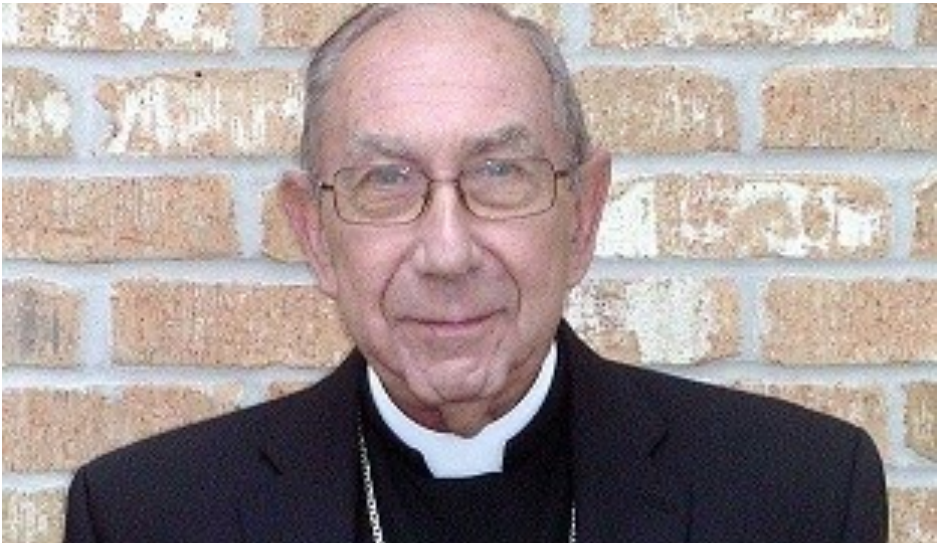


Thanking God for the Life and Memory of Bishop Paull Spring
submitted by Pr. Dennis D. Nelson, Lutheran CORE Executive Director



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- Three tributes to Bp. Emeritus Paull Spring
 - What has the ELCA been reaping?
 - Exactly what is heresy?
 - Who needs the doctor?
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Lutheran CORE owes a great debt of deep gratitude to Bishop Paull Spring. Bishop Spring played a major role in the formation of Lutheran CORE in the fall of 2005. He had the connections, the relationships, and the credibility to bring together a group of people, many of whom had served in significant positions of leadership in the church. These were people who agreed on the authority of the Bible and the traditional Biblical view of human sexuality and marriage and were deeply concerned about the direction of the ELCA. He then served as chairperson of the newly formed Lutheran Coalition for Reform (CORE) until the time of the formation of the North American Lutheran Church (NALC). Every new movement needs a primary catalyst. He was that catalyst.

While thanking God for the life, ministry, and memory of Bishop Paull Spring, I also want to thank two former leaders of Lutheran CORE who have written tributes to Bishop Spring. Pastor Paul Ulring is another one of those people who had the connections, relationships, and credibility to bring together a group of people to form and support Lutheran CORE. He served on the steering committee and as moderator of the steering committee for many years. Pastor Steve Shipman is my predecessor as executive director of Lutheran CORE. He is one of those people who knows everyone. Whenever I have needed to have the name of and contact information for someone who would know something, the first person I always ask is Steve Shipman. He always knows.

Tribute to Paull Spring

by Pr. Paul Ullring, former member of the Lutheran CORE Steering Committee

I remember well the first time I met Paull Spring. It was in a meeting in a Gullixson Hall classroom at Luther Seminary that would lead to the beginning of CORE. Paull walked into the room (in clerics, of course, whenever he was doing church business) with a leader of Word Alone ... that was an amazing sight and combination to be sure. But the cause of Lutheran Orthodoxy and faithfulness



brought such together. And many more of us with them, too.

Paull Spring represented some of the best of eastern Lutheranism, a pastor and bishop and leader from years of ministry. He brought those gifts to the diversity of faithful Lutherans all over the country as we began to form Lutheran CORE.

Those were amazing days, as we came together around the challenge to affect the slippery slope of the ELCA's theological and spiritual descent. Paull Spring was articulate and theologically able. He spoke with both authority and passion.....and a deep love and concern for the Church.

We didn't always agree, but we had huge respect and mutual patience to get the best from each other, not just me but everyone else with Paull Spring. It was a fruitful partnership and collaboration. Our work brought us to Synod and Church-wide Assemblies, to gatherings all over the country. Who could forget the hundreds who came to Fishers, Indiana after the ELCA vote of 2009? Paull was a giant at that meeting and others to come.

Our CORE work eventually came to the reality of forming the NALC, which was launched at a yearly CORE Convocation in Columbus, Ohio.

Paull Spring was chosen as the NALC's first bishop. He knew how to do that already.

Since those times Paull Spring led faithfully and has been succeeded now twice. Yet he has remained a valued leader and respected confidant to many in this new "retirement."

Paull Spring's wisdom lives on even as we grieve his passing. Eternity will tell the rest of Bishop Paull Spring's story. We will enjoy hearing then what now only God knows and Paull sees more fully.

"Oh God, the generations rise and pass away before You. You are the strength of the weary; You are the rest of the blessed dead. We rejoice in the company of All Your Saints" including now Bishop Paull Spring.

