

# Christian Culture

A MAGAZINE FOR  
LUTHERANS



## FEATURING

**Charlie's Race is Finished;  
Yours Is Not**

*Rev. Dr. Christopher Thoma*

**To Presume to Be Nothing  
but a Good Shepherd**

*Dr. Caleb Karges*

**Forgiveness**

*Miss Allyssa Vandercook*



ISSUE 16

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## LCC INVITES PRESIDENTIAL FINALISTS FOR ON-CAMPUS INTERVIEWS

Luther Classical College's (LCC) presidential search committee interviewed six men from a list of those nominated by the college's Board and faculty after receiving numerous names from stakeholders. After prayerfully considering the first round of interviews, the committee has elected to invite Rev. Brent Kuhlman and Rev. Jeffrey Hemmer to Casper for formal on-campus interviews. "We found ourselves blessed to speak with a talented, pious group of men who care deeply about the future of Lutheran higher education," said Dr. Caleb Karges, chair of the presidential search committee and dean of students, "We are thankful for all of the excellent men who willingly let their names stand for the position."

Rev. Kuhlman is pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Murdock, Nebraska. He is a seasoned Lutheran pastor and theological educator with over thirty years of leadership in pastoral ministry, preaching, teaching, and international missions.

Rev. Hemmer is pastor of Bethany Evangelical Lutheran Church in Fairview Heights, Illinois. He has served as assistant to the president of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, is the author of *Man Up: The Quest for Masculinity*, and is a doctor of philosophy candidate at Concordia Seminary—St. Louis, Missouri.

The college requests your continued prayers for all men involved in the search as it selects its next president.

## LCC'S PIONEER STUDENTS EXCEL IN INAUGURAL SEMESTER

Luther Classical College's first cohort of students exhibits an outstanding array of talents. Nearly 75% of students are performing at the sophomore level of college Latin already as freshman. Median standardized test scores exceed those of other Lutheran colleges. A Youth 4 Life chapter was formed before most students had even arrived on campus. Student musicians have accompanied chapel services and formed their own quartets in volunteer after-school practices.

The college's emphasis on faculty mentorship of students ensures that every student is able to rise to the challenge of a rigorous curriculum. "While LCC's test scores are impressive," notes Dr. MacPherson, "we value every student as a unique child of God, recognizing in the classroom that each student has strengths and weaknesses and that all of them are capable of encouraging each other as we learn together in a community of Christian scholars."

Midway through the semester, students were surveyed to determine what they appreciate most about their college experience. The most common response emphasized their appreciation for having chapel twice daily. Students also expressed gratitude for divine service, which is held in the campus's Löhe Chapel on Wednesday morning. A second popular response pointed to the remainder of the Wednesday schedule: no regular classes are held. Rather, the middle of each week is reserved for music ensemble practices, individual music lessons, homework, and social time. Also ranking among the three most common responses, students are amazed at how well their courses are integrated.

***The 38 founding students of Luther Classical College have embarked on an amazing journey. To join them at the college or learn how you can support them, turn to the centerfold of this magazine.***





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# Charlie's Race Is Finished; Yours Is Not

By Rev. Dr. Christopher Thoma



I still struggle to believe Charlie is gone. I'm looking right now at the last text he sent to me. He ended the brief back-and-forth with, "Our best days are ahead! Onward!" Those words echo with a force I cannot shake.

In the most tremendous sense, for Charlie, those best days are now. His race is finished. His fight is won. He has come into the nearest presence of Christ in heaven, where the crown of righteousness is laid upon his head by the Lord Himself. His best days are not ahead in this world, but are right now in the world without end.

So then, to whom is the directive "Onward" now addressed? It is not for Charlie. Not anymore. He has reached the goal. It is, therefore, to us. To you. To me. To the Church still laboring in the shadowed fields of this world. It is a word pressed into the souls of those who remain: Do not falter. Do not retreat. Do not let grief harden into silence. The command is clear. Onward! Charlie's voice is now at rest in the quiet of eternal life. Ours must now grow confidently louder. His steps are stilled in this life. Ours must move even more steadily and faster. His courage has been poured out. Ours must now be filled to the brim. Charlie's legacy is not a eulogy that fades when everyone goes home. It is a summons.

Charlie's courage exposes a festering wound in the Church today. It is simply this: too many Christians, too many pastors, have fallen silent. Silence is not an option. Not for you. Not for me. Not for anyone who dares to call Christ Lord in this fading republic. In an age when the wolves howl in the open, the shepherds often retreat into whispers. After years in the trenches, and countless conversations with clergy, I can tell you the main reason.

Silence risks nothing. It doesn't risk the paycheck. It doesn't risk the security. It doesn't risk congregational division. Pastors, called to be

guardians of the flock, whether they realize it or not, often hide behind abstractions, clichés, and vague theological "applications" that never risk offense. And so, the sheep wander, harassed and helpless (Matthew 9:36), while the shepherds polish their sermons with careful neutrality.

Charlie did not waste his time. He gave it to students, to families, to the Church, to this nation. He stood where others would not. He said what others feared to say. He bore the insults, the smears, the attempted cancellations, and finally, he took a bullet meant to terrify the rest of us into passive quietism.

So, what now? Do we mourn? Yes, and rightly so. The day of his funeral was a hard one. But mourning is not the end. Mourning must stir resolve. Indeed, if Charlie could take his stand on hostile campuses, then surely we can take ours in pulpits, in workplaces, in classrooms, in school board meetings, in conversations with family and friends, in the public square—wherever truth is denied and darkness boasts the upper hand.

With a little bit of self-reflection, a pastor might realize that silence is not safety. Silence is surrender. But Christ did not call his shepherds to surrender to the world's expectations. He called them to surrender to Him. As such, they are made heralds of the Truth. And the Truth, as Charlie reminded us by both word and deed, cannot be divided into harmless categories—one slice for the gospel, another for politics, another for culture. Truth is whole. Truth is the Good Shepherd—Christ Himself—everything that He is.

And so, when the pastors, the undershepherds, refuse to speak, the wolves do not retreat. They advance. They teach the children. They shape the culture—even the Church's culture. They redefine male and female. They catechize the congregation with the liturgies of CRT, DEI, and self-made identity. Neutrality, then, is not polite churchmanship but abdication. The silence of the





*Rev. Christopher Thoma and Charlie Kirk*

undershepherds is consent to the wolves.

Jesus Himself warns that the hired hand, who sees the wolf coming but flees, proves that he cares nothing for the sheep (John 10:12–13). And yet, even as that hired hand remains safely professional and polished, he becomes powerless in his role. Afraid to name the sins that are devouring the flock, they become content to rely on platitudes, hoping the wolf will be satisfied with someone else's blood. Maybe Charlie's blood. This is the shame of Christian quietism.

The pastor's calling is not to build a wall of safety for himself in this world. It is to preach and teach the Gospel in purity and to administer the sacraments according to Christ's command. This is dangerous work because it steers headlong into everything Satan would prefer for the sheep. For one, he would have the sheep slow-boiled into being comfortable in destruction. And yet, to protect the sheep, a pastor is to afflict the comfortable. To preach Christ crucified means to

name the sins for which Jesus died, not to blur them into generic "brokenness" that is easily disregarded. Sheep need precision. Sheep need clarity. Sheep need truth. Sheep need undershepherds who will lift the rod and staff against the enemy, not hide them in quietism's sheath.

Of course, there's no use in hiding what any of this really means. It will cost you. You will lose friends. You may lose your job. You may even lose your life. But the greater cost is cowardice. Cowardice is the corrosion of the soul. It is the slow rot of a nation that once knew what it meant to stand when standing was required. Cowardice is precisely what the enemy of Truth is counting on in this hour. If fear can muzzle us, if the comfort of safety and security can buy us off, then evil has already won without firing another shot.

I know it's scary. Still, the sheep need watchmen who will not hold their peace day or night (Isaiah 62:6). Silence is simply not an option. Neither is



neutrality. For example, pastors must be willing to inform their people that electing candidates who advocate for ideologies contrary to Christ's will means taking a grave step away from Christ. And then they need to name the candidates who do this. Indeed, to refuse to speak in these ways is to deny Christ before men. And He warns that those who do so will be denied before the Father.




“speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20).

Consider Saint Paul's words in 2 Timothy 4:7. “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” Charlie did that. Even so, the fight remains. The race continues. The faith must still be kept. That means the responsibility falls to us—the ones still breathing, still standing, still given the gift of time in this moment of history.

What then? Well, the only thing I can say is what I've already been saying for a decade and a half. The Church must recover the courage of her confession. The seminaries must make it a point to teach and talk about such things. Pastors must know and be found willing to proclaim the whole counsel of God, even as the world will call it hate speech, even when the culture will mock, even when members of the flock will most certainly be offended. It's far better to lose security in this life for offending the world than to offend the Shepherd who laid down His life that we would have eternal life (Matthew 16:25).

Charlie's race is finished. Yours is not. His voice is silenced. Yours is not. His courage has been spent. Yours is being summoned. Do not look away. Do not retreat. Do not stand aside waiting for someone else to do what needs to be done. That someone else is you.

For Charlie's heartbroken wife and children, for the Church in desperate need of those who'd engage faithfully, for the country we all love, and above all, for the Lord who gave us breath—get in the game. Pick up the torch. Carry it high. Do not let the darkness have the last word. 

Something I've said on more than one occasion as a pastor: You cannot love your people if you do not love God more. Charlie Kirk's death stirs these concerns. Again, this one requires sincere self-reflection. And yet, by holding to Christ in faith, I'm confident it will stir the same forthrightness of the Apostles, who said so boldly, “We cannot but

*Rev. Dr. Christopher Thoma is pastor of Our Savior Lutheran Church in Hartland, MI.*

**“Indeed, our best days are ahead! Onward!”**





# The Wickedness of This World Is Ramping Up

A sermon prepared on Sep. 10, 2025

By Rev. Peter Preus

**W**e are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. - 2 Cor. 4:8-10



he wickedness of our world is ramping up. Today we mourn yet another national tragedy. We were already prepared to mourn tomorrow, but God has seen it fit that we mourn today. And so we should. There is a time to mourn. Now is that time.

Charlie Kirk was murdered by a man who surely thought he was doing the right thing. But woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness (Is. 5:20). Their wickedness will not last, but today it hurts the Body of Christ throughout our country. Because, politics aside (sort of), Kirk was a voice that encouraged young people in particular to reject the demonic culture around them, and rather to find peace in the love of Christ and His order of righteousness and goodness and purity.

The wickedness of our world is ramping up. You are hard-pressed on every side. But do you feel the pressure? Do you feel the pressures of sin, vying for your attention, vying for your affection, as Christ calls to you to look only to him for relief? Do you feel the pressures of sin, trying hard to distract you from the goal of eternal life, trying hard to detract from the profound beauty of Christ's death in your place? Do you feel the heavy weight of apathy amidst your

sin? Do you hear the pressure of that ancient demonic voice asking you amidst your struggle against temptation, "Did God really say?"

Dear Christian, do you feel the pressure? Surely you do. But through faith in Christ, you are not crushed. Christ's heel was crushed as He crushed the devil's head. The blood of Christ cries from Calvary for you, that when you feel the pressure of a hard-pressed Christian, you would look to His victorious cross and resurrection and boast in His Gospel which cannot be undone, and which cannot fail to shield you from harm. Through faith in Christ, you are not crushed.

