

El Rostro Desfigurado de la Fe Cristiana: The Missional Task for the Church in the U.S.A.

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This essay focuses on what I believe is the greatest challenge for the Church of Jesus of Nazareth in this land. It is deeply shaped by my social location as a Latine person who appropriates the Christian faith from the Lutheran perspective. Each of us needs to envision responses to the challenges White Christian Nationalism presents from our respective social and ecclesial contexts. However, this great challenge necessitates a joint effort by those of us who are followers of Jesus of Nazareth in collaboration with our interfaith, secular, and not-religious sisters and brothers. What is at stake is not the survival of the church-institution, but our life together in this political experiment called the United States of America.¹

Not a Christian but a follower of Jesus

In October 2016, just a few days before the presidential election, I was the assigned preacher and presider at the weekly eucharist at the Lutheran Center in Chicago, the national offices for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I began my homily with a question, “If you were not a Christian, would you become a Christian today?” The question arose from the way Christianity was being portrayed by many in the political campaign. There was a great inconsistency between what a growing sector of our society professed in terms of their Christian faith and the gospel of Jesus of Nazareth as I came to know it. In that homily I answered the question myself. “No, if I were not a Christian today, I would not become one. Who wants to be part of a movement that seeks exclusion rather than inclusion? Who wants to be part of a movement where empathy, love of neighbor, and humility are seen as weaknesses rather than core values? How could you reconcile the message of Jesus of Nazareth with the demonization of certain groups of people in our communities?”

Since that homily I have stopped describing myself as a Chris-

1. This essay was first presented as the 2025 Scherer Lecture, an annual lectureship in honor of the Rev. Dr. James S. Scherer, renowned Lutheran missiologist held at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

Each of us needs to envision responses to the challenges White Christian Nationalism presents from our respective social and ecclesial contexts. However, this great challenge necessitates a joint effort by those of us who are followers of Jesus of Nazareth in collaboration with our interfaith, secular, and not-religious sisters and brothers.

tian. I am a follower of Jesus of Nazareth. Long ago, John Sobrino taught us about this in his *Christology at the Crossroads*: “In Latin America liberation theology has focused spontaneously on the historical Jesus for guidance and orientation... The historical Jesus would serve as a satisfactory midway point between two extremes: turning Christ into an abstraction on the one hand, or putting him to direct and immediate ideological uses on the other.”²

John Caputo’s “structural gap, the irreducible distance that exists between the church and Jesus”³ has been an ever-present challenge for Christianity in the United States. In the *Narrative Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*, Douglass addresses the inconsistency of the Christian faith:

What I have said respecting and against religions, I mean

2. John Sobrino, S.J., *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), 10.

3. John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 35.

strictly to apply to the slaveholding religion of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of one is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial hypocritical Christianity of this land. . . Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity.”⁴

A world with a line in between

Duane Priebe, former professor of systematic theology at Wartburg Theological Seminary, used to say that whenever we draw a line between us and the other, God is on the side of the other. However, a quick review of our shared history in this global household tells a different story. When a line is drawn between peoples, communities, cultures, or nations, it happens that God is on the side of those seeking power, control, and domination. God is used to lend credibility to and justify the actions of the oppressor. From the colonization of the original nations in Abya Yala (what is known today as Latin America and the Caribbean), to the genocide of original nations in Turtle Island, (what is known today as the United States of America), from the enslavement of Africans to the United States expansionism in this hemisphere under the Monroe and Manifest Destiny doctrines, God has been used to create a narrative of superiority that has led to the violence, suffering, and pain of peoples who have been dispossessed of their lands and of their identities. This cancer is what Robert Schreiter called “narratives of the lie,” and it continues to erode our life together, attempting to erase the histories of the other. When black children in Washington, D.C., are described as “born to be criminals,” when Latine immigrants are labeled as “drug dealers, rapists, and murderers,” when other countries are viewed as “s***holes,” violence is done against them, and the purpose of that violence is “to destroy the narratives that sustain people’s identities and substitute narratives of their own.”⁵ Today the line between us and them has become more pronounced, and that line has a name, White Christian Nationalism.⁶

4. As cited by Jim Wallis in: *The False White Gospel: Rejecting Christian Nationalism, Reclaiming True Faith, and Refounding Democracy* (New York: St. Martin Essentials, 2004), 41-42.

5. Robert J. Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission & Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 34.

