

THIS PRESENT AGE

Tone and the Confessional Lutheran View of the End Times

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June 13, 2023

Presented at
Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary
for the
2023 WELS Southeastern Wisconsin District Conference

Nearly a decade ago, the satirical *Onion* headlined an article, “CNN Holds Morning Meeting to Decide What Viewers Should Panic About for Rest of Day.”¹ That growing feeling of dread you’re experiencing today just by listening to the news is not new. Scientists have been empirically studying it for awhile now, and the trend is not just American but global.² But what feels ramped up today is the combative spirit which characterizes our culture as *one at war*, and each of us as combatants, whether willing or not. On the left: the fear of crippling racism,³ the end of human rights,⁴ and the beginning of an era of fascism and totalitarianism.⁵ On the right: the fear of crippling racism,⁶ the end of human rights,⁷ and the beginning of an era of fascism and totalitarianism.⁸

¹ “CNN Holds Morning Meeting To Decide What Viewers Should Panic About For Rest of Day” *The Onion*, November 7, 2014, [https:// www.theonion.com/cnn-holds-morning-meeting-to-decide-what-viewers-should1819577164](https://www.theonion.com/cnn-holds-morning-meeting-to-decide-what-viewers-should1819577164).

² One of the most well-known studies: Kalev H. Leetaru, “Culturomics 2.0: Forecasting large-scale human behavior using global news media tone in time and space,” *First Monday*, Vol. 16, Num. 9, September 5 2011, <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/download/3663/3040>.

³ Consider the experiences recorded in this article for the Mental Health column of GQ. “I was terrified that [Britain’s vote to leave the European Union and Donald Trump’s 2016 election] these events would embolden racist ideologists and that we were seeing the beginning of a march towards fascism, both here and abroad... I was shocked into an acute anxiety attack, which saw me vomiting and returning to self-harm in a way I hadn’t engaged in since my youth.” Erin Paterson, “Finding it hard to watch the news? You might be experiencing political anxiety” *GQ*, December 27, 2020, <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/lifestyle/article/political-anxiety-disorder>.

⁴ For example, Ronald Brownstein describes how the Right seeks “the erosion of common national rights.” He particularly has in mind abortion rights, gay rights, and voting rights for minorities. “The Republican Axis Reversing the Rights Revolution,” *The Atlantic*, December 24, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/12/republican-states-rights-restrictions/621101/>.

⁵ Consider Robert Kagan, “This is How Fascism Comes to America,” *The Washington Post*, May 18, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/this-is-how-fascism-comes-to-america/2016/05/17/c4e32c58-1c47-11e6-8c7b-6931e66333e7_story.html.

⁶ Consider John McWhorter, *Woke Racism: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America* (New York: Penguin, 2021). Although identifying as a classical liberal, his *Woke Racism* is cited by many conservatives as a “prime contender” for a voice “worth listening to in the culture wars” against the Left. Clive Davis, “Woke Racism by John McWhorter review – a counterblast against the cult of woke,” *The Times*, February 11, 2022, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/woke-racism-by-john-mcwhorter-review-tk0c8ccb>.

⁷ For example, “Governor Ron DeSantis Signs Legislation to Protect Floridians from Discrimination and Woke Indoctrination,” *Governor Ron DeSantis*, April 22, 2022, <https://www.flgov.com/2022/04/22/governor-ron-desantis-signs-legislation-to-protect-floridians-from-discrimination-and-woke-indoctrination/>.

⁸ For example, Arnold Beichman, “Fascism—an ‘Ism’ of the Left, not the Right,” *Hoover Digest*, Hoover Institution, October 30, 2005. Originally published in *The Washington Times*, Aug 29, 2005, <https://www.hoover.org/research/fascism-ism-left-not-right>.

Our device newsfeeds constantly barrage us with a dangerous combination of panic + anger. One of the most popular podcasts on the Right attracts its listeners with titles such as “How the West Turned Kids Suicidal,” “The Satanists Are Winning,” and “Why Economic Collapse Is Imminent.”⁹ One of the most popular podcasts on the Left teaches its listeners a vocabulary hardly suitable for Socratic dialogue with titles such as “Slimy Santos,” “Crapitalism,” “Bad Faith Bozos,” and “Right Wing Warfare.”¹⁰ How many videos in your YouTube feed have you clicked that describe a politician or pundit “destroying” or “ripping” or “owning” their opponent? How many did you click on?

The anxiety is measurable.¹¹ Consider stress tied particularly to reading news on devices, which has led to the creation of new terms in psychology, such as doom scrolling, that have inspired their own series of unique studies.¹²

Within the Church in particular, Christian journalists, scholars, and pastors are sounding the alarm that we may very well be entering a new era of persecution in America. For example, Rob Dreher, in his *Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents* argues for an oncoming “soft totalitarianism” that will lead to widespread persecution against Christians.¹³ Eric Metaxas, known for his biographical work on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writes in his *Letter to an American Church*,

*I have written this book because I am convinced the American Church is at an impossibly—and almost unbearably—important inflection point. ... We are today like the proverbial frog in the saucepan, simmering along and never realizing that unless we see our situation and leap out now, we are very soon to be cooked and beyond all leaping.*¹⁴

He is writing about what he has identified as a clearly anti-Christian ideological shift in American politics, based on critical theory ideology and now manifesting in pro-abortion, pro-transgender,

⁹ From the Daily Wire podcast *The Ben Shapiro Show*: “Why Economic Collapse is Imminent” (2023/5/5), “The Satanists Are Winning” (2023/5/3), “How the West Turned Kids Suicidal” (2023/3/30).

¹⁰ From *The Young Turks* podcast: “Slimy Santos” (23/10/05), “Crapitalism” (23/10/04), “Silencing Dissent” (23/04/07), “Congressional Cowards” (23/03/28), “Bad Faith Bozos” (23/03/14), “Right Wing Warfare” (23/03/06).

¹¹ “Ahead of the most divisive election in decades, more than two-thirds of U.S. adults (68%) say that the 2020 U.S. presidential election is a significant source of stress in their life, a large increase from the 2016 presidential election when 52% said the same, according to a new survey conducted by the Harris Poll on behalf of the American Psychological Association.” Sophie Bethune, “2020 Presidential Election a Source of Significant Stress for More Americans than 2016 Presidential Race,” American Psychological Association October 7, 2020, <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2020/10/election-stress>.

¹² See for example, Seydi Ahmet Satici, Emine Gocet Tekin, M. Engin Deniz, Begum Satici, “Doomscrolling Scale,” *Appl Res Qual Life*. 2023; 18(2): 833–847. Published online at National Library of Medicine, October 19, 2022, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9580444/#:~:text=Constant%20exposure%20to%20negative%20news,2020%3B%20Watercutter%2C%202020>).

¹³ Rob Dreher, *Live Not By Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents* (New York: Sentinel, 2020).

¹⁴ Eric Metaxas, *Letter to the American Church* (Washington, D.C.: Salem Books, 2022).

and pro-Critical Race Theory legislation. The Amazon landing pages for books like Dreher and Metaxas' are loaded with endorsements from Touchstone Magazine, Wayne Grudem, and other well-known names in Evangelical America.