The wickedness of our world is ramping up. You are perplexed, you're confused. Perplexed that the next tragedy has happened to a man with a Christian wife and two small Christian children. Perplexed that prayers are offered online but the pews on Sundays still long to hear once more the prayers of those who have abandoned them. Perplexed at why God allows the gruesome death of His saints. You're perplexed about the present, apprehensive about the future, but duty bound by your Savior not to worry for a second. Indeed, today you are perplexed, but through faith you are not in despair. For God is not the author of confusion but of peace. Despair doubts the resurrection of the body, but faith clings to the





*The Last Judgement by Michaelangelo*

Truth: that precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.

Saints remain God's for ever and ever. For God is not the God of the dead, but of the living. And so all who die in the Lord live with Him. And they will rise on the last day in their bodies, that their very own eyes may behold without perplexity, but with peace, that Christ has saved them.


The wickedness of our world is ramping up. You are persecuted. But have you noticed? There's no such thing as a secular world. Secular just means a realm of existence without consideration of God. Secular means unbelieving. And secularism is on the attack. You are persecuted. Your brother is shot. Your faith is being minimized, misprioritized, relegated to irrelevance by a world which teaches that faith is private; but it's not. In the name of secularism your children are taught evolution, they're taught career over family, sports over church, sex before marriage, hell over heaven. To what end? Sprint home to the Church of Christ, dear Christians! Because although you are persecuted, yet through faith in Christ you are not forsaken.

There is nothing new under the sun. Open your eyes to see the sun shining on the fangs of the devil as he strikes at your faith in the name of so-called neutral secularism. If praying constantly, coming to church frequently, and confessing at all times the glory and righteousness of Christ, if being a Christian is weird and radical, then become weird and radical. Who cares? The secularists do. Because they want you to

die to Christ and to live to the world. But no! The world will persecute you, it will forsake you in death, but through faith in Christ, you are not forsaken.

The wickedness of our world is ramping up. You're struck down. Perhaps the next martyr, but so what? Through faith in Christ, you are not destroyed. You have all things when you have Christ: eternal life, peace, and a foretaste of the world to come.

Dear Christians, walk around with confidence and cheer, even amidst the days of mourning. Your body and soul is bought and paid for by the blood of your God, Jesus Christ, shed for your sin and death on the cross. You have hope. Christ is risen! Let the light, life, and this certain hope of Christ's life for your eternal life radiate from you into this wicked world. The world will see the light of Christ through you. And most will hate you for it. Just look at that martyr, Charlie Kirk. And yet, according to God's gracious will, some may still be drawn to the light of faith in Christ and live—yes, live forever.

The wickedness of our world is ramping up. But this world will be crushed, it will be in despair, forsaken, and destroyed on that final day of judgment. Yet, through faith in Christ, not you—not those who die in faith and for the faith. No. You are a Christian. Carry that around with you. Do not be ashamed. Be proud to die someday as a Christian—and through faith in Christ to live forever. Amen.    

*Rev. Peter Preus is pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Bridgeport, NE.*



# To Presume to Be Nothing but a Good Shepherd

The Letters of Rev. Fritz Reddin 1913-14

By Dr. Caleb Karges



In the early months of 2024, I had the joy of getting to know two of my fellow parishioners in my congregation in southern California through the mutual acquaintance of one of my history students. Without the intervention of that one student, I may not have known Mr. and Mrs. Mark Howell, and by extension, I would have never known the story of the Reverend Frederick ‘Fritz’ Reddin and his wife Luise (née Schoenemann). Likewise, Mrs. Lauri Howell would have never gotten to know her Grandpa Reddin—affectionately known to her and her family members as ‘Olo’—had she not learned from the student of my ability to read old German handwriting. Fritz died during Lauri’s infancy, so all she knew of her ‘Olo’ came from the stories of her parents and from her interactions with her ‘very German’ grandmother Luise, who died during Lauri’s childhood. Many decades later, all Lauri had of her grandfather was the oral tradition passed on to her by relatives and a bundle of letters written by Reddin in Wisconsin to Luise in Nebraska during their courtship over the course of 1913 and 1914. The contents of this correspondence remained completely inaccessible to Lauri as Fritz wrote to Luise in the unique German-language cursive system known as Kurrentschrift, used in the German-speaking world until the 1930s. Although Lauri is proficient in the German language, the letters might as well have been written in hieroglyphics or cuneiform. It unfortunately requires the knowledge of a specialist to unlock this classic form of German handwriting.

Lauri Howell’s problem encapsulated a great misfortune for the Lutheran church in North America that so much of its history is inaccessible due to the double barriers of language and handwriting. The transition from the use of German to the use of English by American Lutherans about a century ago effectively barred those of us living in

the English-language present from the knowledge of our ancestors. Fortunately, thanks to the efforts of those who lived through that transition, we did not lose our legacy and traditions in the realms of theology and hymnody. The work of bringing some of the great German-language works of Lutheranism into English continues. A knowledge of the German language is all one needs to translate printed works, but this is not the case with the letters left behind by our ancestors. Without a knowledge of the handwriting, we will lose our history. Theological tomes tell us what our forefathers believed and thought on certain doctrinal issues, but handwritten letters give us a picture into how they lived out that faith in the day-to-day struggles of their time. Our synodical archives and private collections of correspondence contain a veritable treasury of how our Lutheran forebearers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries addressed the issues of their day. In short, we can turn the historian’s task to their correspondence and learn how they put doctrine into practice. In the case of Fritz’s letters to Luise, through a little bit of cross-referencing with publicly available records and papers contained in the archives of the Wisconsin Synod, we can get a glimpse of Christian culture in 1913.

Rev. Fritz Reddin served for a brief stint as a pastor in the Wisconsin Synod before marrying Luise, moving to California, and turning to a second career in keeping an orange orchard in northern Los Angeles County. According to the family oral tradition, Reddin intended to remain in the pastoral ministry upon his move to California, but his poor command of English left him unable to serve in an area with a limited number of German-speaking congregations. Born in Vehlen, Germany in 1884, Reddin spent the first twenty years of his life in his homeland before first traveling to the United States at age 20 on board the S.S. Pretoria with his friend Gotthilf Bradtke. At Ellis Island the two men





*The Good Shepherd Lays Down His Life for the Sheep* by Unknown Artist

declared they were traveling to the residence of a certain Fred Hilka of Beloit, Wisconsin.<sup>2</sup> Reddin returned to Germany and lived in Bremen before coming back to the United States in 1905 to spend time in Philadelphia.<sup>3</sup> Spending the first two decades of his life speaking only German no doubt hamstrung his English language ability, but it proved sufficient for him to navigate life in the states. By

1910, he and Bradtke were enrolled as students at the Wisconsin Synod seminary in Wauwatosa, where all instruction occurred in German. Reddin and Bradtke's command of English apparently satisfied the 1910 US Census official, who marked them down as proficient in English.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the question remains whether Reddin could preach in English. In the age of World War I, he certainly



experienced his share of anti-German hatred. In 1918, he enrolled in the Kearney Normal School (the future University of Nebraska at Kearney), where he received a letter of recommendation from the president attesting to Reddin's good character.<sup>5</sup> It seems he enrolled at Kearney to show his willingness to assimilate into American society, but it was not enough to convince California's immigration officials. His application for US citizenship in 1929 was denied on the grounds of 'loyalty unsatisfactory'<sup>6</sup> Those two words frustratingly leave the question open as to why? Was it Reddin's command of English that was 'unsatisfactory' or did he harbor sentiments that could be interpreted as German nationalism or loyalty to the Kaiser? Whatever the reason, he convinced immigration officials in 1938 that it was no longer a fact and attained US citizenship at the age of 54.<sup>7</sup>

By then, Reddin had not served in a parish for 24 years (he may have done some pulpit supply but this is unknown ), been married for just as long, had three children, began a successful career as an orange grower in Glendora, and even owned an oil well in Long Beach. When Reddin graduated alongside his best friend, Gotthilf Bradtke, from the Wauwatosa seminary in 1912, he had no vision of this future, although he entertained the thought that Luise might be a part of it. Somewhere between his final trip to America in 1905 and his graduation in 1912, he travelled to Nebraska where he spent some time with the family of Christian and Luise Schoenemann in small community of Buffalo in Dawson County. While there, Reddin met their daughter Luise, who was a year his junior. At some point, the two struck up a correspondence of which the first surviving letter is dated June 30, 1913, after Reddin had been ordained at St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Brodhead, Wisconsin. If they had been corresponding before that date, Luise did not decide to keep his letters. Reddin was not as meticulous a record keeper as Luise and consequently Luise's replies are not extant. Fortunately, we have Reddin's letters, which contain a rich insight into the thoughts of a young pastor and into how his congregation rallied to support him in his struggles.

Indeed, Reddin had many struggles ahead of him. Upon graduating from the Wauwatosa seminary in June 1912, he was assigned to serve as the pastor of the German-speaking congregations of St. Peter's Brodhead and St. Paul's in Sylvester. St. Peter's had just been constituted and held its first divine service in July. It did not have its own building and met in

the homes of members until it later started using the sanctuary of the Norwegian Lutheran church.<sup>8</sup> Before taking up his assignment, Reddin seems to have been struck with crippling headaches. Whether or not he experienced these while at seminary is unknown, but by August they had reached the point that he sought medical help. His doctor diagnosed him with a shattered nervous system and recommended that he rest until October. The cause of the headaches is not given, although judging by the diagnosis the cause could have been panic attacks. A genetic condition or allergies could also have been to blame. Regardless of the headaches' cause, Reddin could not take up his call as originally scheduled. In the meantime, a seminary student filled the pulpit, and Reddin rested at the home of his newly married and newly ordained friend, Gotthilf Bradtke, in Alma.<sup>9</sup>

The rest did its work and by the end of September, Reddin felt ready to take up his post, and on October 13 he was duly ordained at St. Peter's by Rev. Bradtke.<sup>10</sup> However, by March 1913, the headaches had returned, and Reddin asked President Bergemann of the Wisconsin Synod for medical leave and for someone to cover the pulpit. After three months of rest and repeated requests from his parishioners, Reddin took up his post again.<sup>11</sup> (Reddin may have traveled to Nebraska during this time, although this is unknown.) One week after notifying President Bergemann of this decision, Reddin sent his first letter to Luise in reply to a letter from her. It was short, as he found himself swamped with his duties, making visits to as many parishioners as possible while enduring temperatures over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Part of the reason for his visits was damage control, as Reddin noted, 'the devil first has had his game.' During his absence, a relative spread the rumor that Reddin cited his health as a pretext and left Brodhead in order to avoid paying back a debt. Now that he returned Reddin had to 'bear all patiently' and restore 'the old order in my congregation' all while continuing to meet his parishioners in their ongoing spiritual needs. Reddin still suffered from his headaches, noting his health in Nebraska was much better than in Wisconsin.<sup>12</sup>