Designate Your Thrivent Choice Dollars to Support Lutheran CORE

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

Lutheran CORE is very grateful for all of the ways in which our friends support us through their prayers and financial contributions. One of the ways in which some people are supporting our ministry is by designating their Thrivent Choice dollars for Lutheran CORE. In 2019 Lutheran CORE received \$829 in such gifts.



If you are a member of Thrivent Financial and qualify for Thrivent Choice dollars, may we suggest that you consider designating those funds to support our work of being a Voice for Biblical Truth and a Network for Confessing Lutherans. We recognize that every one of us has many worthy ministries and causes that are dear to our hearts, and we realize that over 40,000 organizations are enrolled in Thrivent Choice. But we thank you for thinking of us when you decide how to designate your Thrivent Choice dollars.

[Here](https://www.thrivent.com/making-a-difference/files/26087.pdf) is a link that provides more information regarding how to direct Thrivent Choice dollars - <https://www.thrivent.com/making-a-difference/files/26087.pdf>.

Tribute to Paul Spring: Remembrance

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



While I had met Bishop Paul Spring a few times over the years, our real contact began late in 2005. I had made the mistake of not attending a meeting (the Kansas City Conference), and in my absence I was elected to the Steering Committee of the new Lutheran Coalition for Reform (as it was called then).

Before our first meeting, Paul called and asked whether I would be willing to take the minutes of the meeting. And so the journey began, often together.

Paul was, as a friend described in a positive way, a true character. He was a unique individual, and was not bashful about letting people know his thoughts and opinions. But he would also listen and respond rationally to opposing viewpoints.

As an ELCA bishop from a relatively small rural synod (Northwestern Pennsylvania), Paul was known as the theological conscience of the Conference of Bishops. He developed strong friendships and equally strong dislikes among the group. Paul was not one of those boring people who needed everybody to like him, and he did not suffer fools gladly.

Yet it was Paul Spring who met with Pr. Jaynan Clark of the WordAlone Network, as those two leaders who had very different views on many issues in the ELCA realized that the things they agreed about were more important than the ones that separated them. Probably nobody else would have had the credibility to lead the generally eastern and “liturgical” group into an alliance with the mostly-midwestern and “evangelical” (in the American sense) constituency of WordAlone. But thanks to Paul and Jaynan as the initiators, it happened.

I always enjoyed meetings Paul led, because by about the 50-minute point he would shuffle nervously, and soon he would call a recess so he could go outside and puff on his pipe. Of course, his smoking got him in trouble from time to time. Once at the In-

dianapolis Airport I was sure we would be arrested waiting for a shuttle as he insisted on lighting his pipe beneath a sign threatening prosecution for smoking. And he recounted the time he thought he had found a secret place to smoke during a Pittsburgh Pirates game, but when his family realized he had been gone a long time, they discovered security was in the process of removing him from the stadium.

Paul not only got himself into quite a few mishaps, he delighted in telling about them. As I have heard stories from mutual friends over the years, I realized that I heard most of them from Paul himself. He didn’t take himself all that seriously, but he certainly took his theology seriously.

Riding in a vehicle he was driving was a spiritual experience. I repented of most of my sins on such trips, starting when he let go of the steering wheel at 75 mph on an Ohio Interstate so he could light his pipe. He thought I was kind and generous to do most of the driving; I viewed it as self-preservation.

Paul had strong feelings about hotels and restaurants. He insisted on a hotel where he could smoke his pipe (no surprise there). A glass of wine in the evening with the manager only made the facility more attractive. And he never did like my choice in restaurants. After the biker bar that was recommended to us in Akron (which had great food), I just left it up to him to find our dining places.

Paul also never quite forgave me for a certain church service we attended. I will omit the city and congregation. The congregation was rainbow-friendly, and the liturgy was magnificent until Paul turned around at the sharing of the peace and saw two older men kissing on the lips. The look on his face was priceless. Like at the biker bar.

That said, at Churchwide Assemblies Lutheran CORE usually had a room next to the organization advocating acceptance of same-sex sexual relationships. To most people’s amazement, our groups had cordial relationships. When the folks from the next room invited Paul to their worship service, he accepted. But he was about as comfortable as he was at that biker bar in Akron.

When the time came to choose a bishop for the first year of the NALC, there really was no other option. Paul had the credibility, the respect, and the organizational skills to make it happen. And he had the

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Spirit, Flesh, and Dr. Jesus

by [Rev. Dr. Steven K. Gjerde](#), former Lutheran CORE Vice President

“The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” So says our Lord Jesus Christ, and who knows spirit and flesh better than He does? Through Him and for Him all things were made, and in these last days He has become all that He made us to be: flesh, soul, and spirit, and heart and mind, too — even now He lives and rules in our flesh, His Spirit testifying with ours that we are children of God. So when this Lord and God says, “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak,” we stop to listen.



His Special Concern

If the flesh is weak, then our flesh is the object of Christ’s special concern. “It is not the healthy who seek a doctor,” He reminds us, “it is the sick,” and even so our Good Physician came for the sinful and not the righteous. Our flesh rests in the perpetual care of Dr. Jesus. Ages ago He fitted Himself to our embodied life, matching His Word to our speech by means of a mouth and our disease to His health by the touch of His hand. That same, gracious work continues today as He fits His salvation to our dying flesh, making His grace speakable and edible, hearable and felt. “Gospel is touch,” a friend of mine likes to say, making even the least gnostic of us a bit uncomfortable and exposing just exactly why quarantines hurt.