Are these Christian voices right? Is there an anti-Christian ideological shift taking place in America? If so, we can certainly play our part in sounding the alarm when clear Biblical truth is being undermined, when God calls us to preach law clearly. But the *tone* is what I am after. When these topics come up in our parishes, in our council meetings, from questions in our bible studies, what *tone* would your members describe *you* as setting? Do you contribute to the feeling of dread? Are stress levels the same, if not higher, when you're done speaking? Do you leave your members with the clearly communicated message that they are conquerors, or that they are lambs being led to the slaughter?

The Sons of Korah sympathize with me when I cry out to my God, "How long?" Inspired by the Holy Spirit, they sing,

*for your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.
Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep?
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.
Why do you hide your face
And forget our misery and oppression? (Ps 44:22-24)*

The Sons of Korah remind us that it is human at times to feel abandoned or rejected by God, to feel intimidated by the forces of evil. David sang of the same feelings many times. But Paul reminds us that there are no reasons that these feelings should turn into our usual mode of seeing the world. The Sons of Korah—and, for that matter, David—never let their thoughts remain here. Before their lament, the Sons of Korah sing,

*You are my King and my God,
who decrees victories for Jacob.
Through you we push back our enemies;
through your name we trample our foes.
I put no trust in my bow;
my sword does not bring me victory;
But you give us victory over our enemies,
you put our adversaries to shame.
In God we make our boast all day long,
and we will praise your name forever. (Ps 44:4-8)*

And they will end their song meditating on God's unfailing love. And Paul follows this same pattern. In his Great Chapter 8, his tour de force of gospel truths, Paul gives us only one moment that might be a gentle rebuke to us, as if to be saying, "*Have you found yourself moping*

around, taking the words of the Sons of Korah and twisting them into a lie about life, and living the lie that you are in fact as helpless 'as sheep to be slaughtered'? Is that really what you think you are?" To this, Paul has one word. "No" (Rom 8:37).

It might at times *feel* like we are sheep to be slaughtered. But we *are not* sheep to be slaughtered. This is false. And when we catch ourselves *acting* like sheep to be slaughtered, we must tell ourselves, "*No.*" There is something untrue about the way we feel. And we must tell ourselves the truth. And what is the truth?

The truth is that we are right now victors and conquerors. *We*—not only Christ, but his bride the Church—*we* have *already* overcome the evil one (1 John 2:14). And it is in *this age* in which we find ourselves—the Age of the Gospel, the Age of the Evangelist, the Age of the End Times—in *this age* that we will declare this truth in a special way. *This Age*, the End Times, is truly the best time to be alive. Our Confessional Lutheran theology leads us to this truth unapologetically. No other theological tradition is better equipped at simultaneously acknowledging what we see with our eyes—the birth pangs of the age to come, the Church under assault, the feelings of hopelessness—and at the same time proclaiming that things are *truly not* as they seem: we are complete and total victors through Christ, and we will continue to be, and so we are called and empowered by God to *act* like it.

We are Confessional Lutherans, and so we have a penchant to interpret all of Scripture in light of Christ's work of justification (that is, law and gospel), to see everything in life in light of the theology of the cross, to understand all of history through the lens of the means of grace. And that leads us to an incredible view of these End Times. We will revel in our interpretation of the thousand years of Revelation 20. We will understand rightly the meaning of Christ's ascension and the Spirit's Pentecost. We will unlock Christ's words about his Kingdom coming. And we will celebrate in the truth that not only is this the Age of Christ our Prophet, Priest, and King, but it is also the age of *us*, his appointed prophets, priests, and kings. We will hear Paul declare us victors and call us to act like victors. In an age cloaked in the spirit of doubt, turmoil, and fear, God gives us every reason to lead the Christian Church as pillars of confidence, coolness, and poise.

Pastors, teachers, leaders of the Church, take up the mantle of victory through Christ. When our people are loaded with doubts, sorrow, and anxiety about the future, their primary need is a pastor trained in the proper application of law and gospel, a pastor who will fearlessly declare that things are not as they seem. Our people need to see pastors suffer differently than the rest of the world who has no hope. Our people need teachers teaching how to carry earthly crosses with unearthly understanding. Our people need to hear you, our Church leaders, declare with confidence: Christ is victorious, and so *you* are victorious. You live in complete security in the Kingdom of your God in this blessed Age of the Gospel.

Part 1. The Theology of the Cross: Things Are Not as They Seem. Christ Is Victorious.

Luther never had opportunity to present his *Ninety-Five Theses* in a formal debate. Instead, he was asked to present at Heidelberg in 1518 where “Staupitz asked him not to debate controversial subjects,” such as indulgences or corruptions in the church, “but to prepare theses concerning sin, free will, and grace.”¹⁵ What Luther presented there we call his *Heidelberg Disputation*. It is an early work of Luther, written less than one year after the *Ninety-Five Theses*. In this work Luther describes a *theology of the cross*. To my knowledge, Luther does not explicitly write at length about the theology of the cross again,¹⁶ and the phrase does not appear to be widely used for the next several hundred years after Luther. But recently, perhaps because of the unique challenges to the church in this past century, there has been an explosion of literature on this theological idea.

Luther describes his Heidelberg theses as a presentation of “theological paradoxes.”¹⁸ What follows, then, are meditations on how *things are not as they seem*: The person who thinks he is doing good works is actually committing sins and alienating himself from God (theses 1-12). Man appears free, but really he has a will “in name only” (theses 13-16). And then he speaks of the theologian “who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross” (thesis 20).¹⁹ This thesis is the starting point for what we call *the hiddenness of God*, which is Luther’s epistemological foundation for the theology of the cross.

“Now it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross.”²⁰ Physically God’s presence destroys sinful humans (Ex 33:18-20), intellectually our attempts to find him in nature lead to idolatry (Ro 1:20-23), and spiritually our natures despise and run from him (Ro 8:7). How does God ultimately reveal himself, then? Through Christ on the cross. This symbol of shame and defeat is actually where God’s power is made most manifest. The Holy Spirit through the means of grace reveals to the Christian that this cross is not as it seems. It is in fact the highpoint of human history, the moment to which all human history was either building up

¹⁵ Harold Grimm, Introduction to “Heidelberg Disputation,” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 31, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann. American Edition. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 37.

¹⁶ Luther does refer to *theologians* of the cross. See fn. 23. According to Loewenich, Luther explores the hiddenness of God in greatest detail in his *Bondage of the Will*. Walther von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, trans. Herbert J.A. Bouman (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976), 31. But as the focal thesis in his theology of the cross, it is plainer nowhere else than where it may have first appeared in Luther’s writings, the Heidelberg Disputation.

¹⁸ Luther, “Disputation,” 39.

¹⁹ Luther, “Disputation,” 40.

