

# ***Confession in Our Culture and World Today***

In this closing essay of our 2021 convention, I wish, first, to lift our eyes away from the here and now, and to review confession across time and space. Second, I will sketch the contours of our contemporary situation in America. Finally, we will ask: *quo vadis?* Where do we go from here?

The essential themes that tie these three sections together are sounded in the story of Stephen, the protomartyr. Let us begin there. *“Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.”* (Acts 6:1-3 ESV).

## **Part I: Confession across the Centuries and across Continents**

Stephen was ordained for the work of the diaconate. His duty was to reform the distribution of daily bread to the Church’s widows. Despite the purely temporal nature of this work, *“[s]ome of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called... rose up and disputed with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking”* (Acts 6:9-10).

Theological conflict culminated in the accusation that Stephen was contradicting Jewish culture. *“This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us”* (Acts 6:13-14). This charge brought him to a hearing before Jerusalem’s city council—the Sanhedrin. His speech there so stirred up the crowd that *“they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him”* (Act 7:57-58).

Note several points. First, Stephen is not a “servant of the word,” but a “server of tables” (Acts 6:2). Second, his ministry to the bodily needs of the Church’s widows led directly to public theological engagement.<sup>1</sup> Third, his public confession constituted a direct contradiction of his

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<sup>1</sup> Some may question whether Stephen’s public theological engagement was intrinsic to his diaconal office, or extrinsic—related only to his extra-curricular conversations with the various synagogues. I assert the former with four observations in mind. First in context, Stephen’s story is preceded by Peter and John’s faithful confession; and is followed by Philip, another deacon, preaching in Samaria (8:5). Second, the deacons were chosen specifically for their quality of “μαρτυρομενους” (i.e. martyrs—witnesses) (Acts 6:3). Third, the biblical text seamlessly connects the ordination of the deacons, the growth of the Jerusalem Church, and the preaching of both Stephen and Philip. There is nothing to suggest, in either case, that they were operating outside their office. Fourth, the ordination of the seven deacons finds its counter in the simony of Simon the Magician who sinfully desired to purchase the “laying on of hands,” (cf. 6:6 and 8:18).

city's culture—"the customs that Moses delivered to us." That cultural contradiction became the cause of his martyrdom.

### **A. Individual Christians Confess against Culture**

The word "culture" is related to the Latin word, "cultus," meaning "worship."<sup>2</sup> This verbal link is no accident. It bears witness to an unbreakable bond between religion and the way of life that it shapes. What anyone believes about God—whether consciously or unconsciously—informs the way he relates, the way he communicates, the institutions that he builds, and the customs that he hands down to the next generation. In fact, all communities are shaped by religious notions.

For this reason, "deeply held religious beliefs" in a culture—to whatever extent that they deviate from the One True Faith—will precipitate clashes between Christians in the culture and the laws, customs, mores and traditions of that culture. Precisely in this cultural context, the Christian is called to confess Christ both in word and in deed, rather than concede to the culture's false teaching.

For Stephen, the point at issue was the status of the Herodian Temple and its accompanying covenantal laws. His very life was threatened for confessing that God is located in Jesus of Nazareth, and no longer in the temple. His refusal to compromise that confession led directly to his death.

As Christianity moved out of the Jewish culture and into the Greco-Roman world, the dynamics remained the same. There it was claimed that Caesar is a god. He demanded not only the obedience due to temporal authorities, but the obeisance due to a deity. Early Christians were required to acknowledge this by offering Caesar a pinch of incense (ca. 160). Many who refused participation in this cultus, forfeited their lives.

Each culture has its own cultus—its own faith about the nature of God and where he may be found.

### **India**

In 52 A.D., St. Thomas the Apostle brought the Gospel to the western coast of India. According to the *Thomma Parvam* ("Song of Thomas," 1601), he converted a number of Brahmin families in the region and founded what is known today as Thomas Christianity. Ever since its founding, this branch of Christianity has faced the cultural challenges inherent in the Indian context.

That context involves a caste system inseparably tied to the Hindu religion. Accordingly, every man is born into a caste which separates him from those born in other castes. Eating together, marrying, and religious activity all are controlled by the caste of one's birth. No change of caste is possible. Neither can a member be redeemed from its stigma or renounce its privilege. Caste is irrevocable until death and reincarnation.