He chose to bear his headaches patiently, but they caused him much misery and anxiety. If these were caused by panic attacks, the headaches created a feedback loop of anxiety that would only cause more. In August, Reddin confessed to Luise, 'I came to the conclusion that unless something changes, I



will have to give up my ministry for a while. I really do not like doing it, but you cannot imagine the fear with which I step up to the pulpit. I always fear that my headaches could suddenly strike one day.' The heat, humidity, and mosquitos did little to help him as they sabotaged his sleep, forcing him to sit in the cellar all night for relief. The sleepless nights only gave him more time to ponder on 'what kind of spirit sits in his congregations.'<sup>13</sup> Naturally, being simultaneously afflicted with such misery and with a growing infatuation with Luise, Reddin's thoughts turned to Nebraska as his natural escape, especially when his greatest fear struck on Sunday, August 3. As Reddin delivered his sermon at St. Peter's, he suddenly went blind and lost his balance. He clung to the pulpit to stay upright until the episode passed, telling Luise that how he felt was indescribable other than that he wished for death. Once the headache ended, Reddin carried on but was only able to read his sermon (his normal practice was to memorize it)<sup>14</sup> With this worst fear now realized and the ever-occurring headaches, the prospect of preaching now filled Reddin with terror.<sup>15</sup>

With these episodes repeating themselves, Reddin knew he would not be able to sustain his ministry. So why did he endure the misery of his headaches? Throughout the correspondence, it becomes very clear that Reddin deeply cared about his parishioners and their physical and spiritual well-being, and he knew it was irresponsible for him to abandon the congregation as he would have to give an account before the throne of God.<sup>16</sup> He did have his own anxieties about what parishioners would say, but he realized that people 'will say what they want.' What concerned him more was the idea of leaving his sheep without a shepherd. The synod would have sent students from the seminary to preach on Sundays, but as Reddin noted, 'the preaching of students is also not good for the congregation.' There would be no one there to care for the parishioners the other six days of the week. Hence, Reddin resolved to help them find another pastor.<sup>17</sup> However, he dared not tell the congregation of his internal struggles and his resolutions, especially if he did not have a successor pastor lined up for them. He feared such news could kill the congregation, especially as it was still overcoming its initial turmoil.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, his sheep needed a shepherd to protect them from the wolves. The Methodists in town were trying 'everything to pull members out of our churches to them.'<sup>19</sup>

In the meantime, Reddin found himself under

duress as his relatives demanded he repay his debts. Furthermore, he had to navigate the politics of a dual parish. Naturally, some members of the country church of Sylvester complained that Reddin did not visit them enough. Moreover, parishioners could not understand how he spent his time, as many did not realize the amount of time he spent writing sermons. Reddin discovered that some believed pastors learned all of their sermons at the seminary. Others thought Reddin just improvised at the pulpit. He found solace in seeing his friend Bradtke, in Luise's letters, and in daydreams of moving to Texas with Luise.<sup>20</sup> The latter became much more of a pull away from the congregation as time passed. In a letter on October 20, Reddin proposed marriage to Luise, which she accepted. Luise and Bradtke were not the only ones who sought to encourage Reddin. His parishioners cared about him, too, and wanted to keep him there. Knowing his struggles with the sermons, they floated a number of solutions to him such as to have a student read the sermons until his health recovered or that he just read the sermons while refraining from a strenuous delivery.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, Reddin still experienced headaches from time to time, although not as frequently as he did over the summer. When stuck by a headache, he was left bedridden for hours.<sup>22</sup> Reddin hoped to be in Nebraska by Christmas as in October he had found a potential successor in the person of Carl Friedrich Baerwald, a recently graduated seminarian who was still without a call. Then Reddin learned that this may not be possible as the seminary faculty had concerns about Baerwald's candidacy for ordination.<sup>23</sup>

Baerwald had been in the class behind Reddin and Bradtke at Wauwatosa and was slated to graduate in 1913. While attending the seminary, Baerwald had been engaged to be married to a young woman by the name of Miss Schoenike, and for some reason, he broke off the engagement. This action was seen as just short of divorce, and Schoenike and her family filed a complaint against Baerwald to the seminary as he prepared to sit for his final exams in June. With such a serious accusation, the three professors of the seminary had to investigate the matter before they could approve of Baerwald's candidacy for the office of the ministry. In the meantime, Baerwald, who no doubt felt wronged by a vengeful ex-fiancée, attempted to take matters into his own hands and use Reddin's situation as an easy path into the ministry, presenting the synod with a fait accompli.

<sup>24</sup> It seems Baerwald did not fully explain his



situation to Reddin, as Reddin seemed to become aware of some of the matter after speaking with his supervisor at a conference in November.<sup>25</sup>

Reddin still hoped that Baerwald could resolve the issue. In the meantime, he dutifully and carefully prepared his sermons for his parishioners, and his congregations rallied around him, especially as the Christmas season drew near. Many of the parishioners were farmers, and Reddin found himself never having to pay for food and was often at a loss with what to do with the excess. He found great joy in preparing the children for the Christmas celebrations.<sup>26</sup> Although his parishioners wanted the celebrations to be to a high standard, they complained about his desire for them to put in the appropriate level of effort. While this mentally exhausted him, travelling in the snow between the two parishes physically exhausted him, but he found 'fresh courage' every time he received a letter from Luise. His fiancée also gave him the mental escape of planning for their wedding and purchasing Christmas gifts.<sup>27</sup>

While running the congregations presented their day-to-day difficulties, Christmas gave Reddin's parishioners a chance to show their love and support for their pastor. On St. Stephen's Day, He wrote to Luise recounting the gifts he received:

'From the congregation of Brodhead, I received 12 dollars and from Sylvester, 8 dollars. After that, from various congregants: one watch chain, a pair of mittens, two night shirts, a tie, a pair of suspenders, a tie clip,

and a pair of cufflinks, and then after a variety of knick-knacks, including a large supply of snacks with which I could maintain a large family.'

Furthermore, his parishioners now knew of his intention to leave and begged him to stay.<sup>28</sup> While his letters to Luise stopped mentioning the headaches, they still occurred. In the meantime, Baerwald assured Reddin that his matter with the seminary had been cleared. A week later, Reddin wrote to President Bergemann asking that he, upon the advice of his doctor, take a year of medical leave so he could travel south for his health and that Baerwald was willing to take up his post.<sup>29</sup> At this point, Reddin, the congregations, and Baerwald were prepared to make this happen. Reddin planned to preach his farewell sermon on January 11 and then take off to his bride-to-be in Nebraska.<sup>30</sup>

However, Bergemann put these plans on hold. Baerwald had not been clear with Reddin about his status with the seminary and the synod at large. On January 5, 1914 Bergemann replied to Reddin that he could not approve of Baerwald, as the seminary faculty still had their concerns, and in his follow-up letter on the 8th, he advised Reddin not to disclose the details to the congregations. Nevertheless, Bergemann knew that he had a crisis to resolve. He was personally aware of Reddin's ailments and that it made his ministry unsustainable. He also knew that the congregations needed a new pastor who could be a stabilizing force. Baerwald would have fit well in the congregations as he was born and raised in Wisconsin to German immigrants, but Bergemann



**I** have stayed here in my place for the sake of the people. I have really kind and good people in my congregation, but there are also those who make life hard for me, and I wanted to maintain the good reputation that I had received. I wanted to presume to be nothing but a good shepherd.'

could not risk placing a man into the office who might be embroiled in scandal. Here, he trusted the advice of his friend, John Schaller, president of the Wauwatosa seminary in doing his due diligence.<sup>31</sup>

In the meantime, Reddin now had to choose between 'Love and Duty.' He relayed President Bergemann's message in a congregational meeting on January 11, and the congregation resolved that Reddin should remain until Baerwald could come. Reddin asked for a day to consider and spent a sleepless night beseeching God for His guidance. He ultimately found peace in the verse, 'Whoever loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.' Asking Luise to forgive him for not coming, Reddin resolved to stay with the congregation until the new pastor could come. He felt at peace with the decision, and his parishioners felt relief. Many felt pressured by the Methodists in town, who were attempting to exploit Reddin's imminent departure by claiming that the Lutheran pastor was willingly forsaking his congregation for his own personal gain. Moreover, a scandal involving a relationship between a young woman of the congregation and a man in the city was coming into the light, and her family rejoiced that they had a pastor to help them through the matter. Furthermore, Reddin took on leading confirmation classes for eight youths. For her part, Luise supported her fiancé's decision and did her part from Nebraska to encourage Reddin in carrying on his ministry. Likewise, Bergemann and Schaller also sent letters of encouragement to Reddin to endure until they could sort out Baerwald's affairs.<sup>32</sup>

While Reddin taught classes, visited sick parishioners, and travelled through subzero

temperatures, John Schaller and his colleagues, J.P. Koehler and August Pieper, worked from their end in Wauwatosa to put things aright regarding Baerwald's eligibility for the ministry. Rather than cover up the matter in the hopes of gaining an expedient solution for Brodhead and Sylvester, they worked with Baerwald to clear his conscience and were transparent with the congregations about the situation. Baerwald had to demonstrate to them that he was truly repentant regarding his affront to Miss Schoenike and her family. Even though the Schoenike family rebuffed all of his attempts to reconcile, the seminary faculty determined that Baerwald had shown true repentance. However, Schaller did find it necessary to reprimand Baerwald for his less than honest conduct towards Reddin and the congregations. The process allowed for Baerwald to receive the seminary's approval to take up the post, removing a potential point of scandal from Baerwald's candidacy. Secondly, Schaller wrote a letter to the parishes of Brodhead and Sylvester fully explaining the matter so that if the congregations chose to call Baerwald, they would do so with full knowledge, and that way they could not hold this matter against the seminary nor Baerwald.<sup>33</sup>

The receipt of Schaller's letter at the end of February caused much 'unpleasantness' in the congregations. Reddin could only scribble a few lines to Luise as the repeated meetings with congregational leaders wore him down. However, the letter had the desired effect of forcing the congregation to grapple with the issue, and, if the congregations decided to continue extending the call to Baerwald, they could do so with clear consciences. The process dragged itself out longer than Reddin would have liked. He would have much rather taken his medical leave and traveled to

his fiancée. He found solace in the commiseration of his friend Bradtke, who found himself leading a congregation recently embroiled in the scandalous handling of finances by certain congregational leaders.<sup>34</sup> Schaller's letter to Baerwald also helped push the man to finish doing his due diligence in clearing his name with the seminary faculty, and by March, Baerwald gained the faculty's approval. He would take over for Reddin on Palm Sunday.<sup>35</sup>

Full of relief, Reddin could take up his leave of absence and travel to Nebraska having endured through the pain of his headaches, which had made preaching very difficult. As he prepared to hand the congregation off to Baerwald, he reflected to Luise:

'Your father was right in his letter in one way. I did not stay here because the synod wants it. I have stayed here in my place for the sake of the people. I have really kind and good people in my congregation, but there are also those who make life hard for me (but more of that later), and I wanted to maintain the good reputation that I had received. I wanted to presume to be nothing but a good shepherd.'<sup>36</sup>

Reddin sent his last letter to Luise on March 20, 1914. On March 29, he preached his farewell sermon and, on the next day, caught the train to Nebraska. He and Luise were married on June 12, 1914. He had successfully led his congregations through several crises and placed them in hands of Rev. Baerwald, who shepherded the churches for the next four years. By the end of Baerwald's tenure, St. Peter's Brodhead was able to purchase its own building and become a self-sustaining congregation. Baerwald, himself, took a call to Zion Lutheran (WELS) in Leeds, Wisconsin, where he remained until 1924, when he resigned from the ministry. He then became a tradesman and an active leader in the local LCMS congregation. St. Peter's Brodhead still continues as a WELS congregation in 2025.<sup>37</sup>

As for Reddin, he still held out the possibility of returning to the pastoral office, but even a year after living with his bride in Nebraska, he found the headaches remained. His last letter in the Wisconsin Synod archive is dated June 2, 1915, in which he asked President Bergemann to extend his leave for the remainder of the year.<sup>38</sup> Bergemann replied granting Reddin further leave and wishing him a 'speedy and complete recovery.'<sup>39</sup> From there, life took the turns that Reddin never expected,

ultimately leading him to growing oranges in South California. He never resigned from the ministry and turned his training to being a good shepherd of his growing household, as he and Luise were blessed with three children.