²⁰ Luther, “Disputation,” 52–53.

or looking back. Why? Hidden behind that cross God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ Jesus, pronouncing that we are justified through Christ's death.²¹

The implications of this kind of theology on the church are as mysterious and counter-intuitive as the theology itself. We expect God to reveal himself to his chosen people in power and glory, but he comes to us hidden in a few words and simple elements. We expect our lives to be like the Risen Savior's, but instead we are called to carry our own crosses like the crucified Christ. To the world, our simple works that Christ counts to us as righteousness look worthless, and the works of the unbeliever, no matter how wonderful they appear to be, are nothing in the sight of God.²² The mark of the true Church seems morbid to the world: joy through suffering, life through death, and freedom through submission to our own crosses. Yet these are the things we revel in and seek to remember daily, things utterly hidden to the world, as God remains hidden to it,²³ and as our Christian lives remain hidden in him.²⁴

And so at the heart of Confessional Lutheran epistemology is this truth: *Things are not what they seem*. And the most central paradox is the cross. The cross is history's greatest victory. Combined with the resurrection, it is all that is needed for *Christus Victor*, which Luther rediscovered through his meditations on the Great Exchange.²⁵ To be a theologian of the cross, then, is to embrace that what looks like the greatest of defeats is in fact the greatest of victories. And no servant is greater than his master. This principle applies to us, the Church of the End Times, just as much. What looks like an Age of Defeat, what seems to be a Church abandoned by Christ's ascension, what appear to be lambs ready for the slaughter—all these things we will find are not what they seem.

²¹And where is the *last* place we will find God? In the religious person striving to do good works. Luther calls the chief error of the Catholic Church the fact that "they call the good of the cross evil and the evil of a deed good." Luther, "Disputation," 53.

²²"The theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil; the theologian of the cross calls things what they are." Luther, "Disputation," 40.

²³"A theologian of the cross (that is, one who speaks of the crucified and hidden God) teaches that punishments, crosses, and death are the most precious treasury of all and the most sacred relics which the Lord of this theology himself has consecrated and blessed... Indeed fortunate and blessed is he who is considered by God to be so worthy that these treasures of Christ should be given to him" (Martin Luther, "Explanation of the Disputation Concerning the Value of Indulgences," *Luther's Works*. Vol. 31, 225ff.

²⁴"Why is the life of the Christian a hidden one? Very simply because it is a life of faith... The Christian life can never be fully identified with the empirical life that we lead. The Christian life is an object of faith and, as such, it is hidden. What we see is never the real thing; only God and faith see this innermost core" Loewenich, 114.

²⁵"...he taught that God's Word had effected an exchange of the righteousness and life of Christ for the sin and death of the fallen human creature. In this manner Luther gathered together the fundamental elements of the Christus Victor and Vicarious Satisfaction atonement motifs. He applied them to the daily life of the believer as it is lived out of God's baptismal intervention into the life of the individual believer." Robert Kolb, *The Christian Faith: A Lutheran Exposition*, electronic ed. (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 154–155.

Part 2. The End Times: Things Are Not as They Seem. We Are Victorious.

A THOUSAND YEARS

Revelation is the opposite of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes tells us that, under the sun, as life appears to us without any consideration of God and his providence and his plan of salvation; as life appears in all its mundanity, marked by sin and the consequences of sin, everything is meaningless. Revelation, though, declares that from God's above-the-sun perspective, everything—*everything*—in life is more meaningful than you could possibly imagine. God gives John a wild vision of angelic warfare, dragons and monsters, punishment poured out in torrents, and cities descending from the sky. Why? To make it as clear as possible: *Things are not as they seem.*

Revelation is, to borrow a phrase from C.S. Lewis, a pulling back of the veil of familiarity.²⁶ The epistle bears her name based on her first words, Ἀποκάλυψις²⁷ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, the *apocalypse* (or *disclosure* or *revelation* or *making known*) of Jesus Christ. It is a revelation of Jesus Christ in both the fact that Jesus *reveals* it, and that the revelation is *about* Jesus and his bride, the Church. But it is at heart a *disclosing*, a making known of something otherwise hidden. Now Christ had already made known the general outline of the End Times to his Church. So why is this revelation given once again, but in this different and quite distinct mode or genre? Certainly, it reinforces the facts of the End Times. But perhaps there is something to learn from the mode itself? In contrast to what Christians were seeing with their physical eyes, Christ provides a different kind of seeing. To a Church that *looks* like it is failing, like at any moment they will be snuffed out, Christ provides a glimpse into what otherwise remains unseen, but without a doubt is *really* going on. Louis Brighton, in his Confessional Lutheran commentary, summarizes what Revelation discloses:

Thus the overarching and dominating theme of Revelation is the unveiling of Christ in his exalted glory as the reigning Lord. Before the eyes of the assembled worshipping Christians, the divine presence and the glory of the Savior and Lord is revealed. The Lord Christ, because of his exalted enthronement at the right hand of God, by right of his death and resurrection (5:1-14), now rules everything for the sake of his church on earth. This is the faith and comfort of

²⁶ C.S. Lewis, "On Stories," *The C.S. Lewis Collection: Essays and Speeches*, electronic ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 2017).

²⁷ The term ἀποκάλυψις is actually quite common in the New Testament. E.g., Lk 2:32; Gal 1:12; Eph 1:17; 1 Cor 2:4. The context is almost always referring to divine inspiration regarding the gospel. Romans 16:25-27 "Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation [ἀποκάλυψιν] of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen."

*the church: her Lord rules over all history, all events, over sin and evil, the devil, suffering and death and hell.*²⁸

Or more simply as Luther put it: “we see here in this book, that through and beyond all plagues, beasts, and evil angels Christ is nonetheless with his saints, and wins the final victory.”²⁹ To a Church feeling like lambs being led to the slaughter, the Holy Spirit has one word: *Victory*. And not just a future victory, but a *present* one. Things are not as they seem.

If Revelation has a climax, it is chapter 20, which commentators often call the most disputed chapter in the epistle. But it is only confusing for those who forget the theology of the cross, that Christ reveals victory where we only see defeat.

And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. ² He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. ³ He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended (Rev 20:1-3a).

The confusion lies in what to do with these thousand years. Is it an actual thousand years? Chapter 19 described the defeat of Satan and Christ coming in final judgment, so does this thousand-year period take place *after* Christ’s second return? To my mind Confessional Lutherans have always answered both questions *No*.³⁰ They follow in the tradition of Augustine³¹ and the *amillennialists*³² present since the Apostolic Fathers.

Today, why do so many outside of Confessional Lutheranism have trouble envisioning these thousand years as the present End Times period? Because Revelation states that in this era *Satan can no longer deceive the nations*. And this seems utterly implausible, that Satan right now is bound and unable to deceive the nations. As Robert Mounce, an Evangelical, writes in his commentary, “The elaborate measures taken to ensure his custody are most easily understood

²⁸ Louis A. Brighton, *Revelation*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 9.

²⁹ Martin Luther, “Preface to the Revelation of St. John [II] 1546 (1530),” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 35, 411.

³⁰ See John Theodore Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*, electronic ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 623–624.

³¹ Augustine, *City of God* 20.9 trans. Gerald Walsh and Grace Monahan. FC 14. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1954), quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament XII, Revelation*, ed. William C. Weinrich (Intervarsity Press, 2005) 327. Also see Brighton, *Revelation*, 554.

³² To my knowledge, writings by amillennialists within the apostolic age have not survived. Yet, their opponents testify to their presence. For example, Justin Martyr wrote, “I and many others are of this opinion [premillennialism], and [believe] that such will take place, as you assuredly are aware; but, on the other hand, I signified to you that many who belong to the pure and pious faith, and are true Christians, think otherwise.” “Dialogue with Trypho,” *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1., trans. Marcus Dods, George Reith (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), ch. 80. With Augustine and after, amillennialism appears to become the mainstream view.

as implying the complete cessation of his influence on earth (rather than curbing his activities).”³⁴ This leads Mounce towards a millennial interpretation.

