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AN ESSAY PRESENTED TO THE  
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**W**HO IS THAT?" THE QUESTION CAUGHT ME SOMEWHAT OFF GUARD. I WAS IN THE EARLY STAGES OF serving my vicarage, and had just finished conducting a brief worship service at a local nursing home on a Sunday afternoon. I was in somewhat of a hurry — this was the first of six such services I was doing that afternoon — but a young boy about five years old stood in front of me and pointed at the crucifix I wore around my neck. "Who is that?" he asked, genuine curiosity in his voice and on his face.

I can't really remember my answer other than telling him quickly, "This is Jesus. He died on a cross." What tied my tongue somewhat and sticks in my mind is that question: "Who is that?" *Who is that?! What kind of question is that? What kind of parent has done such a poor job of raising their son that he doesn't even know who Jesus is? Everyone knows who Jesus is!...right?*

In retrospect I have come to realize that *I* was the ignorant one that day. I simply could not imagine that there would be anyone in this country, especially in the heart of the Midwest, who would not know who Jesus is. For many of us who were baptized as babies, who went to Sunday School from an early age, who went to church on a regular basis, the assumption is that most of the people around us have at least a passing knowledge of Jesus' existence. Just look at how fashionable it is, even among popular entertainers and sports figures, to wear crosses as jewelry. How can crosses be so popular in our culture and people not know who was the most important person ever to hang on one? How can Jesus' name be used so often without regard and there still be such widespread ignorance of him? Obviously not everyone trusts in Jesus for their eternal salvation, but don't most people know who he is?

Now, shift your mind back in time some two thousand years to the small region of Judea/Palestine. If you had lived then, would you have known about Jesus? You might have been inclined to ask, "Which one?" "Jesus," in its Aramaic/Hebrew form of "Yeshua," appears to have been a relatively common name at that time. But even if you had been asked if you knew who Jesus of Nazareth, or Jesus the son of Joseph, was, you might have had to plead ignorance.

However, perhaps you had heard stories about this man, Jesus of Nazareth. Stories of mighty miracles. Stories of amazing teaching. Stories of throngs of people following him around. Stories of his claims to greatness. You end up hearing the rumors about his true identity, people wondering out loud what sort of man this particular Jesus was. How would you have answered if your neighbor asked you, "Have you heard about Jesus of Nazareth? What do you make of it all?"

So exactly who *is* Jesus of Nazareth, son of Joseph, who lived two millennia ago and part of whose life story is recorded in the Bible? In this essay I invite you to apply to yourself the question Jesus posed to his closest disciples, "Who do you say I am?" First we will look closely at the very person of Jesus, focusing on the fact that he is the true God-man and what that means for us in our lives. Then we will address how we confess who Jesus is through our worship and our efforts at reaching out with and witnessing to his holy name.

## **Who am I?**

**A**CCOUNTS OF PEOPLE WHO SUFFER SEVERE AMNESIA SERVE AS A SOURCE OF INTRIGUE FOR US, PERHAPS IN part because we have difficulty imagining what it would be like to lose our memories, or even our very identity. *Who am I?* for those of us with decent memories is answered many times with a list: our name, where we live, family ties, likes and dislikes, occupation/vocation, etc. We struggle to know precisely what life would be like if we couldn't list such things, such as Clive Wearing, a conductor and BBC music producer who underwent a viral attack in 1985 that destroyed his memory. Every day he

awoke as if he had just come out of a coma.<sup>1</sup> Closer to home, many of us know someone who suffers from Alzheimer's or some form of dementia and the subsequent loss of memory and identity.

Obviously Jesus was not experiencing an identity crisis when he asked his closest followers, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (Mt 16:13). Jesus' question was a logical continuation of what had transpired to that point as recorded in Matthew 16. Jesus was gently leading his disciples toward a fuller understanding of who he was. Let's look briefly at the immediate background of Jesus' questions.

At the beginning of Matthew 16, Jesus was "tested" by the Pharisees and Sadducees who asked him for a "sign from heaven" (σημεῖον ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ; v. 1). After answering them that the "signs of the times" (σημεῖα τῶν καιρῶν) were so clear as to need nothing additional, since they were as clear and able to be interpreted as easily as looking at the morning or evening sky to forecast the weather (vss. 2-3), he granted that he would show them the "sign of Jonah" (τὸ σημεῖον Ἰωνᾶ; v. 4). Then, after traveling to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus entered into a discussion related to "yeast" and bread. He warned his disciples to watch out for the deceptive false teaching (ζύμη) of the Pharisees and Sadducees (v. 6), a warning which the disciples promptly misunderstood (v. 7). After expressing their confusion to each other concerning Jesus' admonition, Jesus clarified that he was not speaking literally but metaphorically (vss. 8-11). Matthew then adds the assurance that the disciples finally understood Jesus' point (v. 12).

#### *The Wrong Answers – Then*

Jesus continues by asking the question preliminary to the more pointed one, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (v. 13). Matthew presents this question as a logical progression from Jesus working the miracle of the feeding of the 4000 (Matthew 15:29-39), the Pharisees and Sadducees being so blind as to miss the clear testimony of Jesus' identity through such signs, and the slowness of the disciples to catch on fully to Jesus' words of warning. He wants the disciples to state what sorts of ideas are floating around about his identity. "Jesus is not asking for information for his own sake, for he knows the different opinions of men. What he desires is to have the disciples state the wrong opinions of men in order to set over against them their own right conviction."<sup>2</sup>

What "people" were saying about Jesus' identity was at the very least interesting, because each answer accorded Jesus a status of at least some degree of holiness. Had John the Baptist risen from the dead? This idea was first proposed by Herod Antipas, who, after hearing about Jesus' works and teaching, had suggested that Jesus was the very man of God whom he had beheaded.<sup>3</sup> This fantastic speculation must have spread to some degree. That some believed Jesus to be Elijah was understandable, because the prophet Malachi had foretold Elijah's return<sup>4</sup> and Jesus seemed to fit this description.<sup>5</sup> "Jeremiah" as a possible identity of Jesus was perhaps reflective of how both made predictions regarding the upcoming destruction of the temple.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, if Jesus could be identified with Elijah or Jeremiah, why not one other of the Old Testament prophets who had been raised from the dead?<sup>7</sup>

Each of these answers was patently wrong. Jesus knew it. The disciples knew it.

<sup>1</sup> *Forever Today: A True Story of Lost Memory and Never-Ending Love*, [http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/721306.Forever\\_Today](http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/721306.Forever_Today); accessed December 27, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 318-319.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2-20:34, Concordia Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 810.

<sup>4</sup> "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction" (Malachi 4:5-6; ESV).

<sup>5</sup> Jesus would set this particular record straight for his disciples in Matthew 17:10-13.

<sup>6</sup> Gibbs, 811.

<sup>7</sup> See Luke 9:19 for this detail.

*The Wrong Answers – Now*

“Who do people say Jesus is?” How would you answer that question today? Many people are willing to grant that Jesus was/is a special figure, reminiscent of how even some of the Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day recognized him as “a teacher who has come from God” (Jn 3:2). Muslims believe Jesus was a prophet, not on par with Muhammad, of course, but still a prophet. Buddhists believe Jesus was a special and enlightened man who did many acts of compassion. Jews believe Jesus was a gifted yet misguided teacher and definitely not the promised Messiah. Mormons believe Jesus to be the “Son of God,” but he was not so from eternity. Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that Jesus was the first product of God’s creation.

But what about Christian “people”? Remember that when Jesus asked this question of his disciples it was in a context of Jewish people. So what are people today within the visible Christian church saying about who Jesus is?

One might think that it would be easy to demonstrate how Christians of all varieties are agreed on this question. That is, don’t we all claim some sort of adherence to the Bible as foundational for our beliefs? Don’t we join in confessing basic truths as expressed in the ecumenical creeds of the church – the Apostles’, the Nicene, and the Athanasian? Where is there any room for variation in the “bullet points” which state that Jesus is God’s “only Son, our Lord; conceived by the Holy Spirit; born of the virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate...”? How could anyone who calls himself a Christian *not* know who Jesus is?

There are also those Christians who do not believe that eternal salvation is to be realized in Christ Jesus alone. Such “pluralists” maintain that it is wrong to claim only one means of salvation since that would imply a particular religious belief (in this case, Christianity) is superior to all others. Rather, any religion (or at least the “major” ones in the world) is said to “provide independent salvific access to the divine Reality.”<sup>8</sup> John Hick redefines “salvation” so as to adapt to various religious outlooks:

If we define salvation as being forgiven and accepted by God because of Jesus’ death on the cross, then it becomes a tautology that Christianity alone knows and is able to preach the source of salvation. But if we define salvation as an actual human change, a gradual transformation from natural self-centeredness (with all the human evils that flow from this) to a radically new orientation centered in God and manifested in the “fruit of the Spirit,” then it seems clear that salvation is taking place within all the world religions – and taking place, so far as we can tell, to more or less the same extent. On this view, which is not based on theological theory but on the observable realities of human life, salvation is not a juridical transaction inscribed in heaven, nor is it a future hope beyond this life (although it is this too), but it is a spiritual, moral, and political change that can begin now and whose present possibility is grounded in the structure of reality.<sup>9</sup>

The question that still needs to be answered, even in light of such an open-minded view, is “Who is Jesus?” Hick holds that Jesus never claimed to be God but had a “special awareness of God and God’s love...”<sup>10</sup> In addition, “the idea of Jesus being God incarnate has no acceptable literal meaning...” but “...it does have a powerful metaphorical meaning, in that Jesus was so open to divine inspiration, so responsive to the divine spirit, so obedient to God’s will, that God was able to act on earth in and through him. This...is the true Christian doctrine of incarnation.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, eds., *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 17.

<sup>9</sup> John Hick, “A Pluralist View,” *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 35-36.

<sup>10</sup> Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 73.

<sup>11</sup> Hick, 58.