His training in the seminary and time in the parish were not all for naught, as they prepared Reddin for what lay ahead. As a man who deeply imbibed Christian doctrine and thought about how to put it into practice, he lived out Christian culture until his death from hypertension at the age of 69 in 1953. Aside from leading his family in the faith and participating in his congregation, he would use the wealth given to him to serve his neighbors near and far, especially when the Second World War put many in need. When his Japanese-American neighbors and fellow Christians, the Goyas, were sent off to internment camps, he and Luise watched over and worked their property until the Goyas returned. Thanks to the Reddins, the Goyas were one of the few internees who were able to reclaim their property. Likewise, Fritz and Luise leveraged their Germanness and wealth as a means to support destitute German families and churches after the war, sending money, clothing, and food for several years. Thus, Fritz Reddin sought throughout his life to carry out the lessons instilled into him at the Wauwatosa seminary to care for Christ's flock wherever he may be with whatever tools the Lord gave him. ☹️

*Dr. Caleb Karges is dean of students and associate professor of humanites at LCC.*

### Endnotes

1. The author would like to thank Lauri Howell, Mark Howell, and Susan Willems. Lauri Howell inspired this project by placing Fritz's letters into my hands for the time it took me to transcribe and translate them. Mark Howell encouraged his wife to move forward with this project. Susan Willems of the Wisconsin Synod Archive kindly found the records I needed and scanned them for me. Without her kindness, I would not have been able to

2. "New York, Passenger Arrival Lists (Ellis Island), 1892-1925", FamilySearch (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:JFB5-C3X> : Sun Aug 31 20:15:44 UTC 2025), Entry for Fritz Reddin and Fred Hilka, 6 March 1904. There is a discrepancy in publicly available documents regarding Fritz Reddin's age. Immigration and census documents from the turn of the century list Fritz at an age that would place his birth in the 1870s. I chose the date 1884 date given on his two petitions for citizenship in



California, as these petitions would have relied on official documentation rather than the verbal exchange of a German-speaker with an English-speaker.

3. "New York, Passenger Arrival Lists (Ellis Island), 1892-1925", FamilySearch (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:JFWC-W4Z> : Sun Aug 31 21:59:41 UTC 2025), Entry for Fritz Reddin and G C Eisenhardt, 28 August 1905.

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9. WELS Archive: Bergemann Collection, Box 101, Reddin to Bergemann, 10 August 1912; Reddin to Bergemann, 27 September 1912.

10. WELS Archive: Bergemann Collection, Box 101, Reddin to Bergemann, 27 September 1912; Reddin to Bergemann, 13 October 1912; Bergemann to Reddin, 17 October 1912.

11. WELS Archive: Bergemann Collection, Box 101, Reddin to Bergemann, 23 June 1913.

12. Reddin Papers: Reddin to Schoenemann, 30 June 1913; Reddin to Schoenemann, 17 July 1913.

13. Reddin Papers: Reddin to Schoenemann, 1 August 1913.

14. Reddin Papers: Reddin to Schoenemann, 10 August 1913.

15. Reddin Papers: Reddin to Schoenemann, 1 September 1913.

16. Reddin Papers: Reddin to Schoenemann, 13 October 1913.

17. Reddin Papers: Reddin to Schoenemann, 10 August 1913.

18. Reddin Papers: Reddin to Schoenemann, 18 August 1913.

19. Reddin Papers: Reddin to Schoenemann, 3 October

1913.

20. Reddin Papers: Reddin to Schoenemann, 18 September 1913; Reddin to Schoenemann, 13 October 1913; Reddin to Schoenemann, 14 February 1914.

21. Reddin Papers: Reddin to Schoenemann, 20 October 1913; Reddin to Schoenemann, 29 October 1913.

22. Reddin Papers: Reddin to Schoenemann, 12 November 1913.

23. Reddin Papers: Reddin to Schoenemann, 5 November 1913.

24. WELS Archive: Bergemann Collection, Box 37, Schaller to Baerwald, 20 February 1914; Schaller to St. Peter Brodhead, 21 February 1914.

25. Reddin Papers: Reddin to Schoenemann, 5 November 1913.

26. Reddin Papers: Reddin to Schoenemann, 12 November 1913; Reddin to Schoenemann, 19 November 1913.

27. Reddin Papers: Reddin to Schoenemann, 6 December 1913; Reddin to Schoenemann, 17 December 1913.

28. Reddin Papers: Reddin to Schoenemann, 26 December 1913.

29. WELS Archive: Bergemann Collection, Box 101, Reddin to Bergemann, 30 December 1913.

30. Reddin Papers: Reddin to Schoenemann, 22 January 1914.

31. WELS Archive: Bergemann Collection, Box 101, Bergemann to Reddin, 5 January 1914; Bergemann to Reddin, 8 January 1914.

32. Reddin Papers: Reddin to Schoenemann, 7 January 1914; Reddin to Schoenemann, 22 January 1914; Reddin to Schoenemann, 27 January 1914; Reddin to Schoenemann, 4 February 1914; WELS Archive: Bergemann Collection, Box 101, Reddin to Bergemann, 9 February 1914.

33. WELS Archive: Bergemann Collection, Box 37, Schaller to Baerwald, 20 February 1914; Schaller to St. Peter Brodhead, 21 February 1914.

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38. WELS Archive: Bergemann Collection, Box 151, Reddin to Bergemann, 2 June 1915.

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# The Lutheran Institute of Theology: Feeding Today's Confessional Hunger

By Rev. Bryan Stecker



One of the most striking lessons of the past two years is that the Lutheran Church does not lack for interest in its confessional theology. What has been missing is a platform to give such theology voice. Through the podcast *On The Line*, we have seen the evidence firsthand. With over 1.5 million views and downloads, a YouTube audience of more than 16,000 subscribers, and recognition as the number one LCMS channel online ([www.adcrucem.news](http://www.adcrucem.news)),<sup>1</sup> the data tells a story that should encourage every confessional Lutheran. The more unapologetically theological and intellectually weighty an episode is, the stronger the response. Higher click rates, longer view durations, and richer engagement follow precisely when the conversation is most deeply confessional.



This should not surprise us—it is, after all, the DNA of our Synod. The LCMS was not built on watered-down theology but on the conviction that God's Word, taught in its fullness, forms strong congregations and faithful Christians. What *On The Line* has demonstrated is that this hunger is alive and well not only within our pews but also among those curious about Lutheran thought. There is a broad and eager audience for substantive, rigorous Lutheran teaching when it is presented accessibly. The task before us now is to meet that hunger on a scale that can serve congregations everywhere and reclaim a public witness for Lutheran theology. That is precisely why the Lutheran Institute of Theology exists.

## Why Renewal Is Needed: Internal and External

Across the United States and abroad, the habits of intellectual formation have changed dramatically. Increasingly, adults between the ages of 18 and 60 are turning to podcasts, YouTube channels, and online courses not only for entertainment but for their deeper learning. The trend is unmistakable. Recent studies show that more than 55% of Americans age 12 and older listen to at least one podcast per month,<sup>2</sup> and that 20% of U.S. adults regularly watch religious or spiritually focused videos online.<sup>3</sup>

What this means for us as Lutherans is clear. A growing share of our members are already being formed through digital platforms. If we do not offer faithful, confessional Lutheran content in those formats, they will look elsewhere. This is already visible in the widespread adoption of RightNow Media among LCMS congregations. Many churches subscribe to it not because they necessarily prefer its Evangelical theology, but because no comparable Lutheran platform currently exists. The result is that a member may receive a 20-minute sermon on Sunday and a one-hour Bible study from their pastor, yet spend dozens of additional hours every month being taught by Evangelical leaders online. The question must be asked: if this continues over the long trajectory of their Christian life, what will their theological ethos become? It is not difficult to imagine the subtle but significant ways in which distinctly Lutheran convictions could be eroded. Our confession of the sacraments, liturgy, vocation, creation, sanctification, and other topics can easily be reshaped under a steady diet of non-Lutheran teaching.

The audience is there. The hunger is there. And if we are absent, our people will be fed by others. The internal challenge before us is to ensure that confessional Lutherans have ready access to beautifully crafted, theologically rich, and



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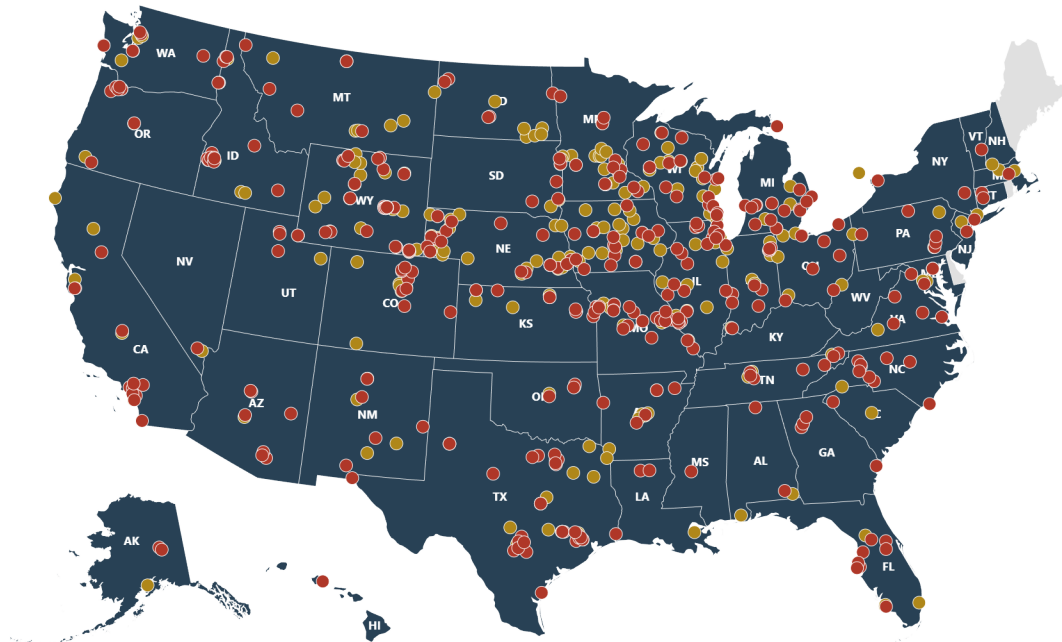
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pedagogically sound resources. Not simply a lecture to watch in passing, but systematic courses that pair cinematic video with written guides, key terms, and discussion prompts—tools that help individuals and groups truly internalize the faith.

Yet the challenge does not stop with our own people. There is also an external opportunity—and here, too, our absence has consequences. Imagine a 25-year-old man living in the western suburbs of Chicago. He grew up nominally Christian, but for years he has had no real connection to the Church. Then, like millions of others, he stumbles across the lectures of Jordan Peterson. Peterson often references Scripture and, in some cases, spends hours walking through biblical texts. For the first time in years, this young man begins to wonder whether the Bible might be more relevant than he had assumed.