But if our flesh rests in the care of Christ, then so do other things that pertain to the flesh, such as the whole tactile life of the church, with all of its dreaded *institution*, nearly a byword among the diaspora. Like it or not, you cannot escape it. Sure, you *can* have the Holy Supper in the open air, but you’ll still be standing on ground, ground that can be taxed or untaxed, mowed or unmowed, shoveled or drifted, beautiful or ugly; someone will have to agree to buy the stuff (and you know how it works: once people

have skin in the game, it gets serious); and finally, you’ll have to arrange it at a time and a place where all of us little hobbits and earthlings can make our way without too much trouble. You get the point: if you want Christ, then sooner or later you’ll want that dreaded *institution*, too, in one form or another, because with Christ the Virgin’s son comes all of human flesh, His special concern, the thing He loves to raise from the dead, and with human flesh comes all of the creation made for it.

With the Church come buildings that shelter and fellowships that organize and papers that say things in ink to make it all clear and bank accounts, because soon you’ll have real people with real bodies and individual minds and arthritis and hormones and a longing for beauty and health, and most of all, backpacks full of sin and history and grief. Associations and coalitions follow hot upon their (our) heels, and some of those organizations will become big enough or deluded enough to start calling themselves The Church, this Church, or herchurch, and the pious will start wondering if it’s all just the anti-Church, and maybe life as a spirit would be better? Some say the angels are bodiless spirits, and they don’t seem to complain (at least not the ones who kept their club privileges). But no, it’s not better. There’s a reason why the angels envy you, and the devils hate you, and it’s not your spirit—

--and all this I say by way of introduction as to why my congregation and I stayed in the ELCA, and why we have now left it.

On Being Dust, Soil, and Free

“Why are you still ELCA?” I think I got Christmas cards with those words embossed in gold. On the one hand, the only possible answer is that I am a sinner, a rotten sinner lousy with sin, who did it all wrong; and on the other hand the answer is that I’m a saint with the courage of King David (the Early Years). But really, it’s not even about me, it’s about Jesus and His special concern for the flesh.

He gave me a call, voted, inked, and delivered, and those votes and ink (that earthiness!) make it no less but all the more the call of God. I served and still serve a real people with a real zip code, different from yours, and therefore with different longings and gifts and histories and griefs. Diversity isn’t our strength (saith the Lord), but it is a thing, a flesh thing, and if you’re a pastor who is also a believer,

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Christ-Less Christianity

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



Sin, Justification, and Salvation: Critical Theory as Christ-less Christianity

Secular Christian Heresy

One of the more perplexing questions I received after writing my [last article](#) was, “Why do you call critical theory a secular Christian heresy?” It was perplexing to me because I thought that was the burden of my whole article; I could see someone disagreeing with me and objecting, but not simply misunderstanding.

To be clear in this article, let me say what I mean by secularized Christian heresy. A heresy is simply unbalanced or incorrect teaching. The word heresy means *to pick and choose*, so rather than accepting the full, robust teaching of the Holy Scriptures regarding this or that topic, they embrace some aspects of it and neglect others.

So, to claim that Jesus was an inspired but perfectly human moral teacher is a heresy, not because Jesus is not an inspired, perfectly human moral teacher, but because teaching that alone neglects the other Biblical teaching that He is also the Word of God that “became flesh and dwelt among us,” (John 1:14) the eternal only-begotten Son of the Father, “the only God, who is at the Father’s side, [who] has made [God] known” because “No one has ever seen God.” (John 1:18) Both Jesus’ full humanity and absolute divinity must be proclaimed together for the Church to correctly articulate the Biblical teaching about who Jesus is. Anything other, less, or partial is heresy.

Christian theology has many subcategories. In addition to Christology (who Jesus is) just a few are soteriology (how we are saved), pneumatology (who the Holy Spirit is and how He functions), and the most difficult of all, Trinitarian theology (how we articulate who God is in Himself). In each of these areas it is possible to fall into error by getting the doctrine wrong through omission, addition, or innovation; though some people would reserve the term heresy to errors in Christology and Trinitarian theology alone, the principle of heresy remains the same across all the theological categories, and I will use the term in that sense throughout this article.

Such theological categories are the common inheritance of everyone in the West, *even those who forthrightly reject orthodox (correct) Christian teaching* — though they may lament it being so, it is the inescapable cultural air a Westerner breathes. A category of meaning like the fall from primordial human perfection was a controlling idea for philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, whose ideas are experiencing a resurgence of influence today. Though he explicitly rejected Christianity — especially its sexual ethics — Rousseau’s thought world was a distorted reflection of the Judeo-Christian story he was rejecting. First, he gets the story wrong by claiming we can return to primordial perfection (Eden) without the ministrations of a divine Savior, as though an impassible flaming sword does not bar our way. That makes his story *heresy*. Then, he goes on to posit that there is no God at the root of our existence ... at least not one of the personal, tendentious, interfering, judgmental sort depicted in the Bible. That makes his story secular. Rousseau’s view of the human predicament is a secular Christian heresy.

Critical theory too adopts categories of meaning from the Christian thought world that it sees as its opponent, makes key errors in the doctrines and then secularizes them in the same way Rousseau did, failing to recognize its debt to Christianity.

