory  
is a Christian  
heresy.**

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# How the Revisionists Re-Framed the Sexuality Debates

by [Pr. Steve Shipman](#), Dean, Western Mission District of the Atlantic Mission Region, NALC, & former Director of Lutheran CORE



Back in my college days, I was on the debate team. We would be assigned a general topic for the year, and a two-member team from one college would offer a proposal within the topic, while a team from a different college would oppose it. We didn't know until a few minutes before the debate started whether we would be advocating the affirmative or negative side, nor did the negative team know how the affirmative would frame its proposal.

One of the tricks was to frame the proposal in terms that made it difficult to oppose. Probably we spent more planning time on that than the merits of the ideas at stake.

I have watched how those holding the revisionist position on sexual ethics have brilliantly re-framed the debate in ways that put those of us holding to traditional biblical ethics at a disadvantage in convincing others. They managed to frame the debate in such a way that any opposition to their positions seemed unjust or even sick.

This has been done in two ways. First, sexual orientations and behaviors were turned into issues of civil rights. Think how you see the = sign on bumper stickers; "All we want is the same right you have to be married to the person we love." And since, as the argument goes, sexual orientations are not a matter of choice but perhaps even good things which God has created, gender identity and sexual orientation should be a protected civil right. So, it is stated as proven and obvious fact that sexual orientation is like race or ethnicity — a matter about which we have no choice. Even though science has failed to find a so-called "gay gene," the statement that "we are born gay [or whatever]" has been repeated so often that it is generally accepted as true [see Orwell, the "big lie"].

I first heard this contention back in 1983 (yes I am that old) at a Conference on the New Lutheran

Church at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. Karen Bloomquist, who at the time served in the social affairs office of the LCA (and would later be the primary writer of the first ELCA sexuality statement, the one that went down in flames) was giving a presentation with a list of groups of people who should be protected, and included along with race, gender, and ethnic origin the matter of sexual orientation. I challenged her, and I still remember Prof. Robert Jenson sitting in the back of the room, grinning I suspect at my naïve surprise at her linking of these topics, for it had been done in the wider society long before I first heard it.

We all have sinful orientations. The Church calls it "original sin." St. Paul speaks of it as "the flesh," to which "the Spirit" is opposed. Not all of us are tempted in the same ways, but on other matters nobody will say, "God made me this way, so you have to celebrate it and be proud of me." For instance, there is a proven genetic connection to addictions including alcoholism, but we would not celebrate drunkenness in an alcoholic. The ethical choice for an alcoholic is not to drink; it isn't to go around proudly claiming, "God made me this way."

Once we turn sexual orientations into civil rights instead of behavioral issues, we have been placed at a significant disadvantage in defending the biblical view of sexuality. And that is exactly what has happened.

**The sexual revisionists basically declared that anybody who opposes their viewpoints on sexuality is mentally ill.**

A danger of seeing sexual orientations as civil rights issues is that this paves the way for the power of government, especially its power to tax, to be used against groups including churches which do not accept this new definition of justice. Already the Supreme Court has declared (I believe disastrously) that tax exemption is not a right but a privilege bestowed by the government to organizations that share its values (the case involved Bob Jones University, and a similar one involved Rev. Moon). Several prominent politicians have publicly proposed that churches which refuse to conduct same-sex marriages should be denied tax exemptions.

A second brilliant move by the sexual revisionists is even more frightening: They have basically

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# The Key Question Remains Unanswered

by [Pr. David Charlton, Lutheran CORE](#) Vice President

*Editor's Note: In this article, author David Charlton thoughtfully critiques [Reconciling Scripture for Lutherans](#), a commentary on Scripture. It was written by [Reconciling Works](#) which advocates "for the full welcome, inclusion, and equity of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual/ aromantic (LGBTQIA+) Lutherans in all aspects of the life of their Church, congregations, and community." While independent, [Reconciling Works](#) is closely affiliated with the ELCA.*



[Reconciling Scripture for Lutherans](#) begins by listing four “common metrics for scriptural interpretation” taken from the writings of Martin Luther. The list includes: a) the *Law/Gospel Dialectic*, b) the *Plain Reading of Scripture*, c) *Scripture Interprets Scripture*, and d) *Scripture as the Manger that Holds Christ*.<sup>1</sup> These are indeed common Lutheran principles for interpreting Scripture. One principle that I would expect to find, but did not, is *was Christum treibt*, or “whatever teaches Christ.” However, I have no objection to the four mentioned.

In general, the description of each is sound. However, I do have a question regarding the *Plain Reading* metric. It seems [anachronistic](#) to include the modern historical critical method as part of that principle. That method would not be developed and standardized for several centuries after Luther’s time. It is more likely that Luther had in mind what some call the historical grammatical method. Luther used the best in contemporary textual criticism, Greek and Hebrew lexicons, and knowledge of history. What would Luther know about source, form, redaction, or narrative criticism? What would he know of the

several quests for the historical Jesus?

The real difficulty with these “common metrics” are how they are applied in interpreting two kinds of texts, labeled “Passages Used to Exclude” and “Passages Used to Welcome.” I will address each section separately, giving examples of how all four metrics are applied to both kinds of passages.

## Passages Used to Exclude

There are eight Biblical texts described as “passages used to exclude.” The intent is to demonstrate how the four Lutheran metrics clear up confusion about the meaning of these texts. The question for us is whether the Lutheran metrics are applied correctly, and whether they succeed in the purpose for which they are used.