Where will he turn next? Quite likely, he will encounter Peterson's public conversations with Bishop Robert Barron. Searching YouTube for related themes, he will quickly be guided toward Catholic resources such as Word on Fire, which has reached millions globally, or the St. Paul Center for Biblical Theology. He may encounter the beautifully filmed catechetical series from Eastern Orthodoxy, or find Orthodox voices like Fr. Josiah Trenham. Evangelicals continue to dominate podcast charts with vast teaching networks; he may listen to Evangelical teachers such as Gavin Ortlund. Each of these traditions has built a substantial digital footprint. And while we can rejoice that this man has renewed interest in Christ, it is almost certain that he will never come across confessional Lutheran resources—not unless he happens upon a local congregation or goes digging specifically into denominational differences.

To be sure, there are exceptions, and it is important to acknowledge and commend the faithful work that has been done by confessional Lutherans. Programs such as Issues, Etc. and resources from pastors like Bryan Wolfmüller and William Weedon have carved out a digital voice. But when compared to the sheer volume and visibility of Catholic, Orthodox, and Evangelical offerings, the Lutheran presence is still very small. For this reason, if his search becomes a genuine conversion, the odds remain overwhelmingly in favor of this young man finding a home in another tradition, often without ever realizing that confessional Lutherans exist.

This is the sobering effect of our absence in the

digital public square. While there is a growing cultural appetite for Christianity—even in secular intellectual circles—the Lutheran Church has little chance of being discovered unless we invest in building a visible, compelling presence. Without popular, beautifully produced theological resources backed by a sound business plan, we remain invisible to seekers who are otherwise wide open to hearing the gospel.

### **The Lutheran Institute of Theology: Feeding the Hunger**

The Lutheran Institute of Theology seeks to change this. By producing resources that gain traction internally and showcase the best of our teachers publicly, LIT can help bring Lutheran theology into broader conversations. Together with platforms like On The Line and A Brief History of Power, the goal is not only to edify the Church but to position confessional Lutheran voices for invitations into wider cultural and ecumenical dialogues.

This will not happen overnight. Building digital influence takes time. But the effort has already begun, and the vision is clear: when Lutheranism enters the public square, it must be represented not by clickbait or watered-down teaching, but by theology that is unapologetically confessional and faithful to the ethos of our Synod.

If On The Line has shown us that there is a deep hunger for confessional theology, the Lutheran Institute of Theology represents our first concrete steps toward meeting that hunger. What we are building now is only the beginning. In this section, I want to describe what LIT looks like today—our current courses, structures, and resources. In the next section, we will turn toward the medium- and long-term goals that will grow this work further, both internally for our own members and externally for the wider world.

### **Course Format and Resources**

From the beginning, we knew our courses had to be both professional and accessible. The backbone of every course is cinematic video, carefully produced to match the quality standards people now expect when they learn online. Each course runs six to eight sessions, with an average lecture length of about 30 minutes. These lectures deliver the core theological content in a way that is engaging and digestible.

But the video alone is not enough. Each course is accompanied by a polished, 30–40 page PDF workbook that supports and extends the learning. These workbooks include:

Key terms and definitions to anchor understanding.

Key takeaways to reinforce the most important points.

Quizzes to help learners test whether they have internalized the content.

Six discussion questions that can be used by families around the dinner table, by small groups in congregations, by classrooms, or even by boards of elders.

This combination of video and written materials draws on proven educational models from other sectors, but it is tailored here for theological formation. The goal is not simply that viewers watch a video, but that they are able to process, discuss, and truly integrate the material into their lives.

### **Five Pathways of Learning**

To structure this growing library of courses, we have organized everything into five pathways that together cover the breadth of Lutheran theology. These are modeled on the divisions used in seminary education, with one important addition.

**Scripture and Interpretation** – The starting point of all theology. This pathway guides learners into a faithful, confessional approach to the Word, ensuring that formation begins with the source of truth itself.

**Church History and Lutheran Heritage** – Here we are grounded in the story of the Church. From the early centuries to the Reformation and beyond, we are taught by the giants who came before us and shown how Scripture has been faithfully interpreted with continuity and cohesion.

**Doctrines of the Faith** – This pathway teaches the core confessions of the Lutheran tradition, rooting learners in right doctrine and clear confession.

**Theology in Story and Culture** – The new addition, which mirrors the recovery of classical education in our time. This pathway explores the role of myth, literature, and imagination. Here we read Dante, Augustine, Lewis, Tolkien, and even Homer, seeing how story shapes culture and how the Christian imagination provides a truer and more beautiful vision.

**Christian Life and Vocation** – Finally, theology must

be lived. This pathway applies all that has been learned to discipleship, work, community, and the vocations into which God calls his people.

Together, these five pathways offer a holistic picture of Christian formation. They do not reinvent the wheel, but lean on the structures and wisdom that have served the Church for centuries.

### **Example Courses**

At launch, several courses are already available, taught by some of the LCMS's most respected teachers:

Rev. Dr. Adam Koontz – *The Art of Biblical Reading*, a clear and accessible introduction to reading the Bible with confessional eyes.

Rev. Dr. Joel Biermann – *Ethics and the Christian Life*, exploring how theology informs daily conduct and vocation.

Rev. Dr. Christian Preus – *Myths and Biblical Truth*, showing both the beauty of classic literature and the stark contrast between pagan creation stories and the Christian confession.

Rev. Jacob Benson – *The Story of the Saints*, reawakening our imagination through the lives of faithful Christians who have gone before us.

These courses are not meant to replace the congregation's weekly Bible study but to expand what is possible. They explore themes that many parishes would not have time to address on Sunday morning, yet which are vital for the formation of thoughtful, confident Lutherans.

### **Accessibility and Affordability**

From the start, affordability has been a guiding principle. Individual subscriptions are set at \$95 per year, while congregational subscriptions scale to about \$10 per average attendee. This ensures that entire churches—large or small—can bring these resources into their life together.

At the same time, we have built LIT with an eye toward sustainability. Beautiful, cinematic production is not cheap, and it would be poor stewardship to cut corners. That is why the pricing model is coupled with donor support. Those who are passionate about this mission have already made it possible to launch, and ongoing generosity will allow us to scale. The goal is to keep costs affordable for





# LUTHERAN INSTITUTE of THEOLOGY

churches while continuing to raise the standard of excellence in theological media.

## **Distinctives of LIT**

Several distinctives set LIT apart from other efforts. (1) It is unapologetically confessional, designed to strengthen Lutheran identity rather than dilute it. (2) It is committed to professional production, recognizing that beauty and clarity honor the subject matter. (3) It is built to support pastors, not replace them, providing tools they can use in their ministry. In short, LIT is the systematic way we will feed the hunger that *On The Line* uncovered. These are our first steps—courses, pathways, and resources designed to form the Church internally. But as we will see in the next section, they also lay the groundwork for the bigger goals ahead: initiatives that will broaden our external witness and make Lutheran theology more visible to the world.

## **Looking Ahead: Future Initiatives**

Building off our initial launch, the courses already in production will remain the backbone of LIT. They will always be the steady rhythm of our work. But if we are to meet the hunger for confessional theology, we must also scale. That means moving toward larger, more ambitious projects—initiatives that blend rigorous theology with the beauty of cinematic media. With business success and donor support, these projects could reshape how Lutherans are formed internally and how Lutheran theology is perceived externally. Imagine how they could shape your family, strengthen your congregation, and place our confession in the wider cultural conversation.

## **A Cinematic Introduction to Lutheranism**

One of the flagship initiatives we envision is a twelve-part cinematic series introducing Lutheranism through the Six Chief Parts of the Catechism. Each part would be covered across two full sessions, weaving careful teaching together with

documentary-style storytelling filmed at historic Lutheran sites, both in America and abroad. Imagine learning about baptism while having it cinematically woven into on-site recordings of the church where Luther was baptized, or reflecting on confession while walking the cobblestone streets of Wittenberg. This kind of project would provide something both intellectually engaging and visually compelling. Internally, it could serve as a resource to assist new members, encourage lifelong Lutherans revisiting the Catechism, or equip families who want to pass the faith to their children. Externally, it would present a polished and approachable introduction to Lutheran theology. Catholics have already shown through Bishop Barron's *Catholicism* series how this kind of production can carry weight far beyond church walls. Done with excellence, a Lutheran counterpart could serve the same purpose—accessible enough to hand to a friend or colleague, yet deep enough to faithfully teach the heart of our confession.

## **Roundtable Series**

Another major project is the creation of a roundtable discussion series. Modeled after the highly successful *Gospels* and *Exodus* projects hosted by Jordan Peterson and the *Daily Wire*, this would feature seven Lutheran scholars gathered around a table for extended conversations on major texts. Each series could span 12 sessions, with discussions running about two hours each, producing over 24 hours of theological dialogue.

These would not be simple talking-head lectures. The format would be filmed with professional quality and an eye for beauty—inviting, aesthetically pleasing, and deeply engaging. Imagine a panel of confessional theologians working through *Genesis*, *John*, or *Acts*, their conversation drawing out nuances in the text, sharpening one another, and showing how Scripture comes alive through

Lutheran theology. Beyond the Bible, roundtables could also tackle the Lutheran Confessions or classic works of Christian thought.

The result would be an engaging resource for the Church: something pastors could use in study, students could benefit from in the classroom, and laypeople could enjoy in their homes. And because this format has already proven popular in broader cultural spaces, it could give Lutheran voices a much greater visibility outside our own circles.

### **Lutheran Apologetics Initiative**

A third long-term goal is the creation of a dedicated Lutheran apologetics initiative. Catholics have the Catholic Answers website—a team producing content that addresses questions both from within their church and from the culture at large. Lutherans need something like this.

This initiative would not attempt to stand in the place of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) or offer new doctrinal statements. Instead, its focus would be at the lay level, helping ordinary Christians explain the faith clearly and confidently. How do you talk about the Lord's Supper to a friend shaped by Evangelical theology? How do you answer cultural questions about gender, marriage, or morality in ways that are faithful to our confession? How do you explain why Lutheran theology matters in a crowded Christian marketplace? The goal is not to create new doctrine but to translate our confessional teaching into explanations and resources that ordinary people can use in conversation.

Internally, this would give members greater confidence in answering tough questions. Externally, it would show that Lutherans do not shrink from addressing challenges but are able to respond with clarity, depth, and conviction. Over time, this initiative could establish the LCMS as a clear confessional voice in an often confused religious landscape.

### **The Larger Purpose**

All of these initiatives share the same purpose: to serve the Church with resources that deepen formation and to raise the visibility of Lutheran theology in the wider world. Internally, they provide faithful, beautifully produced tools for learning and discipleship. Externally, they ensure that when people go searching for serious Christianity, they find Lutheran clarity and not just the louder voices

of other traditions. The hunger for confessional teaching is real. The people are ready for more. The question is whether we will meet them with excellence, courage, and faithfulness.

### **Conclusion**

The lesson of the past few years has been unmistakable: there is a deep and living hunger for confessional theology. Our people want more than quick answers or shallow inspiration. They want to be rooted in God's Word, confident in the Lutheran confession, and equipped to live faithfully in a world that often pushes in the opposite direction.

The Lutheran Institute of Theology exists to meet that hunger with clarity, beauty, and conviction. From our initial courses to the larger projects on the horizon, the goal is the same: to strengthen congregations internally and to extend Lutheran theology into the wider conversation where it is desperately needed.

The opportunity before us is great. Catholics, Orthodox, and Evangelicals have already shown what is possible when theological depth is paired with professional excellence. Lutherans are called to do no less. By God's grace, we are uniquely positioned to speak into this moment—not with vague spirituality or cultural accommodation, but with the truth of Christ rooted in the ongoing beauty of the Lutheran Church.