He is right that the emphasis is not on *curbing*, but on the complete cessation of his influence. But teaching that there is a complete cessation of his influence does not preclude us from an amillennial interpretation. After all, when Jesus died on the cross, did he simply *curb* Satan’s power, or did he actually defeat him? Is there a complete victory that we can speak of? Does the Good Shepherd keep the wolves away only in a limited sense, or are we *actually* safe in his hands? Can we truly sing, as Luther taught us, “This world’s prince may still scowl fierce as he will, he can harm us *none*”?

The rest of Scripture makes it clear that *in some very real sense* Satan is truly bound even now, and the binding flows from Christ’s death and resurrection.³⁵ Paul declares (and note the past tenses): “For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:13-14). You *have already* been rescued from Satan’s dominion of darkness. The writer to the Hebrews declares, “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death” (Heb 2:14,15). What did Jesus accomplish through his incarnation? He broke the power of *him*, of Satan, and has *freed* you.

“But,” you might respond, “isn’t the unbelieving world still under the dominion of Satan?” In a certain sense, true enough. But they do not have to be, not in the End Times Age of the Gospel. Paul recounts Jesus’ words to him at his conversion and commissioning: “I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (Acts 26:17,18). When the Evangelist proclaims the gospel, and the Holy Spirit does his work, what is happening? There is an immediate deliverance taking place *from the power of Satan* to God. Satan

³⁴ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 361, 362.

³⁵ If the key in 20:1 is the same key as 1:18, ch3, which it probably is, the angel is Christ, which directly connects us to his death and resurrection. “If we have been correct in generally identifying 20:1 with the preceding ‘key’ passages, which concern inter-advent realities, then the binding and the millennium are best understood as Christ’s authority restraining the devil in some manner during the church age. This means that the restraint of Satan is a direct result of Christ’s resurrection. If so, the *binding, expulsion, and fall* of Satan can be seen in other NT passages that affirm with the same terms (“bind,” “cast,” etc.) that the decisive defeat of the devil occurred at Christ’s death and resurrection (Matt 12:29; Mark 3:27; Luke 10:17-19; John 12:31-33; Col. 2:15; Heb 2:14).” G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999) 985.

no longer has power over the converted.³⁶ A new soul has joined the ranks of the Millennial reign. In fact, the gospel is the *only* thing we know of that has the power to deliver someone from the dominion of Satan.³⁷ The gospel defeats Satan's attempts to deceive. As Martin Franzmann (Northwestern College and Concordia, St. Louis professor) puts it:

*For these 'thousand years' Satan is confined to that dark abode of impotence. He has lost the aura of invincibility that was his before the Messianic Child was born. Then, he was thrust from his place as accuser, to which God's wrath on man's sin assigned him; now that he is bound, he is seen as the pseudopower he really is, a power that can deceive only those who choose to be deceived.*³⁸

You were right to sing of partaking in "the Lamb's High Feast" even now.³⁹ These thousand years, "is truly the Sabbath day (Heb 4:7-9) of the earth's existence and history, the messianic age of blessedness and rest during which the human race has an opportunity to hear the Gospel message of the Savior, Jesus Christ."⁴⁰ Brothers and sisters, this is the Age that we find ourselves in *right now*.

³⁶ "On the true meaning of the 'binding of Satan for a thousand years' (Rev. 20:2) Scripture gives all needed information. It teaches that all mankind is in the power of Satan because of its burden of guilt. But Christ by His propitiatory death has put an end to this lordship of Satan. As He enters upon His Passion, Christ Himself interprets its significance, saying: "Now shall the prince of this world be cast out [ἐκβληθήσεται ἔξω]" (John 12:31; 16:11). For the individual the reign of the devil ends, and the devil accordingly is bound, the very moment that man is converted through faith in the Gospel, that is, through believing that Christ fully expiated man's sin." Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, electronic ed., vol. 3 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 523–524.

³⁷ Note Jude 6, "And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home—these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day." "The context tells us that it is a chain which prevents the devil from deceiving the nations any longer, that is, it prevents, or hinders, the devil in his attempts to lead men astray into eternal damnation. From the Bible we know of only one thing that can do this. It is the preaching of the gospel, the 'Good News' that the Son of God was manifested to destroy the works of the devil (2 Jn 3:8)... So long as the gospel is preached to the nations, the devil will be hindered in his attempt to deceive the nations. The more widely and the more purely the gospel is proclaimed, the shorter Satan's chain becomes." Siegbert Becker, *Revelation* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1985), 298. "The binding of Satan (v. 2) denotes the period of the New Testament dispensation. By His death Christ virtually delivered all men from the power of the devil (Hebr. 2:14. 15). This deliverance is proclaimed in the Gospel (Acts 26:18), and it becomes actual for the individual the moment he believes (Col. 1:13. 14)." Edward Wilhelm August Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine: A Popular Presentation of the Teachings of the Bible*, electronic ed. (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 300.

³⁸ Martin H. Franzmann, *The Revelation of John* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 130-131.

³⁹ "At the Lamb's high feast we sing / praise to our victorious King, / who has washed us in the tide / flowing from his pierced side. Alleluia!... Mighty Victim from the sky, / hell's fierce pow'rs beneath you lie. / You have conquered in the fight, / you have brought us life and light. Alleluia!" Latin, c. 4th-10th cent., alt 17th cent.; trans. Robert Campbell.

⁴⁰ Brighton, *Revelation*, 568.

YOUR KINGDOM COME

After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. ... Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:3,6)⁴¹

Jesus does not give his disciples a direct answer but tells them to wait until they “receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you” (v8a). The power is promised for the express purpose of sending the disciples out as “witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (v8b). What happens after Pentecost, after this Holy Spirit has come upon them? We find the apostles now proclaiming, “the good news of the kingdom of God” (Acts 8:12). This is especially emphasized after the believers are driven out of Jerusalem (Acts 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25). In fact, the very last verse of Acts is about the proclamation of the Kingdom of God reaching Rome: “[Paul] proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!” (Acts 28:31). *The Kingdom of God* acts as an *inclusio* of the entire book of Acts. With this kingdom language, “the record of Acts closes on a triumphant note. ‘Victory of the word of God.’”⁴² This makes clear to us that this *kingdom* is not simply a reference to heaven (although it includes this), but is intimately bound together with the triumph of the preaching of the gospel, and thus with *this* age that we find ourselves in. Acts is quite literally *about* the triumphal establishment of God’s Kingdom through the proclamation of the gospel.

Our Large Catechism states, “The coming of God’s kingdom to us’ takes place in two ways: first, it comes here, in time, through the Word and faith, and second, in eternity, it comes

⁴¹ It seems to me we might be at times too quick to judge the disciples’ words. We think, “After all this time, they still haven’t got it! They still don’t understand what’s going on!” And it is true that “their question reflects a nationalistic concern for Israel’s vindication and the completion of the promise” Jesus had made earlier. Darrell, L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 62. But were they wrong to not be expecting *something* at this point? What *did* they understand correctly? God had accomplished a great victory through Jesus’ death and resurrection. It *was* time for a kingdom to be established. Just not a nationalistic one. Especially within the context of 1:3, Jesus’ promise of the Spirit would obviously have related to eschatological concerns. See Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, Vol 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: 2012), 683. Bruce sees this last question to Jesus and his answer as a turning point for the disciples. “Their present question appears to have been the last flicker of their former burning expectation of an imminent theocracy with themselves as its chief executives. From now on they devoted themselves to the proclamation and service of God’s spiritual kingdom, which men and women enter by repentance and faith.” F.F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, NICNT, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 36.