6. While the focus of this presentation is on White Christian Nationalism, it is well known that non-white people from historically marginalized communities in the United States adhere to, participate in, and support this ideological framework. In 2002, Philip Jenkins published his book *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. Jenkins offers two theses. First, the center of Christianity has shifted to the Global South, and second, that that Christianity is be-

God has been used to create a narrative of superiority that has led to the violence, suffering, and pain of peoples who have been dispossessed of their lands and of their identities. This cancer is what Robert Schreiter called “narratives of the lie,” and it continues to erode our life together, attempting to erase the histories of the other.

Sociologists Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry have done a comprehensive quantitative public opinion study on Christian nationalism. While Christian nationalism has existed for quite a while around the globe, Whitehead and Perry concentrated their efforts in studying contemporary Christian nationalism in the United States. They published the results of their study in the book *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*.⁷ In the study they observed that a) “Christian nationalism’s pernicious effects are racial in their origin and character,”⁸ b) “Christian nationalism is associated with xenophobic and racist views,”⁹ and c) they have recognized “how harmful Christian nationalism is to Christianity and American democracy.”¹⁰

The bibliography reviewed by Whitehead and Perry for this study is ample, revealing how the topic has been engaged by historians, theologians, journalists, sociologists, and others. Most of these scholars agree that Christian nationalism serves as an ideological framework through which people seek to orient or reorient their lives and identities. Whitehead and Perry define Christian nationalism as an “ideology that idealizes and advocates a fusion of American civic life with a particular type of Christianity and culture.”¹¹ But what particular type of Christianity is this? In the conclusion to their book, they describe it as this:

That Christianity—advocated by those [they] call Am-

coming increasingly conservative. Members of historically marginalized communities in the United States shared that conservative Christian outlook, particularly when it comes to issues that have become part of the “culture wars” in the United States such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and the role of women in society, as well as political conservatism, many fleeing from countries with leftists/socialists leanings.

7. Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002).

8. Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, xv.

9. Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, xvi.

10. Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, xvii.

11. Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, xix-xx.

bassadors and Accommodators and opposed by Rejecters and Resisters seems to be one that paradoxically holds America as sacred in God's sight while viewing its future as tenuous and bleak. It valorizes conquests in America's name and bloodshed in its defense. It idealizes relations marked by clear (metaphorical or physical) boundaries and hierarchies both in the private and the public realms. It baptizes authoritarian rule. It justifies the preservation of order with righteous violence, whether that be carried out by police against deserving (minority) criminals, by border agents against presumptively dangerous (minority) immigrants, or by citizen "good guys" with guns against rampaging "bad guys" with guns. And it glorifies the patriarchal heterosexual family as not only God's biblical standard, but the cornerstone of all thriving civilizations.¹²

This understating of Christianity conflicts with the gospel of Jesus and his project for life. While White Christian Nationalism uses language and symbols that are familiar to Christianity, this movement is ultimately about power and race, with the intent to preserve a "mythical vision" of what the United States was from its founding and its exceptional nature. Is it possible to reconcile these opposing views of Christianity? For Jim Wallis, a leader in the evangelical movement in the United States, the simple answer is no, because, as he writes, "Jesus is a victim of identity theft in America."¹³ The Jesus presented by Mary in the Magnificat and the self-understanding of Jesus in his ministerial manifesto do not fit the image of a folk hero for the white supremacist subculture in the United States. The Jesus of White Christian Nationalism, serves one particular purpose, "to cloak particular political or social ends in moral and religious symbolism."¹⁴

On November 10, 2016. Robert P. Jones, president and founder of Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), published an opinion article in the *New York Times* titled "The Rage of White Christian America." According to Jones, 74% of white evangelical protestants believe things have changed for the worse since 1950. Many of these evangelicals espouse the "great replacement" conspiracy theory, the notion that there is a strategy to diminish the influence of white people in this country. And this is something they understand must be prevented at all costs.

In his opinion piece Jones writes:

Between Barack Obama's 2008 election and 2016, America has transformed from being a majority white Christian nation (54 percent) to a minority white Christian nation (43 percent).

But on Election Day, paradoxically, this anxious minority swarmed to the polls to elect as president the candidate who promised to "make America great again" and warned

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that he was its "last chance" to turn back the tide of cultural and economic change.