Our task now is simple but urgent: to build, to teach, and to share. The hunger is real. The people are ready. May God grant us the courage and faithfulness to meet this moment for the sake of his Church and for the witness of His Gospel in the world. ☕

*Rev. Bryan Stecker is the associate pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Waconia, MN, and is host of the podcast On the Line.*

### **Endnotes**

1. <https://www.adcrucem.news/p/update-ranking-the-lutheran-youtubers>
2. [backlinko.com/podcast-stats](https://backlinko.com/podcast-stats)
3. [www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/06/02/use-of-apps-and-websites-in-religious-life](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/06/02/use-of-apps-and-websites-in-religious-life)



# The Good, the True, and the Beautiful: Milton's *Paradise Lost*

By Rev. Christopher Maronde



If we were to construct a “Mount Rushmore” of the literary geniuses that western civilization has given us, there would of course be much debate as to which faces we would carve. The first face would be very easy to choose: the fountainhead of western literature (other than the Scripture), Greece’s blind poet Homer. The fourth would also be very easy: the Bard, William Shakespeare. Who goes in between? Just as many may debate Jefferson or Roosevelt on the side of a mountain in South Dakota, so many will debate who stands between Homer and Shakespeare. Due to their decisive impact on the artistic heritage of western civilization, I put two great poets in that slot, narrowly edging out Virgil: Dante Alighieri and the subject of this review, John Milton.

John Milton was an English poet who lived during the era of England’s Civil War, from 1608-1674. He quite consciously set forth to write an epic poem, in the style of Homer and Virgil, written in English to bestow on England what those great poets bestowed on their cultures. Lofty goals, to be sure, and not without a touch of artistic ego, but according to the judgment of history he largely succeeded, most especially because he stood on the shoulders of those giants. The connections only increased when Milton became blind, an affliction that, according to tradition, afflicted Homer.

Though writing an epic for England, he did not write an epic about England (though at one point he had thought to treat King Arthur). Instead, he retold Scripture’s greatest story, in some sense the only story: man’s fall and the promised redemption.

Of man’s first disobedience, and the fruit  
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste  
Brought death into the world, and all our  
woe  
With the loss of Eden, till one greater man  
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,  
Sing Heav’nly Muse... (I.1-6)

As with reading many of history’s great epic poems (or Shakespeare, for that matter), the language, both the vocabulary and the poetic structure, provides a challenge for the modern reader. It is helpful to listen to these great poems; a good audiobook will, through the inflections of the human voice, make the poetry much more understandable. On the other hand, I have found that the poetry becomes more clear the more that you read. You develop an ‘ear’ for Milton, Dante, or Shakespeare. It is also helpful to have a guide, and the most illuminating one that I have found to this epic is that of C.S. Lewis, who wrote *A Preface to Paradise Lost* in 1961.<sup>1</sup>

Milton himself expands the scope of his epic far beyond the actual fall, which occurs in Book IX. A visit from the Archangel Raphael, bearing a warning against the wiles of Satan, gives opportunity to describe both the war in heaven (V and VI) and the creation of the heavens and the earth (VII). The epic itself begins in hell, at some point after the creation of the world, as Satan and his minions lick their wounds, gathering together in torment to decide on their next course of action (I and II). After the fall, Michael comes to Adam (putting Eve into a deep sleep) and describes to him the sweep of biblical history before escorting him and his wife out of Eden (XI and XII).

As we approach the poem and its characters, our sinful nature reveals itself. Perhaps that was Milton’s plan, the genius of the writer. We plan to patronize Adam and Eve, because that’s what we’ve always done with them. We think of them as children, naïve and, to be honest, simpler than we are. Of course we think that, for we too were in Adam as he ate the forbidden fruit, and we too have believed the lie that knowledge of evil makes us more wise. So we expect Adam and Eve to be simple, immature in a sense. We want to look down on our forebears, but Milton doesn’t allow us. Adam is instead lordly, kingly and majestic, as Lewis puts it, “he is the sum of all human knowledge and wisdom.”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the queenly majesty of Eve is often missed, but that is because modern readers misunderstand and openly reject

the virtue of feminine submission and humility. Yes, Eve is deceived and does eat the fruit: yes, Adam joins her in this sin (more on that below), but they are not children. They are royalty.

On the other hand, we find Satan to be the most fascinating of Milton's characters (just as we find Dante's *Inferno* more interesting than his *Paradiso*). As much as we despise sin and its effects, as much as we renounce the devil with all of his ways, we cannot help but be interested in Satan.<sup>3</sup> He is the most well-rounded and three-dimensional of Milton's characters. He drives the action forward, leading his minions in council as he led them in Heaven's war, and then proposing to go to earth himself to effect the downfall of God's perfect creation. Milton even manages to show us some conflict in Satan's mind. He nearly repents, when he sees the joy of the human couple.

Me miserable! Which way shall I fly  
Infinite wrath, and infinite despair?  
Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell;  
And in the lowest deep a lower deep  
Still threat'ning to devour me opens wide,  
To which the Hell I suffer seems a heaven.  
O then at last relent: is there no place  
Left for repentance, none for pardon left?  
None left but by submission; and that word  
Disdain forbids me, and my dread of shame.  
(IV.73-83)

Of course, we must be careful when examining Satan as a character in *Paradise Lost*. Milton is quite conscious that Satan is a liar, and so every word must

be sifted. But this failure at repentance indicates that even more than a liar, Satan is blind. He rebels against God without any wrong having been done to him (as he himself says in that same speech), and he rages at joy and beauty, not to improve his own lot, but only to pull down others with him. He is a most contemptible creature.

The Father and the Son play relatively minor roles. I say 'relatively' because the focus is on Satan and his planned and executed temptation. The Son is Christus Victor in all of his might, summoned to war against Satan and the forces of darkness. The battle is a back and forth affair, and Michael is hard put to it, until the Father sends forth his Son on the third day.

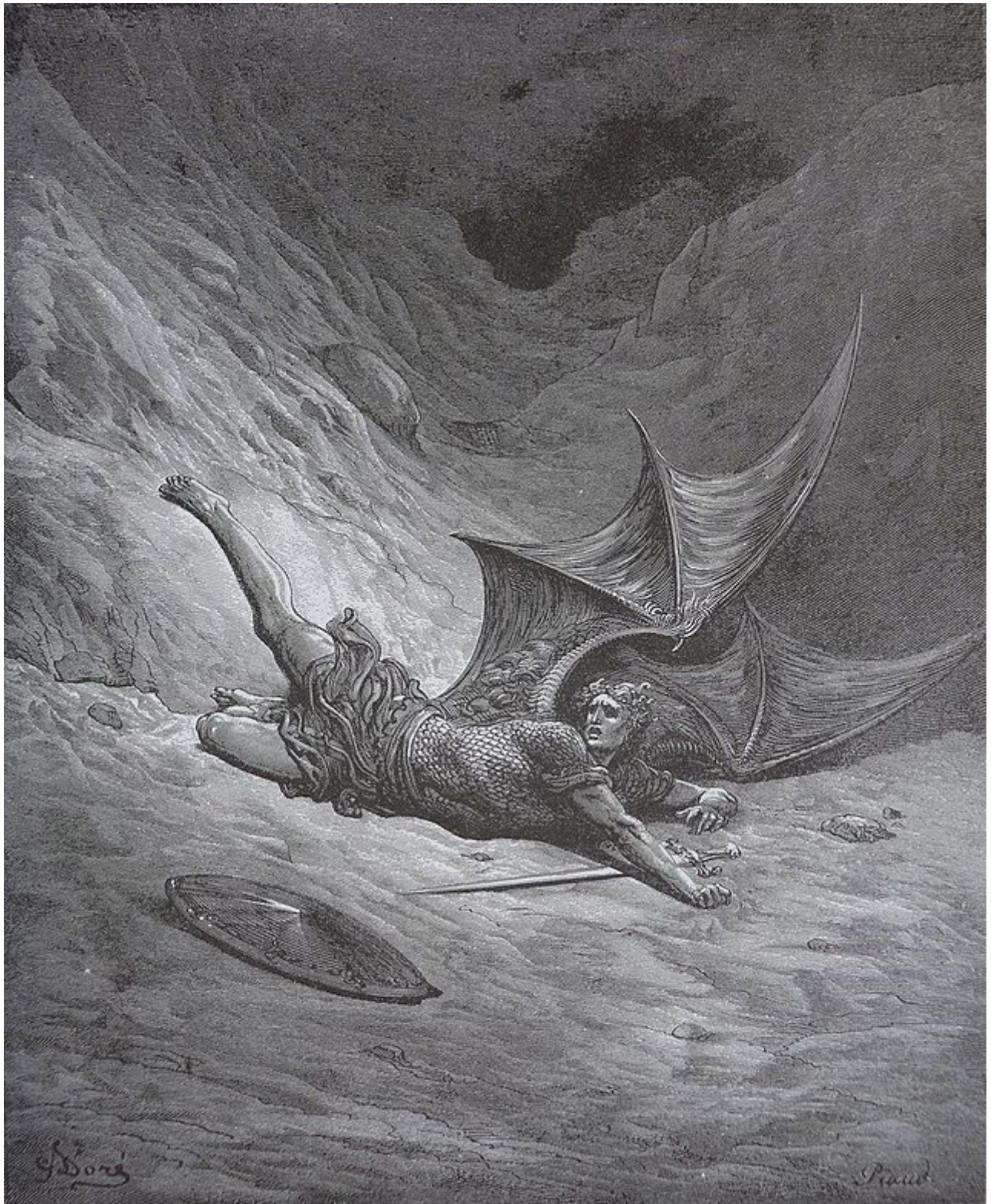
His count'nance too severe to be beheld  
And full of wrath bent on his enemies.  
Yet half his strength he put not forth, but  
checked  
His thunder in mid volley, for he meant  
Not to destroy, but root them out of heaven.  
(VI.825-826, 853-855)

But there is not only the triumphant, warrior Christ in this poem. Before the fall, the Father declares that grace cannot be expressed without the satisfaction of divine wrath, to which the Son volunteers to bear that burden.

Behold me then, me for him, life for life  
I offer, on me let thine anger fall;  
Account me man; I for his sake will leave  
Thy bosom, and this glory next to thee  
Freely put off, and for him lastly die

Those who criticize Milton's portrayal of the Father have less of a problem with Milton than with the Bible. He is the divine monarch, omniscient and omnipotent, acting with justice and mercy. If there is any complaint, it is that the fight against evil is not fair, that Satan could never win. Again, those who find fault with Milton are revealing their own preconceptions of God.





*Satan's Fall from Heaven* by Gustave Dore

Well pleased, on me let Death wreck all his  
rage. (III.236-241)

After the fall, as the Son goes forth to confront the  
sinful couple, he confirms that intention.

I go to judge  
On earth these thy transgressors, but thou  
know'st,  
Whoever judged, the worst on me must light,  
When time shall be, for so I undertook  
Before thee; and not repenting, this obtain  
Of right, that I may mitigate their doom  
(X.71-76)

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preconceptions of God.

