

# “You Will See My Back”: A Lutheran Approach to History

By Mark Braun

In the aftermath of the Golden Calf incident in the history of ancient Israel, Moses on Mt. Sinai pleaded with the LORD not to abandon His original plan to lead the Israelites through the wilderness to the Promised Land. The LORD allowed Moses the opportunity to act as intercessor for the sons of Jacob, and when at last He relented and said, “I will go with you,” Moses, in a burst unself-conscious exuberance, blurted out, “**Now show me your glory**”—in other words, “Let me see what You are really like, with no veil, no vision to obscure Your nature.”

The LORD answered Moses, “**There is a place where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back, but my face must not be seen**” (Exodus 33:12-23).

In the next chapter, the LORD placed Moses in the cleft and He proclaimed: “**The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation**” (Exodus 34:5-7). God reveals Himself to us most clearly in His Word, in the proclamation of law and gospel. But we can also see God’s will and ways with us by observing His **back side**, how He has operated on the pages of history.

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Professor August Pieper, in *The Glory of the LORD*, wrote:

There is a way of beholding God’s glory, his way and counsel, his thoughts and plans. It consists in this, that one looks after God from behind when he has already passed by. This is the knowledge of God’s ways and thoughts drawn from the past history of the great deeds of God in behalf of his people. . . .

In a certain sense we speak quite properly of an evolution of things, except that with our tiny reason we are not able to foresee its extent and goal in advance. Even as the world has not called itself into being by itself, so it also does not evolve by itself. There is another who drives the wheel and does everything that transpires in, under, and above the heavens, both the great and the small. And even as the works of nature on the earth and in the heavens declare the glory of the great God, so also the footsteps of God are everywhere and at all times unmistakably imprinted as his and no one else’s upon the history of mankind in things great and small, there for anyone who wants to recognize them and is able to read them aright.<sup>1</sup>

## Eight Points from Lutheran historians

In summer 2007, my colleagues in the History Department of Wisconsin Lutheran College—Drs. Glen Thompson and Paul Beck and Profs. Patrick Steele and Aaron Palmer—sought to define what constitutes a Lutheran perspective on history. In the course of their conversations they enlisted the help of my fellow

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<sup>1</sup> August Pieper, “The Glory of the LORD,” in *The Wauwatosa Theology*, ed. Curtis A. Jahn (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 2:475-76.

members of the Religious Studies Department—Drs. Paul Lehninger, and Joel Pless, Prof. Charles Cortright—and me for assistance. The result was an eight-point summation of a distinctively Lutheran viewpoint on history. With minor adjustments, I use their outline as the skeleton for this presentation.

*1) God is the creator and ruler of the universe. He is the Lord of history, always in control of the world's events.*

“Don’t know much about history,” Sam Cooke wrote in 1958, in a song re-popularized by Herman’s Hermits in 1965. Many of our students—and maybe many teachers—share that view. History appears to be little more than a dreary recitation of kings and wars and dates and movements; Beaver Cleaver said history was “mostly killin’ people.”<sup>2</sup> History often reveals human beings at their worst, offering, as Edward Gibbon wrote, “little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind.”<sup>3</sup> The winners write history, they say, so who knows whether what we so confidently repeat as “the facts” are in fact a correct recounting of what actually occurred? We like to cite Santayana’s line that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,”<sup>4</sup> but George Bernard Shaw countered, “We learn from history that we learn nothing from history.”<sup>5</sup> If not best, Henry Ford at least said it in the fewest words: “History is more or less bunk!”<sup>6</sup>

Yet St. Paul, referencing selected events in the history of the ancient Israelites, concluded, **These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come ( Corinthians 10:11). Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us**, Paul insisted, **so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope (Romans 15:4)**. Going farther back, we see that, before the LORD ever gave Israel His commands and decrees at Sinai, He reminded them of His gracious intervention on their behalf, **“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Exodus 20:2)**. Repeatedly thereafter, the LORD’s spokesmen reviewed in the covenant language of historical prologue God’s past kindnesses to Israel (see, for example, **Joshua 23:2-5; Psalm 105:5-45; Micah 6:4-6**). Martin Franzmann has written that for Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, “history [was] the dress in which the Messiah of God is clothed in order that He may be revealed and may enter men’s lives.”<sup>7</sup>

“What is sacred history,” Martin Luther asked, “but the visible word of faith or an act of faith?” If we fail to concern ourselves with *faith* in our treatment of sacred history, “the histories of the heathen will seem to be much greater and more celebrated. A mind void of faith and guided by natural reason will of necessity abhor and despise sacred history as consisting of trifling minutiae, in comparison with the great achievements of mighty kings.”<sup>8</sup> Pieper maintained that it “takes a Christian to apprehend the glory of God in history,” who has

<sup>2</sup> *Leave It to Beaver*; quoted by Jack Mingo and John Javna, *Primetime Proverbs: The Book of TV Quotes* (New York: Harmony Books, 1989), 99.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Random House, Inc., n.d.), 69.

<sup>4</sup> George Santayana, *The Life of Reason, or The Phases of Human Progress*, rev. with Daniel Cory (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953), 82.

