

The Distinct Power of Proclamation

On the crucial difference between preaching the gospel and offering information.

Presented by Rev. Caleb R. Bassett to the 2022 District Conference of the Arizona–California District of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, October 17–19, 2022 in Tucson, Arizona.

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Abstract

Rapid cultural, social, and political changes have left theologically conservative Christians feeling disoriented and frustrated. The accelerated rate at which evidently epochal events seem to occur and the elevated tension in which our culture operates have contributed to a sense that the church faces a crisis of authority and influence that requires an equally accelerated and elevated response from the church and her ministers. The agitated question arises, “Why will no one listen to what we have to say?” The equally agitated response is for pastors to engage the situation on its own terms, that is, to preach, teach, or otherwise speak out more frequently or more stridently on more and more topics, including on controversial subjects or developing events.

But Lutheran pastors must resist the temptation to speak when their vocation does not call for it and on subjects where their training does not equip or authorize them. To speak with undue haste or unwarranted authority risks doing grave damage to the witness of the church now and into the future, especially in the cultural climate in which we now operate. Hasty and voluminous communication only makes the perceived problem worse by further eroding authority and weakening influence.

This essay will analyze the vocation of pastor, especially the pastor as public communicator, through the lens of Walker Percy’s useful distinction between **KNOWLEDGE** and **NEWS** to demonstrate how several approaches to communication that pastors often employ are, in spite of their initial appeal, counterproductive in the end. By exposing either the inadequacy, inefficacy, or indecency of several pastoral *fauxcations*, this essay will support the claim that the wise and virtuous course of action for Lutheran pastors today is to recover the power of what they’ve been called to do: not simply to disseminate **KNOWLEDGE** but proclaim **NEWS**—and good news at that.

I wanted to seize hold of him and say to him: In another world you are a king, noble and good! I have seen it! But I hesitated a moment too long and he disappeared into the crowd.

— Piranesi

1

Literal Apocalypse

I consider the pandemic to have been a literal apocalypse, an uncovering and unveiling of the otherwise overlooked or invisible. Every vice and virtue, whether individual or institutional, became plain to see.

I kept a running list of such things in the hopes that later I might reflect on what had been revealed. Where had I and others risen to the occasion? Where had I and others fallen into patterns of vice? Where could I and others grow in practical wisdom from living through a literal apocalypse.

Here is something I noted.

I was unable to resist the perverse temptation to log in to Mark Zuckerberg's misanthropic machine to watch the world lose its collective mind. This is, of course, a literal apocalypse of *my* character, but that is for me to work out. What I want to note here is how, long before outrage was aimed at the President of the United States, the Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, or the Centers for Disease Control, my predominantly Lutheran social graph held in particular contempt anyone who was overly concerned with the implications of a new and deadly pathogen.

Commentators have observed that, when faced with pandemic, Americans attacked each other instead of the problem. I saw a distinct expression of this outrage-at-neighbor. It went something like this, "Oh, so *now* you care about death?"

Articulated more fully (as it often was), the frustration could be paraphrased as, "I am outraged that you people have long ignored the fact that the church where I am a member has been warning you that the wages of sin is death, but now, when a virus comes along, you are suddenly interested in the topic of death. What's wrong with you? Wake up, sheeple!"

A similar sentiment, more academic than acerbic, went something like this, “Well, *actually*, because of sin this is how things have always been. This is nothing new, so why are you so worked up?”

Such sentences are true, of course. Faithful congregations have long warned of the wages of sin and those wages have indeed wreaked havoc on the world since the Fall. Still, something seemed *off* about these expressions. They offered sparse comfort or counsel. They felt like the impotent fist-shaking of Lutherans frustrated that they had been saying true sentences for years to little effect, and now, with a crisis unfolding, they had a few grievances to air about their late-to-the-game neighbors. Workers complaining about their denarius came to mind.

I wondered why, at a moment when millions of people were finally paying attention to the wages of sin, was our collective reaction marred by eye-rolling and outrage? Why, when God had providentially removed all the materialistic concerns we have long said distract from spiritual concerns, were “told you so” and “no big deal” among the first things our fingertips typed?

There are many potential answers to these questions, but the one I propose today is this: It seems some factor beyond bare truth or falsehood is at play. This is hard to admit. If you are in the business of saying true sentences and discover that saying true sentences doesn’t always do what you think it should, well, you might become frustrated enough to lash out about it. And if something comes along and gets everyone’s attention on what you have been talking about for years, well, that is going to rub you the wrong way. You will be almost powerless to resist the childish urge to say, “Yeah, but I said it first.”

Even if such a reaction is understandable, it remains misguided. A better response is to ask, “If simply saying true sentences is not enough, what other factors are at play? For what reasons might someone have disregarded my message for so long? How could I learn more about why people react differently to different messages from different people at different times?”

This wisdom is not my own; it comes from the American author and philosopher Walker Percy. In an essay entitled *The Message in the Bottle*, Percy offers compelling reasons why people react differently to different messages from different people at different times. Percy’s analysis is a prescient explanation of the crisis of meaning the pandemic has revealed. His work helps us understand why comments like, “This is the way it has always been” are not as helpful as we might imagine. Such talk is like saying to a boy who scrapes his knee, “Have you not heard of what scientists call *friction*?” Or like saying to an

anxious wife waiting for her husband's biopsy, "So *now* you care about cancer?" This is callous, thoughtless, and misses the point badly. It borders on sociopathy. It appears to arise from a particular posture toward the world: a detached, view-from-nowhere that is the mark of a certain way of thinking and doing, one that we pastors are susceptible to. Percy's argument and analysis point instead to a more potent way of communicating, one that aligns with the goal of being heeded, not ignored.

In the work that follows I will analyze the vocation of pastor through the lens of Walker Percy's work to support the claim that a wise and virtuous course of action for Lutheran pastors today is to recover the power of what they've been called to do: not simply to say true sentences, but to proclaim good news.

But first, I must introduce you to Percy's guiding metaphor and overall argument. So come now as we visit a distant island surrounded by a vast ocean, a spot where a thriving-yet-displaced castaway finds a message in a bottle washed up on shore and wonders, "What should I make of this word from across the sea?"

2

Understanding the Distinction Between Knowledge and News

“Suppose a man is a castaway on an island.”

So begins Walker Percy’s extended metaphor analyzing and explaining the nature of language and communication.

The island is distant but not deserted. Its residents enjoy fully-developed culture and society. Institutions flourish, industry is productive, education is robust, science is advanced, and the arts thrive.

The castaway quickly becomes a meaningful part of island life. He gets a job, builds a house, marries a wife, and starts a family. Nevertheless, the shipwreck has cost him the memory of his former home. He remains, in the final analysis, a castaway.

A peculiar phenomenon characterizes the island where the castaway now lives. The waves regularly wash up tightly corked bottles, each containing a scrap of paper on which is written a single sentence. The bottles number in the thousands. The castaway must decide what to do with them.

The scientific-logical distinction

The scientists and logicians on the island get to work sorting the messages into two epistemological buckets: *synthetic* and *analytic*.

Analytic statements are true or false *by definition*. For example, the statement “two leprechauns plus two leprechauns equals four leprechauns” is true because it corresponds to the laws of mathematics. Analytic statements are *formal*, that is, they are statements of essence or structure.

Synthetic statements, on the other hand, are true or false not *by definition*, but *by their correspondence to the world itself*. We can say true sentences about calculating sums of leprechauns whether leprechauns exist or not, but we cannot say true sentences about what a

particular leprechaun *did* unless we can show, at a minimum, 1) that leprechauns exist and 2) that the leprechaun in question actually did the thing we say he did. Synthetic statements are *empirical*, that is, they must be verified not by pure theory or formal logic, but by real-world observation or experience.

This is the standard, scientific-logical approach to knowledge formation.

Synthetic Statements

Synthetic statements are true or false by their correspondence to the world itself. They are empirical.

Chicago is on Lake Michigan.

Lead melts at 330 degrees.

Analytic Statements

Analytic statements are true or false by definition. They are formal in character.

Two plus two equals four.

Chicago is on the Hudson River or Chicago is not on the Hudson River.

Table 1 Sample messages from Percy's essay arranged into synthetic and analytic categories. Such is the standard division in the scientific-logical approach.

The knowledge–news distinction

The castaway, however, suspects that there is another equally plausible and, in his view, more sensible way to sort the messages. He observes that the standard scientific-logical approach fails to account for the *effect of the messages on the reader*. After all, some of the bottled messages seem to *matter* in a way that others do not.

So in one category the castaway files the messages that are scientific-logical *in the broad sense*, that is, any kind of synthetic *or* analytic knowledge. The castaway calls the first category **KNOWLEDGE**.

In a second category the castaway files all the messages that are significant insofar as they matter to the affairs of life on the island. The castaway calls the second category **NEWS**.

Knowledge Statements

Broad statements of knowledge that are available to anyone on any island at any time.

Two plus two equals four.

Water boils at 100 degrees at sea level.

News Statements

Synthetic statements that bear directly on the predicament of the islander.

A hostile war party is approaching.

There is fresh water in the next cove.

Table 2 Sample messages from Percy's essay arranged into **KNOWLEDGE** and **NEWS** categories. This is the valid and plausible mode that the castaway uses.

Two kinds of messages

Percy explains that **KNOWLEDGE** is characterized as “knowledge *sub specie aeternitatis*,” that is, knowledge *of a timeless character*. Such knowledge is available, in principle, to any person at any time in any place. In the essay’s metaphor, **KNOWLEDGE** is knowledge that any person could acquire on any island at any time.

NEWS, on the other hand, is the report of an event or circumstance that is directly relevant to the predicament of the hearer. In the essay’s metaphor, **NEWS** is knowledge that *cannot* be arrived at by any person on any island at any time.

Percy claims that the castaway has discovered a valid way to evaluate the messages apart from the standard scientific-logical approach. While the scientific-logical approach is concerned with **KNOWLEDGE**, the islander lives on *this* island at *this* time, so he understands the need to evaluate whether any of the bottled messages are **NEWS**.