The *Law/Gospel* principle is used to address Genesis 1:26-29 and Romans 1:22-27. In the three pages dedicated to Genesis 1:26-29, there is only one reference to Law, and one to Gospel. The authors make the dubious claim that the phrase “male and female he created them” cannot be taken as Law because it is not grammatically in the form of a command.<sup>2</sup> They certainly know better than that. Lutherans have never limited Law to grammatical commands. The Law is understood more broadly than that. While including grammatical commands, it also includes anything that is taken as normative, makes demands, accuses or condemns. The authors undermine this argument three paragraphs later when they refer to “the Gospel in this passage.”<sup>3</sup> They do not cite a grammatical promise that serves as Gospel. Instead, they infer a Gospel promise from the descriptive passage in verse 27, which says that humankind was created in the image of God. If Gospel can be inferred, then so can Law. On the other hand, if absent a grammatical command, no Law can be inferred, then absent a grammatical promise, no Gospel can be inferred.

The discussion of Romans 1:22-27 also fails to apply the *Law/Gospel* principle correctly. However, it does so in a different way. It misconstrues Paul’s use of Law and Gospel in a serious way. Romans 1:22-27 is part of a longer argument extending from Chapter 1 to Chapter 3. It culminates in the conclusion that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (3:23) And yet the authors assert that Paul is not describing the Romans themselves, in 1:22-27, but instead describing a sinful and “unnamed people who are set up as a foil.”<sup>4</sup> He is doing this, it is

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# Is My Pastor About to Quit?

by [Dr. Don Brandt](#), Director, *Congregations in Transition* for Lutheran CORE



You might say we are beginning to witness the proverbial straw that is about to break the camel's back. The camel, in this case, is the Protestant ordained ministry. (Including, of course, Lutheran pastors.) The straw is the current pandemic, and all the ways it is contributing to the work-related stress of pastors in this already infamous year of our Lord, 2020.

And yet the “straw” metaphor doesn't do Covid-19 justice. This pandemic and its consequences would have been hard to even imagine just ten months ago. Yet here we are.

I retired from parish ministry less than two years ago. Apparently just in time. And while I am currently coaching numerous not-yet-retired Lutheran pastors, I have been personally insulated from the “new normal” full-time pastors are dealing with in this pandemic era. So I was surprised to come across Pastor Thom Rainer's latest article just posted on August 31<sup>st</sup>. The title alone gained my complete attention: “Six Reasons Your Pastor Is About to Quit”.

Who is Thom Rainer? He is the former CEO of Lifeway Christian Resources, and currently leads the coaching ministry *Church Answers*. And while Thom is Southern Baptist background, I'm convinced his insights apply to mainline Protestant pastors in general—including Lutheran clergy.

Early in his article Thom writes this: “The vast majority of pastors with whom our (coaching) team communicates are saying they are considering quitting their churches. It's a trend I have not seen in my lifetime.” (Keep in mind Pastor Rainer has been in ministry for almost forty years.) Here are the six reasons, as described by Thom Rainer, why many pastors are “about to quit.”

1. “Pastors are weary from the pandemic just like everyone else.” No surprise here.

2. “Pastors are greatly discouraged about the fighting taking place among church members about the post-quarantine church. Gather in person or wait? Masks or no masks? Social distancing or not?” Rainer also mentions the added stress when these conflicts have been politicized.
3. “Pastors are discouraged about losing members and attendance.” Pastors I have been coaching are, this summer, seeing in-person attendance that is only 30 to 50% of pre-Covid levels. And Rainer adds this: “Pastors have already heard directly or indirectly from around one-fourth of the members that they do not plan to return at all.”
4. “Pastors don't know if their churches will be able to financially support congregational ministries in the future.” And while giving might be healthy up to this point there is apparently mounting anxiety about whether this will continue to be the case in 2021.
5. “Criticisms against pastors have increased significantly.”
6. “The workload for pastors has increased greatly. ... They are trying to serve the congregation the way they have in the past, but now they have the added responsibilities that have come with the digital world. And as expected, pastoral care needs among members have increased during the pandemic as well.”

This pandemic has, in my view, created something of a “perfect storm” when it comes to the matter of clergy supply. Even pre-Covid we were seeing the reality of many more pastors retiring than new pastors being ordained. Now that trend will undoubtedly be accelerating, due in part to many pastors retiring sooner rather than later.

Lutheran CORE's [Congregations in Transition](#) (CiT) ministry coaches are available to help confessing Lutheran congregations who are or soon will be dealing with a pastoral vacancy in these uncertain and unnerving times. If you are a congregational lay leader at a church that already has—or soon will have—a vacancy, or you are a pastor who will be retiring in the next one to two years, *we can help*. Our coaching assistance, while at a distance, is comprehensive, and is customized to address your congregation's unique ministry challenges. If you want to know more, contact me, Don Brandt, either by email ([pastordonbrandt@gmail.com](mailto:pastordonbrandt@gmail.com)) or phone (503-559-2034).

And for every lay person reading this, *do what you can to thank and encourage your pastor!*

Dr. Don Brandt

Director, *Congregations in Transition*



# The Nations at Our Doorstep

by [Pr. Keith Forni](#), Lutheran CORE Member and Encuentro Convener

Many Lutheran church buildings feature cornerstones with dates and historic references chiseled in languages other than English. In cities, towns and open country congregations across the United States, these heritage markers may well be in German, Danish, Swedish or Slovak. They embrace a bilingual or multilingual legacy, while parishioners now worship and serve primarily in English.