⁴² Bruce ends his commentary quoting J.A. Bengel. *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* ([Tubingen, 1742] London, 1862), p. 489), quoted in Bruce, *Acts*, 511. Note that some commentators disagree, e.g.: “Acts is not triumphalistic; Paul preaches the Lord’s kingdom but remains in the current human empire’s custody.” Keener, *Acts*, Vol. 4, 3762. Of course, Keener can only be right if the kingdom is of this world.

through the final revelation.”⁴³ For many Christians, when they hear “the kingdom of God,” they gravitate more towards the second, a future heavenly union with God (especially when parallel phrasing includes, as it does in Matthew, “the kingdom of heaven”). But Scripture speaks very clearly on not limiting God’s kingdom to something *later*, but rather something that has come into our world *with Christ*, and especially through his means of grace. Christ himself tells us, “The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is in your midst [or *within you*]” (Luke 17:20,21). Paul describes the nature of this kingdom: “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:13,14). If you are in Christ, you are *already* in Christ’s kingdom, because “the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Ro 14:17).

This kingdom is within us because it is primarily about a *righteousness* that becomes ours through faith, through the work of the Holy Spirit. Christ himself explicitly connects being born again through the means of grace with being in his kingdom: “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5). This is not to say that the concept of “the kingdom of God” isn’t tied to our afterlife, but it is equally tied to our present life in Christ. It is *the beginning* of eternal life, an eternal life that starts now and goes on into eternity. The writer to the Hebrews goes so far as to say that *already* “you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” (Heb 12:22). And for a church body that holds the means of grace so high, we ought not to ever forget this: Through word and sacrament, you have *already* been brought into to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, to the heavenly Jerusalem. Somehow you live *even now*, in the kingdom of God.

At times, when Biblical scholars outside of Confessional Lutheranism shift the emphasis from a future kingdom to God’s work now, they will speak in terms of a vague ongoing “programe.” N.T. Wright’s glossary entry for *kingdom* in his popular *For Everyone* Bible commentary does not even mention faith or conversion.⁴⁵ But for our confessors, the link between *means of grace faith* and the kingdom of God takes center stage: “Christ’s kingdom is spiritual, that is, it is the heart’s knowledge of God, fear of God, faith in God, and the beginning of eternal righteousness and eternal life.”⁴⁶ “‘May your kingdom come.’...How does this come

⁴³ “The Large Catechism,” Third Part: The Lord’s Prayer, The Second Petition. Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand, *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 447.

⁴⁵ Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 309.

⁴⁶ “Apology of the Augsburg Confession,” Article XVI: Political Order, par. 2, *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 231.

about? Answer: Whenever our heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit, so that through his grace we believe his Holy Word and live godly lives here in time and hereafter in eternity.”⁴⁷

Scripture speaks of this kingdom as something that comes with Christ. Although we can understandably equate the kingdom of God with all believers throughout all history, there is something special about the kingdom *now* in this New Testament End Times era. This becomes clear at the ascension of Christ. What is the significance of his ascension? Why did Christ *need* to ascend? Revelation 5 tells us Christ’s reign is a consequence of him having been “found worthy” to reign; he “triumphed” through his being “slain.” This is not just anyone who has triumphed, but “the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David.” This is David’s heir, *King David’s heir*. The *promised* king has arrived.⁴⁸ Having “with your blood purchased” “every tribe and language and people and nation,” Christ the returning king has “made them to be a kingdom” (Rev 5:5,9,10). So, there is a kingdom that comes (for us) causally *after* David’s throne is re-established, but this time established as an eternal throne.

Paul is speaking about the ascension when he tells us that after Christ’s obedience to death on a cross, “God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name” (Phil 2:9). After Christ “descended,” he “ascended” (Eph 4:8,9). After God “seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms,” he now rules “the present age” as well as “the one to come.” Paul continues, “And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church” (Eph 1:20-22). Jesus is ruling all things *right now* for *the good of his church*. To be in the kingdom of God is not simply to *know* Christ, to have faith, but for Christ *to rule all things for you*, the members of his kingdom. As you proclaim the kingdom of God, you live within that kingdom, with a Lord who is ruling all of creation for your good.

⁴⁷ “The Small Catechism,” The Lord’s Prayer, The Second Petition, The Book of Concord, 357. The explanation from our newest Small Catechism: ““What does God tell us about his kingdom?... The kingdom of God is Christ’s rule in our hearts through his Word. How does God’s Kingdom come to us?... God’s kingdom comes as the Holy Spirit works and strengthens faith in our hearts through the means of grace. What are we praying for when we ask that God’s kingdom come to us?... We are praying that God would keep us in our faith and trusting in the gospel promises... We are praying that God reign in our hearts through his Word so that we live to his honor and glory...” Luther’s Small Catechism (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2017) 254-6. Or consider the Apology: “Besides this, the church is the kingdom of Christ, the opposite of the kingdom of the devil. For it is certain that the ungodly are in the power of the devil and are members of the devil’s kingdom, as Paul teaches in Ephesians 2[:2*], when he says that the devil is “now at work among those who are disobedient.” And Christ says [John 8:44*] to the Pharisees, who certainly participated in an external affiliation with the church, that is, with the saints among the people of the Law (for they held office, sacrificed, and taught): “You are from your father the devil.” Thus, the church, which is truly the kingdom of Christ, is precisely speaking the congregation of the saints. For the ungodly are ruled by the devil and are captives of the devil; they are not ruled by the Spirit of Christ.” “Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Articles VII and VIII: The Church,” The Book of Concord, 176.

⁴⁸ Is it a coincidence that the disciples asked, “When will you come into your kingdom,” and then ten days later the first apostolic sermon is about God keeping his promise to re-establish David’s throne? (Acts 2:24-36)

And so, Revelation revives our Christian imaginations, or, as Luther said in his preface to Revelation, makes us “to look upon Christendom with other eyes than those of reason.”⁴⁹ The End Times is about the establishment of the kingdom of God (Rev 5:10). Through Christ’s total victory on the cross, we have entered a new and unique “messianic age of blessedness.”⁵⁰ The ascension marks the beginning of this special establishment of God’s Kingdom. The exercising of the gospel key brings people into the kingdom, and Jesus now rules at the right hand of God for the good of every person within his kingdom. These are the truths we are called to live by. Not only is this a blessed *time* to be alive, but you are living it within the greatest *place* to be alive, the very kingdom of the conquering Christ himself. Only one thing remains to explore. Who are *you* within this End Times Kingdom?

PROPHETS, PRIESTS, AND KINGS

this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ *“In the last days, God says,*

I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy,

your young men will see visions,

your old men will dream dreams.

¹⁸ *Even on my servants, both men and women,*

I will pour out my Spirit in those days,

and they will prophesy.

¹⁹ *I will show wonders in the heavens above*

and signs on the earth below,

blood and fire and billows of smoke.

²⁰ *The sun will be turned to darkness*

and the moon to blood

before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.

²¹ *And everyone who calls*

on the name of the Lord will be saved.’