From this foundational difference Percy identifies and explains numerous meaningful distinctions between **KNOWLEDGE** and **NEWS**. I will not summarize all of them here, but I will note (and endorse) that Percy’s point is not to condemn the scientific-logical approach as wrong *per se*, but to reveal the appreciable epistemological differences between the nature of **KNOWLEDGE** and **NEWS**, differences that derive from each category’s underlying characteristics. In particular, Percy wants readers to understand that **KNOWLEDGE** has specific limitations that should not be overlooked. His crucial observation is that **KNOWLEDGE** and **NEWS** are both forms of knowledge, yet people read or hear, verify, and respond to each form in significantly different ways. The **KNOWLEDGE–NEWS** distinction is therefore not merely theoretical but eminently practical.

EXCURSUS

ON NEWS AND SCIENCE

To use either the term *science* or *news* in 2022 is to invite significant confusion. But I am unwilling to yield these terms to popular misuse and therefore must briefly clarify their meaning, especially since they matter to my argument in this essay.

By a "piece of news" the castaway generally means a synthetic sentence expressing a contingent and nonrecurring event or state of affairs which event or state of affairs is peculiarly relevant to the concrete predicament of the hearer of the news.

— Walker Percy

FIRST, NEWS. We use the term broadly. For example, we call what's in a typical newspaper *news*, as in, "I was reading the news this morning." We say this even if the words we read do not directly relate to the concrete predicament of our lives. I suppose in such usage we might say that *reading the news* is an exercise in cultivating **KNOWLEDGE** in the broad sense. I gain greater insight about foreign countries and cultures by reading good journalism from overseas correspondents.

But we use the term even more broadly; so broadly, in fact, that the word *news* often means nothing. Virtually all of the programming on what we call cable *news*, for example, is not *news* even in the broadest sense. To call it *commentary* is probably the most charitable term, but terms like *noise* might be more intellectually honest.

Closely related to our culture's attenuated concept of news is what is known as the *pseudo-event*. A pseudo-event is something that exists chiefly to be noted and commented upon. Some pseudo-events are deliberately manufactured, others are indeed real events but are so far afield of anyone's concrete predicament that they become pseudo-events. This year's Depp–Heard trial is an example. The lawsuit mattered tremendously *to two people* (and perhaps their business associates), but it had no relevance to anyone else. Nevertheless, millions of people paid close attention to the proceedings as if it mattered. The real event was turned into a pseudo-event.

Which I suppose sounds a lot like the concept of *fake news*, in which the word *fake* does not mean fake and the word *news* does not

mean news. But to analyze that phrase any further is to cross the event horizon of a semantic black hole.

The point is that when you say the English word *news* not everyone will take it to mean the same thing, and in some cases people will take it to mean radically contradictory things. We, however, will understand news as the report of an event that bears directly on the predicament of the hearer. I will present the term in semibold, small capital typeface to make it clear that I am referring to **NEWS** as Percy distinguishes it.

By “piece of knowledge“ the castaway means knowledge *sub specie aetemitatis*. By *sub specie aetemitatis* he means not what the philosopher usually means but rather knowledge which can be arrived at anywhere by anyone and at any time. ... Such knowledge would include not only the synthetic and analytic propositions of science and logic but also the philosophical and poetic sentences in the bottle.

— Walker Percy

SECOND, SCIENCE. Like *news*, we use the term *science* so broadly that it communicates almost nothing. Prominent recent examples include phrases like, “What does the science say?” or, “Trust the science,” or, “The science is settled on this.” While many liberal or progressive politicians and officials spoke of *science* this way during the pandemic, such talk is by no means the exclusive domain of the left wing. Various figures associated with the right wing of the American social and ideological spectrum regularly speak in identical terms. Prominent skeptics and debunkers, for example, use we-follow-the-science language as much as blue state governors. Everyone wants to claim the moral high ground that comes from following the *science*, whatever that means.

Just as the attenuated meaning of *news* relates to the pseudo-event, so also uncritical talk of *the science* connects to the ideology commonly called *scientism*. The broad claim of scientism is that the scientific method and its related pursuits are the sole exponent of all knowledge about all things, therefore overriding and overruling theology, ethics, politics, and the broad field of inquiry known as the humanities.

The point, as with *news*, is that when you say the English word *science* not everyone will take it to mean the same thing, and in some cases, people will take it to mean radically contradictory things. We,

however, will understand the term *science* connected to Percy's usage, that is, a particular, largely empirical but also analytical method by which **KNOWLEDGE** may be validly constructed. And, as with **NEWS**, I will present the term in semibold, small capital typeface to make it clear that I am using a word with a specific, technical definition, that is, **KNOWLEDGE** *sub specie aeternitatis*.

Applying the Distinction Between Knowledge and News

“Suppose a man is a castaway on an island.”

So began Walker Percy’s extended metaphor analyzing the nature of language and communication; and so it concludes.

The island, we discover, is our world, the sea is the great chasm between us and God, and we are the castaways. Our shores are awash with all kinds of messages. The question facing the modern-day castaway is what to make of them all. What kind are they? Are they true? Are they relevant? Are they worth time and attention? Such questions matter because what castaways need is not really **KNOWLEDGE** (for castaways can get that on any island at any time) but **NEWS**—and not just island news, castaways need news from across the sea.

In applying Percy’s **KNOWLEDGE–NEWS** distinction to the pastoral vocation, I will assume that an audience of pastors needs no reminder that they have been commissioned by the Lord Jesus Christ to *preach the gospel* and that the word *gospel* means *good news*. Indeed, pastors in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod will remember that the emblazoned words of Mark 16:15 have daily greeted generations of seminarians in the chapel at Mequon for this very reason.

We whose task it is to deliver news from across the sea are wise to understand and apply the practical differences between disseminating **KNOWLEDGE** and proclaiming **NEWS**. When we treat our work as if it falls primarily in the domain of **KNOWLEDGE** we hamstring our efforts in ways that we may not realize and presumably do not intend. We miss out on the power of proclamation.

I will analyze the pastoral vocation—especially the pastor’s role as a public communicator—through the lens of Percy’s **KNOWLEDGE–NEWS** distinction to identify several pastoral roles that I will describe with the portmanteau *fauxcation*. I will show how these pastoral

fauxcations are generally flawed because they deal mainly in **KNOWLEDGE**, not **NEWS**; and usually to ill effect.

The *fauxcations* I will address are 1) the pastor-as-scientist, 2) the pastor-as-therapist (and the related pastor-as-motivational-speaker), 3) the pastor-as-expert, 4) the pastor-as-influencer (and the related pastor-as-marketer), 5) the pastor-as-debunker, and 6) the pastor-as-shitposter. By exposing either the inadequacy, inefficacy, or indecency of these *fauxcations*, I aim to support the claim that the wise and virtuous course of action for Lutheran pastors today is to recover the power of what they have been called to do: not simply to disseminate **KNOWLEDGE** but to proclaim **NEWS**—and good news at that.

Immediate Engagement

If I am thirsty and you appear on the next sand dune and shout, “Come with me! I know where water is!” it is not open to me to apply any verification procedures, experimental operations, deduction, or interior recognition and assent to the truth of your statement. A piece of news is neither deducible, repeatable, or otherwise confirmable at the point of hearing.

— Walker Percy

A recent devotional opened with a series of meditations on Genesis 1. This is, of course, a sensible place to begin; it is *the beginning*. But the emphasis in the first week of devotions was not the foundational goodness of creation or the implications of the image of God but a daily affirmation of the six-twenty-four-hour-dayness of creation.

Do you ever sense that our intellectual culture treats theology as little more than a way to engage in cognitive combat with intellectual bad guys like 20th century cosmologists and natural scientists? I do. This is not to say that genuine scientific inquiry and debate is invalid, but I sense that we pastors are tempted to treat too much of our communication as a scientific debate. Such efforts cede a distinct advantage we otherwise enjoy. When we move our message out of the realm of **NEWS** and into the realm of **KNOWLEDGE** we become the pastor-as-scientist and invite outcomes we do not actually want.

When we frame preaching and teaching as **KNOWLEDGE** we are, at the outset, moving our hearers miles away from where we hope they end up—maybe even miles backwards from where they started. We know this from a key characteristic of **KNOWLEDGE** that Percy identifies: **KNOWLEDGE** statements involve a specific set of responses from those who encounter them.

One available response is to simply *disregard* statements of **KNOWLEDGE**. Because **KNOWLEDGE** is knowledge *sub specie aeternitatis* there is no essential reason why anyone needs to investigate any statement of **KNOWLEDGE**. Furthermore, even if someone decides to investigate a statement of **KNOWLEDGE**, the process is aimed at a binary outcome: verification or falsification. Therefore the most sensible posture towards **KNOWLEDGE** is usually skepticism. And finally, even if someone assents to the veracity of **KNOWLEDGE** there is no inherent impetus for anyone to *act* on it. Because the movement

of the scientific-logical approach is to know more, one can archive new **KNOWLEDGE** and call the job well done. Action in the form of application *may* result from **KNOWLEDGE**, but it never *must* result.

Why, then, should we be dismayed when we take on the *fauxca-*
tion of pastor-as-scientist and discover that our hearers take any one of the perfectly valid and, frankly, appealing off ramps that such an approach offers? The pastor-as-scientist has little ground for complaint when his hearers ignore what he says or when they do nothing with it, for this is precisely the epistemological posture the pastor-as-scientist has led them to.

I suspect this is why phrases like “how amazing it is that” or “isn’t it awesome that” appear in preaching and teaching. Such language is an effort to counteract the ill effects of presenting the biblical message in the framework of **KNOWLEDGE**. Breathless words describing, say, the blazing speed at which God created the cosmos or how utterly awesome it is that God exists in the first place do little to negate the fact that the presentation of a nontrivial amount of biblical material lands with the same dull thud of a technical lecture.