Milton of course makes his own theological (and  
exegetical) choices. If one takes on a retelling of a  
biblical story, he will have to make such choices.  
Lewis argues that the theology of Milton is  
traditional, catholic and Augustinian, and that it is  
for the most part correct.<sup>4</sup> While Milton wrestles  
with thorny theological issues, his conclusions are  
generally orthodox. But he is forced to make choices  
on issues that remain in debate even today. As to the  
troubling question of where Adam was while Eve  
was tempted (what does it mean that Adam was  
'with her?'), Milton argues that on the day of the fall,  
Eve had an impulse, given by Satan himself over the  
night, to work by herself. Adam himself falls  
willingly, knowing exactly what he is doing, but not  
from sinful desire. He instead eats the fruit out of  
solidarity with his wife. It is worth noting also that  
when God is walking in the garden and calls to the  
man, it is not the Father but the Son, and the Son is  
explicitly the agent of creation.

One of the more fascinating aspects of the poem is  
its portrayal of the marital union. Milton is quite  
conscious of those who would deny that Adam and  
Eve came together as one flesh before the fall, and he  
gently chides them.

Nor turned I ween  
Adam from his fair spouse, nor Eve the rites  
Mysterious of connubial love refused:

Whatever hypocrites austere talk  
Of purity and innocence,  
Defaming as impure what god declares  
Pure, and commands to some, leaves free to  
all.  
Our Maker bids increase, who bids abstain  
But our destroyer, foe to God and man  
(IV.741-749)

Then Milton rejoices to praise this gift of love from  
God to man.

Hail wedded love, mysterious law, true  
source  
Of human offspring, sole propriety,  
In Paradise of all things common else.  
(IV.750-752)

Things dramatically and tragically change after the  
fall, and Milton chooses the sexual act as an  
illustration of the depravity that has entered into  
human hearts.

They swam in mirth, and fancy that they feel  
Divinity within them breeding wings  
Wherewith to scorn the earth: but that false  
fruit  
Far other operation first displayed,  
Carnal desire inflaming; he on Eve  
Began to cast lascivious eyes, she him  
As wantonly repaid; in lust they burn.  
(IX.1009-1015)

The marital union is no longer pure and beautiful,  
but corrupted. So thoroughly, in fact, that Eve  
suggests that to avoid passing on the poison of sin to  
future generations, they should have no children.  
This sounds eerily familiar to arguments made in  
our world against the begetting of children: "Why  
bring children into this darkened world?" She  
continues by saying that if they cannot resist the  
marital union, then they should seek death, so that  
he only claims two, not innumerable descendants.  
Adam counters that it is only through the bearing of  
children that the world will be delivered. He holds  
firm to Genesis 3:15 (X.966-1040).

By far the most difficult theological question that  
Milton wrestles with throughout this epic is the  
problem of evil. Why did God permit the fall to  
occur? Milton attempts to exonerate God, having the  
Father send Raphael to warn Adam of the danger.  
Yet, the Father permits Satan to enter creation; the  
angels guarding the earth are to let the tempter pass.




Milton explains why.

What can 'scape the eye  
Of God all-seeing, or deceive his heart  
Omniscient, who in all things wise and just  
Hindered not Satan to attempt the mind  
Of man, with strength entire, and free will  
armed,  
Complete to have discovered and repulsed  
Whatever wiles of foe or seeming friend.  
(X.5-11)

Thus Milton argues that God, having created man with free will, allowed man to be put to the test, even though there are hints throughout the epic that he knew how the test would end. The warning from Raphael seems to be calculated by Milton to keep God from being culpable in man's fall. Whether Milton's argument is found persuasive or not, we must appreciate the challenge of writing an epic poem about an omniscient God, which cannot help but deal with the question of the origin of evil that has occupied theology and philosophy for millennia. No matter how man attempts to accuse or exonerate God with regard to the fall, the fact remains that God has his answer to the existence of evil: the cross. All who attempt to do evil will find, to their infinite frustration, that this evil is turned to good. This is what Luther meant when he called Satan "God's devil." At the end of Michael's description of the whole sweep of biblical history to come, Adam stands astonished.

O goodness infinite, goodness immense!  
That all this good of evil shall produce,

And evil turn to good; more wonderful  
Than that which by creation first brought  
forth  
Light out of darkness! Full of doubt I stand,  
Whether I should repent me now of sin  
By me done and occasioned, or rejoice  
Much more, that much more good thereof  
shall spring. (XII.469-476)

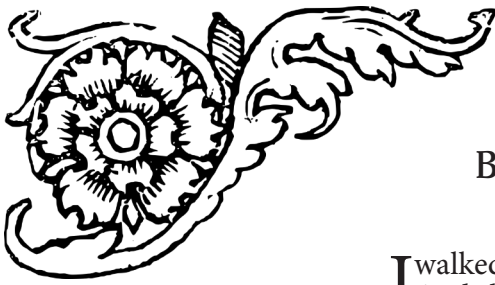
Satan declares in Book I that any good God wants to do through him he intends to pervert to evil (I.164). We reach the end of the story and find that the opposite has happened: the wicked Satan intended has been turned to good. As Lewis puts it, "Those who will not be God's sons become his tools."<sup>5</sup> The end of the epic is not despair but hope, not Satan's victory but his ultimate downfall. 

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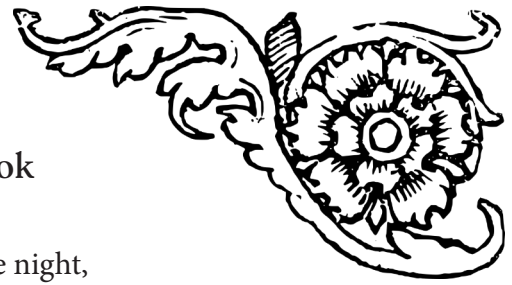
### Endnotes

1. C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).
2. Lewis, *A Preface*, 119.
3. Lewis, *A Preface*, 100. Lewis argues that Satan is the "best drawn" of Milton's characters because it is much easier to amplify our sinful characteristics than our praiseworthy ones. The author of the *Screwtpape Letters* should of course know this quite well.
4. Lewis, *A Preface*, 66-70.
5. Lewis, *A Preface*, 68.





# Forgiven



By Miss Allyssa Vandercook

I walked a dark and lonesome road one night,  
And sharp temptation whispered in my ear,  
“You see the fire yonder, burning bright?  
Its warmth is sweet—go nearer, have no fear.”

And as I stumbled closer, conscience cried,  
Though flesh, corrupted, reveled in the flame.  
That dreadful night, the New Man almost died.  
Old Adam very nearly won the game.

But by God’s grace, the battle was not o’er  
The New Man deep within still strove for breath.  
With one last push, he burst out through the door  
And fled full-speed that flaming house of death.

Yet even when that day was in the past,  
A burning and relentless guilt remained.  
The heavy cords of conscience held me fast  
And nothing I could do relieved the pain.

For naught could ever heal me but the blood  
Poured out by perfect Man for all the world.  
And so, at last, on trembling knees I stood  
And in a whisper, all my guilt unfurled.

Before the pastor, as if God Himself,  
I said aloud what weighed upon my soul.  
I knew that Jesus only—no one else—  
Could bind my wounds of sin and make me whole.

I felt Christ’s piercèd hand upon my head,  
“No fear,” He said, “your sin is put away.”  
And at His word, all guilt and terror fled.  
The night of sorrow brightened into day.

And now, I kneel again, but not alone.  
With all the saints, I taste a holy food,  
As Christ bends earthward from his heav’nly throne  
To feed us with His Body and His Blood.

And at the rail, great peace washed o’er my soul  
As there I glimpsed that blessed feast to come.  
And knew that one day, I would reach the goal,  
When Christ shall bear my blood-cleansed body home. ☞

*Miss Allyssa Vandercook is a freshman at Luther Classical College. This poem was chosen as the winner of a fall break poetry competition among her peers at the college.*



# A Review of Dante's Divine Comedy

By Rev. John Henry III

“...She opened up a book of poems  
And handed it to me  
Written by an Italian poet  
From the thirteenth century  
And every one of them words rang true  
And glowed like burnin’ coal  
Pourin’ off of every page  
Like it was written in my soul...”  
Bob Dylan, “Tangled up in Blue”<sup>1</sup>



Anyone at all enthused by our classical, Christian heritage—theology, philosophy, history, ethics, aesthetics, poetry, mythology—must read all three parts of Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*<sup>2</sup> (completed AD 1321): *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. And, your perusal of just *Inferno* in high school doesn't count.

You might object to this. First, you will probably say *The Divine Comedy* is Roman Catholic theology, and of precisely the kind that started the Reformation. Isn't Purgatory, after all, a nexus of just about everything wrong with Roman Catholic doctrine? Second, you will add the *Comedy* is very long, very complicated, and written in verse, so it's hard to read.

In this review, I aim to meet both objections. First, I am going to tell you why you must read *The Divine Comedy*; second, I am going to give you a procedure for going about it.

At the outset, I will grant something to your first objection. The theology of the *Comedy* is not that of the *Book of Concord*, and you are going to disagree with many things. What is more, you are going to notice that things you took for common places are muted or missing. For example, you will always want more and better things to be said about the priestly office of Christ, about justification as a gift of grace, and about the righteousness that comes by faith alone.

Neither Luther nor the *Book of Concord* ever

directly refer to Dante, so far as I can tell. Quite significantly, though, second-generation Lutherans, especially Mattias Flacius,<sup>3</sup> found in Dante a co-belligerent contra the abuses of Rome, and even a harbinger of the Reformation in some ways. Flacius, it is reported, had a particularly good handle on Dante's works, carried a copy of *The Divine Comedy* under his arm, like Alexander the Great carried Homer, and considered Dante among the faithful remnant of Christianity under papal domination. Flacius also credited Dante as the first to call out the “Donation of Constantine” as a forgery; Flacius was mistaken about this, but he is quite correct that Dante laments, throughout the *Comedy*, the damage done to Roman Christendom by the belief that the bishop of Rome is head of Church and State by divine right. Finally, Flacius included several excerpts from the *Comedy* in his *Catalogue of Testimonies* (the version from 1562), his monumental compilation of pre-Reformation witnesses to the Lutheran confession. For example, Flacius took from *Paradiso* this indictment of the Roman hierarchy and a prophecy of reform:

[...] the Gospel and the great Church Fathers are set aside and only the Decretals are studied—as their margins clearly show. On these the pope and cardinals are intent. Their thoughts are never bent on Nazareth, where Gabriel's open wings were reverent.

And the hill of Vatican as well as other noble parts of Rome that were the cemetery for Peter's soldiery will soon be freed from priests' adultery. (Canto IX, 133-142; Mandelbaum)

Or, again in *Paradiso*, Dante criticizes the useless preaching of his day:

Each one strives for display, elaborates his own inventions; preachers speak at length of these—meanwhile the Gospels do not speak.

[...] Such fables, shouted through the year

from pulpits—some here, some there—outnumber even all the Lapos and Bindos Florence has; so that the wretched sheep, in ignorance, return from pasture, having fed on wind—but to be blind from harm does not excuse them.

Christ did not say to his first company: 'Go, and preach idle stories to the world'; but he gave them the teaching that is truth, the truth alone was sounded when they spoke; and thus, to battle to enkindle faith, the Gospels served them as both shield and lance.

But now men go to preach with jests and jeers, and just so long as they can raise a laugh, the cowl puffs up, and nothing more is asked. (Canto XXIX, 94-117; Mandelbaum).

Now, who does that sound like? Again, these and like passages are included by Flacius in the Catalogue of Testimonies. From the beginning, to the degree that they paid the Italian any attention, students of Luther have found much to appreciate in Dante. The first German translation of *The Divine Comedy* came before the Book of Concord, in 1573, from Lutheran pastor Conrad Lauterbach.