The crowd asks, “What is going on here?” Peter’s answer: It is the Last Days. It is the End Times. How do we know? Because the Spirit is being poured out on God’s people, and this outpouring has an effect.⁵¹ Metamorphosis. Where moments before were the cowering disciples of the

⁴⁹ Martin Luther, “Preface,” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 35, 410.

⁵⁰ Brighton, *Revelation*, 568.

⁵¹ The pouring out of the Spirit in the End Times was widely established in the OT, not just in Joel. See Isa 42:1; 44:3; 59:21; Ezek 36:24-28; 37:14; 39:29.

gospels, now appears an army of prophets wielding the living and active Word of God, the apostle-prophets of the Book of Acts. This is what the gospel does: It transforms. Here at the beginning of the book of Acts, Luke draws attention to how it transforms the citizens of God's kingdom into long-awaited End Time prophets, prophets who will take the gospel message of the kingdom of God to the ends of the earth.⁵²

Although in the days of the apostles there may have been a special office of “prophet” (Eph 4:11; 1Cor 13:2), does not every Christian “have the prophetic message as something completely reliable”? (2Pe 1:19). Commenting on this verse, Luther writes,

Now those who believe in Christ are all prophets; for they have the real and chief qualification prophets should have, even though they do not all have the gift of foretelling the future. For just as through faith we are brothers of the Lord Christ, kings, and priests, so we are also all prophets through Christ. For we can all state what pertains to salvation, God's glory, and a Christian life. In addition, we can also talk about future events insofar as it is necessary for us to know about them. For example, we can say that the Last Day will come and that we will rise from the dead. Furthermore, we understand all Scripture.”⁵³

After Elijah had met Ahab and his prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel; after God had sent a fireball from heaven to consume sacrifice, stones, and soil; after God slaughtered the false prophets; after God miraculously ended the drought; after the Spirit of the Lord had come on Elijah to make him run faster than chariots; after all of these incredible demonstrations of God's power and care for his prophet, the unbelieving Queen Jezebel sends one threatening letter to Elijah, and Elijah cries out in despair and fear, “they are trying to kill me!” (1 Kgs 19:10). Every Sunday school child who hears this account comes to the same conclusion. In the words of my seven-year-old daughter, “Elijah is acting silly.” How much more so for the prophets of God today who hold in their hands *all of God's Special Revelation*, who, as Luther says, “understand all Scripture,” who know *Christ*? The only difference between you and Elijah is that *you know more*: You prophesy the whole of Scriptures. The name of *prophet* belongs to you just as much as to that Elijah who stood beside Christ at his transfiguration. You are the prophets sent out by God “before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord” (Acts 2:20).

⁵² “For Luke the sign of the age to come is the presence of the Spirit... Luke sees in these words an adumbration of the worldwide Gentile mission, even if Peter could not have realized their full import when he quoted them on the day of Pentecost.” (Bruce, *Acts*, 61) “...that passage in Joel describes the kingdom of Christ that will exist spiritually... ‘all who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved’—that is justification by faith, as if Peter were saying, ‘This will be the kingdom of the Messiah, because faith in him justifies sinners and snatches them out of the kingdom of darkness or of Satan.’... So you see how strongly by this sermon Peter urges knowledge of Christ and his kingdom, which exists spiritually.” “*Annotationes in Acta*, B6r-v,” Justus Jonas, *Reformation Commentary on Scripture*, New Testament VI: Acts, ed. Esther Chung-Kim and Todd R. Hains (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 26.

⁵³ Martin Luther, “Sermons on the Second Epistle of St. Peter,” *Luther's Works*, Vol. 30, 165.

And Luther not only calls you prophets, but also priests.⁵⁴ Because Christ and his apostles not only call you prophets, but also priests. The nation of Israel was declared a kingdom of priests (Ex 19:6). But that Old Testament kingdom has been transformed into a New Testament kingdom; its priesthood included.⁵⁵ Peter declares, “you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1Pe 2:5). What are these acceptable sacrifices? Surely it includes all the good works attributed to us in light of Christ’s righteousness. But Peter particularly makes note of declaring the gospel: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1Pe 2:9). Paul’s use of the term is similar:

Yet I have written you quite boldly on some points to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles. He gave me the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God (Rom 15:15-17).

It is *proclaiming the gospel to the whole world* that is our highest duty, the greatest manifestation of our new priestly status in Christ. The priests of this End Times era do not point ahead with their sacrifices, but instead point back to a single sacrifice (Heb 10:11-14). The priests of this End Times disclose to the whole world “the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations” (Col 1:26).

In fact, at the foundational level of Revelation is this message, that the Lamb found worthy has “purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation,” and that he has “made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God” (Rev 5:9-10).⁵⁶ The declaration of the church as Christ’s priesthood nearly bookend Revelation: At the beginning,

⁵⁴ Although it is widely acknowledged that Luther was reviving what had once been alive in the patristic era in calling the laity the universal priesthood, the *Historical Dictionary of Lutheranism* writes, “The full implications of this concept of common priesthood, one of the significant historical achievements of the Reformation, were seldom realized in Lutheran history and in that of other traditions.” The dictionary attributes Pietism for renewed interest in calling Christians priests. Gunther Gassmann, *Historical Dictionary of Lutheranism* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011), 347.

⁵⁵ “Under the old dispensation, the priesthood and the kingship were two different things. No one could be both a king and a priest. But afterwards came the gospel, which united these two offices in Christ. From this it follows that the people whom he has chosen will be both royal and priestly at the same time.” Didymus the Blind (c.313-398), PG 39:1763, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture XI: James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, Jude*, ed. Gerald Bray, (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2000), 87.

⁵⁶ “The fact that his people fulfill their royal reign as priests suggests that the purpose of God’s kingdom on earth is an intercessory one. That is, through the proclamation of the redemptive victory of the Lamb, God’s royal priests on earth hold up before his heavenly throne the atonement or blood covering, as they point people through it to the mercy of God.” Brighton, *Revelation*, 142.

John declares that Christ, “has made us into a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father,” and at the climax, describing the Church in the thousand years, God reveals “they will be priests of God and of Christ.” Especially given the context of Revelation, whether in God’s throne room or in his End Times kingdom, the point is that God’s priests, dwelling in his presence, are *safe*.⁵⁷

And Luther not only calls you prophets and priests, but also kings. Because that is also what you are. In Revelation 20, in addition to the thousand-year reign of Christ we find ourselves in, God reveals one more important detail about this End Times period: It is not only Christ who reigns, but his *Christians*, you and I, as well.⁵⁸ This mirrors what we find in Revelation 5, where the hosts of heaven declare that Christ has made “persons from every tribe and language and people and nation” into those who “will reign on the earth” (Rev 5:10). We may be familiar with the teaching that we will one day reign with Christ in Judgment and into eternity,⁵⁹ but have we the courage to imagine the reign beginning *now*, in *this* lifetime, in *this* age, as Revelation says: on *the earth*?