Sin

In classical Christianity, sin is not a problem for humanity, it is *the* problem. “Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin,

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Focus on Anxiety

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



A personal confession: I was, prior to retirement, a programmatic pastor. In my defense I wanted to increase the percentage of church members who were active rather than passive. And I was also motivated by the hope that more programs — and groups — meant more lay people exercising their ministry gifts in leadership roles. However, this pandemic has been a startling reminder of how quickly many of our church “programs” have become, under our current circumstances, untenable and perhaps even non-essential.

Author and pastor Thom Rainer—whom I know I have quoted in previous columns—addressed this issue in July. And given the fall COVID surge most states are currently experiencing, Rainer’s comments are still timely. Rainer writes, “It is time (for congregations) to revisit the need to simplify...to do only a few things well and eliminate the rest. Many of our churches have become so busy that we have hurt our best families. Many of our churches have become so cluttered with activities that we don’t give margin for our members to have a gospel presence in the community. The pandemic, for the most part, provides us a blank slate. It’s time to rethink our busy schedules and become a minimal church.”

Rainer continues, “A minimal church is not a church of minimal impact. It is a church that has decided that we need to unleash our members to have more time to disciple their families, to become a gospel presence in the community, and to develop relationships in their neighborhoods.”

An additional congregational challenge looms large during this pandemic; a challenge that is currently of far greater importance than most of our

“programs.” This particular challenge has to do with the mental and emotional health crisis millions of Americans are enduring as a result of COVID 19. New York Times columnist Jennifer Senior, this last August, wrote about this crisis in American life: “Let’s start with the numbers. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, roughly one in 12 American adults reported symptoms of an anxiety disorder at this time last year; now it’s more than one in three. Last week, the Kaiser Family Foundation released a tracking poll showing that for the first time, a majority of American adults — 53 percent — believes that the pandemic is taking a toll on their mental health.”

Psychologist and author Daphne de Marneffe defines trauma, in the context of COVID, this way: “What trauma is really about is helplessness, about being on the receiving end of forces you can’t control. Which is what we have now. It’s like we’re in an endless car ride with a drunk at the wheel. No one knows when the pain will stop.”

So, what about your congregational members? How are they holding up? Do you have a clear picture of whether many of them — especially those who are living alone — are being overwhelmed by a sense of helplessness? How is your congregation doing, during COVID, when it comes to member care? This is probably a simpler task for small congregations than it is for mid-sized and larger churches. But the truth is this: Even in “normal” times most congregations have members who are “falling through the cracks” when it comes to pastoral care. But these times are anything but normal; they are extraordinary in the bleakest sense of that word. And the larger the congregation the more likely member care needs to be an urgent, organized effort. This is not about another program. This is about one of the most crucial and central tasks within the Body of Christ. The Apostle Paul sums it up this way:

“But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.” (1st Corinthians 12:24-26)

The ALPB recommends a new devotional and pastoral resource called *The Living Word*. It is a free newsletter that is *not* produced by the ALPB.

Click [here](#) and [here](#) for more information.

Spirit, Flesh, and Dr. Jesus

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then you're a priest in the best sense of the word, and pretty soon that diversity of your people is part of you like a country's soil is part of its wine and cheese. Within the very real diversity of the church, far transcending the fiefdoms of identity politics, the Lord fits His time to different calendars and lengths of patience. "The Lord is coming soon!" — it's true. But just as soon as a man's ready to fit that clarion call to his own schedule and jump in the car, he remembers he's married, and there's a five year old who has to pee, and the man must wait. Along with the Church in every time and place, he discovers, after all, that he is but dust.

I'm not getting into specifics, is the point. The specifics would only bore you and tempt you to sit in the seat of scoffers, which is very bad. But you get the drift: there were reasons good enough that they don't need defending anymore, because it's all done with, anyway. We simply pursued our Lord's path of fitting grace to the flesh, with its drooping hands and weak knees. We looked on our institution as a gift, not a burden—I mean, what else is it, unless you're a [Manichean](#)? — and by pursuing that God-given mission, we pressed ourselves more and more deeply into the local soil and the call of the neighbors and the catholic stink of evangelical ministry, until pretty soon we became something the ELCA simply didn't want anymore ("inclusive"), and we said, "Ah! There it is. Well, okay, then."

The Transfigured Flesh Part

You'd have done and said it differently if you're from Georgia or Albuquerque, but you'd have done it somehow — I know you would have, because you're all brothers and sisters, believers and sinners and courageous saints. But here's the last part, and one of the best parts, the transfigured flesh part: when I first stayed ELCA, it was just my single congregation and me. We spoke our objections loudly, got picky about the pocketbook, and fenced the altar—and still it was just my congregation and me. But as the Lord squeezed His time into our time and thus turned our time into His time, and as He led us down deeper into the flesh and the soil over the objections of so many, He changed all that.

He turned this congregation into this congregation plus another one to serve and love, and a third one who wants to know more; and He turned me into me and another pastor, and then an intern who's now a pastor, and still another pastor, three good brothers

in the ministry who joined me at this address and walked its path, the path right into the ELCA and now out of it, even though they weren't originally on that path, and they're pure gold; and He turned all of us into us *with* all of you, Lutheran CORE and the NALC and the LCMC, and Missouri Synod folk, too, you who are a consolation and strength in all of this. A seed fell to the earth, died a thousand deaths, and bore a thousand-fold harvest.