When we operate in the domain of **KNOWLEDGE** we unwittingly set up scenario after scenario in which a person may regard what we say about God, assent to our message even, and yet *nothing needs to happen as a result*, least of all anything resembling what we call saving faith or its natural fruits.

Statements of **NEWS**, on the other hand, involve a different set of responses from those who encounter them. Because **NEWS** relates to the concrete predicament of the hearer, the initial response must be one of heeding with action (or inaction) *relevant to and appropriate for one’s situation*. Percy notes the remarkable fact that with **NEWS** the question of truth or falsehood is not irrelevant, but it is deferred. Indeed, a person can trust and be saved by a word of **NEWS** (“Fire! Come with me to safety!”) without having investigated or fully understood the underlying claim at all. Factors beyond bare truth or falsehood are in play.

Furthermore, because **NEWS** necessarily addresses the concrete predicament of the hearer it is inherently actionable. It provokes a response *at the point of hearing*. Percy explains how it is impossible for a person to first judge whether **NEWS** is true or false before they can choose to heed or ignore it. Thus, even if someone does not heed **NEWS** as they perhaps should, their inaction is not strictly related to the veracity of message. They rely instead on other canons of acceptance, as Percy calls them, which involve chiefly whether the **NEWS** is

relevant, but also involves other factors such as plausibility, or whether the bearer of **NEWS** is serious and credible.

Here again the illustration of **NEWS** of a fire helps. If a firefighter announces, “Fire! Come with me to safety!” people heed the message without first independently confirming that a fire has, in fact, broken out. Of course, the firefighter could be lying, which would be a serious problem, but the investigation of whether the report is true or false is not in play at the outset as it would be with **KNOWLEDGE**.

I will say more on this later, especially on the matter of relevance and credibility, but for now it is worth noting the qualitatively different way people decide to heed **NEWS** compared to investigating **KNOWLEDGE**. Factors beyond veracity matter because **NEWS** has an effect before investigation can even occur—at the point of hearing.

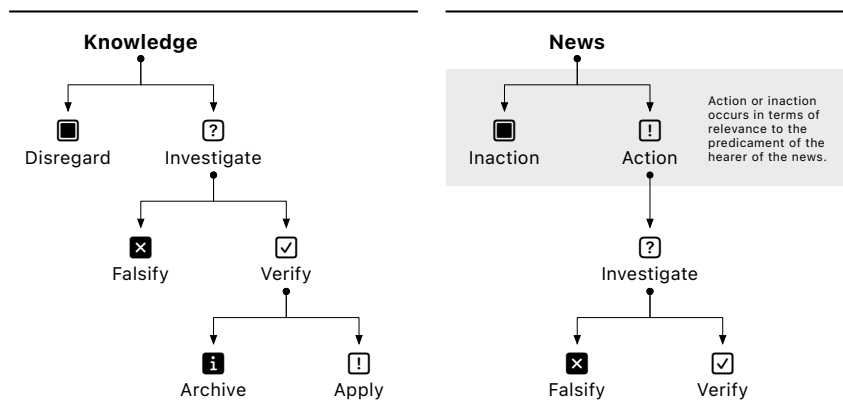


Figure 1 The natural process of *Knowledge* illustrated as a flowchart reveals the multiple “off ramps” available to the disinterested or skeptical hearer. *News*, on the other hand, immediately engages hearers and their predicament at the point of hearing. The matter of verification or falsification is deferred.

We pastors are wise to seriously assess whether our message is one that hearers will need to heed at the point of hearing. If we are acting in the fauxcation of pastor-as-scientist we will be inviting people to treat the message with the set of responses available to someone encountering statements of **KNOWLEDGE**. Engagement with scientific debates over cosmological origin, social conflict over one-man/one-woman definitions of marriage, or detailed deconstruction of exotic eschatologies may be important in some situations, but they are not really **NEWS**.

Consider the advantage **NEWS** proclamation naturally offers. People who heed **NEWS** relevant to their predicament assume a positive attitude toward the subject of the **NEWS** or the person who brought the **NEWS**. From such a disposition often arises a desire to

investigate the situation more fully or to pursue relevant change. One gets the sense that someone new has been born.

In the case of Christian proclamation, the gospel first of all saves and subsequently gives birth to a new self which seeks to investigate the situation more fully. The new self has a different disposition. The pursuit of theological **KNOWLEDGE** that believers naturally seek is shaped by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who is a more powerful ally and a better motivator than we can be. Anselm characterized this as *fides quaerens intellectum*. The **KNOWLEDGE-NEWS** distinction helps us keep the subject and object of that phrase in the right sequence.

NEWS gets things moving in a way that **KNOWLEDGE** does not. It does not move hearers miles away from where we hope they end up, it engages hearers right where we want to engage them: in their concrete predicament. And even in cases where someone does not heed the message as we hope, the task at hand is not to bend the person's intellect to accept as true our propositional statements of **KNOWLEDGE**, but in determining and addressing the particular predicament of our hearer so that we can announce the gospel as **NEWS** that is genuinely relevant and therefore worth heeding. The pastor-as-scientist can argue, but the pastor-as-proclaimer can save.

Enduring Relevance

In judging the significance of a piece of news, everything depends on the situation of the hearer. The question is not merely, What is the nature of the news? but, Who is the hearer?

— Walker Percy

Do you remember the *emergent* church? Are you *missional*? Even now you are probably using the word *intentional* more often than you once did. Ministerial jargon waxes and wanes, but few words have endured the way *relevant* has.

Everyone wants to be relevant. Indeed, ministry consultants have long packaged relevance as a predicable playbook: ditch the vestments, start a worship ensemble, add motion graphics, &c. Do everywhere what was a hit at a particular time (like, say, the mid 1990s) in a particular place (Orange County, California, for example) and similar success must surely follow.

Do not mistake my point. Relevance *is* vital. But we should ask whether the relevance everyone has been chasing is worthy of the name. What if the clichéd triptych, “Real, Relevant, Relational,” is none of those things? This is worth investigating because if Percy is right about the nature of **KNOWLEDGE** compared to **NEWS** then we must take seriously both the situation of our hearers *and* the character of the **NEWS** we’ve been called to proclaim. Our message must not be of *some* relevance to *some* people, but of *deep and enduring* relevance to the predicament *all* people face.

Percy’s analysis reveals the critical role relevance plays in whether someone heeds **NEWS**. News of a cache of diamonds deep in a nearby cave, for example, is of no relevance to a person dying of thirst. Indeed, this is how Lutherans have commonly explained the role of the law vis-à-vis the gospel, that is, the law reveals the gospel’s relevance.

KNOWLEDGE, on the other hand, moves as quickly as possible *away* from any particular circumstance toward broad abstractions. **KNOWLEDGE** cannot consider *any* individual or event to be of any real relevance.

You saw this phenomenon at play during the pandemic. As a discipline, research medicine must necessarily consider the individual situation to be of the *least possible significance*, except insofar as the individual situation is a piece of data used to construct a broad conclu-

sion. This is why, for example, a small business owner might have genuinely agreed with the pandemic policies proposed for his municipality while feeling legitimately insignificant at the same time.

You also see this phenomenon when preaching resembles a deductive lecture on systematic topics or an extended commentary on Hebrew or Greek linguistic details. The propositional statements offered up may be true, useful, and important abstractions of the underlying biblical material, but such a presentation necessarily minimizes the concrete predicament of the individual.

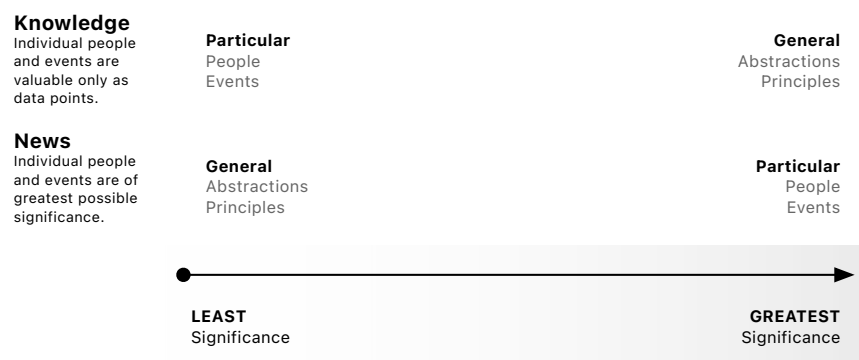


Figure 2 The scale of significance differs dramatically between the modes of **KNOWLEDGE** and **NEWS**. In **KNOWLEDGE** individual people and events are of least significance while broad abstractions are of greatest significance. In **NEWS** the significance is inverted.

Many pastors intuitively sense this and try to solve the relevance problem by preaching Christian self-help or religious pop psychology. After all, the thinking goes, if doctrinal lectures and whole paragraphs about the aorist tense of Greek verbs are not relevant, then surely sermons chock full of good advice are. But Percy's analysis reveals serious flaws with the *fauxcation* of pastor-as-therapist.

Consider that if a person really wanted to, say, manage their anger, they could, in principle, enter a program of study in psychology, complete some original research on the subject, and then work for several years in a private practice offering anger therapy to clients. In doing so they would acquire **KNOWLEDGE** that they could (optionally) apply to coping with their anger.

While possible in principle, this is impractical. Human society does, in fact, require people who devote themselves to the acquisition of specialized **KNOWLEDGE** on which others may rely. Indeed, the Lutheran doctrine of vocation calls this the very handiwork of God.

But in light of the **KNOWLEDGE–NEWS** distinction, we can say that when the pastor-as-therapist seeks relevance through a sermon series centered on a self-help book he recently read he is offering what experts and specialists offer, namely a *faster way to KNOWLEDGE*, and, hopefully, some insight on how to apply such **KNOWLEDGE**. And because the application of **KNOWLEDGE** is necessarily optional, the pastor-as-therapist must take up the related *fauxcation* of pastor-as-motivational-speaker to convince his hearers to apply the **KNOWLEDGE** he has presented.