Our Confessional Lutheran theologians have the courage: “Those who live and reign with Christ during the millennium because of ‘the first resurrection’ (Rev 20:5-6) are the whole company of God’s saints, the faithful followers of Christ, both the church militant and the church triumphant in heavenly glory. The church militant reigns with Christ even now on earth (7:1-8; 14:1-5; 20:4).”⁶⁰ Somehow, even while the Church is under a veil of tears, “there is for them even now a reign with Christ ‘to the close of the age’ (Matt 28:20); for a ‘thousand years’ they are permitted to extend the reign of the Lord whose resurrection they share.”⁶¹ “Every member of the church is a king. Perhaps for this reason neither heaven nor earth is mentioned as the scene of the thrones in this vision. Their symbolism has application to both, inasmuch as some of the kings are still on earth, some are already in heaven, and some may be as yet unborn.”⁶² Even Augustine, sixteen-hundred years ago, knew this truth. *The City of God* was written in part to declare this truth, that even when earthly kings pass away, the *City of God* is ruled even now by Christ’s kings on earth, his Church:

For not only in that future kingdom ... but even now those saints reign with him in some authentic though vastly inferior fashion. To them he said, ‘Behold, I am with you always, even

⁵⁷ Cf. Becker, *Revelation*, 98-99.

⁵⁸ “What the Second Psalm says only of Christ, Christ Himself in Rev. 2:26–27 ascribes to all that are His: “He that overcometh and keepeth My works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations; and he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers; even as I received of My Father.” Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3, 523.

⁵⁹ 2 Tim 2:12; Rev 22:5.

⁶⁰ Brighton, *Revelation*, 569.

⁶¹ Franzmann, *The Revelation of John*, 129-130.

⁶² Luther Poellot, *Revelation* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1976), 260.

*to the consummation of the world.’...Consequently the church, even in this world, here and now, is the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of heaven. Here and now Christ’s saints reign with him.*⁶³

How, exactly, are we kings and queens? Our Confessional Lutheran theology adds more depth and beauty to this truth. Kings and queens do not simply rule. They *judge*. How do Christians partake in this royal activity? Luther Poellot, in his commentary, sees the activity of judgment as the use of the keys (Matt 18:28):

*An important and significant part of the function of the church in the world, then, is to speak up and speak out fearlessly against sin whenever and wherever it may be found or of whatever nature it may be—be it among the high and mighty, whose favor we are tempted to curry, or be it at the grass roots, among the masses, where the foundations of society and civilization begin to crumble.*⁶⁴

What, after all, is the activity of the keys? It is the divine activity of the Christ, the King that sits at the right hand of God, going about his business of ruling: locking and unlocking, welcoming his citizens in, and keeping the enemy out of the kingdom. This task he has charged to his spiritual kings and queens on earth, his wielders of Law and Gospel for the good of his kingdom. When you share Law and Gospel, things are not as they seem. A king, a queen, opens or closes gates to eternal kingdoms.⁶⁵

Friends, is there a better time in all of history to be alive? You live in the thousand-year triumph of Christ. You live in his kingdom even now, ruled by him who sits at the right hand of God, ruling all things for your good. And he has not made you ordinary citizens. The Prophet, the Priest, the King has made you his own mighty prophets, priests, and kings. He releases you into the world with his Holy Spirit poured out on you. You are armed with the keys to the kingdom. You wield God’s living and active directly inspired revelation. You *reign* with him.

The unchurched and heterodox Christians of this world must see you respond to the dread, fear, and anger of this age with a Confessional Lutheran End Times mentality. For you, this is *not* an age of dread, fear, and anger. For you, this is the thousand-year reign of Christ.

⁶³ Augustine, *City of God* 20.9, quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament XII, Revelation*, 327, 328.

⁶⁴ Poellot, *Revelation*, 261.

⁶⁵ “For just as “to loose” means to forgive sins, so also “to bind” means not to forgive sins. For Christ is talking of a spiritual kingdom.” “Apology of the Augsburg Confession,” Article XII: Repentance, par. 176. *The Book of Concord*, 218.

Part 3. Application: Live as If Things Are Not as They Seem. Act Victorious.

SUFFER DIFFERENTLY

We are in the age of Christ's thousand-year reign, his kingdom is even now coming, and he has enlisted and equipped us as prophets, priests, and kings in this present age and in his holy kingdom. Of course, we understand that, according to the theology of the cross, it doesn't *look* like any of this "under the sun." But it is true, and living within these truths make us live differently. The theology of the cross leads to carrying *our* crosses. And it is *how* we carry our crosses that we declare Christ's victory to the world. In this unique moment in recent history, one with such a palpable growing feeling of dread, where the spirit of the age characterizes our culture as *one at war*, there is most certainly a God-given Lutheran moment for you and I to demonstrate the truth that in a very real sense we are not at war.⁶⁶ Christ reigns, and we reign with him, even while we carry our crosses.

It is where he calls us Christ's priesthood, that we find Peter encouraging us to carry our crosses—that is, suffer for the name of Christ—differently. And when we respond to suffering in a way different than the unbelieving world responds to suffering, God's kingdom grows. Peter writes,

2:11 Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.¹² Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.^{13a} Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake...

3:9a Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called...^{3:14} But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.¹⁵ But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect. (1 Peter 2-3, selections)

Here Peter lays out for us God's simple plan for how evangelism works under the cross:

Step 1. You will do good. "Abstain from sinful desires" (2:11). "Live such good lives among the pagans" (2:12). This, of course, is a given. You are called to follow God's law. And this will not make you stick out in any special way in your culture either. Everyone has some moral code that they follow, whether Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, or atheist. After all, the natural knowledge of God has made God's law present, albeit imperfectly, in the hearts of all

⁶⁶ This is not to say we are *not* the Church Militant. We certainly are in comparison to the Church Triumphant. But we are simultaneously holding side-by-side the teaching that we "wage war" (2 Cor 10:3, cf. also 1 Pet 2:11) while at the same time "we are more than conquerors" (1 Cor 8:37).

people. So you will do what God's law calls you to do, both obeying his law and gently but firmly pointing out sin when you see it. This will include engaging in the apologetic tasks of our time. When the postmodernist says there are only relative truths ("*your truth*"), you will boldly proclaim that truth is objective and is found most objectively in God's Word. When the Critical Theorist claims all knowledge is socially constructed to benefit the oppressor, you will boldly proclaim divine Revelation is *not* socially constructed and in fact liberates. When the radical libertarian says that each person is a sovereign over him or herself, you will boldly proclaim that God alone is sovereign, that each life belongs to him. When the humanist says that only matter exists, you will boldly proclaim that God created both matter and spirit, that there is most certainly and most importantly an immaterial reality. And you will do this without becoming a "soldier... entangled in civilian affairs" (2 Tim 2:3) The Confessional Lutheran knows better than any other branch of Christendom that we do not pick and choose which biblical truth to stand on.

Step 2. They will call you evil. "...they accuse you of doing wrong" (2:12). Here things get interesting. Peter says you will *do good*, and the response is you will be *called evil*. To the unbelieving world, there will be times when God's law and the biblical worldview will appear as evil to their darkened minds and hearts. And so there ought to be nothing surprising about Christians being called *evil* by the people in their culture, and then treated as if they are evil. When this happens, praise God as you acknowledge that his plan for evangelism under the cross is working. And of course, we cannot help seeing our Savior's passion in this. "He was assigned a grave with the wicked ... though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth" (Isa 53:9). "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (1Pe 2:21).