Increasingly, in these ministry contexts, Spanish is heard on the streets, in shops and school yards. Hispanic-Latino (“Latinx”) populations are rapidly growing. The Great Commission of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, speaks with power to such communities in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

*“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you to the very end of the age.”* Matthew 28:19-20

The nations have come to us, as evidenced by the presence of people from Latin America today. They come, bearing the spiritual and cultural gifts of their Christian faith communities. Some will be evangelized, drawn to Christ by the proclamation of His life, death and resurrection. Some will evangelize their new neighbors in the U.S.A., perhaps bringing renewal to wearied and diminishing Lutheran congregations.

Will the existing, long-established churches engage their changing, dynamic neighborhoods? Many remain demographically static, functioning in ethnic or linguistic isolation. These shrinking faith communities often gain little or no traction when it

comes to engaging the diverse neighborhoods which now surround them. Some categorically resist such engagement.

And yet, by the power of the Holy Spirit, turning points and breakthroughs can and do occur:

- “Bienvenido/a” is added to the outdoor “Welcome” sign board,
- Spanish or bilingual Bible Story books are given to Vacation Bible School families.
- Pre-printed English scripture bulletins are supplemented with Spanish text inserts,
- Bilingual Facebook posts begin to raise awareness of the parish’s micro-pantry, availability for Quinceaneras and seasonal devotions such as “Las Posadas” or the “Via Crucis” (Way of the Cross),
- English speaking bishops, pastors, deacons, and laity can learn at least rudimentary Spanish. Indigenous leaders are identified, trained, and sent forth.

Through the co-sponsorship of Lutheran CORE, the annual Inter-Lutheran “Encuentro” (Encounter) has served to initiate, encourage and fortify Lutheran bilingual ministries during the past decade.

Hosted by two ELCA / Lutheran CORE Chicagoland parishes, the Encuentro has gathered dozens of lay leaders, pastors, theologians, diaconal ministers and ecumenical partners for mutual encouragement, learning, worship and collaboration. In an age characterized by denominational separation – a kind of Lutheran tribalism branded by abbreviations that are unintelligible to most of the immigrant community – the Encuentro provides common ground for clear focus on the nurture and development of bilingual outreach and pastoral ministry. Here, Lutheran Church Missouri Synod scholars have shared podiums with seminary professors and bishops of the ELCA, reflecting on such topics as the Holy Spirit’s shaping of disciples, Advent’s opportunities to reflect on Mary as the Mother of God – learning from the devotional accents of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and the Emmaus Road along which we encounter the Risen Lord Jesus. Here, at the Encuentro, NALC, LCMC, LCMS, ELCA and Lutheran “micro-synod” members can learn from one another, and from Spanish speaking community members, about the Hispanic-Latino ministry context of our time.

COVID19 has forced the cancellation of an in-person gathering this fall. “Encuentro 2020” will

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# What Is Contemporary Critical Theory?

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*Lutheran CORE defines its mission as being a Voice for Biblical Truth and a Network for Confessing Lutherans. As a Voice for Biblical Truth we feel called by God to serve as a sentinel to warn people of forces and movements in our world today – even in the church – that are incompatible with if not actually hostile to the historic, orthodox Christian faith. This is in addition to our role of alerting people to ways in which orthodoxy is being challenged and compromised within the church today.*

*One of the mindsets and movements that are growing and prevailing today – within our culture and, unfortunately, even within some segments of the Church – is Contemporary Critical Theory. There are two articles within this issue of CORE Voice which deal with this very powerful and I believe very dangerous force within our world today. This first article is intended to give you an overview and introduction to Contemporary Critical Theory. If you are not already familiar with this way of thinking, I am certain you will recognize it as the mindset behind much of what is happening in our nation and our world today. The second article is a longer and more detailed evaluation and critique of Contemporary Critical Theory. The intent of this second article is to show how this mindset is incompatible with and even a threat to the historic, orthodox Christian faith. Many thanks to Brett Jenkins, NALC pastor and former member of our board, for writing the second article.*

There is a major difference between the claim that “there is no truth” and the claim that “there is truth, but we have a hard time seeing it on our own.” While those who are more orthodox-minded may be inclined to assert the latter, those who are not so orthodox-minded may be inclined to assert the former. The former has its roots in the claims of Contemporary Critical Theory.

Contemporary Critical Theory asserts that all knowledge is “socially constructed.” Therefore, there is no single, objective body of knowledge which all must accept. All of knowledge is rooted in experience, and we all have different experiences.

My experience will be different from yours; therefore, the knowledge that is “socially constructed” by me may be different from the knowledge that is “socially constructed” by you. There is no body of knowledge which is wholly objective, as every area of knowledge is tainted with subjectivity. “Even the field of science is subjective.” (Robin DiAngelo & Öslem Sensoy).

Because we all have different experiences, we all have different levels of access to truth. The degree to which we have access to truth depends upon positionality: that is, I may have greater access to truth than you do, or vice versa, based on our respective positions in life. Greater value is given to the perspectives of those with positions in life that give us lived experiences that may provide us with greater insight on the topic(s) discussed.

**These are not just the opinions of a small number of peculiar individuals. Rather they are ideas that have spread far and wide in our society, even within the church.**

The idea that there is such a thing as objective reality is looked upon with great suspicion, or even rejected entirely. Some say that, historically, those in positions of power and privilege have falsely claimed that things which are subjective are actually objective and have used these false claims in order to marginalize and oppress those without power and privilege. Some also say that the privileged misuse these false claims in order to normalize forms of injustice that we should not be accepting as normal. When this is done, “Those in power sleep well at night; their conduct does not seem to them like oppression.” (Richard Delgado).