The wrong answers today about Jesus' identity in large part stem from doubts about the primary source material about Jesus, namely, the Bible, and especially the New Testament. "Higher criticism" of Scripture is nothing new, but more recent assaults on the New Testament have been made by those who cast doubt on the truthfulness and/or exclusive nature of the canonical Gospels. One prong of this assault concerns the fact that we do not have the original manuscripts (autographs) of the Gospels. How can we trust that we know precisely what the evangelists wrote when all we have are copies of copies (of copies!) produced by well-intentioned but fallible men who made so many mistakes in their copying? That the scribes made errors in their copying is not questioned. Some give an estimate of 400,000 variations (textual variants) in the manuscripts of the New Testament. Bart Ehrman voices despair about what this means for arriving at the original text: "Given these problems [of corrupt manuscripts], how can we hope to get back to anything like the original text, that text that an author actually wrote? It is an enormous problem. In fact, it is such an enormous problem that a number of textual critics have started to claim that we may as well suspend any discussion of the 'original' text, because it is inaccessible to us."<sup>12</sup>

To counteract such despair, we need to keep in mind some important facts. First, less than one percent of these variant readings can be deemed "significant." That is, the overwhelming majority of the variants in the New Testament text are easily explained as simple errors of copying, such as repetition of letters (especially when the letters looked similar<sup>13</sup>), making mistakes of where a word started or ended,<sup>14</sup> the wandering mind of a tired scribe, or mishearing the text if one person were reading the text to numerous scribes at once.<sup>15</sup> Second, of this one percent of "significant" variations in the text, *no* doctrine of Scripture is affected by preferring one reading over another.<sup>16</sup> For example, whether or not Mark 16:9-20 (the "longer ending" of Mark) is original to the text of the New Testament does not change our understanding of Jesus or the early church. Whether or not John 7:53-8:11 (the account of the woman taken in adultery) is original to the text does not change our understanding of Jesus and his work. Third, there are many more ancient manuscripts of the New Testament available to us today than any other ancient piece of literature.<sup>17</sup> Currently we know of over 5700 Greek manuscripts (mostly partial) of the New Testament, over 10000 Latin manuscripts, and over one million quotations from the ancient church fathers.<sup>18</sup>

It is also important to keep in mind that as confessional Lutherans we believe that all of Scripture is inspired and inerrant. Yes, this is an article of faith, one clearly stated in 2 Timothy 3:16 and elsewhere, and some might accuse us of faulty logic. That is, we believe that the Bible as we have it is inspired and inerrant. But how do we know we have the original text? We believe that God has preserved it for us

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<sup>12</sup> Bart Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 58.

<sup>13</sup> Many ancient manuscripts were written in uppercase letters. In handwritten Greek, uppercase gamma, pi, and tau looked quite similar, as well as uppercase delta, lambda, and alpha.

<sup>14</sup> The oldest manuscripts many times were written in continuous script, without spaces between words and sentences.

<sup>15</sup> See David Kuske, *The History and Practice of New Testament Textual Criticism* (Mequon, WI: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Press, 1992), 42ff. for additional examples.

<sup>16</sup> Kuske, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Kuske notes that part of the reason why there are so many textual variants among the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament is that we have so many manuscripts! "...this vast number of witnesses is not only the source of our knowledge of these errors but it is likewise the solution" (46).

<sup>18</sup> J. Ed Komozewski, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus: How Contemporary Skeptics Miss the Real Jesus and Mislead Popular Culture* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2006), 71. These numbers do not include different versions of the New Testament, such as Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Gothic, Georgian, and Arabic, and lectionaries. In comparison to some of the best-attested ancient Greek writers (such as Thucydides and Herodotus), the number of witnesses to the New Testament is three hundred times greater.

because he promises to do so in the Bible (such as Ma 24:35 and Jn 17:20<sup>19</sup>). But how do we know that what we read in those promises is reliable, if they aren't from the original text? And so on.

Bottom line? There is the element of faith when it concerns considering the Bible as trustworthy. But there is also empirical evidence through the process of proper textual criticism that the original texts of the New Testament are accurately attained.

Those who cast doubts on being able to answer accurately the question of who Jesus is also point to the "other" gospels that exist, some of them being discovered relatively recently, which paint a different picture of our Savior and of the early church. Let us consider two of the more recent examples: the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Judas*.

The *Gospel of Thomas* was discovered in 1945 in Egypt among what is known as the Nag Hammadi codices. Having been mentioned by some of the early church fathers in the third and fourth centuries, scholars knew of its existence but not of any copies. It is clearly to be considered a *Gnostic*<sup>20</sup> gospel, as evidenced from the prologue and first saying: "These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down. And he said, 'Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death.'"<sup>21</sup> Some go so far as to say that the *Gospel of Thomas* is a more accurate rendering of Jesus' teachings than what we have in the canonical gospels.<sup>22</sup> However, the portrait of Jesus painted by the *Gospel of Thomas* differs from that of the canonical gospels in that it does not emphasize Jesus as the object of faith and there is a definite lack of incarnational theology. Concerning the lack of this latter element, Bock and Wallace state,

Ultimately, an incarnational perspective means that the New Testament authors saw Jesus as the incarnation of God and that therefore his birth, life, death, and resurrection were real events in time-space history. The Judeo-Christian worldview found in the Bible puts a premium on anchoring its narrative to history. The Gospels, in particular, do this. Jesus healed specific people in specific locations. His travels aren't mentioned in glittering generalities but are located in time and space. When he taught, he taught openly. And most important, his death and resurrection are documented with several details. ... The *Gospel of Thomas* is markedly different from the

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<sup>19</sup> "But whether new discoveries are made or not, the Church of God stands on a sufficiently firm Scripture text, as we know *a priori* from Christ's promise (John 8:31-32; 17:20) and *a posteriori* by scientific investigation." Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, volume I (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), 342.

<sup>20</sup> Gnosticism became full-blown in the second century A.D. Gnostics taught that everything was either matter or spirit; generally everything in the world was matter, and all matter was evil. Some humans had a spark of the spiritual/divine and the Gnostics' goal was to provide special/secret knowledge by which a person might free his spark of good and return to be with the supreme god. "At its simplest, Gnosticism might be described as an orientation that focused more on knowledge and the mystical, and less on faith. Gnosticism tended to hold the Old Testament and the Jewish people in low esteem, especially the more radical form of Gnosticism that believed that the world was created by an evil god, the god of the Jews. This more radical form of Gnosticism saw the physical world as hopelessly flawed and the human body as corrupt and as a prison, designed to hold the soul captive. The goal of salvation, then, is not pardon from sin but acquisition of knowledge whereby the physical body and the corrupt, fallen physical world can be escaped. Jesus came not to redeem as much as to reveal, to show his true disciples the way to escape this world of darkness and join him in the world of light above." Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2006), 65-66.

<sup>21</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 20.

<sup>22</sup> For example, the "scholars" behind the "Jesus Seminar" hold this position; see Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say? The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).

Gospels when it comes to historical verifiability. ... As such, the *Gospel of Thomas* self-consciously embraces a minority form of the Christian faith.<sup>23</sup>

Most scholars now consider the *Gospel of Thomas* to have been written in the second century, much later than the canonical gospels. To consider the *Gospel of Thomas* a reliable source about Jesus' identity is questionable at best.

The *Gospel of Judas* has been popularized more recently: a text of it was published by the National Geographic Society in 2006. It has been the subject of numerous books, many touting that it brings new information about Jesus and the early church to light. For example, Elaine Pagels states, "What is clear is that the *Gospel of Judas* has joined the other spectacular discoveries that are exploding the myth of a monolithic Christianity and showing how diverse and fascinating the early Christian movement really was."<sup>24</sup> Bart Ehrman believes that the *Gospel of Judas* makes it clear that "the history of early Christianity needs to be rewritten" as a result of what it contains.<sup>25</sup> The *Gospel of Judas* portrays Jesus as one who reveals secret knowledge to Judas alone, who distrusts the remainder of the apostles, who is not the son of the Creator, who did not die and rise to provide salvation for the world, but who instead provides salvation via secret knowledge.<sup>26</sup> Such ideas are easily disproved by the canonical gospels, which are demonstrably much earlier and more reliable than this fanciful work.

Who is Jesus? Another modern answer which misses the mark is that Jesus was actually a social and political activist. According to this view, Jesus' primary criticisms were leveled against the religious leadership of his day, as exemplified by the centrality of temple worship. Thus Jesus did not preach about himself, but about how forgiveness of sins was to be obtained apart from the temple. The system of worship through the temple only served to corrupt true worship. Furthermore, Jesus did not put himself forward as a substitute who was willing to suffer for anyone but emphasized the necessity of following him: "To follow Jesus means to accept the cross, to walk with him against imperial violence and religious collaboration, and to pass through death to Resurrection."<sup>27</sup> Such ideas fly in the face of the clear statements from the canonical gospels concerning Jesus' mission. For example, Jesus says clearly, "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom in the place of many" (Mt 20:28). "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly," Jesus states in John 10:10. Such words are not found in the mouth of Jesus in the *Gospel of Judas*, the *Gospel of Thomas*, or any other "gospel" outside the canonical ones.

#### *The Right Answers*

"Who am I...according to the people 'out there'?" was the thrust of Jesus' initial inquiry of the disciples. Following their summary answer, Jesus zeroes in on what he really cared about: "But you, who do you say I am?" (v. 15) Jesus wants to contrast clearly the answer the disciples gave on behalf of "people" which he accomplishes with the emphatic use of the personal pronoun, "You" (ὁμιεῖς). The NIV reflects this contrast with its slightly interpretative "But how about you?" phrasing. Jesus wants the disciples to shift completely their attention from what the people were saying about Jesus to what their personal conviction/confession was. Chrysostom preached,

He was calling them on by his second inquiry to entertain some higher mental picture, indicating that their former judgment falls exceedingly short of his dignity. Thus Jesus probes for another

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<sup>23</sup> Darrell L. Bock and Daniel B. Wallace, *Dethroning Jesus: Exposing Popular Culture's Quest to Unseat the Biblical Christ* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 127-128.

<sup>24</sup> Elaine Pagels, "The Gospel Truth," *New York Times*, April 8, 2006, cited in Bock and Wallace, 79.

<sup>25</sup> Bock and Wallace, 98.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 86, 98-99.

<sup>27</sup> Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus' Final Week in Jerusalem* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 145.

judgment from them. He poses this second question that they might not fall in with the multitude who, because they saw his miracles as greater than human, accounted him a man indeed but one that, as Herod had thought, may have appeared after a resurrection. To lead them away from such notions, he says, “But who do you say that I am?” – that is, you who are always with me, and see me working miracles and have yourselves done many mighty works by me.<sup>28</sup>

The present tense of the verb “say” (λέγετε) reflects that Jesus wanted to know what was currently in the minds and hearts of his disciples. *What is your confession about me, right now? Don’t ponder the question; tell me what your understanding is.* The fact that he is asking what they *say* about him is pointing toward a *verbal* confession, which would reflect what was in their hearts.

With this question...Jesus places Himself before Peter, the disciples, and every man who comes into the world and demands from him a decision on which he is willing to stake his total existence, even to the point of death. The question is addressed to each man and no one can answer for another. How other people have answered the question is interesting and informative, but it does not remove the burden of a demanded answer. Refusing to answer the question or pretending the question does not exist is in itself an answer – negative! But simple confrontation with the question is not enough, because not every answer is acceptable.<sup>29</sup>

Peter’s answer to Jesus’ question was unabashedly bold and definitely from the heart: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (v. 16). Should anything be made of the fact that Simon Peter was the one first to verbalize a reply to Jesus? Is this a reflection of his impetuous nature, his strong faith, his incredulity that Jesus had to ask? Were any of the other disciples ready to respond just as quickly but Peter beat them to the punch? Was Peter simply acting as the spokesman for the disciples? Regardless of how one answers these questions, the substance of Peter’s response to Jesus’ question is our present concern.