So now we're LCMC, and probably will be other things, too, and that usually makes lots of folks happy except when they feel we didn't do it fast enough — but land's sake, people: the kid had to pee, the car needed fuel, she forgot the casserole. There were reasons. Cut us some slack, take our coats, and put on the kettle. You're Lutherans. You know how to be gracious with the flesh, and how to be people of skin and bones, with all the history and grief and institution that comes with it, because you know, as so many other Christians do not know, just what it is for the spirit to be willing, and the flesh weak. It means showing greater honor and more consideration to the weaker member, because that weaker member is Christ, crucified for the sins of the world.

Where Love Is Known

The flesh is where love makes itself known, see, and that's why the devil hates our flesh: Christ has shown it such great honor by becoming it and redeeming it. And that's why everything, absolutely everything that we face these days, is all about the flesh. Not only church but also the culture wars and politics, with Trump and Biden and all the rage and spite — it's all about the flesh, in the end, a heavenly conflict stoked by the bitter disappointment of the devil, that angry, ravenous wisp, howling for the flesh that he is not, frantic to devour it all so that it will no longer be, and (he hopes) the hobbits and earthlings won't even be bones anymore but pure smoke, having cast themselves into the flames, confusing smoke with spirit.

Against all that, we devour the flesh of Christ, which only increases the more it's eaten. Yes, that's how it goes: wherever the Supper is, there you find the Words of Institution; and where the Words of Institution, other institution follows, all the flesh and land and shelter and ink that a Supper demands, and through this weakened flesh the willing Spirit has His way, and He knits together the growing body. For who knows our flesh and spirit better than He who became our flesh and breathes the Spirit? He makes us bold to bear that weakened flesh, that beloved body, the body that He has so lovingly destined for glory, no matter the times it may bring.

Christ-Less Christianity

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and so death spread to all men because all sinned.” (Romans 5:12) Sin separates eternally from God and as Genesis 3:7 makes plain, even before humanity becomes aware of the wedge sin drives between us and the divine, we are excruciatingly aware of the wedge it drives between us and the ones we love — Adam and Eve are no longer comfortable naked and vulnerable before one another and so begin to hide aspects of themselves from one another, the deeper and more ominous meaning of their crafting of makeshift loincloths. Sin thus becomes the common inheritance of all humanity, for as psychologist Eric Berne noted, all people “play games” with one another, seeking to manipulate others for their own benefit; “all sin and fall short of the glory of God.” (Rom 3:23)

In critical theory, sin is not the common inheritance of all humanity, but the special purview of the oppressors. Indeed, the oppressed is proclaimed to have a moral superiority over the oppressor, especially if the oppressor is unaware of their oppressive status. Oppression in this case is not simply defined as an immoral, illegitimate exercise of power by one party over another, but rather *any* exercise of power by such a party, for all structures of authority (what sociologists refer to as dominance hierarchies) are defined as immoral because the goal is absolute equity. Indeed, preferential attention is paid to language structures that make some people *feel* oppressed, even if legally and/or culturally they are not. Thus, the married homosexual continues to be oppressed if people are permitted to express disagreement with their life choices because this may trigger doubt of some sort in them even though legally their marriage enjoys the same protections as a heterosexual one and the majority of people in the United States support gay marriage (at least civilly) and the great majority of all entertainment media lionizes their position.

Support for and understanding of the political importance of the First Amendment is falling precipitously among Millennials precisely because they see free speech as a tool of oppression, for nobody should have to defend their choices and/or identity. The political good of liberty, which presupposes that all people will have to live by the consequences of and when necessary defend their choices and sense of identity to people who disagree with them, has been demoted to a good of the second or third order if indeed it is a good; after all, why should anyone have to bear consequences — even natural ones — for their choices? Aren't consequences merely another

form of limitation and potential chastisement and hence, oppression?

And so, for the critical theorist, just as sin is *the* problem for a Christian, so oppression is not a problem ... it is *the* problem. The division between oppressor and oppressed defines the sinner from the saint; in every interaction, it is the purview of the saint to speak, and the privilege of the sinner to listen. Justice means the oppressed are properly the tutors, and the oppressors only rightly their students — willingly or unwillingly.

Justification

Having just passed Reformation Sunday, it must be acknowledged that from a generically Protestant perspective, *the* key doctrine of Christianity apart from the Hypostatic Union (Christology) and the Holy Trinity is the doctrine of salvation *by grace through faith*. Martin Luther famously referred to it as the teaching whereby “the Church stands or falls.”

In its most simple terms, this doctrine might be summarized as follows; because human beings afford the infinitely high cost of sinning against the infinitely holy God — “the wages of sin are death” (Rom 6:23) — Jesus picked up humanity’s paycheck when as a true human being He died without sin on the cross. Because He was also true God, death could not hold Him, so He rose up alive again beyond the reach of death ever again — that is why the Church’s proclamation on Easter is not “Jesus *has* risen,” but rather “Jesus *is* risen;” he remains to this day beyond the reach of death.

Because of His unique status as the God-Man, Jesus alone could have accomplished this mission. Since we cannot pick up the wages of our sin without perishing eternally, God offers us Jesus’ work to take care of our predicament as a gift; we call that *grace*. Because we are not yet at the final judgment when God will proclaim us justified (upright in His presence or righteous) on account of Jesus’ saving work for us, we must accept Jesus’ work at this point in time as a pledge or promise in which we trust ... a promise in which we have *faith*. We are saved by grace through faith.