This is a fine vocation for many, but it is not the vocation of the pastor commissioned to preach the gospel. The pastor-as-therapist is disseminating **KNOWLEDGE**, maybe very good **KNOWLEDGE**, but he is not proclaiming **NEWS**. As harmless as this seems, there is an overlooked but dangerous spiritual shadow cast by the pastor-as-therapist.

Percy observes that **NEWS** is that which no amount of mental or spiritual effort can produce. **NEWS** is inherently *extra nos*. A person may, on the other hand, arrive at **KNOWLEDGE**, in principle, by some degree of their own effort at thinking and choosing. The pastor-as-therapist offering Christian self-help and religious pop psychology is inviting people to join him in the conclusion that what the church offers is merely a faster or more effective way to get what we could all otherwise get by our own thinking and choosing. We must remember our serious Third Article objections to this idea.

Second, the pastor-as-therapist subtly but decisively shifts the question at hand from whether we need a mediator between us and God to whether we need a therapist between us and our messed up lives. In the former situation we need **NEWS** of the man crowned with thorns, in the latter we need **KNOWLEDGE** from the man in the Banana Republic button-down. When a preacher defines the predicament in therapeutic terms that can be solved by applying the right spiritual technology the hearer doesn't need **NEWS** of Jesus at all, but he does need the **KNOWLEDGE** that the preacher claims to possess. Jesus must decrease, the pastor-as-therapist must increase. John the Baptist would object. I say we should, too.

None of this excludes the possibility of practical application in our public preaching and teaching. We should, however, carefully assess whether our dominant emphasis is merely a faster way to **KNOWLEDGE**. Indeed, this insight may help pastors to confront the challenge of addressing a diverse community of people with **NEWS** that is of deep and enduring relevance to them all.

There are many different predicaments in the typical Sunday morning assembly, so how can a pastor make just one announcement of **NEWS** that touches them all? Perhaps by saying less about too-specific situations and more about specific ways in which we experience the universal predicament that the Christian gospel addresses. This takes into account both the hearer and the message.

In the case of the Christian gospel, the character of the **NEWS** is that a particular human being demonstrated his deity and subsequently died to atone for the sin of the world and later defeated death itself on our behalf by rising from the grave. The same person has promised that all of history finds its culmination in him and that one day all that exists will serve him in a new, everlasting kingdom that is qualitatively and quantitatively different than what we now know, yet, at the same time, will be discernible as the perfect continuation of God's creation as we now know it.

Such news is relevant to those who see themselves as sinful, dying, and facing judgment. To change the nature of pastoral proclamation so that it addresses those who see themselves as mostly thriving but in need of a bit of coaching is to do them a grave disservice. The time is coming, declares the Lord, when the **NEWS** you have been announcing will be overwhelmingly relevant. You do not have to change the character of the message to make it relevant now, you must wait until the circumstance for the hearer changes. And when the circumstance does change—and it will—your erstwhile hearers will not really have needed that edgy, every-other-year series on better sex as much as they needed Christ and him crucified.

There is a time and place for therapy and mentoring. After all, the Christian gospel undeniably introduces a new way of life and pursuing that way of life takes faithful effort. But the time and place for therapy is probably within the context of private counseling or in more demographically focused settings where the pastor can more aptly say things relevant to the concrete predicament of the hearers. There it is possible to make the mode shift from **NEWS** to **KNOWLEDGE** more carefully and with a greater chance of success. But once you attempt to address a broad array of predicaments in a setting meant to unite people as one, the quest for relevance-through-therapy is not, in the final analysis, as relevant as one might have assumed. It necessarily segments people into social and demographic silos. It is difficult to be one body when the pastor-as-therapist is carving it to pieces.

It helps to understand why Percy describes people as castaways. Castaways are far from their true home. They are genuinely lost, even as they enjoy what would otherwise seem like a happy existence. Percy

suspects this is why the person living in all the wealth of modern society nevertheless faces so many crippling maladies of heart and soul. To point lost people to more **KNOWLEDGE** from the island on which they are lost is to point them in the wrong direction. What castaways need is not just **KNOWLEDGE**, but **NEWS**, and not just any **NEWS**, they need **NEWS** from across the sea.

Good advice is not **NEWS** from across the sea, for you can find good advice on any island at any time. The gospel of Jesus Christ, on the other hand, is **NEWS** from across the sea that is of *deep and enduring* relevance to every person. It actually addresses the fundamental displacement of the human soul. Nothing could be more relevant.

Perhaps a good course of action is to take the necessary time to craft engaging ways to explain not so much the *how* of things, but to proclaim the *that* of things. Effort is better spent seeking ways to touch the heart with the gospel more than trying to shape behavior with religious therapy. The pastor may show how the *that* of things is the basis for a new way of things. After all, where the heart goes the rest follows. What that looks like can be handled in private or focused settings.

In such an approach the hearer needs Jesus in both an ultimate *and* penultimate sense; they need Jesus now and always. The pastor is not a specialist in such communication, let alone a guru privy to secret gnosis. He does not distract or detract from Christ. He is simply the person commissioned to bear **NEWS** of deep and enduring relevance to all people. And God-willing, they will heed it as a message that is not only relevant, but one that carries real authority.

Expert Authority

The message in the bottle, then, is not sufficient credential in itself as a piece of news. It is sufficient credential in itself as a piece of knowledge, for the scientist has only to test it and does not care who wrote it or whether the writer was sober or in good faith. But a piece of news requires that there be a newsbearer.

— Walker Percy

The pandemic revealed a striking paradox. On the one hand, society genuinely needs competent expertise. Many problems benefit from specialized knowledge and experience. Yet many people are deeply skeptical toward expertise—and their skepticism is justified. Even the mere phrase “experts say” has become a source of division in an escalating culture war.

Pastors in Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod are deliberately trained as generalists, not specialists. Nevertheless, most parishioners probably think of their pastor as some form of expert, which is why pastors find their work affected by the erosion of trust in our culture. People tend to have a warped relationship with expertise, which means they tend to have a warped relationship with their pastor. Indeed, sometimes we warp the relationship further.

Without a thorough grasp of how expertise, trust, and credentials interact with the way people hear and heed messages, pastors are prone to making missteps that precipitate or exacerbate many of the broader cultural pathologies connected to expertise. While it is hard to deny that pastors bring a form of expertise to bear in their vocation, it seems fair to acknowledge that certain manifestations of the pastor-as-expert represent another *fauxcation* worth evaluation. We want our message to carry authority—divine authority, even—but some of our most reflexive means of expert communication undermine and erode the genuine authority we seek.

In the summer of 2020 a large group of public health experts released an open letter indicating that, in spite of all their prior injunctions against in-person gatherings during the peak phase of a respiratory pandemic, large crowds were nonetheless sanctioned so long as such crowds took the form of social protests supporting specific, character-

istically progressive causes. One can hardly imagine a more damaging destruction of credibility or a more potent example of how experts invariably overstep their ability to understand and judge subjects outside of their core competency.

Such self-immolation has become commonplace in American social and political discourse, but I suggest it occurs frequently enough in Lutheran preaching and teaching to warrant criticism. Is it unfair to observe that the class of experts called *the ministerium* tends to be quick to opine on or make applications of subjects far afield of their training? A pastor can shred his credibility, perhaps irreversibly, with but a single, reactionary post on social media, to say nothing of a habitual tendency to commit what some have called *epistemic trespassing*. Perhaps it is wise to recall how you and I feel when some talking head on television incompetently explains spiritual subjects and then stretch our imagination just wide enough to consider that *we're that guy* when we take any and every opportunity to immediately and publicly comment on any and every thing.

Further complicating the problem with expertise is that *experts in the same field frequently disagree*. Indeed, millions of media viewers encounter expertise this way. Producers know that dueling experts attempting to one-up the other is must-see media. No one is trying to persuade anyone in such confrontations. Instead, viewers are left to their tribal instincts to make a judgment. The only roadmap left to follow is some kind of prejudice.

Again I ask if this sounds familiar. Is what comes from our pulpits occasionally nothing more than a duel with some expert? And *in absentia*, no less? I can take down Sam Harris all day if he is not there to respond. And I know that dueling experts scores easy points with the kind of people who want to hear such stuff from the church. It is easy to engage a congregation the way a politician might fire up an ideologically-aligned base.

This is no way to reach a broad community of people and serves only to provoke the already inflamed intellectual environment our hearers are living in. Even worse, it tends to confirm people in their own self-righteousness. Such preaching launders ginned-up outrage and returns it as righteousness. To excuse a style of communication that deliberately triggers in-group/out-group division as an example of how the Word hardens some hearts and softens others is a comforting lie. What is actually happening is that some people are rightly repulsed from such a presentation while others are wrongly attracted to hearing it. It's hard to imagine a more damning result of the *fauxcation* of pastor-as-expert.

I think this is both explicable and addressable in light of Percy's **KNOWLEDGE–NEWS** distinction. Expertise is in the domain of **KNOWLEDGE**, which means the primary task at hand is verification or falsification. In fact, Percy notes that in the realm of **KNOWLEDGE**, verification and acceptance are synonymous. This is the principle of scientific-logical inquiry. If something can be demonstrated as true, then it must be accepted as true. *Quod erat demonstrandum*.

But in the popular mind of the modern-day castaway the process is perversely reversed. Acceptance (or not) is treated as verification (or falsification). It is common for a person to first judge whether they want to accept or reject some **KNOWLEDGE** and then to treat their acceptance as proof that what they accepted (or rejected) is true (or false). Indeed, this is a major reason behind the polarization we now see in society. This is also why, perhaps moreso now than in recent history, proclamation of **NEWS** has such distinct power. If even the process of acquiring **KNOWLEDGE** has become corrupt, then a dramatic shift in mode makes a profound difference.