<sup>5</sup> George Bernard Shaw, *The Revolutionist’s Handbook*; in George Seldes, *The Great Thoughts* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985), 381.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Ford, interview in *The Chicago Tribune* (May 25, 1916): 10; [http://www.giga-usa.com/quotes/authors/henry\\_ford\\_a001.htm](http://www.giga-usa.com/quotes/authors/henry_ford_a001.htm), accessed December 22, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Franzmann, *Concordia Self-Study Commentary, New Testament* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Introduction to Justus Menius, *Exposition of 1 Samuel* (1532); *St. Louis Edition*, 14:153-54. Cited by Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says: An Anthology* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), II:651.

“come to understand the gospel, God’s revealed Word, as to law and gospel in its very essence,” and “who has experienced it in his heart as the great truth and wisdom which is accessible to us carnal, puny little human beings, stone-blind in spiritual matters, only through the Holy Spirit.”<sup>9</sup>

*2) Although God can and does intervene powerfully in human events, more typically He works in a hidden way. The Lutheran historian often cannot distinguish God’s short-term role or plan.*

An obvious advantage enjoyed by the authors of the Bible lay not only in their ability to observe God’s “back side” as history unfolded but also in God’s revelation to them of His interpretation and understanding of that history. Old Testament prophets could announce with inspired certainty the plan and will of God because He had uniquely revealed His mind to them. Isaiah, for example, could call Cyrus the Persian, long before Cyrus appeared on the scene, the LORD’s **anointed** and His **shepherd** who would make possible the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple when He brought Judah’s Babylonian captivity to an end (**Isaiah 44:28; 45:1**).

Because we live at a different time in history, however, and because we do not possess an inspired revelation of God’s actions and intentions today, we cannot clearly distinguish God’s purposes behind human events.

Shortly after the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, I listened to a preacher—one I greatly admire—offer his explanation of God’s purposes behind that evil event. Noting the many extraordinary expressions of trust in God and displays of generosity by Bible-belt Christians, the preacher concluded that God had allowed the bombing to happen there because this segment of the American population was providing an especially powerful witness of the Christian faith to America. Interesting as I thought his thesis to be, I also found myself silently debating him: how can we be so sure of God’s hidden will in the bombing?

Six years later, after terrorists flew jet airliners into the World Trade Center, the sermon (not from that preacher but from others) presented a different interpretation. Only two days after 9/11, Jerry Falwell, appearing on Pat Robertson’s “700 Club,” infamously concluded that throwing God out of public schools and the public square had precipitated God’s actions:

The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the A.C.L.U., People For the American Way—all of them who have tried to secularize America—I point the finger in their face and say, “You helped this happen.”<sup>10</sup>

Yet Jesus Himself refrained from revealing God’s hidden will behind the daily tragedies surrounding Him—though others were only too eager to speak for God. **There were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices**, Luke records, referring to a local incident, the details of which we cannot recover, but which must have set townsfolk talking. **“Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?”** Jesus asked them. **“I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or”**—citing another example—**“those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish”** (**Luke 13:1-5**). On another occasion, when Jesus and the disciples encountered a man blind from birth, the

<sup>9</sup> Pieper, “The Glory of the LORD,” 476.

<sup>10</sup> Partial transcript of comments by Rev. Jerry Falwell on the September 13, 2001 telecast of the 700 Club; <http://www.actupny.org/YELL/falwell.html>; accessed September 12, 2008.

disciples asked, “**Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?**” Jesus answered that neither the man nor his parents were guilty of some particular sin which had brought down on him this punishment, “**but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life**” (John 9:1-3).

Seminary Professor J.P. Koehler warned that “cocksureness which has everything all figured out and has thus settled all issues, is not the conviction of faith, neither in its method nor its reliability,” but can be “selfish and loveless.” This conviction of faith, while “grounded in a peculiar message of God’s grace,” will maintain “a humble knowledge of its own insufficiency both in perception and comprehension.” Such uncertainty amid conviction, Koehler conceded, was “paradoxical, but then all of life is a paradox, our Christian life itself because of the duality of our total existence under sin and grace.”<sup>11</sup>

*3) God uses all events and individuals, both good and evil, to bring about His ultimate plan. Usually, however, God’s intervention comes through natural means. The Lutheran historian will investigate earthly cause and effect rather than blithely ascribing to God specific events and outcomes.*

The Bible often provides both an “above” and a “below” explanation for events that took place in biblical history. The fall of the Kingdom of Israel to Assyria in the eighth century B.C., and the fall of Judah to Babylon in the sixth, can be attributed to various “below” factors, readily explainable in political and historical realities: the superior economic resources Assyria and Babylon possessed, the advanced weaponry and more proficient military units of the two Mesopotamian empires, inept leadership in Israel and Judah, the disastrous decision of the kings of Israel and Judah to defy the power of their much larger suzerains, and others.