Thus, our uprightness in God’s presence is something of a legal fiction; we are not actually without sin and so deserving of eternal life, God just counts us as sinless because of Jesus, who is truly sinless. Protestant theologians have classically referred to this as forensic (legal) justification.

Justification — being just — works similarly for

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Christ-Less Christianity

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the critical theorist. While the oppressor-sinner can never be truly just (non-oppressive), she, he or zhe (gender neutral) can be *declared* just by renouncing their identity as oppressor and proclaiming themselves an ally. If you have heard of undergraduates renouncing a seemingly immutable characteristic (their ethnicity, sex, family of origin, etc.) in order to claim the status of “ally” or their wholesale adoption of a new identity in a group who has garnered the social capital of “oppressed,” you have seen people proclaiming their religious conversion. They have been “justified” as a gift from the group designated as oppressed, and although they can never be truly other than oppressor, they can accept the gift (grace) of their new “woke” or “ally” status by trusting — having faith in — the social contract that conferred it upon them. Their persistent pleas for mercy as they seek further wokeness are direct parallels to the Christian life of continual repentance and pursuit of holiness, but they prostrate themselves not before God, but before the capricious, constantly-shifting social categories that new discoveries and definitions of “oppression” dictate.

Salvation

For the Christian, the fullness of salvation is a matter for an undetermined future date and can only be sketched in the loosest outlines, but what they know of it seems promising; Jesus spoke of it as being “like a wedding banquet” and apocalyptic and prophetic texts, beginning with the oldest book of the Bible, Job, refer to it as a time when “after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God,” (Job 19:26) and “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” (Rev 21:3–4) When this shall happen is totally in God’s hands — “concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only” (Matt 24:36) — but that it shall happen is the fundamental hope of Christianity.

Equally so, for the adherent of critical theory, precisely when the hoped-for day of perfect inclusivity, equity, and diversity will arrive is unclear, for since oppression is defined by subjective experience rather than objectively-verifiable metrics, new “inequities” are always being “discovered.” Howev-

er, that it shall indeed come and that its coming will be glorious is a truth not to be questioned, for it is the prime motivator for all the efforts Herculean and pedestrian that give their day-to-day life shape and meaning. Indeed, their participation in the process of ushering in this new age is reflective of not only the classical Christian struggle for sanctification, it is reflective of a peculiarly modern form of Evangelical Christianity which believes that God will not or cannot act until we “do our part” to usher in the longed-for future, such as learning how to harness our spiritual power in the Word of Faith movement or the building of a third temple in Jerusalem for many dispensationalists.

As Patrick Deneen has noted, progress toward a brighter, more glorious future is the great myth — the grand metanarrative — of Western secular Liberalism, a 300+ year project of which both modern conservatism and liberalism are a part. When President Obama quoted Dr. Martin Luther King, saying, “the arc of history bends toward justice,” he was not expressing Dr. King’s Christ-based hope in the eschaton, but rather the conviction of secular Progressivism, which is the intellectual superstructure of Christianity wrenched from its historic and metaphysical foundations; it is Christ-less Christianity, and heretical Christ-less Christianity at that.

The Heretical Moves

How is it heretical? First of all, it is so in its understanding of sin. Just as some misguided forms of Evangelical Protestantism confuse sanctification with the claim that a relatively or completely sin-free life is possible following one’s conversion to Christ, so critical theory believes that through strenuous efforts at “wokeness” and externally-measurable equity that people can become relatively free of the sins of exclusivity and inequity as denominated in the more familiar constellation of sins like sexism, racism, ableism, homophobia, white supremacy, etc.

Or perhaps such sinfulness may be conquered completely in a world where the education of the masses from womb to tomb is rigorously controlled by politicians, teachers, and CEO’s of multi-national communication and commerce companies who effectively operate beyond the regulatory bounds of sovereign nation states ... if such leaders are catechized properly — and exclusively — by critical theorists, who have in true Enlightenment fashion, defined an intellectual space wherein they can operate free of the “sin” that haunts the great wash of humanity.

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Christ-Less Christianity

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Orthodox Christian doctrine allows no such bifurcation of humanity into the (perhaps relatively) sin-free and the sinful. There is a bifurcation inherent in Christianity, but it is between the redeemed and the unredeemed — those who trust in Christ's work of salvation and those who do not. Such trust includes both salvation and whatever holiness of life proceeds from faith, which are ultimately the work of the Triune God who creates, redeems, and makes us holy.

People, believer and unbeliever alike, not only fail to, but are *incapable* of becoming sin-free by their own efforts. “We confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves,” go the familiar words of the *Lutheran Book of Worship's* Brief Order of Confession and Forgiveness. All human beings are both oppressed because they live under the yoke of sin and oppressor because they regularly and willingly collaborate with sin in the oppression of others around them for personal gain.

The Orthodox Christian Alternative

There is literally no option for human beings to be radically free in Christian theology, something that the atheist existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre understood far better than many self-identified Christian theologies, which are heretical on this point. Redemption through faith in the gracious gift of God in Christ Jesus means moving from unwilling servility to sin (oppression) to willing servanthood to the Lord. The self-aware and active disciple of Jesus is to be a “slave to righteousness:”

¹⁵ What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶ Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, ^[a] you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? ¹⁷ But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. ¹⁹ I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.