Consider how news of some great or national significance tends to create a sense of solidarity even across once-rigid party lines. It wasn't **KNOWLEDGE** of the 2001 terrorist attack in New York that created a period of galvanized national unity, it was **NEWS** of the attacks. *That* someone flew airplanes into the World Trade Center meant more in subjective terms than *who* did it or *why*. And that was *bad* news. Imagine what profoundly relevant *good* news will do.

In Jesus' day the dominant (and dead) mode of communication was the rabbinic debate. Experts spoke with endless commentary to extend their authority into every area of life. But this only sapped their message of power.

The more we add endless commentary on every subject the more likely we will be written off as more irrelevant noise by people already exhausted from expert overstepping. The more we rely on cheap takedowns from the pulpit the more people will suspect that we do not have much to say at all. This is losing tactic.

Expertise has not only been corrupted, it also carries an unsavory sense as a class marker indicating the superiority of the expert who has Done the Work. Most people prefer not to be talked down to and I suspect our shared goal is to avoid pastoral condescension. No one likes to listen to a know-it-all.

By shedding the *fauxcation* of pastor-as-expert the pastor-as-proclaimer gains credibility. The pastor-as-proclaimer is not an expert with an air of superiority, he is a fellow traveler on the Way. He is free to communicate solidarity with, not aloofness from the people he has

been called to serve. He actually needs the **NEWS** and, like everyone else, no amount of his own thinking or choosing was going to get him where he needed to be.

I suggest that now, as in Jesus' day, encountering **NEWS** feels quite refreshing compared to the mental model of expertise our mass and social media impose on us. Addressing this problem with **NEWS** is not some rhetorical trick, it is the actual job God has called us to do. Proclamation of **NEWS** sets aside the world of expertise and frees people to consider a message that carries real authority and is therefore worth heeding.

Durable Credibility

In these times everyone is an apostle of sorts, ringing doorbells and bidding his neighbor to believe this and do that. In such times, when everyone is saying “Come!” when radio and television say nothing else but “Come!” it may be that the best way to say “Come!” is to remain silent. Sometimes silence itself is a “Come!”

— Walker Percy

Several months ago on a busy street corner in San Francisco two events occurred simultaneously. One was a protest against vaccination, the other was a gathering of street evangelists. Both groups used bullhorns to amplify a message of general armageddon. Both groups agreed that the end was near, although they disagreed on what, specifically, was ending and why.

What makes this story important is not the event itself, but the one who told it: a 40-year-old Ph.D. chemist attending a Bible information class.

He is not an atheist; on the contrary, he has ruled out atheism as a credible position. His view is what I might call *theistic agnosticism*. He assents to God’s existence, but much of what is left to know about God is, to him, an open and perhaps unanswerable question.

What, then, does a person *in his shoes* see and hear when he encounters the cacophony of that San Francisco street? He sees the Christian message presented in the *same form as the protest* where volume is paramount and getting attention is the goal. From his viewpoint both groups are the same. Even if they are saying true sentences their message lacks an aura of credibility. Their noise does not move him closer to an answer on God or vaccination.

Here is one of the most troubling implications of Percy’s analysis: credibility. It is troubling because credibility depends significantly on the one bearing **NEWS**, that is, on us. The *credentials of the newsbearer* is another category in which people necessarily evaluate **NEWS** differently than **KNOWLEDGE**.

The credentials of a person bringing **KNOWLEDGE** do not really matter. Since **KNOWLEDGE** is necessarily independent of the scientist-logician, a person may hear, evaluate, and accept **KNOWLEDGE** even

from people who are otherwise obnoxious scoundrels. Acceptance of **NEWS**, on the other hand, is intimately connected to the credentials of the newsbearer because **NEWS** requires action at the point of hearing. You cannot go to the lab to check **NEWS** out first. You have to judge, among other things, the person bearing the **NEWS**.

We intuitively sense this. If the newsbearer is a close relation, and if the newsbearer knows the concrete predicament of the hearer, and if the newsbearer is sober-minded, serious, and communicating in good faith, and if the news is of momentous significance, a person has every reason to heed the **NEWS**. If, on the other hand, the newsbearer is known to be a “knave or a fool” (Percy’s words) or is marked by “drunkenness of spirit—enthusiasm in the old sense of the word” (Percy’s words again), then a person has reason to ignore the **NEWS**, even if it is true. In other words, the person bearing the message must conduct himself according to the character of the message he carries. The person who announces **NEWS** not only brings the message, he also brings his personal character, conduct, and manner of speaking, all of which necessarily influences whether a person will heed the **NEWS**.

How does pastoral practice stand up under this kind of analysis? Do you and I cultivate durable credibility, or are we seeking something more transitory? Perhaps we can use a trendy word to label a pastoral *fauxcation* that seeks momentary credibility at great cost, the pastor-as-influencer.

Influencers are natural when authority means less and less. They achieve credibility not by the merits of their message but by mastery of their medium. Influencers seek to attract a following or start a movement at any cost, even if the price is to become frivolous and ephemeral. The pastor-as-influencer is willing to bet all the black chips on ministry mediated by mass media. But this necessarily attenuates the bearer of **NEWS**, which, if Percy is right, is a step in the wrong direction. Indeed, the importance of the newsbearer in the conveyance of a life-changing or life-saving message gives intellectual and philosophical weight to the common sense that all the digitally-mediated ministry that has exploded in popularity since the pandemic is, in a word, *weird*.

In digitally-mediated ministry the authentic presence of the newsbearer is diminished at best and absent at worse. I understand that, yes, if a person was alone on a deserted island and a copy of the Gospel of John washed ashore they could read it and be saved. This illustration has been used to support some version of the claim that the minister of the gospel is not as crucial to God’s work of salvation as some might want him to be. The illustration is meant to say it is the Word that

works, not the minister. But this is not the actual phenomenon of ministry. Ministry is not primarily the conveyance of information from one *mind* to another *mind*, it is a *person* bearing the good news to another *person*.

This gives us reason to approach the subject of disembodied ministry with warranted caution. If all we are communicating is religious **KNOWLEDGE** then, yes, disembodied information disseminated through digital channels is ideal. The more viral the better. Indeed, if this is the case, let's go all the way and select, say, the 10% of pastors who are most skilled at this approach to ministry and rescind the calls of the other 90%. After all, if the Christian message doesn't really need a newsbearer, then why pay all these newsbearers when a tiny fraction of them can prepare digital materials to be duplicated and distributed to millions? I am asking a serious question. What is your answer?

One answer is that human beings are embodied creatures who flourish in embodied relationships. It doesn't matter how many techno-gnostics try to hype up, say, the disembodied world of the metaverse. Everyone can sense how *odd* they are. Yes, they have a lot of cultural clout right now, but only because no one wants to feel like they are missing the next big thing (and techno-gnosticism does feel like a big thing). But techno-gnosticism is misanthropic in character and will either fail or introduce dystopia. The pastor-as-influencer seeking to acquire likes and faves across a vast digital landscape is the knave and fool Percy describes. No one will listen to them when it really matters because disembodied avatars have no durable credibility. They will not even be there to be believed. The pastor-as-influencer may appear popular, but he only trends for a time because he is ultimately irrelevant and, in the final analysis, unbelievable. He is the medium, not the message.

But, not everyone is all-in on full-throated techno-gnosticism. More of us are probably enthralled by a softer form of disembodiment: movement- and marketing-driven approaches to ministry.

The goal in the American Evangelical model that Lutherans love to copy is to read the winds of culture and set the sails of ministry accordingly. This may provide rapid gains in metrics like attendance, views, impressions, or even revenue, but the recent collapse of influential ministries and the damning self-assessments of others reveal the remarkable fact that if you had ignored the trendy ministry movements of the last 20 years you would have missed nothing. Indeed, you would probably be in a better position today than if you had tried to catch all those market-driven waves when they were cresting.

Are you ever struck by just how much of the conversation about evangelism is indistinguishable from what marketers talk about? Lead-generation, follow-up, deal-closing, user-journeys, &c. Yet there is nothing authentically Christian about marketing. If marketing works for the church it is more accidental than essential. Church marketing, especially digital marketing, will inevitably appear alongside a wide range of other messages. A carefully crafted post will almost certainly appear with bizarre memes, political tirades, and straight up trolling. There your church speaks. As does Q. When the pastor-as-marketer becomes overly enthralled with his mastery of the medium he easily ignores the importance of sobriety and embodiment that credible communication requires.

I do think there is a role that digital marketing can play in the total strategy of a church, especially if the marketing strategy takes the actual phenomenon of digital communication into consideration and aims the effort at getting people *out* of the disembodied world. The image I have for such work comes from the 1999 film, *The Matrix*. I mean this seriously. In the imaginary world of the Matrix human beings were plugged into machines to provide the machines their energy. In the real world people are plugged into machines that convert not the body's heat to electricity but the mind's attention into money. We provide the machines their funding. The goal of a pastor's entrance into this literally dystopian world must not be to make a home in it, but to rescue people from it. A congregation's strategy must be driven by the values of the kingdom, not the commercial interests of Silicon Valley or the bizarre, quasi-religious ideologies of its most ardent transhumanist True Believers. If a marketing strategy can be called Christian it must be a rescue mission designed to bring people to the place where meals are shared, relationships are formed, and the gospel that promises to heal whole human persons is delivered on the lips of another. It must be one of the nets that gospel fishermen use in their work, not the totality of their effort.

I think Percy's analysis of the importance of the newsbearer lends credence to a model of ministry that emphasizes the long, slow work of forming relationships as the trusted context for delivering the gospel. We have emphasized this in the so-called friends-relatives-acquaintances-neighbors approach to evangelism. The new-to-us emphasis on legitimate, Christian hospitality, genuine community service, and authentic Christian presence makes clear sense in light of Percy's analysis. We could probably save ourselves significant time and effort by accepting that the so-called *attractional model* of church was a mistake at worst or is no longer effective at best.