But the writer of **2 Kings** also presents a “theological explanation” of the fall of Israel: **All this took place because the Israelites had sinned against the LORD their God. . . . They worshiped other gods and followed the practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before them, as well as the practices the kings of Israel had introduced. . . . The LORD warned Israel through all his prophets and seers . . . , but they would not listen and were as stiff-necked as their fathers. . . . They bowed down to all their starry hosts, and they worshiped Baal. . . . So the LORD was very angry with Israel and removed them from his presence (2 Kings 17:7-18).**

The prophet Jeremiah sang in his lament over Jerusalem:

**The LORD has given full vent to his wrath;  
he has poured out his fierce anger.  
He kindled a fire in Zion  
that consumed her foundations.**

**The kings of the earth did not believe,  
nor did any of the world’s people,  
that enemies and foes could enter  
the gates of Jerusalem.**

**But it happened because of the sin of her prophets  
and the iniquities of her priests,  
who shed within her  
the blood of the righteous (Lamentations 4:11-13).**

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<sup>11</sup> Joh. P. Koehler, *Lehrbuch der Kirchengeschichte*, vi-vii; trans. Erwin Wagner; cited by Leigh Jordahl, introduction to Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod* (St. Cloud, Minn.: Faith-Life, 1970), xx.

In a world in which one nation's victory over another was taken as the defeat of lesser gods by more powerful deities, who could have understood without divine revelation that the LORD's intent was to employ the Babylonians as His instrument to bring about a painful yet necessary repentance and the preservation of a remnant in Judah? (see **Jeremiah 25:8-14; Ezekiel 11:6-21; Habakkuk 1:5-11; 2:2-4**).

One might say as well that one of the most significant persons in the spread of the gospel in the first century after Christ was Alexander the Great—though he died more than three centuries earlier and never believed in the God of Israel. Alexander operated entirely from motives of conquest when he led his armies eastward from Macedonia to the Near East and beyond. More than military and political control, Alexander introduced that way of thinking and living Edgar Allan Poe called “the glory that was Greece.”<sup>12</sup> Hellenism was cool for new generations of these many conquered peoples, including Jews. Already by Alexander's time, many Jewish believers had moved out of Palestine but had sustained their faith in the God of Israel by gathering each sabbath day in synagogues, yet because even these Jewish believers had grown less familiar with Hebrew, the Scriptures were translated into the more accessible Greek of the *Septuagint*. These seemingly random events served to install a far-flung network of Jewish communities reading the Scriptures in Greek. By the first century A.D., these Jewish reading rooms had also begun to attract numerous interested Gentiles. The apostle Paul—himself a son of the synagogue—used these reading rooms as launching pads for communities of men and women won for the new faith in Jesus as the fulfillment of the promises of the Messiah.

The most powerful example of both “above” and “below” explanations of history can be found in the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus. The arrest, trials and crucifixion of Jesus can be and have been ascribed to jealous religious leaders in Jerusalem, explained by the unwillingness of a Roman procurator to aggravate already tense relations with local power brokers, and provoked by the surprising popularity of a Galilean peasant preacher that threatened Roman control over its province of Palestine. But the prophet Isaiah, centuries before, had defined God's larger purposes in this seeming miscarriage of justice: the Servant of the LORD would be **pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities (Isaiah 53:5)**.

The apostle Peter highlighted the “above” and the “below” explanations of Jesus' suffering and death in his sermon on Pentecost:

**“Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. . . . God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear” (Acts 2:22-25, 32-33).**

God operates through evil men as well as good to accomplish His purposes. This does not excuse us from the responsibility of being informed citizens regarding candidates pursuing public office. Although granting that it was preferable to have a prince who was both “good and prudent,” Luther advised (surprisingly, perhaps, to our Evangelicalized-ears) that “if one cannot have both, it is better [that a ruler] be prudent and not good than good and not prudent.” Luther reasoned that “the good man” (pious but incompetent) would be ruled too easily by others. But “even if the prudent man [competent but not godly] harms good people, yet at the same time he governs the evil ones, which is the most necessary and suitable thing for the world, since the world is

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<sup>12</sup> Norman F. Cantor, with Dee Ranieri, *Alexander the Great: Journey to the End of the Earth* (New York: Harper Perennial Books, 2005), 3.

nothing else than a crowd of evil people.”<sup>13</sup> By such thinking, we would be less likely to cast our vote based on the public church-going habits of our candidates, or to decide thorny political issues based on a single-issue political litmus test.

“We know that the finger of God is in history,” said Dorothy L. Sayers. “The difficulty is in knowing which way it is pointed.”<sup>14</sup>

*4) God created Adam and Eve in His image, but they rebelled against Him. The effects of their fall into sin have been passed on to all their descendants. Because of the pervasive nature of inherited and actual sin, Lutheran historians do not expect human history to reveal an upward evolution in goodness or morality.*

A recurring theme in late-nineteenth century America was progressive post-millennialism—the optimistic expectation of a world becoming better and better. In his second inaugural address in 1873, President Ulysses S. Grant predicted that our “Great Maker” was “preparing the world, in His own good time, to become one nation, speaking one language,” a nation in which “armies and navies will no longer be required.”<sup>15</sup> Said clergyman Newell Dwight Hills, “Laws are becoming more just, rulers humane; music is becoming sweeter and books wiser; homes are happier, and the individual heart becoming at once more just and more gentle.”<sup>16</sup> Victor Hugo envisioned a 20<sup>th</sup> century in which “war will be dead, the frontier will be dead, the scaffold will be dead, royalty will be dead, dogmas will be dead; and man will survive. There will be overhead of us all but one great country, the whole earth—and one great hope, the whole heaven.”<sup>17</sup> Josiah Strong believed that the world was “making progress, we are leaving behind the barbarism of war; as civilization advances, it will learn less of war, and concern itself more with the arts of peace.”<sup>18</sup> Strong considered the Anglo-Saxon race uniquely equipped to lead the world into this new era.