Contemporary Critical Theory pays great attention to the particular demographic status of the person, and, based on that status, to whether the person might, in context, be considered privileged or marginalized (i.e., rich or poor, white or black, male or female, straight or gay, cisgender or transgender, etc.). The marginalized have the benefit of lived experiences which the privileged simply cannot experience first-hand. Because the marginalized have greater access to truth than the privileged, the voices of the marginalized are considered to be of greater value than the voices of the privileged. That is especially, but not exclusively, true of matters in which the lived

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experience of the marginalized provides particular insight into the matter being discussed. For example, a powerless person who has experienced discrimination at the hands of a person in power will be better equipped to explain such discrimination than a person in power who has never experienced such discrimination first-hand.

Contemporary Critical Theory warns that those with power and privilege do not easily give up their power and privilege. Rather, they establish institutions, rules, norms, and claims of objective truth in order to establish and protect their dominance in society. Those in power use all those institutions, rules, norms, and claims in order to subject the powerless to marginalization and oppression. When the dominance, power, and privilege of the privileged are challenged, they cast doubt on the validity of the claims of those who challenge them. Consequently, the act of questioning those who are marginalized, especially when done by those who are privileged, is frowned upon, looked upon with suspicion, or even forbidden entirely.

These are not just the opinions of a small number of peculiar individuals. Rather they are ideas that have spread far and wide in our society, even within the church. These ideas are driving forces, though not the only driving forces, behind several contemporary movements in the political and social arenas. These ideas are widely, but not universally, accepted. They have their critics, on the left as well as on the right. And there are those with more nuanced positions who will partially but not wholly accept these ideas. Nevertheless, the influence of these ideas is strong, with variants on the left and on the right. It is critically important for us to be aware of them, in order that we might be able to respond effectively.

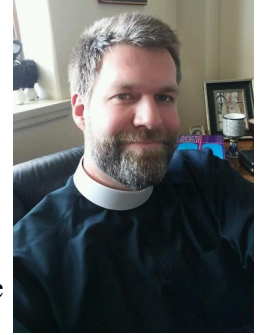
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## Thank You and Warm Welcome

by [Pr. Dennis D. Nelson](#), Lutheran CORE Executive Director

One of my greatest joys and privileges while serving as executive director of Lutheran CORE is to be able to work with such an outstanding board of directors. This is a very dedicated group of seven men and women who love the Lord, love the church, and are committed to the work of Lutheran CORE.

As a board, we want to say thank you to Pastor Steve Gjerde as he goes off the board after many years of faithful service on the board. Pastor Gjerde is senior pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in Wausau, Wisconsin, one of our most faithful supporting congregations. Pastor Gjerde is very articulate in his defense of the orthodox Christian faith, as shown in the many articles he has written for CORE Voice. He always has good ideas and was always able to help the board think through the issues. When Pastor Gjerde spoke, people listened. We look forward to a continued strong relationship with Zion Lutheran, and for many more articles written by Pastor Gjerde.



While we say thank you to the senior pastor of Zion Lutheran, we also express a warm welcome to one of the associate pastors of Zion Lutheran, Chris Johnson, who was recently elected by the board to serve on the board. Prior to

serving as associate pastor at Zion Lutheran, Pastor Johnson served at Christ the King Lutheran Church in Escanaba, Michigan, in the Upper Peninsula. His former congregation hosted a couple of events through their local chapter, Northwoods Lutheran CORE.



This chapter hosted a convocation and presented on Lutheran CORE at several Northern Great Lakes Synod Assemblies. Pastor Johnson hopes to provide insight for the board as a “younger pastor.” He is already helping with the project to develop and post video book reviews of several of the items contained in our List of [Confessional Resources](#) on our website.

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## Coming Events

- **LCMC 20th Annual Gathering and Convention**— Arden Hills, MN at North Heights Lutheran Church on October 5, 2020. This event will be live streamed. Only 250 delegates can attend in person. [Click here.](#)
  - **Encuentro 2020**—[Click here.](#)
  - **2021 Pro Ecclesia Conference**— June 7-9, 2021. [Click here.](#)
  - **2021 ELCA Youth Gathering**— postponed until 2022
- Published by Lutheran CORE; [Kim Smith](#), Editor



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alleged, to set up his main argument, that “salvation is based entirely on Christ, and not on our own ability to do good works and follow the Law.”<sup>5</sup> This is a non-sequitur. That Paul’s ultimate goal is to show the impossibility of salvation by the works of the Law, does not mean that he doesn’t consider the activities he describes to be sinful. It would make no sense to use things that are not sinful to convict people of sin. Nor does it mean that Paul doesn’t consider some in Rome to be guilty of those sins at one time or another. He seems to assume that as Christians, they no longer engage in those activities. This does not imply that they never engaged in those activities before they came to faith in Christ.

The *Metaphor of the Manger*, is used in interpreting Genesis 2:22-24, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. Its application to these texts is puzzling. My understanding of that metaphor is that it teaches us to ask, “Where is Christ in this passage?” It calls for a Christological interpretation of the Old Testament. The problem is that in the discussion of Genesis 2:22-24, this principle is never mentioned. No attempt is made to show how a Christological interpretation helps us interpret those texts. Instead the argument relies entirely on a discussion of the meaning of “one flesh.”<sup>6</sup>

In addressing the texts from Leviticus, only one mention is made of the Metaphor of the Manger. We are asked to compare these texts with what we know of Christ, to see whether they correspond to him, or whether they are straw.<sup>7</sup> Is this really what the Metaphor of the Manger teaches us to do? In fact, in his *Preface to the Old Testament*, Luther tells us not to despise or be offended by the Old Testament. It is as precious as the manger that held the infant Christ.<sup>8</sup> Nowhere in that writing does Luther refer to the Old Testament as straw. The authors seem to be conflating Luther’s view on the Book of James, found in his *Preface to the New Testament*<sup>9</sup>, with his words about the Old Testament.