Peter’s confession in this verse is not the first time that the disciples had correctly declared Jesus’ identity. After witnessing Jesus walking on the water and calming the storm, the disciples said to Jesus in Matthew 14:33, “Truly you are God’s Son.” In John 1:41, Andrew tells his brother Simon (Peter), “We have found the Messiah.” What made Peter’s confession special this time, in that it elicited from Jesus a special blessing upon Peter (Mt 16:17)? What was so significant about Peter’s confession that only God could make it known to him? What was so remarkable about Peter’s confession that six days later Jesus was transfigured before him, James, and John, placing an exclamation point on the accuracy of Peter’s words?

#### *Jesus is the Christ*

Take note of Jesus’ admonition of the disciples in Matthew 16:20: “Then he gave orders to the disciples that no one they should tell that he was the Christ.” Why would Jesus want that fact to be a secret kept from some? What did it mean for Jesus to be the Christ, the Messiah? If Jesus was indeed the *anointed* one, he was anointed by God to *do* something, much like the kings, priests, and prophets of the Old Testament were anointed for special tasks. Exactly what was Jesus anointed to do?

Before we answer that question, let’s review some of the basics about who Jesus is – his *person*. Scripture makes it very clear that Jesus is true God. In the verses we consider for this essay Jesus accepts Peter’s confession that he is God (Mt 16:16-17). Jesus is said to have pre-existed the world (Jn 17:5; 1:1). Jesus created all things (He 1:10; Jn 1:3). He is omniscient, knowing all things (Jn 21:17). He is omnipotent, having all the power of God (Jn 10:28-30). He raises the dead as only God can do and does miracles of his

<sup>28</sup> St. John Chrysostom, “The Gospel of Matthew Homily 54.1,” *Matthew 14-28: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, ed. Manlio Simonetti (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 45.

<sup>29</sup> David P. Scaer, *What Do You Think of Jesus?* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1973), 8.

own accord (Jn 5:21, 28-29; 2:11; 1:14; 10:18). As God, Jesus is worthy of praise only to be accorded to God (Ph 2:9ff.)

The Bible also makes it very clear that Jesus is true man. Scripture refers to him specifically as such in Romans 5:15-19, 1 Corinthians 15:47-49, and 1 Timothy 2:5. When Jesus referred to himself as the “Son of Man,” in part this title emphasized his humanity (Mt 8:20; Mk 10:45; Lk 18:8; Jn 3:14). Jesus’ human ancestry is traced in Matthew 1:1-16 and Luke 3:23-37. That Jesus had a human birth is clear from Luke 2:7. He has actual human flesh (Lk 24:39; He 2:14), experienced human emotions (Mk 3:5; 14:34; Jn 11:35), and experienced hunger (Mt 4:2) and thirst (Jn 19:28). Jesus also died a human death (Jn 19:30) and was buried as a human would be (Lk 23:53; Jn 19:42).

True man and true God. This is precisely what we confess about Jesus in the Athanasian Creed: “For the right faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man; God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and Man of the substance of His mother, born in the world; perfect God and perfect Man, of a rational soul and human flesh subsisting.”<sup>30</sup> More often we confess in the Nicene Creed that Jesus is “God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father...and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and was made man....”<sup>31</sup> These confessions about Jesus reflect biblical reality.<sup>32</sup>

As the God-man, Jesus was anointed by the Father to carry out a very special task, a task promised in Genesis 3:15: [To the devil God said,] “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (ESV). In order to carry out this vital work, Jesus, the promised offspring, had to be God *and* man. He had to be God so that his work would be salvific and applicable to all of creation (Mt 20:28). In other words, if Jesus were only a man he would have been able to keep God’s law only for himself. Thus he had to be God also. Jesus had to be man so that he could submit himself to God’s law in our place. He had to be, as the writer of Hebrews says, “made like his brothers in every respect” (2:17; ESV). As the ancient axiom states, “What was not assumed was not healed (redeemed).”<sup>33</sup> That is, if Jesus had not assumed our human nature, it would have been impossible for him to buy us back from sin and death.

Yet as the God-man Jesus is not two persons, but one. At his incarnation Jesus took on a human nature in addition to his divine nature. Now these two natures are joined inseparably in what is called the *personal union*. “This term clearly and unmistakably expresses the truth that in Christ, God and man do not form any kind of union in general, but constitute a personal unity.”<sup>34</sup> In this unique union, the human nature and the divine nature are not mixed together to form some sort of hybrid nature. Each nature retains its original properties. But the union between the divine and human natures in Christ Jesus is complete.

Therefore we also believe, teach, and confess that it was not a plain, ordinary, mere man who for us suffered, died, was buried, descended into hell, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and was exalted to the majesty and omnipotent power of God, but a man whose human nature has

<sup>30</sup> *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* (St. Louis: MorningStar Music Publishers, 1996), 30.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>32</sup> In addition to Matthew 16:15-16, see also Lk 1:31-32; Je 23:5-6; Ro 9:5; Jn 1:14; and Ro 1:3-4.

<sup>33</sup> In Greek, ἀπόσληπτον ἀθεράπευτον.

<sup>34</sup> Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, volume II (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), 85-86. This relationship between the two natures of Christ was expressed at the Council of Chalcedon (the Fourth Ecumenical Council) in A.D. 451: “[Jesus Christ is] to be acknowledged in two natures, unconfusedly [ἀσυγχύτως], unchangeably [ἀτρέπτως], indivisibly [ἀδιαρέτως], inseparably [ἀχωρίστως]; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved and concurring in one person.” Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1890), 62-63.

such a profound and ineffable union and communion with the Son of God that it has become one person with him.<sup>35</sup>

Within this personal union of the two natures of Christ the distinct properties of each nature are shared. The Lutheran Confessors were quite careful in explaining how the two natures of Christ interact so that errors about Jesus' saving work could be avoided. They divided the ways in which the two natures shared attributes into three categories:<sup>36</sup> the *idiomatic genus*,<sup>37</sup> the *majestic genus*, and the *apotelesmatic genus*. According to the *idiomatic genus* the attributes of both the divine and human natures are ascribed to Jesus' entire person.<sup>38</sup> Thus it is possible to say, for example, that Jesus is unchangeable (He 13:8) and changeable (Lk 2:52), and equal to the Father (Jn 10:30) and less than the Father (Jn 14:28).<sup>39</sup> Pres. Paul Wendland explains what we mean when we speak of such "communication of attributes."

Jesus Christ is a single, undivided personality. He is not sometimes acting, feeling, or existing separately in his nature as God; nor is he sometimes acting, feeling, or existing separately in his nature as man. While each nature remains distinct, there is a genuine sharing of each nature's attributes in the one person of Christ. Whatever Jesus is and does since becoming human, he is and does as a single person – the God-man!<sup>40</sup>

According to the *majestic genus* the divine nature of Jesus shares its unique powers with his human nature in a one-way fashion.<sup>41</sup> For example, before Jesus gave the "Great Commission" he expressed this truth: "To me has been given all authority in heaven and on earth" (Mt 28:19). Again, when John states in 1 John 1:7 that "the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from every sin," the power to justify which Jesus' divine nature has is shared with Jesus' actual, very human blood.<sup>42</sup> The Formula of Concord explains the comfort of the *majestic genus*:

Hence we consider it a pernicious error to deprive Christ according to his humanity of this majesty. To do so robs Christians of their highest comfort, afforded them in the cited promises of the presence and indwelling of their head, king, and high priest, who has promised that not only his unveiled deity, which to us poor sinners is like a consuming fire on dry stubble, will be with them, but that he, he, the man who has spoken with them, who has tasted every tribulation in his assumed human nature, and who can therefore sympathize with us as with men and his

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<sup>35</sup> Theodore Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord*, FC SD (Ep) VIII, 8 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 488. All subsequent quotes from the Confessions are from this edition.

<sup>36</sup> See Appendix 1.

<sup>37</sup> "Genus" means "a class, kind, or group marked by common characteristics" (Lange, 258). See Lange, 260ff., for an excellent explanation of the three *genera*.

<sup>38</sup> The Formula of Concord states, "...since in Christ two distinct natures are and remain unchanged and unblended in their natural essence and properties, and since both natures constitute only one person, therefore any property, though it belongs only to one of the natures, is ascribed not only to the respective nature as something separate but to the entire person who is simultaneously God and man (whether he is called God or whether he is called man)" (FC SD VIII, 36).

<sup>39</sup> Scaer states, "This *genus* is essential for a proper understanding of the Atonement in which the one person, Jesus Christ, God and man, offers his very human life for that of the sins of the world, which by virtue of the personal union, is joined to the Son of God who makes it possible for this one human life to be the perfect sacrifice and just payment for the sins of the world." *Christology*, Volume VI of *Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics* (Ft. Wayne: The International Foundation for Confessional Lutheran Research, 1989), 56.

<sup>40</sup> Paul O. Wendland, "Now That God is One of Us: A Study of the Communication of Attributes in the Person of Christ," *We Believe in Jesus Christ: Essays on Christology*, ed. Curtis A. Jahn (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1999), 69.

<sup>41</sup> That is, there is no reciprocity in that his human nature does not share any unique powers with his divine nature.

<sup>42</sup> See FC SD VIII, 59.

brethren, he wills to be with us in all our troubles also according to that nature by which he is our brother and we are flesh of his flesh.<sup>43</sup>

The *apotelesmatic genus* is the category that expresses that the one person of Christ functions “in, according to, with, and through both natures.”<sup>44</sup> That is, in whatever Christ Jesus did, both his divine and human natures participated. Thus we can sing, “O sorrow dread! Our God is dead...”<sup>45</sup> Not just Jesus according to his human nature suffered and died on the cross, but also Jesus according to his divine nature. Thus we have assurance of forgiveness of our sins and eternal life! Martin Chemnitz states,

Thus our faith has the surest comfort...the work of our redemption is not the work of a mere man or of the humanity by itself. For thus sin would be even greater, the wrath of God heavier, and the reign of death stronger. By His own blood God has redeemed the Church.... For the power of the divine nature itself works through the obedient and suffering assumed nature and thus achieves redemption.<sup>46</sup>

#### *Jesus' Humiliation*

But if Jesus is indeed “the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16), how could he be killed? Simply put: Jesus is also “the Christ.” As such, he was anointed by God for the special task of attaining eternal salvation for all people, and to attain this goal he had to *allow* himself to be crucified on the cruel cross. The fact that Jesus did not give in to the taunts of the passers-by and leap down from the cross (Mt 27:40) – for which he had the inherent power, since he is also God – was a part of his *humiliation*.

Jesus' humiliation is not the same as his incarnation. Taking on a human nature was not a limitation for Jesus. The limitation Jesus imposed upon himself after he was conceived as a human was that as a human he did not always make full use of his divine power. Jesus restricted himself in this way until after he was placed in the tomb on Good Friday. St. Paul describes Jesus' humiliation in Philippians 2:5-8:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (ESV)<sup>47</sup>

Note well the words “made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant...” This does not mean that Jesus gave up his divine power after his incarnation in the sense of losing any part of it. In his state of humiliation Jesus submitted himself to the law in our place, showing himself to be the servant prophesied in Isaiah 42 (especially vss. 1-9). In order to carry out this work Jesus did not constantly make use of the power that belonged to him by virtue of his divine nature. Chemnitz explains in what Christ's humiliation consisted:

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<sup>43</sup> FC SD VIII, 87. It is also important to note that Christ's humanity did not change in its essential nature, and his divinity remained undiminished (FC SD VIII, 71).