We intuitively sense that in our communities the street preacher has no credibility. The person roaming the street with words of judgment is more likely to be insane than anything else. While digitally-mediated street preachers seeking an audience in the cacophonous digital square may have a veneer of credibility today, they are, in the end, bereft of the the kind of power that comes from embodied proclamation. The related movement- and market-driven model of ministry lies in ruins as well. People are rightly suspicious of the pastor-as-influencer and the pastor-as-marketer. The entire *fauxcation* reeks to everyone of inauthenticity. Can you smell it? But those who deliver **NEWS** seriously, with sober-mind, and in a manner worthy of the message enjoy durable credibility. They enjoy durable credibility because they are not trying to close a deal or get you to like and subscribe; they are authentically involved in the real lives of real people.

Authentic Involvement

The absent-minded professor, the inspired poet, the Vedic mystic, is indifferent to news, sometimes even news of high relevance for him, because he is in a very real sense “out of this world.”

— Walker Percy

Galileo has long been a mythic figure on the internet. Any discussion on the relationship between science and religion tends to reach the inevitable point when someone cites the Roman Catholic Church’s opposition to Galilean astronomy as proof that the church is anti-science. This simplistic logic has long been popular among armchair atheists and casual, spiritual-but-not-religious types, but the myth of Galileo has since spread across the social and political spectrum. It has come to apply in almost any situation where there is disagreement over **KNOWLEDGE**. You’ll find this syllogism at work:

The Church said Galileo was wrong, but he was right

Some expert or authority said I am wrong about something

Therefore, I am right (and also brave and brilliant)

Significant cultural cachet is available to those who can cast themselves as a courageous outsider throwing rocks at ossified establishment ideas—a dynamic that affects the pastoral vocation, too. Pastors are under pressure to wear the internet-distilled Galilean costume and serve as debunkers of received wisdom. Indeed, we have a mythic syllogism of our own in which we substitute Luther for Galileo and draw the same conclusion: I am brave and brilliant. But this is a corrosive trend that wise pastors must resist. The pastor-as-debunker is more *fauxcation* than vocation.

We turn again to Percy’s **KNOWLEDGE–NEWS** distinction. **KNOWLEDGE** and **NEWS** require different *postures*. Anyone engaged in discussion of **KNOWLEDGE** must stand outside of and over against the world. The posture of **KNOWLEDGE** is one of scientific *objectivity* which cannot take into account the special character of any individual

person or event. Everything is but a piece of data serving the larger goal of verification or falsification. Therefore *detachment* is the natural, even necessary posture of **KNOWLEDGE**.

This is why the popular well-actually-let-me-tell-you-how-things-really-are view from nowhere must necessarily abstract people and events into some larger principle. One sees this malady when columnists and bloggers declare that a certain event is really *all about* some other, abstract issue. Just as the theoretical physicist discusses massive concepts like gravitational fields, the pundit writes to promote social justice or criticize woke ideology. Indeed, an entire class of professional debunkers has arisen to build large and lucrative audiences around the cause of deconstructing received wisdom. *Vox* explainers are identical in essence to iconoclastic takedowns on *The Federalist*. Every party claims the posture of objectivity because objectivity is purity. Take off your sandals when you visit Twitter for this website is holy ground.

The posture of detached objectivity strikes me as a particular occupational hazard for the pastor. We like to talk and we love to be right, so when we are pressed by our people into the quasi-priestly class of debunker, we often wear the mantle willingly. Indeed, for some this is the only vestment they will wear. But the more you communicate in the *fauxcation* of pastor-as-debunker the more detached your hearers will become from the reality of people and events. Everything becomes about some bigger and necessarily farther-away thing.

The people in your pews already live in a world of deep detachment. A startling percentage of daily interactions are mediated by algorithmic systems that must, by technical necessity, abstract every individual person into arrays addressable by computer scientists and their machines. The most lucrative media is aimed at turning individuals into data that support or undermine some larger issue or topic. Your neighbor is not your neighbor, he is a piece of data you evaluate objectively. And in our morally-charged cultural moment this means your judgment of rightness or wrongness is a judgment of whether your neighbor is holy or profane. You are the scientist in the lab sorting your neighbors into abstractions ranging from *libtard* to *covidiot*.

This is the natural effect of the view from nowhere that characterizes the aloof, detached mode of the modern debunker. And it is a cultural sickness unto death that is behind our modern misery.

The more we preach and teach as if the *sole issue* at hand is whether our theological **KNOWLEDGE** is right or wrong the more we will invite people along the road the rest of the world is already leading

them: to detachment from their neighbor and the good works God has prepared in advance for them to do. The goal is not to invite people into the great company of Tucker Carlson or Bill Maher, but to make disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. This will require **NEWS**.

To proclaim **NEWS** is to deliver a message that makes it nearly impossible for the hearer to become detached from authentic involvement with the world. To proclaim **NEWS** is to avoid the easy subtext offered by the pastor-as-debunker, something like, “Isn’t it great how right we are?” To proclaim **NEWS** is to connect what has happened in history to what must now happen as a result.

I will use the example of preaching and teaching on creation again. If our exclusive emphasis is on the six-twenty-four-hour-dayness of creation then the most compelling way to engage our hearers is to cast the whole thing as an us-versus-them fight in which the job of the pastor is to debunk the entire field of secular cosmology. A statement like, “We know that God made the heavens and the earth in six twenty-four hour days” is probably only **NEWS** if there is, say, a large cash prize available for this discovery. Consider instead the kind of authentic involvement that a different emphasis offers: “God had you in mind when he created the universe and intends for his creation to bless you and you to bless it and all who live in it; indeed, God made the universe as the place where he could draw near and save you.” Now we are getting somewhere.

Of course, the debunking mode is not always as on the nose as I am describing. Even if we diligently work to avoid communicating from the aloof and detached view from nowhere we might still fall into habits that have the same detaching and abstracting effect. For instance, assuming that people are comforted with the claim that “God is here” or “God is God” ignores the fact that abstractions do not comfort. This is why the wording of our prayers is no small matter. Petitions like, “God, we praise you for being you” do not say much. Tautologies make bad prayers.

In the same way there is little to no effect to explaining to someone that *sin* is the cause of something. This is akin to saying *gravity* is why a plane crashed; this is objectively true, especially from the wide-angle lens of detached objectivity, but the abstraction of it all is precisely why it says so little. Sin does not sit in the pews, sinners do. They do not need abstractions of **KNOWLEDGE**. Learn their predicament and describe it clearly, maybe even with some emotion, for that is what their predicament involves, then tell them **NEWS** from across the sea.

The eye-rolling tone of the pastor-as-debunker catechizes people to leave church thinking, "I am a person with correct views surrounded by idiots." The stone-throwing outsider with a posture of detached objectivity moves people further away from where God wants them to be: authentically involved in the affairs of his creation. It is hard to love your neighbors when you despise them. It is hard to rescue lost souls while on patrol for crimethink. Your hearers already live in a world characterized by deconstruction and debunking. They do not need God as an abstraction at best and a sanction for their self-righteousness at worst. They do not need to see their neighbor as a piece of data or a pawn in the culture war. They need the kind of meaning that authentic involvement engenders, which means they need the pastor to proclaim the **NEWS** that genuinely expands their God-given purpose and action.

Meaningful Responsibility

If he commanded them to flap their arms and fly out through the skylight, they would hardly heed him. If he spoke like a fool with all manner of ranting and raving, they would hardly heed him. If they knew him to be a liar, they would hardly heed him. But if he spoke with authority, in perfect sobriety, and with every outward sign of good faith and regard for them, saying that he knew the way out and they had only to follow him, they would heed him. They would heed him with all dispatch.

— Walker Percy

Who doesn't love a good meme? The danker the better, I say. Indeed, if I am lucky, someone will make a meme about my presentation of this paper. But in spite of their appeal, memes deserve evaluation. Generally speaking, memes are not sharp, framed comedy (that is called a comic), but cynical, permanently ironic communication disguised as humor. The glib style of memetic communication has come to dominate culture, and pastors are just as susceptible to its corrupting effects as everyone else. This phenomenon points to the last *fauxcation* I have in mind: the pastor-as-shitposter.

Shitpost is a technical term describing deliberately simplistic or off-topic online communication meant to disrupt, derail, or provoke. It's a form of intellectual vandalism and, it must be said, is extremely *fun*. This is how everyone owns the libs and dunks on conservatives. It is all memetic. And you do not need to be online to participate in this race to the bottom. You can shitpost IRL.

Memes abstract an idea to something simplistic. The meme is formulaic; it is the formula that you respond to, not the meaning. Therefore, a meme requires no actual thought.

Memes strike me as Percy's concept of **KNOWLEDGE** taken *ad absurdum*. There is an air of detachment, glib irony, even, but unlike the pursuit of **KNOWLEDGE**, detachment is not a necessary byproduct, it is the entire point. Memetic communication is blank contempt. Full stop. Nothing is really new, nothing is really funny, nothing really matters except the sick burn and a few lolz.

Memetic communication's obvious advantage, if we can use the word loosely, is that the person making the meme doesn't have to say or argue anything of substance. They can remain aloof, detached, and objective. They can be *just sayin'*. The advantage of memetic commu-

nication for the person receiving the meme is that they do not have to think or change or act. They can be confirmed in their views. Or not. *Whatever, bro.* It doesn't matter.

I suspect that we are shaped by the corrosive effect of memetic communication more than we might like to think—especially in what one might call our media diet or our (even private) social media personas. Many of us engage in memetic communication daily and this must affect how we view one another, ministry, and the people we serve. Memes excuse people from meaningful responsibility, which means memetic communication excuses Christians from the work of sanctification.

Here I will offer what may be the most controversial claim in this paper. You should stop reading the Babylon Bee; or at least read it a whole lot less. The once-clever Babylon Bee has become a sort of intellectual pornography, a corrupting simulacrum of the real thing. It immediately gratifies but is forgotten just as quickly. It rarely offers genuine humor and is probably bad for your soul.