From this, it should be clear that the *Comedy* is much more than a poetic geography of spiritual realms. Instead, in a word, it is an epic. Modeling after the *Aeneid*, and with Virgil himself as guide partway, Dante takes the reader on a heaven-ordained quest through all the possibilities of human nature and destiny. His story begins in the middle of his own life, at what we now call a "mid-life crisis" (which means, incidentally, that you are never too old to start this journey with him). The route we follow is not through a manual of afterlife theology, but a manifold map of vice and virtue, of classical

history and mythology, of the Bible and Christian history, all portrayed in relation to the Summum Bonum, communion with God.

Here, we find the mature (though not infallible) genius of Christendom, dissolving and reintegrating the pagan heritage with the Biblical and Christian, and the western Latin heritage into Dante's own vernacular Italian. And this translation and elevation of the vulgar tongue to sing with the classics has always been the hallmark of the western spirit: in Virgil, in Dante, in the King James and Luther Bibles, in Shakespeare, and on and on.

Wrote Terence, famously, *humani nihil a me alienum puto*—"I consider nothing human alien to me."<sup>4</sup> Dante gives us a scope to comprehend, in light of God's wrath, his call to repentance, and his upward call to glory, everything human. A

place for everything and everything in its place: the whole human world of saints and sinners, the whole classical inheritance, the history of Christianity from Genesis to Dante's present, his whole world and, by extension, our own. It is all in there.

As such a map of humanity, it is also a map of the human soul. In the depths of hell, on the painful mount of purgation, and in the heights of glory, the common feature is the presence of man. Man is present everywhere in the *Comedy*, so the whole *Comedy* is present, at least in potential, in every man. It is the macrocosm that reveals the possibilities of each microcosm; that is, the map of each of us. Man—every man, or any man—can be dragged to *Inferno* by his own passions; or can, in cooperation with God, undergo painful *Purgatorio*, unto holiness (FC SD II: 65-73); and can, by the grace of God, be brought to the perfection of love, *Paradiso*, and to the vision of the mystery that



*The Burden of Pride by Gustave Dore,  
Illustrations of the Divine Comedy*



upholds the cosmos, the Holy Trinity.

I will go a step further. Despite its subject matter, *Purgatorio* is, to my mind, the most underrated piece of Christian fiction ever written.

I use the word “fiction” advisedly. Dante, like the western Christians of his time, believed in an intermediate, holy-making state or place of souls after death, before entering Paradise: Purgatory. However, even for Christians who hold to a doctrine of such a state or place, it would be better not to understand *Purgatorio* as intending to be a doctrinally precise explication of this place or assertion of its existence, nor a literal description of what to expect should you find yourself there.

It is, rather, a grand, metaphorical epic about the purification of the Christian soul, its liberation from the lower passions through repentance, the bearing of the cross, and the pursuit of the good, the true, and the beautiful. It has at least as much in common in form and intent with Protestant author John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (published 1678-1684) as it does with *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

As we wrestle with the symbols of *Purgatorio*, we find that we understand from our own experience exactly what is going on, and we’ve met all the same people Dante has. Here, familiar things are heard and sung: *Agnus Dei* (Canto XVI), *Te Deum laudamus* (Canto IX), *Gloria in excelsis deo* (Canto XX), and many others, as the faithful await with certainty the consummation of all their faith and hope. The Reformation did not so much abolish this purging as bring it down to earth and enclose it within our temporal vocations: “The Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever” (SC IV). So, while we reject Purgatory, there’s a lot to learn in *Purgatorio*. It might just be the place in *The Divine Comedy* where Lutherans will feel most at home.

So much for why you should read. Here is how.

The procedure that I am going to recommend will both guide the first-time reader and enrich the experience of someone returning to the text. This procedure also assumes that you do not have anyone else to guide you through; if you do have someone, listen to him, not me. But in the likely event that you

do not, allow me to be your Virgil.

Get a hold of two translations of the *Comedy*. This procedure depends on your using exactly the two editions I’ve specified in the endnotes of this review. The first, which I’ll call Mandelbaum, is a modern verse translation into accurate and readable English. The second, which I’ll call Longfellow, is the classic English translation by one of America’s first and greatest poets, paired with Gustave Dore’s famous illustrations. The advantage of Mandelbaum is depth of study, especially the detailed notes on each section of the poem. The advantage of Longfellow is aesthetic, the beauty of the poetry and the wonderful illustrations. Compare the two versions of the opening lines (*Inferno*, Canto I, 1-3):

When I had journeyed half of our life’s way,  
I found myself within a shadowed forest,  
for I had lost the path that does not stray.  
(Mandelbaum)

Midway upon the journey of our life  
I found myself within a forest dark,  
For the straightforward pathway had been  
lost. (Longfellow)

Observe that Dante is calling this a spiritual autobiography. The poem is deeply autobiographical in a literal sense, too, and there is an incredible amount of information about Dante’s life and politics woven in.

Before beginning to read the poem, read all the introductory material in Longfellow, and scan the timeline in Mandelbaum. Observe, also, that the three books of the poem are each divided into thirty-three Cantos, except for the *Inferno*, which has thirty-four, bringing the number to one hundred.

Before you read each Canto, read the summary in Mandelbaum, and also quickly look over his notes for that Canto. Then, read the Canto in Mandelbaum, reread his notes, and, finally, read the Canto in Longfellow, and enjoy the illustrations. Repeat for each Canto until you arrive at the beatific vision of God in heaven. This will take a long time. Be patient.

The *Divine Comedy* has long been called “the *Summa Theologica* in verse,” referring to the theological work of Thomas Aquinas. But high-minded students of theology and the classics should take that description as a challenge and an



*Charon, The Ferryman of Hell by Gustave Dore, Illustrations of the Divine Comedy*

inspiration rather than an excuse not to read it. If Dante can express the teaching of St. Thomas's tomes of philosophical theology in beautiful verse, which elevate his own vernacular, then he has proven that systematic theology can rewrite the rules of literature. So, Lutherans of classical ambition should ask why no one has written a spiritual epic expressing the theology of the Book of Concord. The bar has been set high by Dante—one might say "among the stars"—but he has shown that it is doable. Someone should get to work on this. ❧

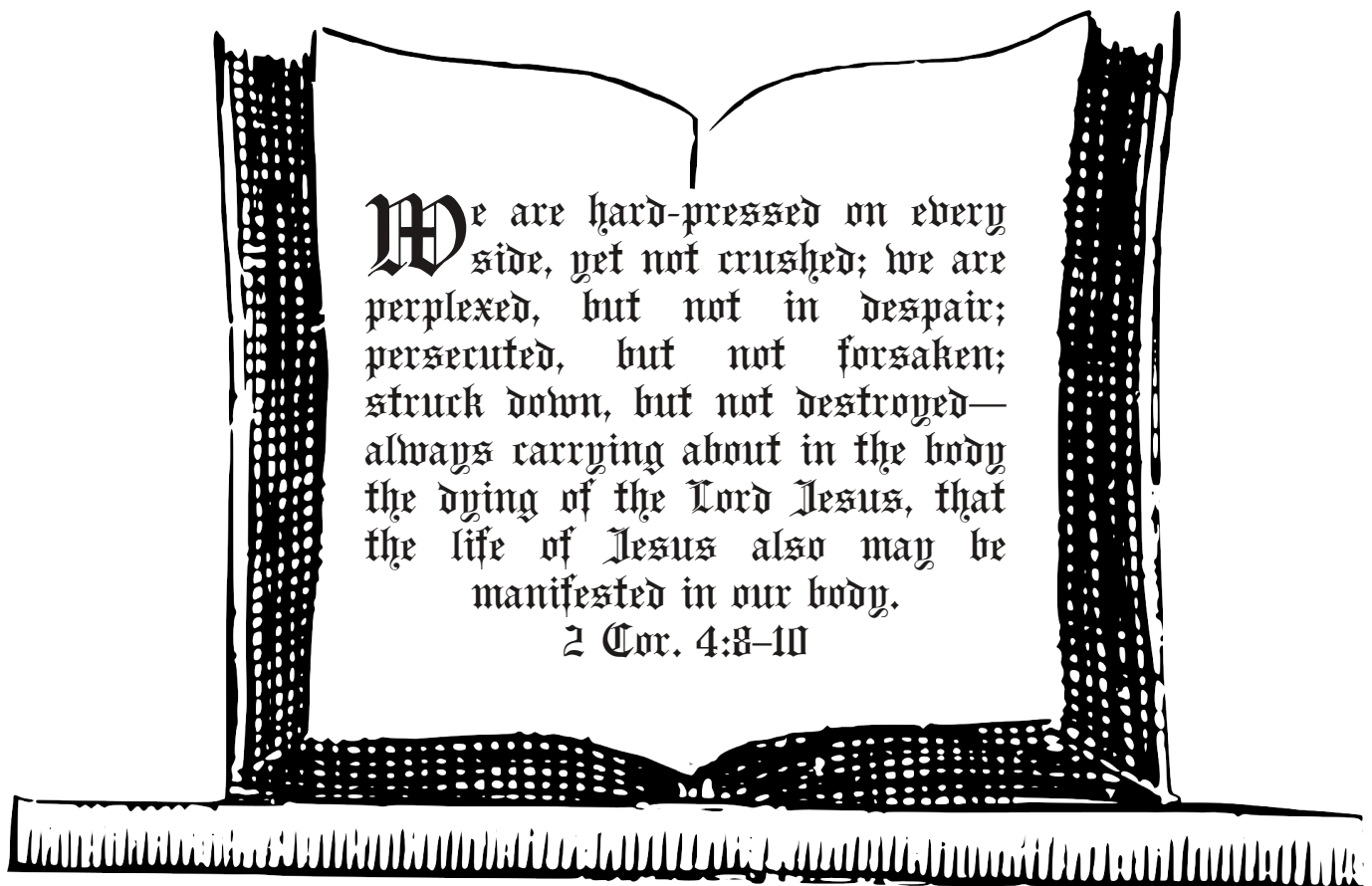
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### Endnotes

1. Dylan is incorrect about "the thirteenth century," as *The Divine Comedy* was completed in 1321; he could be given a pass, however, since it was not published until 1472.
2. I recommend these two translations:  
Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, illus. Gustave Dore (San Diego: Canterbury Classics, 2013).

Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Alfred A. Knopf-Everyman's Library, 1995).

3. The good name of Matthias Illyricus Flacius (d. 1575) as a genuine Lutheran has been damaged, through his own fault, by Article I of the Formula of Concord. Beyond his blunder and necessary rebuke, though, Flacius should be admired as a faithful, learned, tenacious, and long-suffering disciple of Luther, who fought hard and won decisively for the true sense of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. For a brief summation, see *Concordia: A Reader's Edition of the Book of Concord*, (St. Louis: CPH, 2006), 689; for a detailed and sympathetic reading of his overstatements and their corrections, see F. Bente, *Historical Introductions to the Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis: CPH, 2005), 335-354; for an exhaustive summary of his life and contribution to confessional Lutheranism, see Oliver K. Olson, *Matthias Flacius and the Survival of Luther's Reform* (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2011). All of the information in this review about Flacius and Dante is taken from Olson's book, pages 32, 35, 228, 238, and 250.
4. Publius Terentius Afer, *The Self-Tormentor*, Act 1, scene 1.







*The Christian Martyrs* by Konstantin Flavitsky



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