<sup>44</sup> FC SD VIII, 46.

<sup>45</sup> *ELH* 332:2. Cf. also *ELH* 282:4: “...When God, the mighty Maker died For man the creature's sin.” The Formula states, “‘If it is not true that God died for us, but only a man died, we are lost.’ ... From this it is evident that it is wrongly put to say or to write that the cited locutions, ‘God suffered,’ ‘God died,’ are merely empty words which do not correspond to reality. For our plain Christian Creed teaches us that the Son of God, who was made man, suffered for us, died, and redeemed us with his blood” (FC SD VIII, 44-45).

<sup>46</sup> Martin Chemnitz, *The Two Natures of Christ*, tr. J.A.O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 221.

<sup>47</sup> Note that the NIV translation of v. 6 is faulty; it states, “...Who, being in very *nature* God...” (italics added). Since vss. 5-8 are speaking about Jesus in his state of humiliation after his incarnation, translating μορφή as “nature” would essentially empty the second person of the Trinity of his divinity (v. 7). See John A. Moldstad, Jr., “A Look at Our Lord's Humiliation and Exaltation,” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (June 1985): 8-28.

The humiliation mentioned in Philippians 2...does not indicate a deprivation, removal, robbing, exclusion, taking away, degradation, putting away, lack, absence, loss, bareness, or emptiness of the fullness of the Godhead which dwelt in Christ bodily from the very moment of the conception. But it has to do with the use or exercise of it, that is, the brilliance of Christ did not always shine out in the time of His humiliation, since it was covered with infirmity, and it did not always assert itself plainly and clearly because of the humiliation. For Christ drew in and restrained to some degree the divine power and presence which dwelt bodily in Him by working in and through His humanity...and He permitted the natural characteristics and the other assumed infirmities to prevail and predominate and assert themselves in His assumed human nature as if they were alone.<sup>48</sup>

Through his work in his state of humiliation, Jesus was able to serve as our substitute, obeying God's law in our place (even though he is, as God, the giver of the law and our judge) and taking upon himself the condemnation we deserved for our sins (Is 53:1-6; 2 Co 5:21; Ga 3:13). "If Jesus had not taken on the form of a servant and submitted to death on a cross, we would not have been saved. Thus, Jesus, in love, did not insist on the divine prerogatives given to his human nature."<sup>49</sup> In 2 Corinthians 8:9, Paul emphasizes Jesus' grace in action for us: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (ESV). The comfort we derive from Christ Jesus' humiliation is real and practical: "Christ's poverty is our patrimony, our savings in life, our traveling allowance [*viaticum*] in death, because with his poverty He acquired for us heavenly riches."<sup>50</sup>

#### *Jesus' Exaltation*

The time came, however, for Jesus, according to his human nature, to return to using fully and constantly the "divine prerogatives" which were his according to his divine nature. After completing all the stages of humiliation,<sup>51</sup> Jesus entered into the state of *exaltation*, in which state he presently and eternally resides.<sup>52</sup> Paul continues his description of Jesus in Philippians 2 (vss. 9-11): "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (ESV). No longer is Jesus in the process of fulfilling the role of the Suffering Servant. Since he completed his work of obtaining redemption for us, now Jesus is our exalted Lord who continues to reign as Prophet, Priest, and King.

Time does not permit a discussion of each of the stages of Jesus' exaltation. Because of particular false teachings concerning it which rob us of great comfort let us consider briefly the final stage, that of Jesus sitting at the right hand of God. If I were to ask you, "Where is Jesus...*right now*?" your answer might be, "He's in my heart," or "He's everywhere," or "He's in heaven." Is he in your heart? Yes. Jesus prays in

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<sup>48</sup> Chemnitz, 488-489. Johann Gerhard likewise states, "So, then, Christ's emptying is not a natural lack or pouring out or evacuating of the gifts communicated to Him through the personal union but a voluntary and willing humiliation...of Him who does not always exert and use, in and through the assumed flesh, the majesty of His divinity, which otherwise dwelt in 'bodily' [Col. 2:9] or *personally*." *Commonplaces: On the Person and Office of Christ*, tr. Richard J. Dinda, ed. Benjamin T.G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 304.

<sup>49</sup> Lange, 269.

<sup>50</sup> Gerhard, 316-317.

<sup>51</sup> Adolf Hoenecke states, "The individual steps, or stages, of the humiliation, which are not specified by all dogmatians in the same way, are according to the customary enumeration eight, namely: conception, birth, circumcision, humble education, visible dwelling among people, the great suffering, death, burial." *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics, Volume III*, tr. James Langebartels (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2003), 115.

<sup>52</sup> Gerhard (314) states, "To the state of exaltation belong the descent into hell, the resurrection from the dead, the ascent into heaven, and sitting at God's right hand." These stages we confess in the Apostles' Creed, the latter three of which are recorded in the Gospels, while the first is recorded in 1 Peter 3:18-19.

John 17:23, "I in them [believers] and you in me...." Paul says about us Christians in 1 Corinthians 2:16 that "we have the mind of Christ" (ESV). Paul also states in 2 Corinthians 13:5, "Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?" (ESV) Is Jesus everywhere? Yes. As God he is omnipresent as the psalmist states (139:7-10), "Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me" (ESV). "Do I not fill heaven and earth?" the Lord asks through Jeremiah (23:24; ESV). Is Jesus in heaven? Yes. In Acts 1:9ff. we read of Jesus' actual ascent there, the place where he has gone "to prepare a place" for us (Jn 14:2-3).

Not all Christians answer this last question in the same way, however. Following in the footsteps of Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), many in the "Reformed" branch of Christendom answer the question, "Is Jesus in heaven?" with, "Yes, he is *only* in heaven." Zwingli filtered whatever the Bible taught through the false axiom, "The finite is not capable of the infinite."<sup>53</sup> Zwingli would say that Jesus' human nature could not share his divine nature's attributes and still be considered truly human. Thus, for Zwingli when Scripture says that Jesus ascended into heaven and sat down at God's right hand it means that Jesus is forever and only locally present at a specific spot in heaven. He cannot be more than one place at a time. The *Heidelberg Catechism* used by many of the Reformed asks in Question 47, "Is not then Christ with us as he has promised, unto the end of the world?" and answers, "Christ is very man and very God; with respect to his human nature, he is no more on earth; but with respect to his Godhead, majesty, grace, and spirit, he is at no time absent from us."<sup>54</sup> Consider the ramifications of this false belief for the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper. If Christ Jesus is only in heaven, he cannot be present in any real way in the Supper he instituted.<sup>55</sup> If Christ Jesus is only in heaven, when we eat the bread and drink the wine all we receive is bread and wine. If Christ Jesus is only in heaven, his body and blood are with him in heaven and cannot be present in the Supper. If Christ Jesus is only in heaven, what is the benefit we receive from the Sacrament of the Altar?

We dare not limit Jesus where he has not limited himself. Jesus is in heaven;<sup>56</sup> Jesus is with us on earth, in us, around us, coming to us in his Supper, granting us true forgiveness of sins and life eternal. At the right hand of God Jesus continues to rule for our benefit, working all things for our good (Ro 8:28). Paul describes the importance of Jesus' "place" in heaven in this way:

...that you may know...what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Eph 1:18-23; ESV)

<sup>53</sup> In Latin, *finitum non est capax infiniti*.

<sup>54</sup> *Heidelberg Catechism*, <http://www.ccel.org/creeds/heidelberg-cat.html> (accessed December 31, 2010).

<sup>55</sup> Lutherans maintain that the real, physical but supernatural presence of Christ's body and blood in his Supper is dependent on his clear words of institution: "This is my body.... This is my blood..." (Mt 26:26-28).

<sup>56</sup> The *Formula of Concord* (FC SD VIII, 28) clarifies "where" God's right hand is: "...not a specific place in heaven, as the Sacramentarians maintain without proof from the Holy Scriptures. The right hand of God is precisely the almighty power of God which fills heaven and earth, in which Christ has been installed according to his humanity in deed and in truth without any blending or equalization of the two natures in their essence and essential properties." Luther states about the Reformed, "...but what it means that Christ ascends to heaven and sits there, they do not know. It is not the same as when you climb up a ladder into the house. It means rather that he is above all creatures and in all and beyond all creatures." *Luther's Works*, Vol. 36 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 342.

### *What Does This Mean?*

“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” For Jesus’ apostles, was this more than just a dry, lifeless statement, a dogmatic expression that could be uttered and soon relegated to some book of “famous quotes”? How did this concise expression of Christology affect the lives of Jesus’ followers? How does a true and biblical Christology affect *our* lives?

We have seen thus far that there is great *comfort* in our Christology, in what the Bible teaches about Christ Jesus. We have a reliable record of what Jesus did and taught, recorded for us in the four canonical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. We have a God who loved us in this way, that he sent his very Son into our world as one of us so that he might live perfectly in our place, die innocently in our place, rise to life as the ultimate victor over sin and death, and now and forever serve as the mediator between God and man (1 Ti 2:5). God himself died and rose from the dead in our place! The victory that Jesus won is now ours. Note part of Jesus’ commentary on Peter’s confession: “‘And I say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not win the victory over it’” (Mt 16:18). While it is true that the devil and his allies attack the church, the battle Jesus depicts here shows the church attacking the very gates of hell. Those gates, as impregnable as they may at times appear, are no match for the power of God’s Word.

We have also seen thus far that our biblical Christology affects how we *think*. We cannot understand, that is, *how* the almighty God, creator of the universe, could be God and man at the same time, two natures joined in the one person of Jesus. We also cannot understand, from a logical way of thinking, how these two natures interact with one another (the three *genera*). Yet we believe what the Bible teaches us about our Savior; we accept the Christology that Scripture teaches by faith. “Our Christology fully admits that there are things about Christ’s person and work that go beyond our ability to really understand, but it also teaches us to be content with what God has revealed.”<sup>57</sup>

In the next section of this essay we will delve more deeply into how two other facets of our lives as Christians, worship and witnessing, are affected by our confession of Jesus as the Christ. In particular, we will concentrate on one element of the question Jesus asked his disciples: “Who do you *say* I am?”

### **What Do You Say?**

**R**ECALL I STATED ABOVE THAT WITH HIS SECOND QUESTION OF HIS DISCIPLES JESUS WAS TRYING TO ELICIT a *confession* on their part. Jesus wanted to hear what his disciples would say about him, about his identity. He wanted them to consider who he was, and then put into words what was in their hearts and minds. Often, therefore, “confession” implies beliefs that are verbalized.

#### *We Confess Christ Through Our Worship*

In our midst “worship” can be somewhat of a hot-button topic. Suffice it to say that I do not intend to try to settle any issues regarding worship currently debated in our midst. Rather, because of the intrinsic connection between Christology and Lutheran worship, a few comments are in order.