The principle of *Scripture Interpreting Scripture* is used to interpret Genesis 19 and Deuteronomy 23:1. They make a good use of this principle in discussing Genesis 19, using multiple references to Sodom in the Old and New Testament to show that homosexuality was not the primary focus when the sin of Sodom was discussed. In a similar manner, they show that the attitude toward eunuchs changes as we move through Scripture, so that Deuteronomy’s exclusion must be balanced with the inclusion

found in other places. I agree that neither of these texts can be used by themselves to exclude homosexuals or eunuchs.

As for the *Plain Reading of Scripture* principle, I have the objection that I mentioned earlier. I think it tends to be anachronistic, as if Luther had the historical critical method in mind. On the other hand, lexical objections to traditional interpretations seem to be more in line with the tools that Luther had in mind. In discussing Deuteronomy 22:5, 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10, the authors raise appropriate questions about the proper translation of key words. We should not assume that modern notions of homosexuality or transgenderism are what the original reader would have had in mind.

### Passages Used to Include

The authors use the *Metaphor of the Manger* to interpret the story of Ruth (1:16-17) and Psalm 139:13-14. In both cases they interpret the text Christologically. In Ruth they find a foreshadowing of Jesus’ welcoming of outsiders. They also imply a connection between Ruth’s loyalty and God’s faithfulness in Christ. In interpreting Psalm 139 Christologically, they lift up the Incarnation itself, reminding us that God embraces our humanity fully, not just in part. They rightly highlight the importance of recognizing the many ways that loyalty can be expressed in human relationships, the importance of welcoming and including the marginalized, and of embracing people as they are, following the example of Jesus.

The *Plain Reading* principle is used to interpret Isaiah 56:3-5 and Acts 10 and 11. They use the plain meaning of each text to illustrate the way that God breaks down walls of ritual purity that exclude those who were considered unclean because of sexual or gender status, diet, or nationality. They rightly conclude that such categories no longer apply in the Church. One is justified and therefore included in God’s family by faith in Christ, not by any outward status or action. Whether one is circumcised or not, follows dietary laws or not, is male or female, Jew or Gentile, eunuch or not, is not relevant. One is acceptable to God by faith alone.

The sections on *Scripture Interpreting Scripture* focus on Galatians 3:26-29 and Matthew 22: 34-40. In both cases, the principle is able to raise questions, but not able to provide answers. Does the dual commandment of love of God and neighbor help us interpret passages like those in Leviticus 18 and 20? To some degree. Does Galatian 3:26-29 help us

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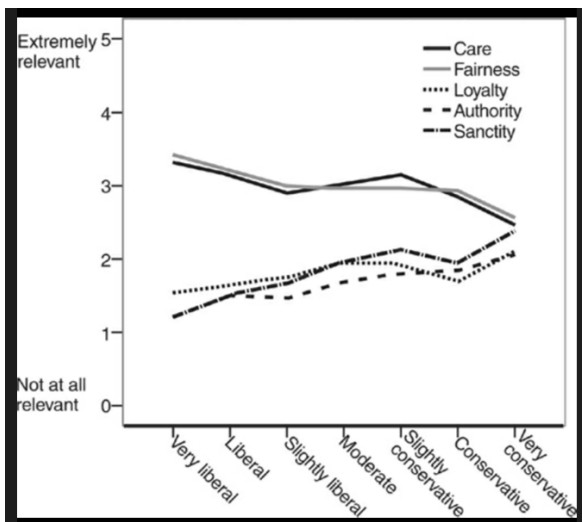
# The Christian Alternative to Critical Race Theory

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real disadvantage in accessing the social and economic rewards deemed legitimate by the value system at its foundation; it is a system that needs a watchdog that calls for course corrections when the process whereby “the rising tide that lifts all boats” creates eddies and riptides that prevent people from weighing anchor and setting sail.

In his book *The Righteous Mind*, Jonathan Haidt contends that in the same way all the complex flavors of the world’s cuisines are composed of the tongue’s four basic tasting capacities—sweet, sour, salty, and bitter—the great diversity of moralities to which people ascribe are woven from the five basic “cognitive modules” with which we define and evaluate morality and justice. Defined in terms of their antipodes, these modules are care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation. Haidt names this Moral Foundations Theory.

One need not agree with Haidt’s thesis about the origins of these cognitive modules to see their utility as an interpretive grid. In analyzing the political application of the theory, Haidt, who identifies himself as a liberal, discovered that those who measured as the most “liberal” registered highly in the care/harm and fairness/cheating categories but little to not at all in the other three. Though caring and fairness were also the dominant categories for those who registered as the most “conservative,” people with these political leanings showed a near convergence with the other three concerns of loyalty, authority, and sanctity:



What this means is that if it *seems* that the proponents of Critical Theory are “tone deaf” to some of the moral concerns expressed by other, more

“conservative” people, it is because they are. For the “liberal” adherent of CT, the mere presence of inequity is all the proof needed that injustice is occurring. Questions of whether people have demonstrated the social virtues of developing skills (that is, demonstrating *loyalty* to the system’s values) are largely not considered, or if they are, the need to do so is defined as part of the oppression inherent in “the system.”