They presented two different visions for the United States, the "monochromatic vision of 1950s America," espoused by the Republican nominee, and "the pluralistic future of 2050" presented by the first female presidential candidate.¹⁵

Jim Wallis sees this as the political aim of White Christian Nationalism, "to prevent our changing demography from changing our democracy,"¹⁶ and for that reason "We are literally in a battle now between false religion and true faith and between racial fascism and multicultural democracy."¹⁷

On April 20, 2021, the Governing Board of the National Council of Churches adopted a statement on Christian nationalism. The Statement strongly opposed this ideological framework that claims a "biblical worldview" that could be described as bad religion:

...their understanding of that worldview is in multiple ways contrary to the actual witness of the Bible. Where the Bible has at its core the story of a people committed to welcoming aliens and strangers because they themselves were aliens and strangers, and to defending the oppressed because they themselves were once oppressed, the Christian nationalist narrative rejects the stranger and judges the oppressed as deserving of their oppression. Where the Bible declares that all human beings are made in the image of God, American Christian nationalists regard only certain people—"advanced," white, Christian, English-speaking—to have the full measure of God's image.¹⁸

15. Robert P. Jones, "The Rage of White Christian America." *New York Times*, November 10, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/11/opinion/campaign-stops/the-rage-of-white-christian-america.html> accessed 8/4/25.

16. Wallis, *The False White Gospel*, 10.

17. Wallis, *The False White Gospel*, 5.

18. "The Dangers of Christian Nationalism in the United States:

12. Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 152.

13. Wallis, *The False White Gospel*, 11.

14. Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 153.

Let me share a little confession with you. I am so glad I am retired and not serving in parish ministry. Don't get me wrong, I deeply loved and enjoyed parish ministry at the time I did it, but I am not sure I would be able to do it today because of the complexity of the issues ministerial leaders need to address and the extreme polarization in our society. There are plenty of cultural wars that demand our attention. Often I say that if I were in an average ELCA parish today, I would last for about three months before I was tarred and feathered in the public square. Many of my colleagues in ministry used to tell me "Rafael, you are a political animal." No, I am not, but yes, I enjoy getting involved in the business of the *polis*, from a non-partisan perspective. I believe the gospel of Jesus of Nazareth frees me from my self-centeredness to serve the neighbor in need, and in my service to the neighbor, in my work for justice, I do not allow any political ideology to claim for itself what belongs to the gospel. I am astonished by the number of people in many of our communities of faith and in our own families that adhere to the Christian nationalist ideological framework. This ideology is distorting the face of Christianity in the United States and increasing the structural gap of which Caputo speaks.

This is what that type of Christianity looks like today. According to the policy statement of the National Council of Churches these are the religious affirmations that characterize Christian nationalism:

that the United States was founded as a Christian nation;

that America is exceptional. That is, God has given the United States particular blessings and privileges not available to people in other countries, and the nation must remain Christian for those blessings to continue;

that only Christians are the proper custodians of this nation's heritage;

that Christianity (or a particular form of Christianity) should have privileged status in the United States, particularly in matters of law and political policy;

that, even when their presence is tolerated, people who practice other religions or no religion cannot be fully American—they are not welcomed, their voices are discounted, and they are not to be trusted with political and cultural leadership;

that Christians in general and some Christians in particular should enjoy a level of legal protection not granted to those who practice other religions; and,

A Policy Statement of the National Council of Churches." <https://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/common-witness/the-dangers-of-christian-nationalism-in-the-united-states> Accessed 8/4/25.

The Jesus presented by Mary in the Magnificat and the self-understanding of Jesus in his ministerial manifesto do not fit the image of a folk hero for the white supremacist subculture in the United States. The Jesus of White Christian Nationalism, serves one particular purpose, "to cloak particular political or social ends in moral and religious symbolism."

that Christians have been made to suffer unjustly, leaving them no alternative but to respond with revolutionary zeal to preserve the United States as a great Christian nation.¹⁹

What attracts people to this ideology? Is it possible or even realistic to assume that the divide could be surpassed for the sake of dialogue and understanding? Pamela Cooper-White in her book, *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism*, states four reasons why people are attracted, a) "the need for belonging and a sense of purpose; b) fear of loss of white social status, resentment, and a desire for power; c) fear of loss of patriarchal authority; and d) the irrational allure of conspiracy theories."²⁰ I will concentrate on the reason I believe is at the heart of this ideology: a desire for power.