What *is* worship, anyway? Our English word “worship” is derived from the Anglo-Saxon word *weorthscipe*, which simply means “to ascribe worth.” According to Luther’s *Large Catechism*, the highest worship of God is to believe in him: “Behold, here you have the true honor and the true worship which please God and which he commands under penalty of eternal wrath, namely, that the heart should know no other consolation or confidence than that in him, nor let itself be torn from him, but for him should

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<sup>57</sup> Forrest L. Bivens, “How Does Our Christology Impact Our Daily Lives?” *We Believe in Jesus Christ: Essays on Christology*, ed. Curtis A. Jahn (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1999), 201.

risk and disregard everything else on earth.”<sup>58</sup> Our lives as Christians can well be described as true worship: “Therefore I urge you, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies (as) a sacrifice, living, holy, acceptable to God, (which is) your spiritual worship; and do not be conformed to this world, rather be transformed by the renewal of your mind in order that you may accept as proved what the will of God is, the good and acceptable and perfect” (Ro 12:1-2).<sup>59</sup> In addition, we worship not just by how we live as Christ’s people but privately as we pray, read his life-giving Word, sing hymns, conduct family devotions, etc.

When we consider “worship,” however, what may come to mind most often is what we do corporately, as gatherings of the body of Christ, when we “go to church.” By so gathering we take the opportunity publicly to show how much God is worth to us. Such regular gatherings are in keeping with what the writer of Hebrews encourages: “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (He 10:25; NIV). Such regular gatherings are prime opportunities to be served by our merciful God (*Gottesdienst*<sup>60</sup>) as he comes to us in Word and Sacrament.

This brings us to *why* we worship. Perhaps the pious wish of the Greek-speaking men recorded in John 12:21 summarizes our motivation well: “We wish to see Jesus.” We do not gather for worship simply out of habit, from a sense of outward compulsion, or intending to win favor with God. We gather for worship because we have experienced God’s boundless grace through Christ and cannot help ourselves.

Gospel, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper are not legal ordinances. The administration of Word and Sacrament enjoined upon the Church and each Christian – we mean the enjoined actions of preaching, baptizing, and of celebrating the Lord’s Supper – is likewise not a legal ordinance.... After we have come to know the gospel in faith, preaching, baptism, and celebrating the Lord’s Supper become for us not a duty – for duty is a legal concept – but an inner spiritual compulsion.<sup>61</sup>

Our regular response to this compulsion – joining in corporate worship – is sure to cause certain feelings to stir deep in our souls. Would we then agree with the following description of the objective of worship?

[Referring to the 3000 souls converted on Pentecost in Acts 2:] Why were those 3,000 people converted? Because they felt God’s presence, and they understood the message. Both of these elements are essential in order for worship to be a witness. First, God’s presence must be sensed in the service. More people are won to Christ by feeling God’s presence than by all our apologetic arguments combined. Few people, if any, are converted to Christ on purely intellectual grounds. It is the sense of God’s presence that melts hearts and explodes mental barriers.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> LC, First Commandment, 16.

<sup>59</sup> See also 1 Corinthians 10:31: “Therefore, whether you eat or drink or do anything, do all to the glory of God;” 1 Peter 2:5: “...you yourselves also are being built as living stones (into) a spiritual temple, in order that as holy priests you offer up spiritual sacrifices very acceptable to God through Jesus Christ;” and Hebrews 13:15: “Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name” (ESV).

<sup>60</sup> Concerning the assembling of Christians for worship, Peter Brunner states, “It was of great concern to Luther that these assemblies of Christians were called *Gottesdienst*. ‘It were fine indeed if it could become customary to call going to hear a sermon going to a “service of God” (*Gottesdienst*) and to call preaching “serving God” (*Gott dienen*), and to say of all assembled there that they are gathered in a truly sublime “service of God” (*Gottesdienst*).” *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, tr. M.H. Bertram (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 23.

<sup>61</sup> August Pieper, “Are There Legal Requirements in the New Testament?” trans. Carl Lawrenz, *Theologische Quartalschrift* 13, no. 3 (July 1916): 165.

<sup>62</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 241-242.

Or what about this description of why we worship?

Effectiveness remains for me a jarring word when it comes to worship. But I am learning how to appreciate its significance as a reflection of a central emphasis in Evangelical style. A recurring theme is that each person should have a profound, personal experience with God. With that as an objective for interacting with those gathered at worship, a natural question is whether most people could indeed recognize having had such an experience. If not, what could be done differently to help it happen among more of them?<sup>63</sup>

Note well that the two preceding descriptions of the objective of worship focused on people; they are very anthropocentric. This outlook contrasts sharply with the Christocentric nature of Lutheran worship. When we gather for worship, we are *in* the presence of our Savior. Jesus said, “Where two or three come together in my name, there I am in their midst” (Mt 18:20). To gather around Word and Sacraments is to come into direct and tangible contact with Christ Jesus himself. Thus his presence with us in our worship is also tied directly to his incarnation.

Between the time of Jesus’ ascension and His return, the Word- and sacrament-bound Pneuma-presence of God is the only possible manner for God’s presence, incarnated there and then in Jesus’ earthly humanity. Today we encounter the humanity of Jesus as the vessel of the saving presence of God actually only in the proclaimed Gospel and in Holy Communion. God’s presence through the incarnation of the Son will have to be claimed as the effectual basis for all other modes of God’s presence. Therefore every other presence of the Triune God with which the believer may comfort himself is rooted in this presence of the incarnate Jesus, who lived in Palestine, who was exalted to the throne of God, and who fills the universe, for this presence is given us and made apprehensible to us now through Word and sacrament. Thus the particular character of this presence of God granted us through the proclamation of the Word and the celebration of Holy Communion consists in this that God presents Himself to us here in the actually and really present humanity of Jesus, in which Jesus as our human brother in a mysterious union with the eternal Son suffered, died, and rose again for us.<sup>64</sup>

The purpose of Lutheran worship is driven by the hunger to be served and fed by our loving Lord. Whether or not we “feel” his presence in strictly or primarily an emotional way is immaterial. Jesus is with us.

Consider some of the more obvious ways we confess Christ Jesus when we worship. Most times we begin the worship service with the invocation. According to its etymology, “invocation” means to “call in” someone. When we invoke our triune God we are humbly and respectfully asking him to be with us.<sup>65</sup> When we confess our sins to our merciful God, we ask for his forgiveness for the sake of Christ Jesus: “...for His [Christ’s] sake grant us remission of all our sins...”<sup>66</sup> When the pastor absolves us, he says, “Almighty God...has given His only Son to die for us, and for His sake forgives us all our sins.”<sup>67</sup> The Scripture lessons we hear have Jesus as their heart and center. When we confess our faith with the words of either the Apostles’ or Nicene Creed we focus on Christ, especially his incarnation and salvific work for us. The Prayer of the Church begins with the petition, “Everlasting and merciful God, we beseech You

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<sup>63</sup> David Luecke, *Evangelical Style and Lutheran Substance* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1988), 106-107.

<sup>64</sup> Brunner, 118. See footnote 69 below.

<sup>65</sup> Luther Reed states about the invocation, “We formally express our ‘awareness’ of the presence of God, we place ourselves in that presence, and invoke the divine blessing upon the service that is to follow.” *The Lutheran Liturgy*, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1947), 252.

<sup>66</sup> *ELH Rite One*, 41.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ: to have mercy upon us.”<sup>68</sup> Our celebration of the Sacrament of the Altar is a bold confession of Christ Jesus, since by so celebrating we receive his very body and blood by which he forgives our sins and grants us new life. Many of the hymns we sing focus on Christ. When we celebrate a baptism we witness a new person being created as he is joined with Christ Jesus in his dying and rising.<sup>69</sup>

Our very act of gathering for worship, therefore, *is* a confession of what we believe about Christ Jesus. His person, his Word, his very self permeates and saturates our worship services. This confession of Jesus as God, Mediator, Savior, Servant, and Creator of life is made to our fellow worshippers, and is made to the world.<sup>70</sup>

#### *We Confess Christ Through Our Witnessing*

If we, as a synod and as individuals, are serious about “engaging others with Jesus,” it is clear we will need to carry such work out through more than our worship.<sup>71</sup> Not everyone that needs to hear the saving message of the Gospel of Christ will someday walk into our sanctuaries and plop down into a pew, eager to learn about Jesus. We need to be motivated and prepared actually to *go* into the world (Mt 28:19) so that we can explain to the lost why we have hope in a hopeless world (1 Pe 3:15).

Consider the example of Jesus’ apostles. These men who had confessed clearly who Jesus was, namely, the long-awaited Messiah, listened to Jesus’ parting words and acted accordingly: “...and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” (Ac 1:8). After Jesus poured out his Holy Spirit on them and the entire Church on Pentecost, the apostles took the lead in confessing their Savior to the world. Peter preached an awe-inspiring, zeroed-in-on-Christ sermon that same day (Ac 2:14-40). Peter and John confessed that Christ Jesus was the one whose power had healed the lame man at the gate “Beautiful” (Ac 3:16), even when they were brought before the high priest (Ac 4:10). When they were told to cease their preaching about Jesus, they said it was impossible for them to stop (Ac 4:20)! The apostles performed “many signs and wonders” (Ac 5:12), were imprisoned and right away set free by an angel (Ac 5:18-20), and then were beaten which they considered a badge of honor (Ac 5:40-41). They were so intent on proclaiming the Good News that “every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ” (Ac 5:42; ESV).

The book of Acts continues for another 23 chapters detailing the incredible efforts of the early Christians to proclaim Christ Jesus all over the world. But is it fair to compare our task of witnessing to Christ to those newest Christians? After all, how many of us demonstrate the power to heal or raise the dead to back up our words? How many of us were eyewitnesses of Jesus’ glory (2 Pe 1:17-18) and have that remarkable experience always in the back of our minds as we proclaim his word? How many of us have had the chance to be inspired all the more to confess Christ by being physically persecuted?

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>69</sup> Romans 6:3-4: “Or are you ignorant that, as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus, we were baptized into his death? Therefore we were buried together with him through baptism into death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, in this way also we might walk in newness of life.”

<sup>70</sup> Our recitation of the Creed, for example, is putting forth an identity marker for all to see: “...even to call creeds ‘symbols’ is to suggest that they have more to do with establishing the *identity* of the community of faith than with providing a set of intellectual propositions. It is more important that orthodox Christians know that they recite the Nicene creed to identify with the orthodox faith than that they know from the outset what *homoousios* means – just as, by analogy, it is more important for an army to recognize its flag than to know what its colors symbolize.” Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 705.

<sup>71</sup> For some excellent resources on the outreach capabilities of our worship, however, see the three essays presented at the 2010 Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium on Worship and Outreach, available for download at <http://wlsce.net/symposium/2010-symposium-worship-and-outreach>.