Likewise, the need to “pay one’s dues,” which recognizes the system’s *authority*, is construed as more evidence of injustice rather than a period of *necessary* apprenticeship during which there is predicted inequity between those who

have acquired the sought-after skills and resources and those currently acquiring them. Finally, the need to exhibit sustained effort with or without immediate reward—the most *sanctified* value in a meritocracy—is despised most of all as the mechanism of systemic injustice because, although such effort generally yields overall *improvement* in the socio-economic position of a given class of people, there is no guarantee in any particular instance that the effort so exerted will result necessarily in *equity*. The moral concerns of three of the five moral cognitive modules are not only temporarily bracketed to focus analysis on the issue of fairness, for the “liberal,” they quite literally do not register as things worthy of assessment and for the critical theorist, they are merely attempts to obfuscate the real issue, which is measurable equity.

## Revolution Over Equity

Moreover, the proponent of Critical Theory does not need to provide measurable criteria whereby to evaluate the claims of their analysis. The existence of the inequity natural to *and predicted by* a system that rewards merit is the *prima facie* evidence that revolution is needed. Whether the proposed system could actually create the desired equity and whether that equity would be balanced with other moral concerns (everyone living in social and/or economic squalor is, after all, a type of equality) need not be seriously contemplated, because the only value in view is equity, which is defined as *fairness* that provides the necessary *care* for everybody.

**If it seems that the proponents of Critical Theory are “tone deaf” to some of the moral concerns expressed by other, more “conservative” people, it is because they are.**

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# The Christian Alternative to Critical Race Theory

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This is how these critics can be right about what is wrong (that is, in Critical Race Theory, the form of CT most affecting the life of the Church at present, racial inequities), but so wrong about what would put these wrongs *right*; their theories are not based upon a morality with a complex enough palate, capable of fine enough distinctions.

## **Eschatology and Anthropology**

This is also in part why Critical Theory is a comprehensive worldview; in merely noting inequity, it believes that it has accounted for all the most significant moral variables—the only ones that count. It must then flatten all human experience into the narrow interpretive grid it deems the only valid one.

### **Four Fundamental Questions**

The late Ravi Zacharias helpfully delineated at least four fundamental questions of human life to which any worldview must propose an answer: human origin, meaning, morality, and destiny. Because of the 1925 “Scopes Monkey Trial,” the issue of origins has dominated the intellectual landscape of the Western Church for the last 100 or so years. First, it dominated the popular imagination as “yet another case” of backward religionists resisting reason’s inevitable march of progress in accord with the Enlightenment’s self-narration. (Yes, this was *first*. Scopes deliberately implicated himself so that a trial would need to be held and Darrow deliberately had the trial played out by a sympathetic urbane media in the court of public opinion as part of his legal strategy.) The attempts to condemn Intelligent Design as veiled religious dogma are the intellectual descendants of that controversy. Secondly, it precipitated a growing crisis within the Church between Fundamentalists and Modernists, who believed a dating of the age of the earth to greater than 7,000 years was congruent with orthodox Biblical interpretation. The inheritors of that dispute are the Young Earth versus Old Earth Creationist debates of today.<sup>2</sup>

“Your [theology](#) can never be better than your [anthropology](#),” was one of the favorite axioms my Prophets professor in seminary passed on to us from his mentor. Of course, being self-consciously orthodox, I thought that axiom got it exactly backward; our theology—specifically our [Christology](#) and [soteriology](#)—necessarily defines our understanding of human nature, so our anthropology can never be better than our theology.

Unfortunately, the Western Church’s obsession with origins has led to a relative neglect of the way

our understanding of *who Jesus is* and what salvation *fully* entails informs our understanding of what human beings are (our *meaning*), how we should live (our *morality*), and our purpose or *telos* (our *destiny*). The preaching of Jesus predominantly as life coach, social activist, friend of sinners, prophetic preacher, social reformer or even atoning sacrifice for sinners, has led to the neglect of the consistent preaching of Jesus as the God-Man or *Theanthropos*, a new species in God’s economy of salvation.<sup>3</sup> “God became man that man might become [like] God,” exulted Irenaeus of Lyons in his second century classic *Against Heresies*, going on to declare as the soteriological significance of that teaching that “the glory of God is a [hu]man fully alive.”

Great Tradition Christianity proclaims that the ultimate destiny of redeemed humanity is not merely to avoid hell (Jesus as the cosmic get-out-of-jail-free card) or to emulate Jesus as the finest example of a fully self-realized or perfectly moral human person, but rather to become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). Through our Sacramental union with Jesus, who was fully God and fully human, by faith in His promises, we are drawn into the [perichoretic](#) inner life of the Godhead, the most Holy Trinity. As the *Theanthropos*, Jesus is the “firstborn among many brothers” (Romans 8:29), not the only-born to be admired and worshipped, but whose life remains fundamentally distant from our own.

This teaching about the implications of salvation through Christ for our *destiny* as human beings thoroughly conditions and shapes all other elements of our theology. In other words, remembering the fullness of our *destiny* as human beings in Christ has far more impact on our understanding of what is the *meaning* of human life and the *morality* by which it is to be lived than our understanding of our *origins*.

*Editor's Note: The conclusion to this article will be available in a [second post](#) on or about September 18, 2020.*

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic. *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. (New York: New York University Press, 2017), page 8.

<sup>2</sup> If you speak the first article of the Nicene or Apostles’ Creed without crossing your fingers, you are a *creationist* of one stripe or the other; it is important that non-fundamentalist Christians be absolutely clear on this point and think through the consequences of that position as distinct from a functional Deism.

<sup>3</sup> Justification by grace through faith—forensic justification—may indeed be the doctrine upon which the Church stands or falls as Martin Luther declared, but it was never meant to be preached denuded of the very Christology that makes it so powerful and poignant.

