

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium 2026
What is Man? Answers from Lutheran Anthropology

Reaction to Pastor Joel Seifert's Essay
"I Believe in Man: A Credo Confession of the Human Nature"

Seventeen years ago today,¹ I had my first major post-seminary lesson in anthropology. I sat on a living room chair next to Jeanette. She was weeping. Harold, her husband of fifty-seven years, had just died. His body was on a hospice bed in their den. And while this had been my second time ministering to someone who was dying, it was my first time talking to a wife who had witnessed it with me.

I expected her to be sad. What I didn't expect was what she said to me after we prayed: "Pastor, I don't remember so well anymore. I'm afraid that without him here I'll forget ... him ... everything." It broke my heart. Her identity as wife had been stripped away by death, and dementia threatened to strip away so much more.

Nothing in the house looked dignified or transcendent that day. In fact, outward observation would confirm the implications of Harari's statement about Darwinism—that human life has no transcendent meaning—that's how depressing it appeared. Harold had died well, sure, but he was still dead; Jeanette had lost him, and eventually she would lose herself.

What is man? Fragile, in more ways than one. This was my first time getting such a dismal view of human frailty.

Judging by outward appearances, it was bleak. Our essayist reminds us that a similar bleakness is leaving its mark on society. This is the sort of bleakness that comes when the creature is unshackled from belief in the Creator, the sort of bleakness that comes from living by sight (2 Cor 5:7).

Thank God, then, that "the things we truly need to know and believe about ourselves are matters of divine revelation, not scientific observation" (4). That revelation tells us the "wonderful true story" (34) of the Triune God's design in our creation, redemption, and renewal.

First Article anthropology teaches us that man is limited, defined, and dependent on the Creator. He is a unified body-and-soul being, intentionally gendered and endowed with dominion.

Against "an overly Platonic view of human nature" (8) it is important to note that we are *individuals* by design. God didn't create Harold to die, but his death wasn't a technical glitch either. Sin did that to him, functioning just as advertised (Gen 2:17; Rom 6:23).

What is man? The crown of God's creation, created in God's image, but now "a lost and condemned creature," lacking true righteousness and holiness. Which is why Harold lay dead, waiting for transportation to the funeral home, and Jeanette sat on the couch crying and afraid.

A First Article—only anthropology cannot dispel the bleakness, whether in that house then or in our world now. So, our essayist reassures us that we are objects of God's love and confronts us with a Christological anthropology to prove it.

Man was created to be righteous before God (*coram Deo*) and to live out righteousness in the world (*coram mundo*). The Fall stymied that (see, for example, Gen 4:1–11:25). So the Son of God became a

¹ Seriously. This happened on Monday, September 21, 2009.

man to be the Redeemer we need: true man to be subject to the law and gift us his obedience, true God to be born without sin and have his death count for all sins.

Christ restores righteousness in both dimensions, and Harold and Jeanette were recipients of both. For fifty-seven years they lived together in cruciform shape, with eyes fixed on God, feet planted on earth, and arms outstretched to support each other and everyone else God put in their lives.

What is man? God's handiwork: created in Christ to live like Christ.

That is possible because humans are uniquely "blessed with a capacity to be converted, passive though that capacity may be" (28). That conversion is effected by God's Spirit, who works through the gospel in both psychological and supernatural ways. As a result, no one is excluded from this relationship by cognitive impairment, age, or disease.

For Jeanette that meant not losing Jesus. She eventually forgot who I was before she died, but she never forgot Jesus. She was a sheep who could hear her Shepherd's voice (28).

And the Good Shepherd does not intend for us to live with him forever in heaven as disembodied souls. "God created the human creature for an eternal, righteous, embodied life together with him" (30).

For Harold that meant his body's stay at the North Shore Memory Gardens in Coloma, MI would only be temporary. The resurrection is the culmination of God's creative and redemptive work for him and for us.

What is man? God's special creation. Fragile because of sin, but redeemed by Christ, renewed by the Spirit, and anticipating perfect restoration on the Last Day. That's not bleak, that's transcendent. This is Scripture's story—our story—and it is also our confession.

Thank you, Pastor Seifert, for confessing it so well. Your essay is thoroughly biblical and authentically Lutheran. Your writing is engaging and your pastoral heart is obvious. You work through truths that we know well and teach often, but you have a knack for expressing them vividly.

Most of all, thank you for bringing to mind a situation in my ministry that is similar to those you describe, and for helping me to clearly see the awesome privilege of being a human ministering to other humans.

Questions for our essayist (and the assembly):

- Where do you see "the fumes of Christianity" (2) still powering our cultural attitudes about mankind? Where do you see those fumes beginning to run out?
- Since God's creation of humanity as male and female, with distinct callings given to each gender, is one of the Bible's basic teachings, where is the best place to integrate in a BIC curriculum?
- In what ways can we pastors unintentionally communicate an "overly Platonic view of the human" (8)? How and when can we better emphasize the biblical truth that God created us as embodied creatures and that our bodies matter to him?

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