Granted, in many ways there is no comparison between confessing Christ in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Our congregations do not appear to grow by the thousands after preaching one solid sermon about Jesus. Even a synod such as ours, faithful to God's Word, struggles to survive (at least by worldly standards) instead of making an indelible impression on the civilized world. Our confessions of Christ today might seem relatively stale and distant compared to what took place in the early church. Have we lost the sense of freshness of confession that Jesus' first followers had, a freshness which came from seeing Jesus face to face?

But we *have* seen Christ Jesus, just as much as his apostles did! We are told ever so plainly that he is in his Word (He 1:1-2; Lk 10:16) and yet because we cannot "see" his physical flesh with our eyes in the same manner as the apostles did we doubt his presence. We believe, since his Word tells us, that Jesus is physically present in the bread and wine when we celebrate his Supper (Mt 26:26-28; 1 Co 11:23-29), and yet we crave for more of a vision of our Lord because all we *see* is a wafer of bread and a swallow of wine. And just because we cannot see sin being washed off someone who is baptized does not mean we cannot see Jesus at work in the water connected to his Word.

Furthermore, have we not witnessed miracles, miracles for which only Christ Jesus himself could be responsible? Whether it be remarkable accounts of physical healing (which doctors cannot explain) or auto accidents averted at the last minute or the cry of a newborn baby, all of us have witnessed Christ's hand intervening in our physical world to bring about something unexpected, something only prayed for, something beyond normal hope.

Yes, dear brothers and sisters, we *have* seen Jesus. We *do* see Jesus...everyday. We glory in his grace poured out through his special means and refresh ourselves in his abundant and never-ending forgiveness. As we are so renewed we are empowered and emboldened to confess Christ by how we live our lives. Why do you strive so hard, Christian mother, to be such a good mother to your children? You know that by doing so you are showing Christ's love to your children. Christian husband, why do you try your best to love your wife "as Christ loved the church" (Ep 5:25)? You know that when you do you are reflecting the love Christ has for you to your wife; you are showing Christ's love to her. Christian employee, why do you make efforts at being faithful in your work? You know that by doing so you are showing the same attitude that Christ has, who "came not to be served but to serve" (Mt 20:28). Thus you show Christ himself to your employer and your co-workers.

Indeed, living in the various vocations into which God has placed us gives us constant opportunities to confess Christ to our neighbors. As Luther rightly stressed, we are the "masks" behind which God hides.

What is the mask that God wears to interact with the world? You. He wears you and your works and your ways. He puts you on and wears that mask as he protects and preserves this world. Here is life with high dignity. Not only that you should be called sons of God, but that God would use you and even the smallest things you do to care for his world. The masks of God are the "hands, channels, and means through which God bestows all blessings."<sup>72</sup>

In Luther's day only those who had devoted themselves entirely to God's work by cloistering themselves in churches and monasteries were considered to be wearing a "mask" of God; they were the only ones who truly had a vocation. This false idea was a logical result of an emphasis on works-righteousness, because the more one could "do" for God in a direct manner the more one would be looked upon favorably by God. But Luther's correct teaching concerning righteousness led him to conclude that "no

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<sup>72</sup> Jonathan E. Schroeder, "Our Calling," presented at the annual convention of the WELS (July 2009), 12, citing the *Large Catechism*, First Commandment.

amount of monkish activity makes a man perfect or righteous in God's eyes.... People who lock themselves away in a monastery are not more pleasing to God than the cobbler making his shoes."<sup>73</sup>

In a real sense, we not only confess Christ; we *are* Christ to our neighbors, just as much as they are Christ to us. Consider Jesus' description of the final judgment, when he gathers before him all the people of the world and separates them "as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats" (Mt 25:32). Both the sheep and the goats were surprised to learn that their action or inaction with their neighbors was action or inaction with Christ himself.

...Christ is hidden in our neighbors, particularly those in need. What motivates Christians to love their neighbors is to see Christ in them. Particular neighbors may not be very lovable, but Christ loves them and died for them, and if they are fellow Christians He indwells them through the same Holy Spirit that we share with them. How could we not love them?

And this surely applies in vocation. The farmer and the others feeding the "hungry" are feeding Christ. The mother dressing her baby is dressing Christ. Employers and employees, husbands and wives, rulers and subjects, pastors and laypeople, and whoever our neighbors are in our vocations – we are all to see Christ in one another.<sup>74</sup>

Such a view of our daily lives as Christians is certainly in keeping with Paul's admonition to the Christians at Corinth: "Therefore whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all things to the glory of God" (1 Co 10:31). A life lived to God's glory is a confession of Christ.<sup>75</sup>

Let us think again about Jesus' apostles in the early church. It is clear that they "spoke" Christ by what they did, how they lived. What about the actual words of their confession of Christ? Mention has already been made of some of those powerful utterances: the amazing sermons, the bold proclamations in the face of persecution, the near constant repetition of the best news they could imagine. Is there a difference between the words they used to confess Christ and the words we use today? Is it enough to tell someone, "We have found the Messiah!" (Jn 1:41) and expect results? What reaction would we get by preaching, "Repent and be baptized...in the name of Jesus Christ" (Ac 2:38)? Might we be showered with God's grace if we give our "testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (Ac 4:33)?

Is there a difference between the verbal confession of Jesus' followers in the early church and ours? Consider their audience. Many of those to whom the apostles preached were fellow Jews, Jews who were hoping to see "the consolation of Israel" (Lk 2:25), who were, that is, anticipating eagerly the promised Messiah. As a generalization, these people were spiritually hungry and thirsty. Yes, they had their worship and rites and prayers and Scriptures; they had their fasts and offerings and sacrifices; but all these things revolved around an unrealized hope. Their lives centered on waiting: waiting for God to send their Savior. So it was not necessary for the message of Jesus' disciples to be overwhelmingly complex. "Here he is! Here's the one for whom you've been waiting! Here is your Messiah!" Perhaps we can picture the thrust of their message to be like someone who draws back the curtain which was hiding a marvelous present from our eyes. Instant realization that this is something great!

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>74</sup> Gene Edward Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2002), 45.

<sup>75</sup> "Allow them to learn a lesson at least from your works. Be meek when they break out in anger, be humble against their arrogant words, set your prayers against their blasphemies; do not try to copy them in requital. Let us show ourselves their brethren by our forbearance, and let us be zealous imitators of the Lord...." St. Ignatius, *Letter to the Ephesians* in *Early Christian Fathers*, ed. and trans. Cyril C. Richardson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 91.

Consider our audience. Most of the people to whom we have opportunity to confess Christ are not specifically waiting for their promised Messiah to arrive. We could consider current statistics which show that most Americans (64%) consider themselves to be “deeply spiritual” and also “spiritually mature” (82%).<sup>76</sup> But it’s really not necessary for statistics to tell us what we know: that our non-Christian relative or neighbor is *searching*.

People are tired of feeling spiritually cast adrift, alone in a vast ocean of doubt and situated under a blank heaven, without God and without hope. That’s where materialism and scientism have left them. They are desperately seeking spirituality. ... So they have repopulated the middle air with new angels and demons and principalities and powers. ... They figure if there are aliens somewhere out there, then maybe they won’t feel so all alone. They’ve also reinhabited the earth with spirit guides and channellers and mystic crystals and energy auras. They want to make a connection to God, you see.<sup>77</sup>

It is easy to see this all around us, and even *in* us, because we know the emptiness that sin brings about. When Adam and Eve believed the lie of the devil and ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, it did not add to their lives as Satan promised; it took away. And it took away in a big way.

So we see people try to fill that spiritual void with things: cars and clothes and money and booze and sex. We see people going to whatever lengths possible to feel “fulfilled” and like they have “purpose” in life. Our airwaves are filled with messages proclaiming the intrinsic worth of every human being (except, of course, unborn babies). We see addictions to almost anything imaginable; we see mental health issues on the rise; we see our neighbors wondering whether the end really is coming in 2012, or whether *The Da Vinci Code* is really accurate. People are searching...still.

So does our message, our message of hope, differ radically from Jesus’ earliest followers? Does our verbal confession of Christ need to be modified, improved, tweaked, or relativized? Not at all. People are spiritually lost. God has given us the message for such spiritually lost people. We proclaim it, pure and simple.

What tremendously good news we have to share.... We can tell them...that we have something more than a spirit guide to bring us news of the world beyond. He is not far, not lost among a thousand stars. He’s near, very near. They don’t have to drift anymore. They don’t have to wander down endless paths in search of him. Because he came looking for them. He’s come down for them. See, poor and in a manger, there he lies. He is all transcendent mystery and yet all intimate love. God has sunk himself deep into the flesh, our flesh. There we can find him.<sup>78</sup>

We probably have more opportunities to share God’s message of hope in Christ Jesus than we know what to do with. I say this not to make anyone feel guilty – all of us ignore or are oblivious to such opportunities every day – but to remind us to be aware of opportunities to engage a lost soul with Jesus. Are we looking for opportunities? Are we praying that God would give us such opportunities? Taking advantage of an opportunity to confess Christ might be as simple as striking up a conversation about a recent news item. What about news articles that come out around Epiphany concerning the wise men and the star they followed? Could you ask a coworker what s/he thinks about such an article? Or perhaps you could ask a relative what s/he thinks about the blog entry you read about whether or not Jesus really rose from the dead. In either case you might very well end up getting an opportunity to talk about Jesus, who he is and what he has done for all people, including your friend.

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<sup>76</sup> Barna Group, October 27, 2008 survey; <http://www.barna.org/faith-spirituality/19-american-spirituality-gives-way-to-simplicity-and-the-desire-to-make-a-difference>; accessed February 7, 2011.

<sup>77</sup> Wendland, 83.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

But what about the risks involved? What if your coworker asks you a question you can't answer? Wouldn't that be embarrassing? What if your friend shuts you down cold, refusing to listen to you? Are you going to lose him/her as a friend? What if you say the wrong thing? What if you just can't muster up the courage to start talking "religion"?

Each of these fears is surmountable when we keep a few things in mind. First, God is the one who motivates and moves you to confess his Son (Ph 2:13). He will not put you into a situation to set you up to fail. Second, you are among the best-trained and most knowledgeable Christians there are! Consider the depth of training you have already had, in your Sunday School, Christian Day school, Christian home school, Confirmation class, Bible class, etc. Even what you know and understand from the Apostles' Creed is a remarkable amount of knowledge about what the Bible teaches, especially about Christ Jesus! Third, if your non-Christian friend or relative is, by definition, going to hell, what could you ever say that would make his/her situation worse? Finally, if your message is rejected, it does not necessarily mean that you will never get another chance to confess Christ to that person. On top of that, when we keep in mind that God is the one who controls the results of our witness (Is 55:11), it could be that our witnessing opportunity is the time simply for planting the seed. Someone else might come along later and water it (1 Co 3:6).

We also have to keep in mind as we consider confessing Christ that this is a team activity. Not only are there millions of Christians around the world working to engage others with Jesus, we also have more localized groups known as synods and congregations which combine efforts in the kingdom. It is definitely advantageous for us to walk and work together to spread the Good News, because the collective outreach and witnessing efforts of a congregation far outweigh what one lonely individual Christian can do on his own. What can the congregations of our synod do to build a positive "mission mindset" among their members?