# How the Revisionists Re-Framed the Sexuality Debates

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declared that anybody who opposes their viewpoints on sexuality is mentally ill.

Think of what that term “homophobia” means: “homo” means “same” and “phobia” is fear. It is a pseudo-scientific term coined to cut off any debate about the rightness or wrongness of same-sex sexual activities. If you disapprove of same-sex sexual relationships, you are obviously homophobic, and shame on you! End of discussion.

In my state, our Secretary of Health started life as Richard but is now Rachel. And the media is trumpeting how those who make unkind statements about her are “transphobic.”

I’m not sure about you, but I don’t lie awake nights in fear that a group of transgender people are going to attack me. Nor do I wake up screaming because of a nightmare that some crazy doctor is attacking me with a knife. I guess there might be such a thing as homophobia, in the sense that a person may be insecure in their masculinity or femininity. But most of us do not go through life obsessed with fear of gay or lesbian people or inclinations. I have friends and family members who are gay or lesbian, and they are generally nice people. I just don’t agree with this aspect of their lifestyle. But then there are reasons to disapprove of a lot of things I do too (file that under the topic of original sin, even though most of my sinning isn’t all that original).

Not only does turning traditional sexual ethics into mental illness cut off any constructive conversation, but it puts us in a very vulnerable position, which is exactly the intention. Call me paranoid, but I can see that in a certain cultural climate, folks like me might be compassionately “treated” in a kind and gracious attempt to release us from our bondage to our phobias.

Let’s be clear: All gay and lesbian people, all transgender people, are precious children of God for whom Jesus died, as he died for all us sinners. They are our neighbors whom we are commanded to love as we love ourselves. All of us (including me) need to avoid unkind comments or actions toward these people.

And it is true that there is such a thing as gender dysphoria, where the brain and body fail to communicate accurately in fetal development, so that the brain thinks it is one gender while the body develops as the other. This is tragic, and Christians can and will disagree on how a person deals with this aspect of the brokenness of our fallen world. Similarly,

there seem to be very complex factors in a person being attracted to a member of the same sex. I accept that persons normally don’t choose to be gay or lesbian (although today there seem to be some exceptions like Katy Perry “I kissed a girl,” who try it for kicks and to prove their open-mindedness).

What does this mean for us? For starters, I believe we need to repent of any nastiness or unkindness we practice or feel toward what are called “sexual minorities” (I won’t try to name them all). We are not called to hate anybody, and when we come across that way, we simply confirm the opinion of those who believe we have a serious prejudice or mental illness.

**We can’t always change what we feel, but we can have some control over what we do.**

And on a societal basis, we need to treat all people with justice and fairness. The time is probably long past when pastors should be agents of the state in officiating at marriages. We should let the government do its thing, and if people want God’s blessing pronounced on their relationship, that would be our role where we believe we can do it with integrity.

But we need to keep reminding ourselves and others that our concern is not with orientations or inclinations but with actions. We can’t always change what we feel, but we can have some control over what we do. I am not saying that this is easy: I think of Mark Twain who said that it was easy to quit smoking; he must have done it a thousand times. And most of us can relate regarding our struggles with our particular temptations.

I am not optimistic that we can change the framework in which sexual ethics is being argued today, but we need to be aware of it and be prepared to challenge it. Once behaviors outside the boundaries of heterosexual marriage are turned into civil rights, and especially when opposition to them is defined as mental illness, we have our work cut out for us. It will require a lot of wisdom and patience to counter those assumptions (for they are assumptions, not proven facts). And if we fail to love other sinners, we don’t deserve to win an argument either. So let us keep our focus directed toward love for all our neighbors, even as we look for opportunities to account for the hope that is in us, but always with gentleness and reverence (see 1 Peter 3:15-16).



## The Key Question Remains Unanswered

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determine which Old Testament laws are no longer relevant in the eschatological community of the Church? In part. What complicates things is the fact that the Lutheran confessions put the laws of the Old Testament in three categories, 1) religious or ceremonial law, 2) the civil law of the nation of Israel, and 3) the moral law that applies at all times and places. Many laws that applied in ancient Israel no longer apply to us today, but some of them do.

This leads us to the final category, *Law and Gospel*. This is where things tend to get complicated. In their discussion of Acts 8 and 1 Corinthians 12, the authors are not careful to distinguish the many ways that Lutherans speak of the Law. As I mentioned above, Lutherans have distinguished between different kinds of Old Testament laws. The proper distinction between Law and Gospel does render Old Testament religious or ceremonial laws obsolete. The laws that once distinguished between clean and unclean, Jew and Gentile, are no longer in effect in the Church. The same is true for civil laws that applied to the nation of Israel in the era of Moses, the judges, the kings, or the Second Temple.

However, the moral law, as described in Romans 1:19-20, still applies today. It has a twofold function, the so called civil use and theological use of the Law. In its civil use, the Law defines the boundaries that are necessary for any healthy community. The Law in its civil use finds many forms of expression, but some things remain the same. Murder, adultery, theft, lying and envy are universally detrimental to community.

The theological use of the Law is to expose sin and reveal the wrath of God. In doing this, the Law reveals that all fall short of the glory of God. It undercuts all attempts to justify oneself through works. In doing so it drives a person to Christ, who through the Gospel grants forgiveness to all who have faith.