But then “came the deluge,” as Reinhold Niebuhr put it. “Since 1914 one tragic experience has followed another, as if history has been designed to refute the main delusions of modern man.”<sup>19</sup> The great World War—the war that was to end all wars—followed by the Great Depression, a second and still greater World War, revelations of the horrors of Nazi Germany, together with persistent racism and abuse closer to home, all confirmed the hollow and hypocritical nature of human morality. “Under a thin cultural veneer,” observed August Pieper, “there lay hidden the brutal and satanic nature of the human heart, unbounded greed, unheard-of mendacity, and an insatiable lust to kill.” Christians should be least surprised at this; we have learned that **every inclination of the thoughts of [the human] heart is only evil all the time (Genesis 6:5)** and that **the heart is deceitful about all things and beyond cure (Jeremiah 17:9)**. “No article of Christian doctrine is more clearly attested by the history of human development than this doctrine of the moral depravity of the human heart,”

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<sup>13</sup> Martin Luther, Lectures on Deuteronomy, trans. Richard R. Caemmerer, *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), 9:19.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted by Dr. Ronald Feuerhahn, “History of the LCMS” class; Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, July 7, 1993.

<sup>15</sup> Second Inaugural, March 4, 1873; <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres34.html>; accessed September 19, 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Cited by Raymond H. Bailey, *Destiny and Disappointment* (Beloit, Kans.: McGrath Publishing Company, 1977), i.

<sup>17</sup> James Cappon, *Victor Hugo: A Memoir and Study* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1885), 387.

<sup>18</sup> Josiah Strong, “The Anglo-Saxon and the World’s Future,” in *Our Country*, ed. Jurgen Herbst (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1963), 200-218.

<sup>19</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1949), 6-7.

Pieper continued. In the fall “all human life and nature was corrupted and therefore lost. Unless this truth is preached in all its severity the Gospel cannot exert its regenerative and saving power.”<sup>20</sup>

And so, Lutheran historians may come off more pessimistic than their counterparts who continue to expect an upward evolution in human morality. For this very reason, things may seem easier for the secular reformer than the Christian reformer, T.S. Eliot said, because the secular reformer mostly “conceives of the evils of the world as something external to himself.” Either he sees them as an impersonal thing, or, if there really is evil *incarnate*, “it is always incarnate *in other people*—a class, a race, the politicians, the bankers, the armament makers, and so forth—never in oneself.” Such “exhilarating” but unfounded optimism in human nature is something “the Christian must deny himself,” Eliot wrote. “It causes pride, either individual or collective, and pride brings its own doom. For only in humility, charity and purity—and most of all humility—can we be prepared to receive the grace of God without which human operations are vain.”<sup>21</sup>

*5) God did not abandon His creation, but He has guided the events of history to bring his Son into the world to redeem the world. The incarnation of Christ stands as the turning point of all history. Before the coming of Christ, God brought people into His kingdom primarily through the nation of Israel; He now uses the church to expand His kingdom throughout the world.*

Particularly in his later letters, St. Paul wrote that he had come to appreciate the great new age of gospel proclamation unfolding during his lifetime, and the role God had called him to play in that proclamation. He wrote to the Ephesians:

**Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.**

In referring to **mystery of this revelation**, the **mystery of Christ**, Paul may have had in mind the various mystery religions of the first century Mediterranean world, the secrets of which were not to be divulged to the masses but reserved only for those few “worthy” enough to be told them.<sup>22</sup> But God was turning the **mystery** of the gospel on its head, and He selected and commissioned Paul to “let the secret out of the bag”: **This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 3:2-6).**

For twenty centuries thereafter, the gospel has moved through the world in ebb and flow. Philip Yancey said he has observed “a pattern, a strange historical phenomenon of God ‘moving’ geographically from the Middle East, to Europe to North America to the developing world.” God, Yancey said, “goes where he’s wanted.”<sup>23</sup> Some corners of the earth, once centers of Christian faith and activity, have been re-paganized, and God has brought His happy message on to others.

<sup>20</sup> August Pieper, *Isaiah II*, trans. Erwin E. Kowalke (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1979), 96.

<sup>21</sup> Cited by Martin E. Marty, *Context* 23 (December 1, 1991): 2.

<sup>22</sup> For a popular discussion of the mystery religions and their purported influence on Christianity, see John Ankerberg and John Weldon, “Did Christianity Arise Out of the Mystery Religions?” <http://www.ankerberg.com/Articles/historical-Jesus/DaVinci/PDF/Mystery-Religions.pdf>; accessed September 19, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Philip Yancey, “God at Large,” *Christianity Today* 45 (February 5, 2001): 136.