Step 3. You will bless them. "Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called" (3:9). This is the big one. When you do good but then are treated like you are evil, the pain you are experiencing, of course, is "the pain of unjust suffering" (2:19). It is *unjust*. Yet, we have no problems being treated unjustly, because, like Christ, we can entrust ourselves to the one who judges justly (1Pe 2:23). After all, *things are not as they seem!* Despite the experience of injustice, what is actually the case? You are living in the era of the Christ, the thousand years when Christ reigns in power. You are *even in the midst of your sufferings* in the kingdom of God. You know that Christ has *already* triumphed over the powers of evil, and so whatever evil you are experiencing "for a little while" (1Pe 1:6) is being transformed into a blessing (1Pe 3:13) that ends in "praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1Pe 1:7). And until then, "the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer" (1Pe 3:12).

And so you will bless them. When you are called evil, immoral, oppressive, toxic, sexist, bigoted, racist, homophobic, transphobic, or cruel, you will calmly respond, "I stand by what God's Word says, but also know that I love you and forgive you, and I will pray that God blesses

you. I will do everything in my power to help other people love you. And if the opportunity ever presents itself, I pray God gives me the strength and courage to die for you.”

Step 4. They will ask, “Why?” “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1Pe 3:15). Peter tells us that when we respond to mistreatment with blessing, people will ask, “Why are you doing this? Why, after all I’ve said about you and done to you, are you blessing me? How could you wish me well when I’m doing so much ill to you?” And Peter says *this is what it is all about. This is the moment you’ve been waiting for.* When you show Christ through your actions, this will lead to the best opportunities to talk about Christ. We most often hear 1 Peter 3:15 used as a *sedes* for apologetics, for being prepared to give an *apologia*. And it most certainly has implications for apologetics. But the context really is not best described as apologetics. The context is really *carrying your cross*. When you suffer for Christ’s name *and yet you bless those making you suffer*, the result will be an audience that needs to know why you are acting so unlike the world.

Step 5. Be ready to give an answer. They will need to know why you are acting so unlike the world. And you will tell them you are acting in a very small way like Christ. You will do this with gentleness and respect, but yet with confidence. Because you know that *things are not as they seem*. You know you are safe and cared for by Christ who is alive and reigning. And you will be ready to do this. You will have planned it out. You will have practiced ahead of time. Because *you knew it was coming*.

Just consider how someone caught up in the dread, fear, and anger of our times would respond to a Christian who faces suffering this way.

COUNSEL DIFFERENTLY

Knowing that we are in the Victorious End Times makes us suffer differently. It also makes us counsel differently. In a culture riddled with anxiety and depression and unabated anger, you can share unshakeable certain truths that can lead to gratitude, peace, and joy. Christian counsellor Rick Loewen of Crosstrain Ministries and myself have developed a uniquely Confessional Lutheran summary of truths that you have the power to share and realign faulty thoughts with. Some of our truths include the following:

- To a Christian catastrophizing about the future, uncertain about how things will turn out, you have the power to say, “*It will be alright, you are safe, this will end well.*” Why? Because he or she is a precious child of God, called by God into his family, and “we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28).
- To the Christian who thinks his struggles with sin preclude him from the family of God, you have the power to say, “*You are a saint who sins.* The good you want to do, you often won’t do, and the evil you don’t want to do, you often will do. But there is no

condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom 7:24-25; 8:1). You are not defined by those sins. You are still a saint in God's eyes.

- To the Christian who feels completely surrounded and at the mercy of the forces of evil, you have the power to say, "*You are a victor, not a victim. We are more than conquerors through him who loved us*" (Rom 8:38).
- To the Christian who has lost a sense of purpose in life, you have the power to say, "*Your purpose in life is to serve, not to be served. Consider the vocations God has already given you, and serve one another humbly in love*" (Gal 5:14).

For the Christians who have been convinced by culture that there are no longer any certainties, no longer any firm ground, no longer anything completely trustworthy, God sends you as his advocate with the certainty, the firm foundation, the complete trustworthy Word of God. You, wielding the certain Scriptures, are exactly what this uncertain world needs right now. You are the counsellor that is most needed. Because you are really God's End Times prophet in the form of a counsellor.

LEAD DIFFERENTLY

The Bible teaches us that there will be lots of events that happen in life that we cannot control. God is deeply interested in how we respond to these events, and how those thoughts shape our feelings *about* the events. Consider the following account about Elisha's view of an event with his servant Gehazi's view. Elisha had angered the Arameans, and so they sent out an army to kill him. Knowing he was in the city of Dothan with his servant, the Aramean army surrounded the city. The account continues:

[The Arameans] went by night and surrounded the city [of Dothan]. When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. "Oh no, my lord! What shall we do?" the servant asked.

"Don't be afraid," the prophet answered. "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them" (2 Kgs 6:14b-16)

Elisha and Gehazi were both watching the same events unfold in front of them. Yet at first the two had very different feelings about the event: Gehazi was terrified, but Elisha was calm and fearless. Why? Because they were both thinking different thoughts about the events before them. Gehazi was thinking something like, "We're going to be overpowered and killed by this army!" Elisha was thinking, "There's no way we're going to be overpowered and killed by this army." Same event, but different thoughts about the event, and so different feelings. Gehazi had a distorted view of the world, but Elisha didn't. Elisha's thought, "There's no way we're going to be overpowered and killed by this army," was true. We know this because the account continues: "And Elisha prayed, "Open his eyes, Lord, so that he may see." Then the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha"

(2 Kgs 6:17). Elisha knew the armies of God were present, protecting Elisha and Gehazi. No human army has any chance against the armies of God, so Elisha and Gehazi were safe.

Interestingly, we're not told that Elisha saw the army. We only know that Gehazi's eyes were enabled to see the army. Elisha didn't need to have his eyes enabled to see the army, because he knew that *things are not as they seem*. Elisha knew what God's Word tells us about what the world is really like for believers. Even though it looked like they were alone, Elisha knew what God had revealed to his children before: God had said to Abraham, "I am your shield" (Gen 15:1). God had said to Joshua, "Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go" (Josh 1:9). God had inspired David to declare, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me" (Ps 23:4). Elisha didn't need to see the army. Elisha knew the truth revealed to him in God's Word: His God was there, directing, protecting, and shielding him. And so, Elisha could lead as a pillar of confidence, coolness, and poise.

Our Confessional Lutheran theology gives us the ability to be the Elishas of our communities rather than the Gehazis. We do not need miraculous intervention to make us pillars of confidence, coolness, and poise. Because we are heirs of the theology of the cross: We know that *things are not as they seem*. The only difference between you and Elisha is that you know way more than Elisha. You have *all* of God's special revelation. You have the *epistle of John's Revelation!* You have received the vision of the thousand-year reign of Christ! You know the devil is on his leash. You believe John's words that you have *already* overcome the evil one. You know that you are actually right now a resident of God's Kingdom. You now stand tall and sure, a prophet of God, a priest of God, a king of the King of Kings. You now stand in that "spiritual peace and rest that the Messiah will bring to his people."⁶⁷ So be at peace. To a world marked by discord, strife, and conflict, model that peace that transcends all understanding. And watch his kingdom come.

⁶⁷ Becker writes of "a spiritual peace and rest that the Messiah will bring to his people. The New Testament teaches us very clearly that this kingdom was firmly established before the apostles died (e.g., Mk 9:1)." Becker, *Revelation*, 306. See also Isa 2:4, Php 4:7, Rom 8:21.