Clearly, the Law that declared the Ethiopian unclean because he was a Gentile and a eunuch no longer applies today. He was justified and made part of the Church by baptism and faith, as all Christians are. In a similar manner, Paul makes it clear in 1 Corinthians 12 that membership in the Body of Christ is not based on which gifts a person has been given, but on the confession that Christ is Lord, i.e. faith. This faith, in turn, is a gift of one and the same Spirit. Anyone who confesses Christ as Lord is already part of the Body of Christ, through the power of the Spirit.

The question remains whether the prohibition of

sex outside of heterosexual monogamous marriage is part of the obsolete ceremonial and civil law of ancient Israel, or whether it is part of the moral law, which remains valid today. If it is part of the ceremonial law, it is no longer mandatory for Christians. If it is part of the civil law of ancient Israel only, then it need not apply to us today. However, if it is part of the moral law inscribed in the human heart, then it still applies in both its civil and theological uses.

If so, then there are two implications. First, the prohibition of sex outside of heterosexual monogamous marriage remains the standard for leaders in the Christian community. (civil use) Secondly, it still accuses those who violate that prohibition. In that case, the proper response of the Church is not to abolish the Law, but to preach the forgiveness of sin for Jesus' sake to those who sin.

### Where Are We?

I do believe that *Reconciling Scripture for Lutherans* makes a convincing case that Old Testament rules of exclusion and punishment need not apply today. They made a good case that distinctions between clean and unclean no longer apply. Their Christological interpretation of Scripture is convincing in its argument that all people should be welcomed, and that all people should be treated as whole persons created in God's image. No person should be unwelcome in the Church or excluded as recipients of its ministry.

What the authors failed to do was to show that the four Lutheran metrics for interpreting Scripture were able to solve the key question. Is the prohibition of sex outside of monogamous heterosexual marriage a part of the obsolete ceremonial or civil law of ancient Israel, or a continuing part of the Law which even today continues in its civil and theological uses? In the end, we are right where we began. The ELCA decided in 2009 that it could not decide which was the case. Instead, it identified four possible conclusions and chose to allow congregations to choose the answer that suited them. Meanwhile, it called on people to respect the "bound consciences" of others.

**The Lutheran confessions put the laws of the Old Testament in three categories, 1) religious or ceremonial law, 2) the civil law of the nation of Israel, and 3) the moral law that applies at all times and places.**

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# The Key Question Remains Unanswered

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The authors were not able, on the basis of the four Lutheran metrics for interpreting Scripture, to resolve this dispute. More importantly, they have failed to show why pastors, seminarians and congregations should be required to abandon the traditional position of the catholic Church.

## Final Thoughts

One further Lutheran metric that I believe applies to the question is what I would call the metric or principle of *Scriptural Authority*. The principle here is twofold and is related to the understanding of God's Word as Law and Gospel. The Church may only command what God commands in the Word. It may only bless that which God blesses in the Word.

In the Large Catechism, Luther makes the case for clerical marriage based on the fact that throughout Scripture God both gives commands that protect marriage and promises blessings to those who enter into marriage. Meanwhile, God never commands men and women to take vows of celibacy, to become monks or nuns, or enter monasteries. Neither does God promise to bless those who do. The Church does not have the authority to prohibit marriage, nor to require people to keep monastic vows.

The same is true today. The Church has no power to require people to enter same sex marriage, or to perform same sex marriages. It has no authority to bless such unions, nor the authority to require its pastors to bless such unions. The Church has no authority to exalt a man-made institution, whether celibacy or same sex marriage, to the level of an institution that has both God's command and blessing.

Pastors, congregations and seminarians who adhere to the traditional understanding of marriage have not violated Lutheran metrics for Scriptural interpretation. They have not violated their ordination vows or the Confession of Faith of the ELCA. They should be under no pressure to adopt the position of Reconciling Works on same sex marriage or be under the threat of retribution for failing to do so.

**Traditionalists  
should be under no  
pressure to adopt  
the position of  
Reconciling Works  
on same sex mar-**

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 19-20.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Lull, Timothy F. Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings (p. 98). Fortress Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 96.

## The Nations at Our Doorstep

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take an alternate pathway. Lutheran CORE, in partnership with the Bilingual Ministry Resource Center (BMRC) of Joliet & Chicago will provide Bilingual ministry materials at no cost (while they last) to those requesting them (September through December 2020).

Curated and mailed by the BMRC and parish leaders from First & Santa Cruz, Joliet and St. Timothy, Hermosa – Chicago, the packets will include sample resources from a range of providers, including:

- ALPB (American Lutheran Publicity Bureau) – publishers of bilingual Lutheran identity tracts,
- EAL (Editorial Avance Luterano) – publishers of the Spanish language weekly text worship insert, “Plegaria y Palabra”,
- Augsburg-Fortress – publishers of a Spanish / English edition of Luther's Small Catechism (an endeavor inspired by the BMRC),
- CPH (Concordia Publishing House) – providers of the iconic “Arch Book” children's Bible story book series (with English, Spanish and Bilingual editions),
- Various parish-based resources, such as the Faith-related “Questions Kids Ask” bilingual reader and coloring books, recently created and published by Peace Lutheran Church, New Lenox IL.

The pandemic prevents the in-person presence we so desire, and yet it does not keep us from fortifying the partnerships which enable lively outreach in Jesus' name, true to His Great Commission.

To order an “Encuentro 2020” resource packet (one per parish, please) contact Pastor Keith Forni, Encuentro Convener at First and Santa Cruz Lutheran Church, 55 W. Benton Street, Joliet IL 60435-4094 or [KeithLForni@gmail.com](mailto:KeithLForni@gmail.com)

<sup>1</sup> See Reconciling Scripture for Lutherans, pp. 9-11.

<sup>2</sup> *Reconciling Scripture*. p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 17.