Even if you disagree with every sentence of the preceding paragraph, surely you can sense how the main goal and primary result of a great deal of memetic communication is to do nothing more than cultivate cynicism. Even if you agree with the editorial aims of the Babylon Bee, you surely understand that no one will be persuaded to adopt your views because of sick satirical burns.

Here is the death cycle that we are in. When trust is eroded, debunking arises. When debunking arises, detachment follows. When detachment is the norm, social disintegration is inevitable. And when social disintegration is rampant, unity and wholeness are compromised. The only good left available is to mock one another.

Thus the meme.

Does this sound familiar? Do you know why so many people left Lutheran congregations in the tempest of 2020 and beyond? It was often because congregations would not be for them what they wanted them to be: some memetic cudgel by which to oppose, punish, or expose ideological enemies. It mattered nothing that you were united in a creed that transcends centuries of history, something far more important had taken over. The catechetical power of memetic communication algorithmically tuned for maximum outrage had prevailed. The fruits of faith stand no chance against the intense and momentary pleasure of the sick burn. The stories of people ghosting church in the wake of the pandemic are many things, not least of all sad. But one thing they are not is surprising, at least not to anyone who has paid attention to the way memetic communication corrupts character.

If we believe that **NEWS**, specifically good news, is God's actual answer to the problem of disunity and division among his human creatures, and if we believe that pastors are the very vanguard of the solution to this problem as the lips from which the good news is proclaimed, then surely we understand the need to dial back our consumption and generation of the kind of memetic communication that leads people away from real responsibility for both belief and action in God's world.

Here we can glean one final point from Percy's **KNOWLEDGE–NEWS** distinction. Meaning is inversely proportional to the expansion of **KNOWLEDGE**, that is, people's horizon of meaning contracts even as horizons of scientific **KNOWLEDGE** expand. If my argument is valid, then much of our communication may be moving people already starved for meaning further away from the meaning they crave. Diminished meaning mixed with the memetic dissolution of responsibility yields a potent poison.

NEWS, on the other hand, by virtue of its immediacy to real-world people and predicaments increases meaning and purpose. And where meaning increases, so does responsibility. And where responsibility is on the rise, so also are the virtues that Christians have long associated with faithfulness. People may actually appreciate having a pastor who can point them beyond the trivial to the important, past the formulaic to what is genuinely enjoyable. Real-world engagement and authentic responsibility to live as God's people in God's creation is an increasingly rare thrill.

There is wisdom in ensuring that there are certain jokes you do not get because you are not sufficiently paying attention to the Current Thing. Would it not be nice (and maybe even a good example) to say to some member who is trying to press you into overstepping your pastoral vocation into some damaging *fauxcation*, "I don't even know what it is you are talking about, and I do not want to know what it is. I have more important and enjoyable things to do, and you do, too." Maybe we could adopt a tongue-in-cheek riff of 2 Corinthians 4:13. We believe, therefore we speak. But sometimes silence speaks volumes. We believe, therefore we shut up, or at least we stop retweeting. By saying less, especially less that is marked by the permanent irony of the internet, we will really say something instead of *just sayin'*.

A Uniquely Evangelical Approach for Uniquely Stupid Times

The dweller in today's world is a castaway whose island is awash with many messages. The average member of your congregation will spend hours every day interacting with an effectively infinite stream of new content served up by algorithmic social media. Their finger flicks up and down, left and right as some part of their mind rapidly assesses whether what is on screen has the right mix of whatever it takes to drive engagement. The important appears alongside the trivial. And that is the point. Everything is an addictive mix of the ephemeral and engaging.

But you know this already. And if statistics reflect reality, a good number of you spend time doing the same thing every day.

Some are fond of saying that the revolution in communication and culture precipitated among us by the internet in general and algorithmic social media in particular amounts to much the same thing as what happened after the invention of the printing press. The basic argument is, "Because *that* worked well, *this* will too."

This position only makes sense by eliding or ignoring the crucial differences between the nature of the medium then and the media now. The effects of movable type and algorithmic social media do not overlap as much as one might think. We should consider the possibility that although the printing press seems to have helped the cause of the gospel, this time the most dominant technological innovation is not as much of an ally as we might have hoped.

Millions of people have been catechized into social dysfunction in service of commercial interests. The results are plain. We, like everyone else, are powerless to resist the little text box at the top of our Facebook feed. We are continually conditioned to believe that we need to say something about everything. Our people assume this as well. Thus we need a sermon series on this and a Bible study on that. We

have to issue a statement. Someone is wrong on the internet and we must intervene. But all the messages we toss into the sea are not doing the work you think they are doing. They are not addressing castaways with what they truly need.

Like a wreck on the side of the road, 2020 and its aftermath have been equal parts engrossing and horrifying. Perhaps most unsettling is how much *fun* everyone seems to be having as they contribute, each in their own way, to the decay of our social cohesion and national competence. You can count me in agreement with Jonathan Haidt who recently diagnosed these times as *uniquely stupid*.

My goal has been to move us toward a philosophy of ministry for uniquely stupid times, a pastoral posture that has a reasonable shot at cutting through the noise instead of adding to it, a proclamation that is powerful because it is uniquely evangelical, a message that moves people because it is **NEWS**.

I have argued using Percy's analysis of language and communication that working primarily in the mode of **KNOWLEDGE** does not move people toward what we consider the goals of gospel proclamation. I aimed to help fellow pastors understand some aspects of what an algorithmically-shaped, information-overloaded, meme-dominated, trust-deprived, meaning-starved culture means for the work we do, that is, its effect on how and what we communicate to the people swept away by a flood of information. There is more to our work than saying true sentences. This insight should enlighten, not aggravate.

Rapid cultural, social, and political changes have left theologically conservative Christians feeling disoriented and frustrated. The accelerated rate at which evidently epochal events seem to occur and the elevated tension in which our culture operates have contributed to a sense that the church faces a crisis of authority and influence that requires an equally accelerated and elevated response from the church and her ministers. The agitated question arises, "Why will no one listen to what we have to say?" The equally agitated response is for pastors to engage the situation on its own terms, that is, to preach, teach, or otherwise speak out more frequently or more stridently on more and more topics, including on controversial subjects or developing events.

Percy's insights help Lutheran pastors adopt a strategy that doesn't seek to confront the threat so much as to outflank it—but such a maneuver requires discipline. Lutheran pastors must resist the temptation to speak when their vocation does not call for it and on subjects where their training does not equip or authorize them. Indeed, it may be wise to err on the side of silence. To speak with undue haste or

unwarranted authority risks doing grave damage to the witness of the church now and into the future, especially in the cultural climate in which we now operate. Hasty and voluminous communication only makes the perceived problem worse by further eroding authority and weakening influence. Such efforts move us from our vocation as heralds of the gospel to what I have characterized as *fauxcations*; immediately appealing but ultimately misguided activities for the Lutheran pastor.

None of this has been to say that **KNOWLEDGE** and its characteristics are wrong or that development of theological **KNOWLEDGE** is inappropriate. Percy made no such case in his essay and I have made no such case in mine. The point is to understand the epistemological characteristics that **KNOWLEDGE** entails and to watch out for how even good work in that mode may yield unappealing and unintended consequences. To know and understand that we also have the mode of communication Percy calls **NEWS** in our ministerial arsenal is useful, practical wisdom for the Lutheran pastor. This may lead you to conclude, as it has led me, that a wise and virtuous course of action for Lutheran pastors today is to recover the power of what they've been called to do: not simply to disseminate **KNOWLEDGE** *sub specie aeternitatis*, but to proclaim **NEWS** that will endure *in saecula saeculorum*, news from across the sea, glad tidings of great joy for all the castaways, a great drama that brings our hearers home.

SDG

Good News for the Pastor-as-Castaway

I have argued against a number of pastoral *fauxcations* in order to emphasize a renewed appreciation of a pastoral vocation centered on the proclamation of **NEWS**, and good news in particular. *Preach the gospel* is our mandate. You and I are *pastor-as-proclaimer*.

We are also *pastor-as-castaway*.

We live in some of the most beautiful places on earth, but we are generally discouraged. We enjoy unparalleled comforts, but we are typically unhealthy. We have our material needs met, but we are often unhappy. God's abundant gifts surround us on every side, yet we are so sad and restless that we resort to the endless pull-to-refresh hoping the feed serves up some momentary relief. And we do so while flying down the highway at 80 miles per hour. Is even the scenery not enough? Clearly not.

I am sure there are many causes for our ennui, but one that strikes me as a particular peril for pastors is the constant quest to satisfy ourselves with more **KNOWLEDGE**. We devour books that offer the pleasant comfort of an "aha" moment. We consume blog after blog looking for handy lifehacks. Our Kindle library brims with pastoral self-help.

Do you sense underlying premise of the quest for healing through **KNOWLEDGE**? *If I can just learn enough and then do enough it will all come together.* We gaze longingly at a future that authors promise is not only possible, but entirely achievable *if you will just follow their good advice.*

I will say it again: **KNOWLEDGE** is good. Indeed, the entirety of my work above is in the category of **KNOWLEDGE**. You can take it or leave it. But when it comes to our fundamental *lostness* no amount of **KNOWLEDGE** will make any difference. All these books and blogs we turn to are island news. You can get this stuff on any island at any time. We know where to find it. Indeed, it might be all we have. But the problem we face is not helped by what we can get on any island at any time. The pastor-as-castaway needs **NEWS**, and not just any **NEWS**, the pastor-as-castaway need **NEWS** from across the sea. You need it. I need it.

And here it is.

“The journey is too great for you.”

So said the angel of the Lord to the despondent prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 19. Elijah had enjoyed God’s great victory over the prophets of Baal, but the same victory had put a price on his head. Jezebel vowed to have him killed. He had a spectacular moment of ministry success, yet Elijah was ready to die.