Luther had his own insight into this mystery. “Beloved Germans,” he urged with emotion,

buy while the market is close at hand! Gather while the sun is shining and while there is good weather! Make use of God’s grace and Word while it is here! For you should know this: God’s Word and grace is a passing downpour which does not return to where it has already been. It has been with the Jews; but what’s lost is lost, and they now have nothing. Paul brought it to Greece; what’s lost is lost, and they now have the Turks. Rome and Latin-speaking regions have also had it; what’s lost is lost, and they now have the pope. And you Germans dare not think that you will have it forever, for the ingratitude and disdain will not let it remain. Therefore take hold and hang on tightly, while you are able to grab and to hold.<sup>24</sup>

What would Luther say if he could extend his analysis of how the Savior’s gospel has fared in the world? “It has been with the Americans; but what’s lost is lost, and they now have Oprah”?—vague, non-theological, low-demand, self-help spirituality; no sin, no judgment, no Christ, no cross, no forgiveness, no good news—but at least we all feel better about ourselves!<sup>25</sup>

This “passing downpour” of the gospel continues. It could still be said in the 1930s, as British writer Hillaire Belloc put it, that “Europe is the faith; the faith is Europe.”<sup>26</sup> But we live today during “one of the transforming moments in the history of religion worldwide.” While many maintain the stereotype of Christianity as the religion of the “West” or the “global North,” during the twentieth century “the center of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably south, to Africa, Asia, and Latin America.”<sup>27</sup> Kenyan scholar John Mbiti has written, “The centers of the church’s universality [are] no longer in Geneva, Rome, Athens, Paris, London, New York, but Kinshasa, Buenos Aires, Addis Adaba, and Manila.”<sup>28</sup> Joel Carpenter, director of the Nagel Institute for the Study of World Christianity at Calvin College, concludes that the “average Christian” in the world today is a woman from Africa or Latin America, whose family is poor, whose children have no textbooks in their schools, and whose governments are fragile or corrupt. The Bible’s “accounts of famine, plagues, and corruption—which seem distant to most of us in the global North and West—are immediately relevant to her. The Bible is her book.”<sup>29</sup>

There are now six times as many Anglicans in Nigeria as in England, and as many Pentecostals in Africa as in all of Europe. By 2050, only one Christian in five will be white or non-Latino. “As Christianity moves from the privileged west to the less wealthy south, it becomes more conservative; more open to mysticism,

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<sup>24</sup> “Letter to the Town-Councilmen” (1524), *Sämmtliche Schriften* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1885), 10:464. This article is also in the American Edition of *Luther’s Works*, “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany that They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools,” trans. Albert T.W. Steinhäuser (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), 45:352-53.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “The Church of Oprah Winfrey—A American Religion?” [http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/article\\_main\\_page/0,1703,A%253D161438%2526M%253D200373,00.html](http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/article_main_page/0,1703,A%253D161438%2526M%253D200373,00.html); accessed September 22, 2008.

<sup>26</sup> Martin E. Marty, *A Short History of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 306.

<sup>27</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 1-2.

<sup>28</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa* (Edinburgh: University Press/ Orbis, 1995), 154.

<sup>29</sup> *Response* (Autumn 2007); in Martin E. Marty, *Context* 40 (February 2008, Part A): 8.



exorcism and supernaturalism; and, more than at any time since the fourth century, the religion of the poor rather than the prosperous.”<sup>30</sup>

*6) Through the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, God calls men and women back into relationship with Himself. While the working of the Holy Spirit is invisible, the fruits of His work can be observed in history. Still, the Christian church on earth remains tainted by sin and must be a continually reforming church.*

In 1980, candidate Ronald Reagan reportedly said, “I would like to be President because I would like to see this country become once again a country where a little 6-year-old girl can grow up knowing the same freedom that I knew when I was 6 years old, growing up in America.” To which Peter Beinart, writing in *Time* magazine this past summer, remarked that “as a matter of historical fact” Reagan’s statement was “downright bizarre.” Reagan was 6 years old in 1917, a time when “women and most blacks couldn’t vote, and America’s entry into World War I was whipping up an anti-German frenzy that some of the towns in Reagan’s native Midwest banned the playing of Beethoven and Brahms.” But for Reagan and perhaps for other politicians and their supporters, movies can be confused with real life and “history usually meant myth.”<sup>31</sup>

But how easily do we see things the same way in the church? In the old grammarians’ joke, we tend to consider the “present tense” but the “past perfect.” We recall better times when the surrounding culture was, if not more Christian, then at least more moral. Lutherans were staying Lutheran and having lots of babies. Our parochial school classrooms were crowded, and being in the teaching or preaching ministry of the church was an admirable thing. The Wisconsin Synod was breaking out of its Midwestern stronghold; the back pages of *The Northwestern Lutheran* requested names for new mission church openings in places like Huntsville, Alabama; Anchorage, Alaska; Yucaipia, California; Hartford, Connecticut; Albuquerque, New Mexico; and East Brunswick, New Jersey.<sup>32</sup> From 1961 to 1968 alone, the number of states containing Wisconsin Synod churches more than doubled, from 16 to 33.<sup>33</sup> The goal was to make “Every State by ’78,” and we came close. “The Wisconsin Synod today supports missions in places in which it had no intention of going a few years ago,” *Northwestern Lutheran* editorialist Immanuel Frey reported. This aggressive mission expansion was “literally forced upon” the Synod, “in large part as a direct result of the liberal trends which have developed in once conservative churches.”<sup>34</sup>

Today, we seldom hear of new school openings; instead, the news is about declining enrollments and schools consolidating, barely surviving, or closing entirely. Our congregational numbers, likewise, continue to decline. Most disturbing is how we seem to be losing more and more of our own, who grew up in our churches and schools but who never embraced or no longer treasure distinctive elements in their Lutheran heritage. Still, a closer look at our history reveals the early struggles of horseback-riding preachers, feeble financial support for home missionaries,<sup>35</sup> and the disconcerting revelation that the official mission policy of the Wisconsin Synod for much of its history hinged on a judgment by one of its synodical teachers that not all church bodies were

<sup>30</sup> Mark Braun, “Twentieth Century Christianity,” article to be published in *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2009).