The Neo-Constantinian repristination

Historians have debated about the reason, or reasons, behind Emperor Constantine's conversion that led to the Edit of Milan in 313 proclaimed by both emperors, Constantine and Licinius. The edit provided for religious tolerance, ending the persecution of Christians, and restoring properties to them. While this improved the situation for Christians throughout the Empire, the marriage between Church and Empire, in my estimation, proved to be a nefarious deal for the Christian faith. The thirst for power seeped through the church reaching its apex in the high Middle Ages. Sectors of the church today continue to be plagued by this malady I call the Neo-Constantinian repristination.

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19. NCC policy statement, <https://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/common-witness/the-dangers-of-christian-nationalism-in-the-united-states> Accessed 8/4/25.

20. Pamela Cooper-White, *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism: Why People Are Drawn In and How to Talk Across the Divide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 41, Kindle.

He currently serves as senior scholar at the Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies in Baltimore. In his book, *The Violent Take it by Force: The Christian Movement that is Threatening our Democracy*, he traces the development of the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR), a movement created by C. Peter Wagner in the 1980s. The NAR is deeply rooted in Dominion Theology, waging spiritual warfare against the forces of evil that have taken control of society in the United States.

The title of Taylor's book references a Bible verse that became the rallying cry for the movement under Wagner's leadership, "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force" (Matt. 11:12). By the year 2000, the NAR was a large movement within the Independent Charismatic sector. In 2008, Wagner published *Dominion! How Kingdom Action can Change the World*, expounding on the goals for the NAR and its dominion theology: "Our battles are no longer physical; they are spiritual. Jesus said, 'from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force' (Matthew 11:12). We will not take dominion by remaining passive. We will only take dominion if the Body of Christ becomes violent and declares war on the enemy."²¹ Through an extensive network of apostles and prophets Wagner was able to refine and expand the work of the NAR and ultimately connect to the MAGA political movement led by Donald J. Trump. One of those prophets was Texas televangelist Lance Walnau. Walnau was able to bring together some older ideas floating in the Independent Charismatic Movement and created the Seven Mountain Mandate, a divinely mandated strategy calling Christians to take control of seven spheres of life: family religion, education, media, arts, entertainment, business, and government.

The 2016 presidential election campaign saw what Jim Wallis calls the MAGA/MEGA connection.²² Two NAR leaders, Paula White, who later became President Trump's religious advisor, and Lance Walnau, played a critical role in facilitating the overwhelming support of white evangelicals for the MAGA movement and their presidential candidate. Here we ask ourselves another interesting question, how could evangelicals give their support to Donald Trump? Sociologists Whitehead and Perry ventured a response in the conclusion of their study, "Therefore, groups opposing Trump should realize that dwelling on Trump's sexual dalliances, corrupt business practices, or even collusion with a foreign power are not useful tools in the project of changing minds. For a large swath of the American public the only thing that counts is whether they feel as though their religious and national identity is being given preference."²³ In 2015, after a meeting with Donald

Trump and a group of televangelists, Lance Walnau claims God spoke to him and said, "Donald Trump is a wrecking ball to the spirit of political correctness. Trump is a Cyrus."²⁴ And thus the famous concept of Cyrus Anointing was born, legitimizing this nominee, and his "divine selection."

January 6 (2021) was an unprecedented event in U.S. history. As Isabel Wilkerson writes in the Afterword of her book *Caste*, "how could a rioter in our era, deliver the Confederate flag farther than Robert E. Lee?"²⁵ It was possible because this event was driven by something more powerful than politics. It was driven by religion. We all saw the images of Christian symbols and placards displayed at the Capitol building. We saw The Proud Boys pray before the attack, and after the Capitol building was overtaken, the Shaman prayed on the floor of the U.S. Senate. Matthew Taylor writes: "As Peter Manseau, curator of American Religious History at the Smithsonian put it, religion was not a piece of the story that day; it was "'the story of what happened' on January 6."²⁶ In the conclusion of his book Taylor states, "It is my opinion, informed by history, that Christianity in America has not been this divided—theologically, socially, regionally, or epistemically—since the eve of the Civil War."²⁷

Confessing through resistance

In September 1933 the Rev. Martin Niemoller founded the Pastor's Emergency League to resist the nefarious policies of the Third Reich, and as an alternative to the German Christian Party pastors who fell in line, or as we say today, "obeyed in advance," to Hitler's demands. The first protest was issued on September 27 at the National Synod of the Church in Wittenberg. The Pastor's Emergency League issued a statement protesting the "Aryan Clause."