We have already considered the overtly Christological elements of our worship, but a few additional comments are in order. A congregation can work to build a mission mindset among its members by considering and appreciating the evangelistic and outreach nature of its worship services. Please do not misunderstand: I am not advocating converting *ELH* Rite One into a revivalistic endeavor. We do not need to make substantive changes to our worship services to make use of their evangelistic potential.

Can our liturgy aid the church's mission? You bet it can! So let's use our liturgy to issue forth the call to repentance in service after service. And let's use our liturgy to proclaim the Word and celebrate the Sacrament of the Altar that the soothing oil of the Gospel of forgiveness may be poured into the wounds left by our sins. When and where this is done, the children of God will not only present their lives to God as a living sacrifice, but they will also go to the house of the Lord willingly to hear the Word and answer with prayer, thanks, and praise.<sup>79</sup>

And this sort of mindset about worship is not new.

The Church of the New Testament...left leaderless by the ascension but made powerful by Pentecost, had in its possession the promise of God fulfilled. Surrounded by the world, they did what the Church always did: they worshipped. And in their worship, they proclaimed the promise to the world around them. In their homes, in their streets, and in the place of public worship they proclaimed the promise to strengthen faith and to create it in the lost.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Michael Krentz, "How Can the Liturgy Aid the Church's Mission?" *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (March 1991): 66.

<sup>80</sup> Jonathan E. Schroeder, "Worship & Outreach: A Lutheran Paradigm" (essay presented at the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium on Worship and Outreach, September 20-21, 2010), 3.

One aspect of our worship services that makes them a natural outreach tool is that they are public events.<sup>81</sup> Anyone can walk into one of our churches at the time designated for worship and be presented with God's Word. A question to consider in this regard: What sort of impression do we give to our guests? Granted, there are many things that the congregation can do in the realm of common sense.<sup>82</sup> But are there things that a congregation might do that are slightly more intentional toward outreach?

Many of us grew up following along with a service as it is printed in the hymnal. It does not really faze us to flip from p. 41 to the hymn and back to p. 41 and then to another hymn (or even a Psalm) and then to read along with the Scripture lesson from the back of the bulletin or an insert and then to skip to p. 57 when there is no communion and then.... Put yourselves in the shoes of a guest to your worship service, especially a first-time guest. Now also pretend you, as a guest, are a young mother who is juggling a small child along with your hymnal and bulletin (and the inserts keep falling out) *and* you're expected to do the Lutheran equivalent of aerobics as you stand up and then sit down and then stand up, repeated a number of times for maximum effect and confusion. How much easier would it be for guests of your worship service to have the *entire* worship service printed out in one place, namely, the worship bulletin/folder? Does it cost more? Yes, slightly. Is it more work? Yes. Is it superfluous if you have no guests on a particular Sunday? No; even many of our long-time members will appreciate having the service printed out in one place (especially the parents juggling children!). In addition, making this effort to remove the stumbling block of a hard-to-follow service will impress the importance of guest awareness upon the members.<sup>83</sup>

The pastor will also want to make his preaching a priority when outreach is in mind. Our Confessions state, "Practical and clear sermons hold an audience...."<sup>84</sup> Most times guests to our worship services focus primarily on the sermon and only secondarily on everything else. The nicest church grounds, the most inviting entryway, friendly and warm members, easy-to-sing hymns, and even the entire service printed in the bulletin can be negated from the guest's perspective if the sermon is poor. This is not the time nor place for a quick lesson on homiletics, but let us remind ourselves of the basics: good Law and Gospel (textual and specific) and language that is easy to understand. One hears today about the importance of making our sermons "relevant." We preachers in the ELS do this not by constantly talking about current events but by remembering our task *as* preachers: to bring God's Word in all its fullness to our hearers where they are and for who they are. Extra time spent on sermon preparation will, in the long run, greatly benefit your outreach efforts.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 5: "Outreach happens whenever the lost or straying come into contact with God's Word on the lips of his people. Ever since the Church found itself East of Eden and surrounded by great and growing wickedness and unbelief, public worship has always been a proclaiming of the name of the LORD to the glory of God and the salvation of man. Like it or not, our first contact with the unchurched is often public worship."

<sup>82</sup> David J. Valleskey mentions some of these: "The efficacy of the Gospel is not dependent on the friendliness of a congregation, the upkeep of the property, the availability of parking, a church nursery, or other such externals. It is true, however, that congregations demonstrate concern and love for visitors not only in the message they offer, but in the way they offer the message. First impressions count. Negative impressions discourage visitors from returning. Positive impressions do not guarantee that a visitor will be won for Christ, of course, but they may bring a person back to hear the Gospel a second time. Who can know on which visit the Holy Spirit will work his great work of conversion?" *We Believe – Therefore We Speak* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1995), 95.

<sup>83</sup> Please note that these comments are made *not* in the spirit of removing hymnals completely from our worship settings.

<sup>84</sup> AC Ap XXIV, 50.

<sup>85</sup> Schroeder states, "If you want to give a boost to your outreach program, spend lots of time on your sermons. Excellent worship encourages your members to invite guests; excellent preaching does so even more." "Worship & Outreach," 19.

Another aspect of our worship services which we need to emphasize regarding our outreach efforts is our practice of close communion. I have to confess that this was definitely *not* my way of thinking when I was first called to start exploratory mission work in Bullhead City, Arizona. Once we began conducting Sunday worship services we did not right away celebrate the Sacrament of the Altar at those services. Rather for the people who were our “nucleus” of ELS/WELS people we held a once per month somewhat informal communion service in a home. We made this our practice so that, we were told,<sup>86</sup> we would not have to explain to prospective members or guests why they were not allowed to commune at our altar. The line of reasoning went: How would we attract prospective members when we were appearing to be so judgmental of them by refusing them participation at the Lord’s Supper? The wrongheadedness of this practice finally struck me when, after about six months of this practice, one of our ELS/WELS people told me she was uncomfortable with these private services, that it seemed that we were hiding something or being secretive.

She was right. We were giving that impression, at least to our “members,” and we were not being honest with our prospects about who we really were as confessional Lutherans. Part of what makes us Lutheran is that our focus in worship is on Word *and* Sacrament. Our worship

primarily serves the found and secondarily serves the lost. We make worship accessible to the unchurched, but we don’t design worship for the unchurched. Regular, public worship certainly serves outreach because of its proclamation of the gospel: it cannot, however, replace the outreach ministry of the congregation. Worship remains the primary time for God’s people to be fed by God in Word and Sacrament—to be served by God at this *Gottesdienst*.<sup>87</sup>

It is good to keep in mind also the proclamatory nature of celebrating the Sacrament: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Co 11:26; ESV). What is “proclaim(ing) the Lord’s death” if not proclaiming the Gospel? By avoiding celebrating holy communion as part of our regular worship we miss an opportunity to show in a real way what Jesus accomplished by his sacrificial life and death.

There are practical, outreach-driven reasons to keep publicly celebrating the Sacrament as well. Public celebration facilitates the conversations necessary to move prospects from visiting to membership. ... The practice holds right before the prospect the concept that Christianity consists in more than Sunday dresses and hearty handshakes. It declares that there are mysteries involved here that are not readily comprehended. It shows that there is a line of demarcation between the world and the body of Christ. And it makes them ask, “Why? How? When?”<sup>88</sup>

Perhaps it would be best to try to engender this attitude about our practice of close communion in our synod—pastors and laypeople—so that all of us pay more attention to the actual positive side of our practice rather than the perceived negative. We can make strides in that direction if we concentrate on the doctrine we confess of the real presence of the Lord versus the possible infraction of rules of fellowship. It is high time we embrace our practice of close communion instead of being ashamed of it.

In many respects the pastor needs to take the lead when it comes to fostering a mission mindset among the members of our congregations. I do not mean to say that Sunday after Sunday the pastor needs to berate his flock from the pulpit, pounding them with the message that they need to be out in the “highways and byways” looking for unsuspecting prospects that they can then drag along to worship. Yes, the pastor can evangelically encourage the sheep under his care to confess Christ in their daily lives, in the various vocations in which God has placed them. But the pastor can also be a spearhead and a

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<sup>86</sup> This practice was part of the *modus operandi* at the time for beginning home missions.

<sup>87</sup> Schroeder, “Worship & Outreach,” 21.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

good example in other outreach efforts, such as calling on prospective members. Does the pastor have a plan of regularly calling on those who have visited worship? Those who have recently moved into the area? Those who live in the congregation's neighborhood? Is the pastor involved in the community, such as through volunteering at community events, helping coach a sport, or volunteering to teach at a community center? Does the pastor make it a point to model good citizenship in the community? Granted, the pastor should not be expected to shoulder all outreach efforts the congregation makes. Much, or even most, of the outreach a congregation carries out will be by its members in their daily lives. But the pastor's example of confessing Christ in the congregation's "neighborhood" is invaluable.

Building up the mission mindset of your congregation might be a challenge, but it is not impossible. Make use of available resources for ideas. The synod's Board for Evangelism is a good resource to consider. You will find at its website (<http://www.evangelicallutheransynod.org/we-tell>) "ideas for spreading the Word" which may prove helpful in your efforts to engage others with Jesus. Check out what our sister synod, the WELS, has to offer regarding resources. For example, check its evangelism website, [www.whataboutjesus.com](http://www.whataboutjesus.com). Or you can request access to the "WELS Connect" site (<https://connect.wels.net/Pages/Default.aspx>) to see if you can find ideas for outreach, especially in the "Evangelism" area.

Find out what other congregations in your area or in our synod are doing for outreach. Many times our home mission congregations set a good example in making outreach a priority. For example, Redeeming Grace Lutheran Church in Rogers, Minnesota strives to have some sort of outreach-related event or activity virtually every month (see Appendix 2).

Consider what every board, committee, group, or service organization that is part of your congregation can do regarding outreach. Do some of their activities have a specific outreach-related element? Do they have outreach in mind when they make plans for the year? For example, do they plan some sort of activity to which members can invite unchurched friends? Is their focus predominantly inward so much that they never look outward?

How would the complexion of our synod change if every one of our congregations thought of itself as a "mission congregation"? This is already done to the extent that every one of our congregations faithfully and regularly serves as a dispenser of God's treasures of grace by proclaiming the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. But does each of our congregations have as a *priority*—not an afterthought—locating and reaching out to the lost souls in their area?<sup>89</sup> Does each of our congregations envision itself only as a bulwark of confessional Lutheranism, standing firm in the face of rising apostasy, turning back the tide of encroaching liberalism, secularism, and ecumenism? Or does each of our congregations also see itself as a rescue ship, actively looking for those floundering in the waves of hopelessness and despair?

## Conclusion

**I**N THE NEXT FIVE YEARS, WE WILL LEARN MORE FAITHFULLY TO ENGAGE OTHERS WITH JESUS." SO READS OUR synod's new mission statement which corresponds to its five-year strategic plan. When I first heard this statement, I must admit I found myself still in my socks. *Don't we already know enough about spreading the Gospel? And what does it mean to "engage others with Jesus"? Sounds kind of nebulous to me.* Such were my thoughts.