<sup>31</sup> Peter Beinart, “Patriot Games,” *Time* (July 7, 2008): 29.

<sup>32</sup> *The Northwestern Lutheran* 55 (October 13, 1968): 339.

<sup>33</sup> Norman W. Berg, “1961-1971: A Decade of Decision for Home Missions,” *The Northwestern Lutheran* 55 (November 10, 1968): 366.

<sup>34</sup> Immanuel G. Frey, “Still Living,” *The Northwestern Lutheran* 54 (June 11, 1967): 183.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Arnold Lehmann, “Wisconsin Synod *Reisepredigt* Program,” *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 6 (Spring 1988): 22-43; Martin O. Westerhaus, “Early WELS *Reiseprediger* On The Great Plains,” *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 17 (April 1999): 17-28.

equally constrained by the Great Commission.<sup>36</sup> Our Synod's school system typically got by on the most meager of budgets, and in the 1930s the Synod barely avoided bankruptcy.<sup>37</sup> A deeper awareness of our past gives us clearer perspective, keeps us humble, and drives us back to greater trust in God's promises.

*7) Unrepentant human beings are still able to use reason and conscience to seek what appears to be morally good, but civic righteousness can never truly benefit humanity without the knowledge of God's will as revealed in the Bible.*

Lutheran doctrinal statements extol the value of "civic righteousness." The *Apology to the Augsburg Confessions* states that "God requires the righteousness of reason" and that "honorable works prescribed in the Decalogue are necessary." Such civil discipline is necessary because God wants particularly those who are not Christians "to be restrained by such civil discipline," and "to preserve it he has given laws, learning, teaching, governments, and penalties." *Apology* author Philip Melancthon added, "To a certain extent, reason can produce this righteousness by its own powers," and "we willingly give this righteousness of reason the praises it deserves."<sup>38</sup> The *Formula of Concord* adds that these works are required of and performed by the unbelieving and unconverted.<sup>39</sup> "Honest and just government, law-abiding citizens, stable family units, and respect for human life and other people's property all make for a better society." Such a peaceful, protected society "enables Christians to preach the gospel unhindered by domestic violence," and so "Christians will encourage and promote civic righteousness for the good of the country in which they live."<sup>40</sup>

But Lutheran doctrinal statements are also quick to point up the inadequacy of civic righteousness. Though "God honors it with temporal rewards," this civic righteousness "ought not be praised at Christ's expense."<sup>41</sup> The good works of civic righteousness, "because they do not proceed from true faith," are "sin in God's sight." They are "tarnished with sins and are regarded by God as sin and impure because of the corrupted human nature and because the person who performs them is not reconciled with God." A person "must be acceptable to God beforehand (and that alone because of Christ), before that person's works are at all pleasing to him."<sup>42</sup>

We find ourselves, then, in the occasional "Catch-22" of alternately praising civic righteousness and warning of its limitations. We also find ourselves voicing appreciation for the moral stands of other Christian bodies—occasionally even joining them in expression of those stands—while maintaining boundaries separating ourselves from them over doctrinal disagreements. Then Missouri Synod President Ralph Bohlman remarked in 1986, "We often find ourselves working side by side" with Roman Catholics "to correct such evils

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<sup>36</sup> Koehler wrote in *History of the Wisconsin Synod*, 196, that "there are organizations, like people, that remain small in number," meant to do "intensive rather than intensive" work. Establishing and maintaining a preparatory college for pastors was deemed "mission enough for awhile."

<sup>37</sup> See the grim details in Edward C. Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans: A History of the Single Synod, Federation, and Merger* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992), 190-94.

<sup>38</sup> *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, IV, 22-24; *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 124.

<sup>39</sup> *Formula of Concord*, Solid Declaration IV:8 *The Book of Concord*, 575.

<sup>40</sup> Lyle W. Lange: *God So Loved the World: A Study of Christian Doctrine* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2005), 407-408.

<sup>41</sup> *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, IV, 24; *The Book of Concord*, 124.