Dean G. Strout, a former Presbyterian minister and professor of German at the University of Wisconsin—Lacrosse, published in 2013 a fascinating book of sermons preached by some of the pastors in the resistance movement. For those of you looking for inspiration to face these troubling days, I recommend this book, *Preaching in Hitler's Shadow: Sermons of Resistance in the Third Reich*.²⁸ The parallels between then and now are striking.

The pastors and members of the Confessing church maintained that the gospel of Jesus the Christ was incompatible with the Nazi ideology and the accommodation and support of German Christians. They called the church to resist, not to acquiesce, and to hold firm to the *corpus fidelium*. Closely after Adolf Hitler was pointed Chancellor of Germany in 1933, Karl Barth founded a theological journal known as *Theological Existence Today*. For Barth the preaching and teaching offices in the church were of

21. C. Peter Wagner, *Dominion! How Kingdom Action Can Change the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chown Books, 2008), 118; cited by Matthew D. Taylor, *The Violent Take it by Force: The Christian Movement that is Threatening our Democracy* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2024), 69.

22. Wallis, *The False White Gospel*, 24.

23. Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 158.

24. Taylor, *The Violent Take it by Force*, 160.

25. Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2023), 390.

26. Taylor, *The Violent Take it by Force*, 2.

27. Taylor, *The Violent Take it by Force*, 245.

28. Dean G. Strout, *Preaching in Hitler's Shadow: Sermons of Resistance in the Third Reich* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013).

utmost importance as the Christian family in Germany faced the distortions of the Christian faith. Reflecting on the first issue of the journal Strout writes:

The question of the moment was how “preachers and teachers of the church” were to live their theology today, not yesterday or tomorrow. Barth insisted that the clash of theologies (confessional and Nazi) presented an urgent crisis in the church’s life in which orthodox theology must combat demonic heresy. God was demanding radical faith rather than resignation or conformity to Nazi Christianity.²⁹

Helmut Gollwitzer served as pastor of the Berlin-Dahlem congregation after the arrest of their pastor, Martin Niemöller. On November 16, 1938, the Sunday of Penance, the Sunday immediately after *Kristallnacht*, he preached about the events of the week. I share with you some excerpts from his sermon:

Who then on this of all days has a right to preach? Who then should be preaching repentance on such a day? Have not our mouths been muzzled on this very day? Can we do anything but fall silent? What good has all the preaching and hearing of sermons done for us and our people, and our church? ... Why don’t we at least keep our mouths shut? Yes, that might be the right thing to do. What if we just sat here for an entire hour without saying a word, no singing, no speaking, just preparing ourselves silently for God’s punishment, which we have already earned? ... All of us have done our part in this: one by being a coward, another by comfortably stepping out of everyone’s way, by passing by, by being silent, by closing our eyes ... Now just outside this church our neighbor is waiting for us, waiting for us on his need and lack of protection, disgraced, hungry, hunted, and driven by fear for his very existence. That is the one who is waiting to see if today this Christian congregation has really observed this national day of penance. Jesus Christ himself is waiting to see.³⁰

The Third Reich presented itself as a protector and benefactor of Christianity. In a radio message two days after his inauguration as Chancellor of Germany, Adolf Hitler announced that his government “regards Christianity as the foundation of our national morality and the family as the basis of national life.”³¹ These reassurances served their purpose, to co-opt and pacify the mindset of a large sector of the German church, and ultimately, to gain their trust and support for the political agenda of Hitler’s regime, and the Nazi’s “false understanding of Christianity.”³² According to Strout, the question Christians faced was simple: “Should and could a Christian in Germany confess Hitler as a manifestation of

The advice given by the Apostle Paul to his young companion Timothy serves us well today: “I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths” (2 Tim. 4:1b-4).

God’s will, or would Christians have to hold firm to the ancient confessions and see Hitler as a demonic expression of evil?”³³

What do we learn from these preachers who defied the claims of the Third Reich and its Nazi ideology? To use a phrase coined by my friend Bishop Will L. Herzfeld, preaching then, and preaching today, is an “act of evangelical defiance.”³⁴ The advice given by the Apostle Paul to his young companion Timothy serves us well today: “I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths” (2 Tim. 4:1b-4).