What was God’s answer? The angel did not come with the cheerful demeanor and can-do spirit of a pastoral pep-talker. On the contrary, he came with a refreshing dose of reality. *This is too much for you to do, Elijah. But take heart, for it is not really up to you.*

The **NEWS** that comes to us from across the sea is that the Lord our God has been where Elijah was. He has been where you have been. Only he has gone to even darker depths. On the cross our Lord Jesus Christ died Elijah’s death and yours. On the third day our Lord Jesus Christ rose for Elijah’s justification and yours. It matters not in which *fauxcation* you have previously labored in vain, your genuine calling comes from Christ and none other. He calls you his minister, yes, but also his blood-bought brother. And in the end he will call you from this lost island to the home where you belong.

The Doctrine of Knowledge and News

Doctrinal questions naturally arise when applying Walker Percy's **KNOWLEDGE–NEWS** distinction to the pastoral vocation. Indeed, at the end of *The Message in the Bottle* Percy explicitly connects his thinking to Christian concerns.

While the bulk of *The Message in the Bottle* followed Percy's stated purpose of investigating **NEWS** as a category of communication, he concluded the essay with an application of his analysis on the theological debate about the nature of Christian faith and its connection to the Christian gospel. Percy wanted his readers to understand that his distinction between **KNOWLEDGE** and **NEWS** could be an important Christian insight, specifically that the Christian gospel is what a castaway would call **NEWS**, not **KNOWLEDGE**.

So how does our systematic treatment of divine *loci* concerning matters of saving faith relate to Percy's distinction between **KNOWLEDGE** and **NEWS**? Is Percy's distinction helpful or even valid? I argue that it is both.

Faith-as-Knowledge

I can understand why someone might be tempted to dismiss Percy's distinction *prime facie* on the grounds that the biblical text sometimes uses the term *knowledge* synonymously with *faith*, e.g. John 17:3, Philippians 3:8, Galatians 4:9. Indeed, Francis Pieper tends to collapse faith and knowledge into a single concept in his systematic theology (see especially Volume II, Part 3, "Saving Faith").

One could reason, therefore, that if faith and knowledge are the same thing in Scripture, and if both are the result of the gospel, then distinguishing between **KNOWLEDGE** and **NEWS** in our practical theology might be nothing more than sophistry.

Nevertheless, I think dismissing Percy's distinction on these grounds would be an erroneous rush to judgment. The **KNOWLEDGE–NEWS** distinction is not invalid or unhelpful given our doctrinal formulations. On the contrary, I note that Percy's philosophical analy-

sis rhymes quite closely with a number of our doctrinal distinctions concerning the matter of saving faith.

First, Pieper himself understands that one must make some necessary distinctions in order to make sense of the doctrine of saving faith. For example, he cites a longstanding category (via Quenstedt) called *apprehensio theoretica*, which is acknowledgement of or even agreement with divine truths that may result even in the minds of the unregenerate. The existence of *apprehensio theoretica* is why dogmatists have had to contend that merely accepting Jesus as a historical figure or God as a theoretical entity does not, in fact, constitute saving faith.

Second, Pieper notes that saving faith cannot rest even on our knowledge and understanding of all Scripture since no one can be ultimately sure whether their understanding of biblical revelation is, in fact, entirely correct. He makes this point to emphasize where our ultimate confidence lies: in the person and work of Jesus Christ, that is, in an *extra nos* event announced to us, not an intellectual capacity we build up within us. It strikes me as impossible to conclude that Pieper is somehow saying on the one hand that knowledge and faith are interchangeable terms in biblical terminology yet on the other hand genuine knowledge of the Scriptures is inadequate in the constitution of faith. He is clearly making a distinction between *mere* knowledge and faith-as-knowledge.

Finally, we cannot ignore that the heart of our theology is something that goes by the literal name *news*. Christ does not ask the church and her ministers to merely cultivate intellectual knowledge of God, Christ commands us to proclaim his work as news. The gospel is primarily announced, not explained.

Thus a *prime facie* rejection of Percy's philosophical distinction does not adequately account for the nuanced nature of Lutheran systematics on the related *loci*, especially on the matter of saving faith.

Faith-as-Trust

Closely related to the question concerning faith-as-knowledge is the matter of whether and how the intellect and will are involved in the act of faith. Is faith just knowledge? Or is it trust as well? Here again I sense a natural affinity between the Lutheran position on the matter and Percy's analysis (which, you will see, is ironic considering that Percy was himself a Roman Catholic).

The Roman Catholic position claims that the seat of faith is the intellect and, therefore, faith consists of *mere* knowledge of Jesus Christ. Rome rejects as impossible that the act of faith includes confidence in Christ as an act of the will. Rome may allow for the concept of trust, but such trust is not, in the Roman view, within the nature of saving faith. This is why the aforementioned distinction between faith-as-knowledge and *mere* knowledge, or *apprehensio theoretica*, has been so vital. The distinction is part of our **NO** to the Roman position on the matter.

Then there is the American Evangelical claim that faith is exclusively an act of the will apart from, or even in spite of, the intellect. A willful decision for Christ is therefore of chief importance in the American Evangelical tradition. Many treat faith as a sort of belief in the absurd *because it is absurd*. Faith must be a sheer act of will, the reasoning goes, for that is what it takes to believe the absurd. One thinks of so-called *presuppositionalism* which treats the Christian message as if it is utterly inaccessible to the unbeliever and therefore the unbeliever must first accept all the premises and presuppositions of the Christian paradigm as an act of faith. In other words, the unbeliever must decide to believe the unbelievable.

There is, of course, a theological tradition that gets this exactly right. It goes by the name “Confessional Lutheranism.”

We believe, teach, and confess that the nature of saving faith is trust in and reliance on the promise of God’s grace, on account of Christ, announced in the gospel. We root faith in the heart, that is, in the will. We do not count as saving faith the mere intellectual acceptance of Jesus as a historical figure. We do not *believe in Jesus* the way we *believe in Julius Caesar*. We also do not count as saving faith the purely logical deduction that if Jesus died for the sins of all people therefore he must also have died for me. Nor do we count as saving faith a commitment to a set of exegetically sound, systematic doctrines drawn from the inerrant, biblical text. Faith does not consist of mere intellectual agreement. Faith consists of personal reliance on the gospel as an act of the will. Faith is *fiducia cordis*.

Nevertheless, we do not claim that the intellect has nothing to do with the operation of the Holy Spirit. As a practical consequence, for example, we do not believe that a person may come to faith by the proclamation of the gospel in a language they do not understand. We also understand that the very object of our faith, Jesus Christ, is a real person in real history who did real things that were seen with human senses and testified to with human language. For this reason we consider historical and textual investigation entirely in line with a theology that promotes, in the end, *fiducia cordis*. The Word works, as

we say, but it does not work like a magic spell. Real language about real events is what the gospel consists of and the human mind grasps these things not by some special mechanism reserved only for religious subject matter but in the normal, human way of encountering reality.

We do well to continually claim our theological territory even if the Lutheran approach looks too Catholic to Evangelicals and too Evangelical to Catholics. We are wise to avoid so eagerly distancing ourselves from theologies of synergistic, decisional regeneration that we forget to act on our theological commitment that faith is, in the end, an act of the will that must be prompted by news of God's grace in Jesus Christ. In the same way, we should avoid so eagerly distancing ourselves from Rome that we forget to act on our theological commitment that the human mind is involved in belief. We believe that saving faith is in every case the reception of the gospel by an act of both the intellect and the will — all of which is attributed solely to the work of God the Holy Spirit.

Faith-from-Hearing

I sense that the theology summarized above lines up quite closely with what Percy characterizes as **KNOWLEDGE** *sub specie aeternitatis* compared to knowledge as **NEWS**.

As Lutherans deny that mere knowledge, or *apprehensio theoretica*, is sufficient as faith, Percy's thought contributes a philosophical analysis to help us understand a few reasons why mere knowledge, or **KNOWLEDGE**, doesn't do what **NEWS** does.

As Lutherans claim, contra Rome, that faith is not merely an intellectual act but heartfelt trust, or *fiducia cordis*, Percy's thought contributes a philosophical analysis to help us understand a few reasons why mere knowledge, or **KNOWLEDGE**, doesn't provoke people to willful action the way **NEWS** does.

As Lutherans explain that a person must see the relevance of the gospel to their concrete predicament before the gospel will come across as something worth trusting, Percy's thought contributes a philosophical analysis to help us understand why mere knowledge, or **KNOWLEDGE**, is not relevant the way **NEWS** is.

I sense no deal-breaking doctrinal problems with the distinction Percy makes between **KNOWLEDGE** and **NEWS**, especially in light of such passages as Romans 10:17, "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ." Indeed, Percy notes the startling fact that such a remarkable thing as salvation could come simply by hearing, as opposed to, say,

rigorous empirical experimentation or deep, internal introspection. If we are to be saved it will require a message from the outside, not from the inside. There is no point in our intellect or emotions that could serve as the fulcrum of the lever that would lift us from our lost condition. It will require **NEWS**, not **KNOWLEDGE**. The gears of Percy's thoughts mesh well with our doctrinal formulations.

Perhaps I am laboring too hard to address potential objections. Perhaps we are already in agreement that if we are committed to preaching the gospel and if we believe that *gospel* means *good news* then a demonstration of the validity of **NEWS** as a category of communication is most helpful to those whose full-time vocation it is to be the bearer of such **NEWS**. Mere knowledge is enough for Rome, but the report of a great, momentous, *extra nos*, event is the **NEWS** we Lutherans announce in order to save those who will heed it.

Colophon

This paper was prepared for the 2022 District Conference of the Arizona–California District of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, October 17–19, 2022 in Tucson, Arizona.

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Those interested in reading the material on which this work builds may refer to the bibliographic reference below.

Percy, Walker. *The Message in the Bottle*. Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1975. ISBN: 1-399-23128-6.

The essay entitled *The Message in the Bottle* is chapter six of the larger anthology that carries the same name, pp. 119–149.

Correction suggestion may be submitted to the author at caleb.bassett@hey.com. Please refer to the version number below in any correspondence about this document.

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