<sup>42</sup> *Formula of Concord*, Thorough Declaration IV:8; *The Book of Concord*, 575.

as abortion, pornography, and the corruption of family life,” yet “traditional Catholic teaching in such areas as justification, papal primacy and infallibility, the role of Mary and apostolic succession remains unchanged.”<sup>43</sup>

And the *Apology* concedes that even the best-intentioned efforts at civic righteousness are “often shackled by its natural weakness and by the devil, who drives it to shameful acts.”<sup>44</sup> Tracy Kidder, in his account of the life and work of Dr. Paul Farmer, describes the Peligre Dam project on Haiti’s Artibonite River. Conceived by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the project was designed to improve irrigation and to generate electrical power—though also intended to benefit mostly American-owned agribusinesses downstream and to supply electricity for the wealthy few in Haiti’s capital, Port-au-Prince. But as the Artibonite River flooded, peasants who had farmed the river’s valley were forced off their land—some with little prior warning—and were forced to go looking for work in Port-au-Prince, where they found employment as cooks and domestics, stitching dolls and baseballs, but where more and more of them came back home to die of AIDS. Many of the valley’s residents formerly owned creole pigs, which they kept like bank accounts and then sold at market to pay the school tuition for their children. But in the early 1980s, alarmed at the outbreak of swine flu in the neighboring Dominican Republic (and fearful that the outbreak could hurt the American pork market), the United States led an effort to destroy Haiti’s pigs and replace them with pigs purchased from Iowa farmers (a true Congressional pork project!). But the less hardy American-bred pigs were more expensive to house and feed and they did not thrive in Haiti, leaving the peasant farmers with no pigs at all. The net result of these humanitarian efforts—mitigated, of course, by much self-interest on the part of their benefactors—was increased poverty, a decline in educational opportunities, and greater dependence on inadequate relief aid.<sup>45</sup>

8) *The Lutheran historian sees history not primarily as cyclical, evolutionary, or random, but as teleological and Christological. God moves the universe toward the final goal of the return of Christ in power. The Lutheran historian does not expect an earthly millennium or an end to social evils before Judgment Day.*

Biblical history and the course of God’s actions in it “are like an arrow shot toward a target, not like a planet endlessly pursuing an unchanging, circular course.” In such a “linear” system, “judgment is built in.” The target “is where the arrow is going, and every action in the whole of the arrow’s course—the drawing of it from the quiver, the setting of it on the bowstring, the releasing of the bow, and the flight of the arrow through the air—everything, quite literally, is governed by the history-fulfilling judgment of the bull’s eye at the end.” This linear view of history “has its origin in the Old Testament and is intrinsic to Christian thought. History has a beginning, it proceeds under God’s providence and not without His intervention, and it will arrive at the goal which He has set for it.” While the linear view “is realistic about history, it is optimistic about the consummation of history on the day of Christ’s return.”<sup>46</sup>

This view of history stands in marked contrast to the views of Hinduism, Buddhism, and other religions coming out of India and the Far East. Indian philosophy sees time as “moving endlessly through various cycles,” progressing from an initial phase of peace and abundance to increasing famine, war, decay and immorality. The world is finally destroyed by Shiva, “the world dissolves and all souls depart into suspended

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<sup>43</sup> Cited in “News Around the World,” *The Northwestern Lutheran* 73 (April 1, 1986): 134.

<sup>44</sup> *Apology*, IV, 22; *The Book of Concord*, 124.

<sup>45</sup> Tracy Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, the Man who would Cure the World* (New York: Random House Publishers, 2003), 36-38.

<sup>46</sup> Richard D. Balge, reviewing *Patterns in History: A Christian Perspective on Historical Thought*, by D.W. Bebbington (Baker, 1990), in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 89 (Summer 1992): 232.

being. After a period of repose, the world begins again and the souls take up new bodies.”<sup>47</sup> Likewise, the teleological Christian view differs from primal beliefs in many parts of the world, in which time is circular, “following the pattern of the celestial and natural world.” The rhythm of sunrises and sunsets, the waxing and waning of the moon, the dependable change of the seasons are celebrated in primal myth and ritual. In primal religion, “people, like the land, the sea, and the forests, undergo an eternal process of birth, death, and rebirth.”<sup>48</sup>

It can happen that Lutherans, searching for kindred spirits in their historical worldview and turned away by Eastern, secular, liberal, and postmodern views of history—both in academia and the church—feel themselves to be more in step with conservative, Evangelical historians. While there is much to admire about conservative and Evangelical historians, and things to learn from them, their historical viewpoint is often colored by a millennial view of history, with the expectation of a rapture and a literal thousand year reign of Christ on the earth prior to Judgment Day.

Evangelicals typically find support for a millennial concept of history in the book of Revelation, yet Siegbert Becker has insisted that Revelation is “the most anti-millennial book in the whole Bible.”<sup>49</sup> In many ways, conservative Christians awaiting an earthly millennium have more in common with secular views of personal and societal evolution upward and the old dreams of the perfectibility of the human race. “The whole concept of a millennial kingdom,” Becker writes, “is the result of [a materialistic] concept of what it means to be a child of God in this sin-cursed world.” Despite a conservative, even fundamentalist approach to Scripture, “millennialism is at heart closely related to the Social Gospel., which holds out the hope of a better world where there is no war, no sickness, no hunger, no inequity of any kind, without the renewal which will take place on the final day of judgment. Men have always yearned for a golden age where peace and harmony and justice prevail everywhere.”<sup>50</sup>

### **Is it harder to do history now?**

In a 1996 episode of *Seinfeld* entitled “Bizarro Jerry,” Elaine meets three new friends who are kinder, less self-centered, and more sophisticated counterparts of her friends Jerry, George and Kramer. Kevin is reliable and kind, in contrast to Jerry’s forgetfulness and indifference; Gene is quiet and courteous, compared to the loud and obnoxious George. Feldman buys lunch for his friends and brings Kevin groceries, unlike Kramer who mooches Jerry’s groceries and often bursts through his door without warning.