33. Strout, *Preaching in Hitler’s Shadow*, 25.

34. Will L. Herzfeld was the presiding bishop of the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches at the time of the merger that led to the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). In the ELCA, Will served as associate executive director for the Division for Global Mission. During his visit to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Central African Republic (CAR) for the ordination of the first female pastor, Will witnessed the festive joy that led the mother of the ordinand to dance as her daughter was ordained. Will described the movement as an act of evangelical defiance. Shortly after his return from that visit Bishop Herzfeld died of cerebral malaria contracted in the CAR.

29. Strout, *Preaching in Hitler’s Shadow*, 33.

30. Strout, *Preaching in Hitler’s Shadow*, 118-126.

31. Strout, *Preaching in Hitler’s Shadow*, 5.

32. Strout, *Preaching in Hitler’s Shadow*, 25.

Poking holes at darkness

Pr. Otis Moss tells a story shared at Trinity Church by the Rev. Samuel Kyles, a civil rights leader, during one of his sermons at the congregation:

A little boy who was supposed to be in bed watched out the window as a city employee lit the lamps (when gas powered the streetlights). He ran to his mother and father and said, “Come here, quick!” “Why are you up?” they asked. “You have to see this! There’s a man outside. He’s punching holes in the darkness!”³⁵

As pastors and ministerial leaders, we need to prepare and accompany the people in our faith communities to go out and poke holes in this darkness that is swallowing up our society. I suggest we engage in:

Deconstruction: For John Caputo deconstruction means “to sketch a portrait of an alternative Christianity, one that is as ancient as it is new, one in which the ‘dangerous memory of Jesus’ is still alive—deconstruction being, as I conceive it, a work of memory and imagination, of dangerous memories as well as a daring way to imagine the future as such good news for the church.”³⁶ But we cannot engage in deconstruction work from the position most of our denominations are, we need to decenter ourselves from the allure of power and privilege. All of us who are facing the challenges of membership decline toss around the word “transformation” quite often. But transformation is the cosmetic changes the system affords us, while making sure it will not be subverted. Transformation necessitates displacement, and that displacement is toward marginality. The margins are not only a social location in our communities, but they are also a way of being in the world, a way of being rooted in the “dangerous memory of Jesus.”

Revamping our educational ministries: White Christian Nationalism thrives in misinformation and the construction of an alternative Jesus that justifies their ideological framework. This movement, along with MAGA, has developed a sophisticated and extended educational network to sustain their religious and political claims and goals. How can we compete against that? I have been in conversation with several bishops, pastors, and church leaders of my denomination trying to find some *pistas* (hints) to address this challenge. One of those leaders, Bp. Leila Ortiz, responded, ‘Rafael, how can we go beyond the 12 minutes that we are given each week?’ A good number of our parishioners do not participate in educational opportunities offered during the week, and most of these programs are dwindling. They rely mostly on the 12-to-15-minute homily on Sunday, and as we will see in my next point, many of these sermons could have been preached in 1975 without

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any adaptation. Professor Jesus Rodrigues Cortes, a member of the Disciples of Christ Church in Puerto Rico, argues that our educational programs—and I will include our preaching as well—need CPR, “a contextual, pertinent, and relevant” remake. How could we, theological education institutions forming ministerial leaders, provide new skills and competencies to assist these leaders in developing online, multimedia, accessible resources that will invite people in their congregations to go beyond the 12-minute experience?

Let me ask a poignant question, what is our alternative to Turning Point USA? We need to redouble our efforts to deepen and extend our ministries with youth and particularly our campus ministry work. But here is the catch. We need to do this, not for the sake of institutional build-up, but as a contribution by the church to civil society. The expansion of our campus ministry efforts needs to be ecumenical, interfaith, humanistic, and non-religious, for we seek to shape the minds of our youth and young adults around our shared humanity, working together for the common good.