²⁰ For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹ But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is

death. ²² But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:15-23)

Because this is reality, the actors who seek for themselves radical libertarian freedom will find themselves in the end to be merely a slave to sin, receiving as the reward for their quixotic quest unbenevolent fruits whose culmination (end) is death.

Conversely, the Christian who willingly lays down his erstwhile “freedom,” which is really bondage to sin, chiefly taking the form of futilely trying to fulfill his disordered desires, finds in the end that every desire is in fact fulfilled as he learns to love the things that God loves, pursues the things God would have him pursue, and in the end receive for it “the unfading crown of glory.” (1 Peter 5:4)

All this proceeds from the justification we have in Christ Jesus; it is “not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For [Christians] are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (Eph 2:9–10) Christians continue to be servants, but no longer of a cruel taskmaster who will in the end take everything from them, but rather for a gracious Lord who will in the end bestow everything upon them.

You see, sin is not just a problem — the problem — for human beings in the Christian telling of history, it is also a problem for God, for God's great desire is for restored communion with His fallen creatures. (cf. John 3:16, Ezekiel 18:23, Mark 5:15, etc.) In Jesus of Nazareth, “Christ crucified,” we are not to see a God so demanding and bloodthirsty that He required the death of His Son before He would allow errant sinners into the kingdom of heaven. Rather, with a full and robust Christology, in the cross of Jesus Christ, we are to know God as the One who is so loving that He was willing to sacrifice Himself — experience the annihilation of death, which is utterly foreign to Him as the One whose deep and first revealed name is “I AM” — that we might have eternal life and restored communion with Him.

Evangelical Hope

In every critical respect — its understandings of sin, justification, and salvation — critical theory is a secularized form of Christian heresy. While this means we must be on our guard not to drift into false teaching when dialoguing with its proponents as the Church of Jesus Christ, it is also a cause for hope.

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You Reap Whatever You Sow

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



The apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians, “Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow.” (Galatians 6: 7) From my viewpoint, the ELCA is reaping what it from its inception has been sowing.

Lenny Duncan is an ELCA pastor who describes himself as “the unlikeliest of pastors.” He is author of the book, [Dear Church: A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the United States](#). We should not be surprised that he quickly became a celebrity within the ELCA – a sought after speaker in congregations and educational institutions. He sounds exactly like someone to whom the ELCA would give the greatest amount of publicity and visibility.

There is only one problem. He has turned on the ELCA and has done so viciously. Check out his website - <https://lennyduncan.substack.com>. There you will find parts one through five of his articles, “Why the ELCA needs to start a reparations process,” which he subtitled, “Why you should defund your denomination.”

What is his plan? What I really should ask is, What is his demand? He is demanding that the ELCA set aside \$32 million over the next three years to create a reparations fund to right the wrongs of centuries of racial injustice here in the United States. And if the ELCA does not set aside \$32 million over the next three years, then he is challenging people to “defund churchwide” and redirect \$32 million in contributions away from the ELCA into his reparations fund. What is amazing to me is not only the audacity of the way in which he demands that the ELCA make his top priority into their top

priority, but also the vicious way in which he speaks of the leadership of the ELCA – a group that gave him support, visibility, and every opportunity to make maximum impact.

But as I think about, I realize that his words and behavior should not be surprising. I would like to distinguish between the more moderate, pro-organization revisionists, and the more extreme, burn-and-tear-the-organization-down revisionists.

The more moderate, pro-organization revisionists are the ones currently in power in the ELCA. They have three top priorities – their relentless agendas, their own power, and the preservation of the churchwide organization. For them it seems that anything goes – you can believe and advocate for anything you want – even the rejection of basic, Biblical moral values and the foundational tenants of the historic Christian faith – as long as you are loyal to the organization. For them preservation of the organization is paramount.

The problem is that they are now running into – or maybe I should say that they are being run into by - what they have been enabling and empowering – extreme revisionists who feel no loyalty to and do not value the organization. Rather these extreme revisionists would be just as happy to burn or tear the organization down. As it is happening in our nation, so it is happening in the ELCA.

Here is another example. In 2019 the ELCA Conference of Bishops recommended to the Church Council a document entitled, “Trustworthy Servants of the People of God” as a basic statement of the ELCA’s expectations for rostered leaders. Extremists, who do not want pastors and other rostered leaders to have to be married (by any definition) in order to be sexually active, objected so strongly that the ELCA Church Council declined to consider the document and instead sent it back to the ELCA’s Domestic Mission Unit to come up with a new document that would not be so hurtful and harmful for people who had been deeply wounded by former ELCA statements that held to traditional Biblical standards for behavior and relationships. The latest I have heard is that the ELCA’s Domestic Mission Unit has not yet come up with a new document because it wants to give the ELCA a “breathing space.” Here also the extreme revisionists have been enabled and empowered. You can be sure that they will not rest until the document that is approved by the ELCA Church Council is one that reflects the most extreme, revisionist view of human sexual relation-

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A Sharp Contrast

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



The Great Commission Society of the North American Lutheran Church is to be commended for the three-day, online missions conference which they held in early November under the theme, “Unveiled: Shining Light in the Darkness.” The comment was made at the beginning of the event that the only person that the conference organizers wanted to lift up is Jesus – not the structures of the church, not our own resourcefulness or efforts, but Jesus. I need a faith that focuses on Jesus. That is the kind of faith that I found nourished and sustained at the Unveiled Conference from the NALC’s Great Commission Society. I also give thanks for the gift of today’s technology, which made it possible for us to be blessed by such an event, even during the time of a pandemic.