Remarking on the superior qualities of her new friends, Elaine tells Jerry: “They *do* good things. They *read*.”

Jerry responds: “*I* read.”

Elaine: “Books, Jerry.”

Jerry: “Oh.... Big deal.”

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<sup>47</sup> Lewis M. Hopfe and Mark R. Woodward, *Religions of the World*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed., (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004), 88.

<sup>48</sup> John L. Esposito, Darrell J. Fasching, and Todd Lewis, *World Religions Today*, second ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 36.

<sup>49</sup> Siegbert W. Becker, *Revelation: The Distant Triumph Song* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1985), 3.

<sup>50</sup> Becker, *Revelation*, 103.

Elaine: “Well! I can’t spend the rest of my life coming to this stinking apartment every ten minutes to pore over the *excruciating minutia* of every, single, daily event.”

Which Jerry can’t seem to understand.<sup>51</sup>

Perhaps a charming feature of the Seinfeld gang was their shallowness and fixation on “the excruciating minutiae” of their daily lives. But numerous forces are conspiring to make us all more like them. As newspapers grow smaller and news reporting becomes shorter, more sensationalized, and more devoid of analysis, people seek quick, simplistic answers to life’s day-to-day minutiae. Thoughtful, in-depth reading and reflection suffer, which is bad news for historians. According to figures assembled by the Jenkins Group:

- 1/3 of high school graduates never read another book for the rest of their lives.
- 42 percent of college graduates never read another book after college.
- 80 percent of U.S. families did not buy or read a book last year.
- 70 percent of U.S. adults have not been in a bookstore in the last five years.
- 57 percent of new books are not read to completion.<sup>52</sup>

Andrew Keen, in his book, *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today’s Internet is Killing Our Culture*, warns that the internet revolution is delivering “superficial observations of the world around us rather than deep analysis, shrill opinion rather than considered judgment.”<sup>53</sup> Nicholas Carr, asking, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” cites Bruce Friedman, a regular blogger, on the use of computers in medicine, who admitted that he has “almost totally lost the ability to read and absorb a longish article on the web or in print.” Friedman’s thinking has taken on a “staccato” quality, reflecting his practice of rapidly scanning short passages of text from many online sources. “I can’t read *War and Peace* anymore,” he admitted. “I’ve lost the ability to do that. Even a blog post of more than three or four paragraphs is too much to absorb. I skim it.”<sup>54</sup>

Maryanne Wolf, a developmental psychologist at Tufts University and author of *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*, worries that the style of reading promoted by the Internet, which places “efficiency” and “immediacy” above all else, may be weakening our capacity for deep reading of long works of prose. Searching online, we tend to become “mere decoders of information,” while our ability to interpret text and make mental connections remains disengaged. Wolfe even fears that prolonged use of the Internet may cause our brains to develop different mental circuits from those woven by reading books and other printed works.<sup>55</sup>

Apparently, this is not a new thing. A half century ago, Will and Ariel Durant lamented that “we Americans are the best informed people on earth as to the events of the last twenty-four hours; we are not the best informed as to the events of the last sixty centuries.”<sup>56</sup> But it also must be a growing phenomenon. “Are

<sup>51</sup> “The Bizarro Jerry,” in *The Television Transcript Project*, [www.geocities.com/transcripts/seinfeld/bizarro.htm](http://www.geocities.com/transcripts/seinfeld/bizarro.htm); accessed August 29, 2008.

<sup>52</sup> Jerold Jenkins, [www.JenkinsGroupInc.com](http://www.JenkinsGroupInc.com); accessed September 24, 2008.

<sup>53</sup> Andrew Keen, *The Cult of the Amateur: How the Internet is Killing Our Culture* (New York: Doubleday, Currency, 2007), 16.

<sup>54</sup> Nicholas Carr, “Is Google Making Us Stupid? What the Internet is doing to our brains,” *TheAtlantic.com* (July/August 2008); <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200807/google>; accessed September 12, 2008.

<sup>55</sup> Maryanne Wolf, *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (Harper San Francisco, 2007), 3-8.

<sup>56</sup> *Peter’s Quotations*, 247.

kids more ignorant today?” asked a recent submission to the local editorial page. We can keep up with the breathlessly shifting dysfunctional details of the Spears family or the downward spiral of Anna Nicole Smith, but according to a survey done by professors at Columbia University, twenty-five percent of incoming freshmen could not identify Abraham Lincoln as the U.S. President during the Civil War. Among the accomplishments ascribed to Theodore Roosevelt, students listed that he was a forest ranger, purchased Alaska, saved the country from the Depression, was a War of 1812 hero, headed a troop of Negroes who helped free Texas and “helped quiet the Indians.”<sup>57</sup>

The loss of our national history and our ability to comprehend and analyze written texts does not bode well for our educational institutions. But to lose the record of God’s saving acts on our behalf carries deeper consequences. God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the Lord of history, and because God the Son entered our human history, the study of history will always deserve our greatest attention and our best efforts.

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<sup>57</sup> Thomas Zachek, “Are Kids More Ignorant Today?” *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (September 30, 2008): 9A.