But since first hearing that statement I've had a chance to mull it over, in part while preparing this essay. Certainly we can learn *more* about reaching lost souls with the message of "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Co 2:2). Consider how much there is to know about Jesus! That he is God and man at the

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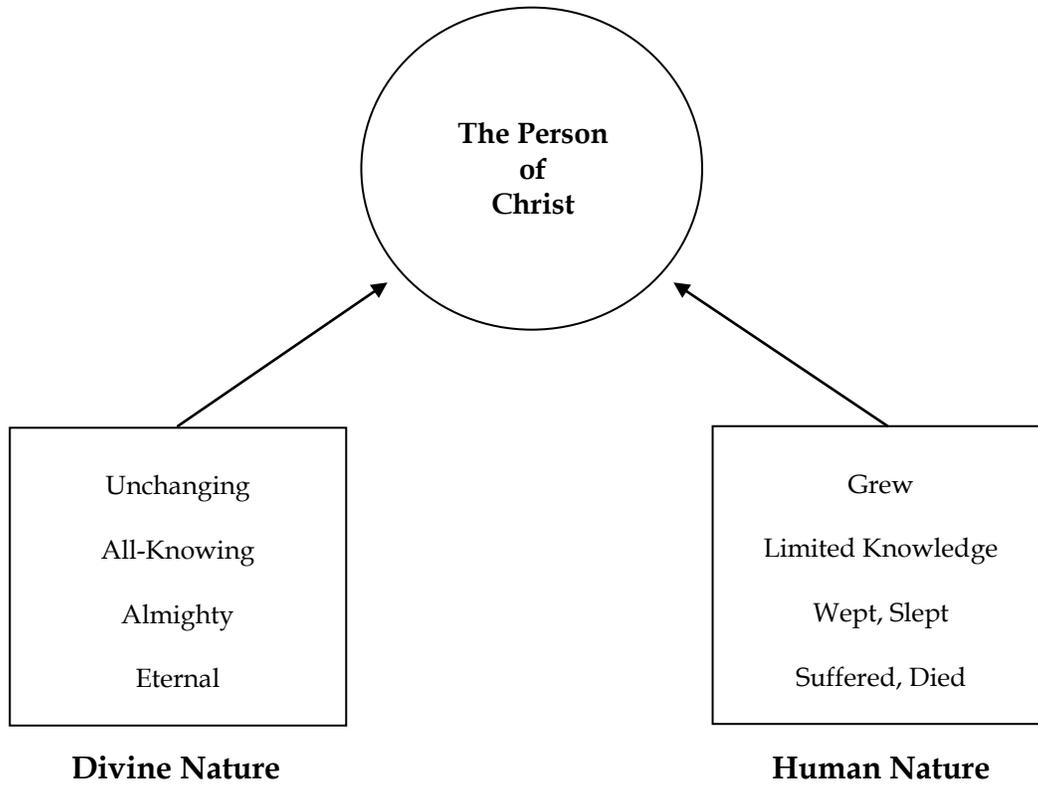
<sup>89</sup> This is not to ignore the vital importance of emphasizing *world* outreach, of course, which hopefully is also a priority of each of our congregations.

same time, the long-awaited Messiah, the only way to eternal salvation – all of this would provide for more than a lifetime of study. Do we know all there is to know about the spiritually lost? That is, do we understand what and how they think so well that we could explain to anyone we meet precisely how Jesus is their Savior from sin, death, and hell? Again, there is always more for us to learn. Regarding “engaging others with Jesus” – what more is that than what Jesus already told us in his Great Commission? Thus, how many different ways can I find to go and touch someone’s life *every day* with the Gospel of our Savior? What sort of creative outreach ideas might be bouncing around in my head or in the heads of others, ideas that might be harnessed for the good of God’s kingdom? Have we exhausted every avenue possible in trying to reach those who need to know Jesus’ love and forgiveness?

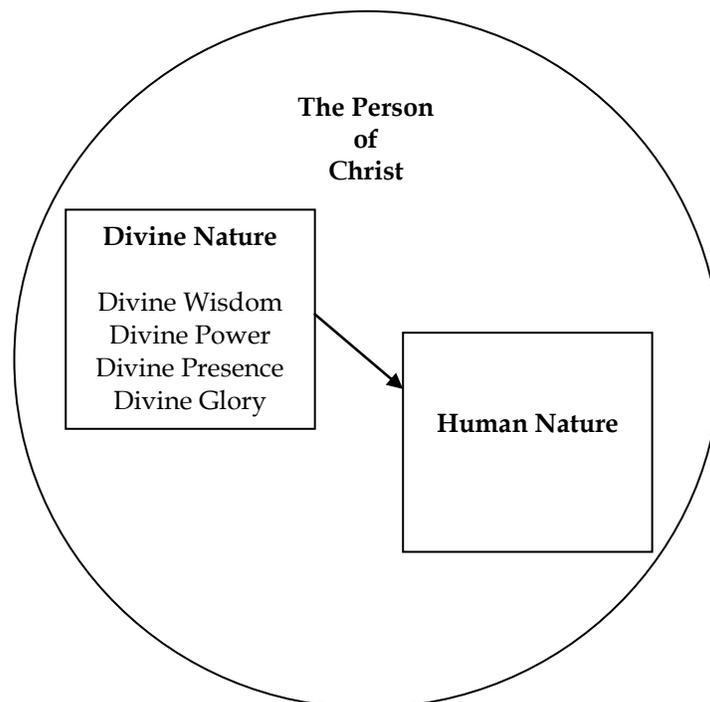
Perhaps you also have had questions about this mission statement. In fact, maybe you *should*. Why? Because that means you’re thinking about it. Indeed, in some ways that mission statement sounds so simple, and yet there is great depth to it because of its subject matter: Jesus. You see, even though “we” is the subject of that statement, grammatically speaking, it’s not what’s important. In that way it’s analogous to Jesus’ question we’ve been considering: “Who do you say I am?” Where is the focus of that question? Even with the emphatic “you” at the beginning, the emphasis is still on Jesus, the ultimate I AM. Through your worship, your words, your love for your fellow man, through everything you do, continue to confess Jesus so that more and more will be able to say to Jesus with Peter, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” In this confession – because Jesus is the content of this confession – is life eternal.

**Appendix 1**

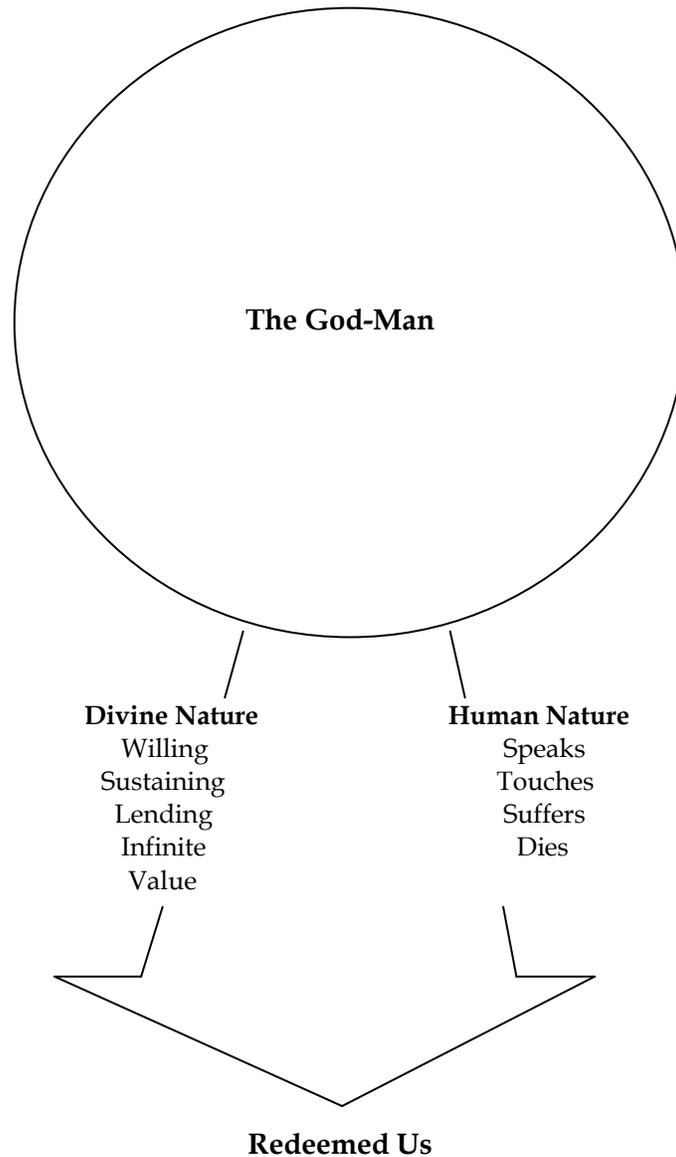
*Genus Idiomaticum*  
**"He is the God-Man"**



*Genus Maiestaticum*  
**"In This Man, We Find God"**



*Genus Apotelesmaticum*  
**"He is the God-Man, Our Kinsman and Redeemer"**



*From Paul O. Wendland, "Now That God is One of Us: A Study of the Communication of Attributes in the Person of Christ," We Believe in Jesus Christ: Essays on Christology, Edited by Curtis A. Jahn (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1999), 88-90.*

## Appendix 2

Redeeming Grace Lutheran Church (Rogers, MN) lists as their outreach and evangelism goals for 2011:

- Monthly HDS Direct new resident mailings Sep. – Aug.
- Twice monthly prospect newsletter Sep. – Aug.
- Plan/revamp/submit “Press Releases” and block ads for the Star and North Crow River Newspapers; possibly add the Wright County Journal Press Sep. – Aug.
- Plan for/participate in I-94 West Chamber of Commerce Business Expo Sep. – Oct.
- Advertise on Wedding Planner Page in North Crow River Feb. – Oct.
- Plan/Carry out Christmas for Kids in partnership with LES and Education and Growth Nov. – Dec.
- Plan/Carry out Marriage Seminar/Dinner Out (with help of Youth) Dec. – Feb.
- Plan/Carry out Pre-marital Counseling Seminar Dec. – Feb.
- Plan/Carry out Easter for Kids Feb. – Apr.
- Plan/Carry out float for *Rockin’ Rogers Days* Parade May – Jun.
- Plan/Carry out participation in St. Michael Daze Business Expo (maybe parade) Jun. – Jul.
- Plan/Carry out VBS in partnership with LES and Education and Youth Jul. – Aug.
- Plan/carry out canvasses (pastor, BLC/BLTS, KOG Youth) both informational and survey Sep. – Aug.
- Research/Study/Propose *Jesus’ Cares Ministry* or Parenting Support Group Sep. – Aug.
- Pastor attends, as able, Chamber of Commerce events (e.g., ribbon cuttings of new businesses, business card exchange networking, etc.) Ongoing

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