Later in the day of the third session of the “Unveiled” conference I watched a webinar with Dr Thom Rainer of Church Answers. You can learn more about his ministry at <https://churchanswers.com>. His webinar was entitled, “Preparing for Revitalization in a Post-COVID World.” One of the points that he made that I thought was most insightful was his comment about how much COVID has accelerated change. Whatever dynamics and trends a congregation was experiencing prior to COVID have been accelerated by about four years. If a congregation was in decline, its decline has been accelerated by four years. But he also gave hope. He gave strategies for revitalization, and he is working to train coaches who will work with congregations in the process of revitalization.

Both of those webinars were life and hope giving. But what do I receive from the ELCA? A word that tells me that I need to repent of systemic racism and white supremacy.

The law is not life and hope giving. The law rightly applied shows me my sins and drives me to Christ. But the law wrongly applied only crushes, demoralizes, and discourages. If the main message the ELCA has to give is all of the ways in which I need to repent because I have acted contrary to all of their chosen priorities, then how can I ever expect that the ELCA knows how to renew congregations and help them recover from COVID?

Christ-Less Christianity

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Since our thought worlds are not so far apart, we may be able to give a winsome and persuasive witness to the gospel by doing what orthodox Christians do; we can confess the sins of which we are guilty, including our own slides into heresy. We can help them understand the fatuousness of their account of sin and justification and point out that the categories of meaning they employ are quickly resulting in the opposite of paradise wherever they are or have been employed, that “the end of those things is death.” Most importantly, we can tell them a far better story of sin, justification in Christ, and redemption, a story whose end is eternal life for those who will, in the immortal words of the Lutheran Reformers, through faith “grasp on to it.”

You Reap Whatever You Sow

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ships and identities.

And what about the ELCA’s refusal to stand up to the “We Are Naked and Unashamed” movement, which arose out of one of the ELCA seminaries and which rejects marriage by any definition as normative for sexual activity? Or what about the people who are chosen to be keynote speakers for the ELCA’s triennial youth gatherings? The last time – in 2018 – one of the keynote speakers – another pastor whom the ELCA has chosen to make into one of its greatest celebrities – led 31,000 young people in rejecting traditional Biblical standards for morality as a lie.

What will the ELCA do as it continues to experience the effects of what it has been enabling and empowering? How will the ELCA respond as it continues to reap what it has been sowing?

Tribute to Paull Spring: Remembrance

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theological acumen to get us started in the right directions.

Paull and I continued to connect through the years, sometimes at events and sometimes as Linda and I worshipped at the congregation he helped start in State College, Pennsylvania.



Paull and I didn't always agree on things (including politics), but we were always able to share with mutual respect. I wrote a few things along the way that disturbed people in the NALC, but if Paull wrote a response, he always made sure I received a copy directly from him. He was generous with his praise, helpful with his criticisms, and always a true gentleman and a faithful follower of Christ.

I visited him at the hospital in State College earlier this year, and he knew how sick he was. In typical Paull fashion, as I walked into the room, he blurted out, "I almost died, you know!" And the last time we were together, at a worship service in Emmanuel in State College, I asked how he was doing and he barked, "Not as good as I used to be." That sort of blunt realism characterized so many of my experiences with him.

I will miss seeing him again this side of eternity, and I trust that our Lord has prepared a good supply of pipe tobacco, since near the end he was even unable to enjoy that guilty pleasure.

I thank God for the privilege of knowing and working with this unique and delightful (even when grumpy) saint. His example, his faithfulness, and his hard work will be a blessing to the North American Lutheran Church and beyond for generations to come. My prayers continue for his wife Barbara and for their daughters.

May Paull Spring rest in peace, and may light perpetual shine upon him!

Coming Events

NALC Life Conference — January 28, 2021 [Click here.](#)

March for Life, Washington, DC — January 29, 2021.
[Click here.](#)

2021 Pro Ecclesia Conference — June 7-9, 2021. [Click here.](#)

NEXUS Course — Summer 2021. [Register here.](#)

Video Book Reviews

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



Recently I was talking with an ELCA seminarian who was saying how much he wished that there was a list of Biblically and confessionally faithful books and other resources. I was very pleased to be able to tell him about the List of Confessional Resources, which can be found on the [Seminarians](#) page on our website, www.lutherancore.org. You can also find the Seminarians page by clicking on the hamburger symbol in the upper righthand corner of the website home page. Seeing that list, he said, "That is exactly what I have been looking for." There you will find a list of and information about such resources as books, commentaries, videos, ministries, and movements that have been recommended by friends of Lutheran CORE.

That resource is now being taken to the next level. We have begun the process of providing video reviews of some of these books on YouTube. Our first book review can be found [here](#). Our YouTube channel can be found [here](#).

Many thanks to Pastor Chris Johnson for making the first review, Pastor Brett Jenkins for making the intro and outro, and Joel Awes for setting up the YouTube channel.

Our plan is to publish a new video book review during the first week of every month.

When you look at a video review for the first time, please click on the Subscribe button. As enough people do that, it will eventually help us get a channel name that will include our organization's name.

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