Increase our support to rostered leaders: In conversation with another bishop, Felix J. Malpica, of the ELCA La Crosse Area Synod, Felix expressed a need experienced by many of his colleagues in the ELCA Conference of Bishops: “How can I best support pastors and deacons that feel and/or experience they are living outside of their own white culture?” Many of these pastors are serving in politically conservative contexts and the way they understand the gospel of Jesus and its call for radical inclusion differs from what their parishioners expect in terms of preaching and congregational social engagement. Often parishioners express their unease with a gospel message that confronts their political ideology. Any critique of unfair and exclusionary government policies is dismissed as “we don’t preach politics here.” This reveals a major challenge in parish ministry today. In numerous instances, parishioners tend to identify more strongly with their political affiliation than with their baptismal identity. Preachers are afraid of saying what they know they must say from a gospel perspective because they fear not only criticism, but possible loss of financial support for the congregation and for themselves. Here each of you needs to think critically about this from your respective denominational background. Our polity, governance, and support of ordained ministers vary. For us Lutherans, our

35. Otis Moss III, *Dancing in the Darkness: Spiritual Lessons for Thriving in Turbulent Times* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, New Delhi: Simon & Schuster, 2023), 8.

36. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* 35.

members, do not protest that much (something oxymoronic), however, they show their discontent with their pockets or their feet, they stop their financial support to the congregation or leave. These rostered leaders face a great challenge, how to give free course to the gospel of Jesus in the congregations they are called to serve.

Redouble our efforts in social service work: The rise of autocracy, and its powerful grip on the federal government under the Trump administration, has led to the systematic erosion and dismantling of the social safety net that has been built since the days of FDR and the reconstruction of the country after the Great Depression. Today marginalized communities face the harsh reality of seeing subsidies and support to the most vulnerable being eliminated and those funds used to offer greater subsidies and tax cuts to the rich and wealthy. The gap between the haves and the have nots (the one percent and the rest) continues to widen. Churches have traditionally stepped in to close the gap by providing services through their social ministry organizations. The ELCA social statement on economic life, “Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All,” calls for followers of Jesus to engage in public and private sector partnerships advocating for policies “that promote stable families, strong schools, and safe neighborhoods, addressing the barriers individuals face in preparing for and sustaining a livelihood.”³⁷ Dealing with our engagement in alleviating poverty and serving the neighbor in need, this social statement “draws our attention to: 1. The scope of God’s concern—“**for all**,” 2. The means by which life is sustained—“**livelihood**,” 3. What is the need—“**sufficiency**,” and 4. A long-term perspective—“**sustainability**.”³⁸

Casus Confessionis: Earlier I raised a question for which I provided no answer: Is it possible to engage White Christian Nationalism in dialogue? Pamela Cooper-White says yes, and for that she has developed a “triage” method. However, I am not sure. Most of the scholars I have reviewed agree that White Christian Nationalism creates lines rather than bridges, and it is difficult for me to identify a common ground that would allow for that dialogue to happen and to shape the conversation. Could that common ground be Jesus, our shared humanity? There are significant differences in the way we understand Jesus and the notion of shared humanity. As mentioned earlier, each of us must appropriate this matter from our denominational contexts. As a Lutheran I believe the distortion of the Christian faith posited by White Christian Nationalism and the practices that ensue from such distortion are so contrary to the gospel, that we must declare to be in a *status confessionis*. Status confessionis is traced back to Matthias Flacius and the controversy between two Lutheran parties during the adiaphora controversy of the sixteenth century, but we are more

In our baptism we were given an indelible mark, as we were “sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross forever.” We professed our faith in Christ Jesus, rejected sin, and confessed the faith of the church. Listen to those questions again: Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God? Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God? Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God? And we replied, “I renounce them.”

familiar with Bonhoeffer’s position re: the Nazi regime and the action taken by the Lutheran World Federation in 1977 against apartheid. I anticipate that my position may be subject to scrutiny or challenge from certain individuals. Some may say I am creating a distinction between groups. True, but what are the options? Silence, accommodation, and acquiescence? Questions, questions, and more questions. We should work together to find solutions.

Here we have gathered with the baptismal font in our midst. In our baptism we were given an indelible mark, as we were “sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross forever.” We professed our faith in Christ Jesus, rejected sin, and confessed the faith of the church. Listen to those questions again: Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God? Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God? Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God? And we replied, “I renounce them.”

After the profession of faith again, we were asked: Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in holy baptism: to live among God’s faithful people, to hear the word of God and share in the Lord’s Supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth? And we replied, “I do, and I ask God to help and guide me.”

I have just one more question, but this one is not in the liturgy for the sacrament of baptism: What are the sociological implications of our theological affirmations?

37. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*, (Chicago, 1999), 8.

38. ELCA, *Sufficient*, 3.