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<sup>2</sup> While treatises have been written debating the exact derivations, Latin lexicons agree that cultus is a form of the verb "colere," meaning "to till, farm, cultivate; worship." cf. <http://latindictionary.wikidot.com/verb:colere>

The caste system itself is a cultural confession of the Gnostic worldview. Hence, the cult that is Hindu Gnosticism comes into head-on conflict with the culture of Christianity. The very act of a Brahmin eating the Body and Blood of Christ in common with an untouchable is an affront to the Hindu culture. As such, it discredits the Church, hinders evangelistic opportunities, and sometimes brings violent persecution.

Over the course of two millennia, different Christian communities in India have been marginalized by living out the unity of the Gospel. Others, to their shame, have declared that caste is a matter of “indifferent external things” (*adiaphora*) and “of no theological significance.”<sup>3</sup>

### ***Constantinian Rome***

Meanwhile, back in the cradle of Christendom, the first Christian emperor, Constantine, had only recently affected the first ecumenical council which unified Christendom under the banner of the Nicene Creed. However, only a decade later, he deposed Athanasius of Alexandria, the great defender of Nicene orthodoxy. Over the next 17 years Athanasius would be exiled by three other emperors and flee for his life an additional six times.

In each case, Athanasius was contending against the Arian heresy. Nevertheless, in the eyes of the emperors, his exiles were imposed under the color of sedition and defiance of imperial authority. The Roman Empire did not know of any separation between church and state. It cared nothing about what citizens might believe in their hearts. But it cared very much that words and actions could change the balance of power. Any stand for orthodoxy was a stand against the culture, and thus, against the cult of Arianism.

### ***Islam***

In the early seventh century, a new heretical religion swept across the middle east. In less than a decade (from 634-643) the cradle of Christianity from Damascus to Jerusalem to Egypt was taken in conquest by Muslim armies.

For the next 12 centuries, excepting the interlude of the Crusades, Middle eastern Christians have thrived in a culture that knows no separation of Church and State and in which evangelism is forbidden and conversion from Islam to Christianity—along with open contradiction of the Arian Allah, or criticism of the false prophet, Muhammad—is punishable by death.

While Christians are permitted to live in this culture, strict laws consign them to dhimmi status. They are second-class citizens by law who cannot hold certain jobs, or build superior homes, or even repair broken churches. The intent of dhimmitude is not to exterminate, but to humiliate. Under these conditions, it is the children of the next generation who are severely tempted to accept formal Islam to gain full participation in the culture.

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<sup>3</sup> David Mosse, *Caste and Christianity*, p. 2.  
[https://casteout.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/david\\_castechristianity.pdf](https://casteout.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/david_castechristianity.pdf)

In all three of these situations, our brothers and sisters in Christ have been living for centuries under conditions that we have never known. Full acceptance in communal life, inclusion in society, even the protection of law, depended upon a person's confession of the cultus of his day. Failure to give proper obeisance to the cultural deity results in a person being shunned, marginalized, and considered "outlaw"—literally outside the protection of society's laws.

Even Luther, living in the Holy Roman Empire, found this to be the case. He was pronounced an "outlaw" for confessing against the cultic errors of his day. His confession at Worms resulted in the loss of safe conduct and his friendly imprisonment in the Wartburg castle.

### **B. The Church Guides and Supports**

In every culture and against every false cult, the true worship of Christ must be confessed even at the cost of death. Still today, every Lutheran confirmand vows "to live according to the Word of God, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, even to death." This vow of personal faithfulness is immediately followed by a vow to corporate faithfulness: "to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it" (LSB 273). Thus, we give our lives and livelihoods into Jesus' keeping both in the present and in eternity—both individually and corporately. Christ responds by promising, "*be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life*" (Revelation 2:10).

Jesus' response to persecution is not only for the future. Even now He entrusts to the Church on earth to care for the persecuted. That, after all, is the very reason why Stephen was ordained (Acts 6:6). Christians, baptized as children of the Father and brothers of our Lord Jesus Christ, concretely forsook Abrahamic family ties. As a direct result, they were cut off from the "social security" of the Jewish world. This left widows and orphans destitute with no means of support.

The Church did not simply look on their lot and say, "*blessed are you*" (Matthew 5:11)! They labored to do everything that could be done to alleviate their suffering. The apostles ordained deacons for the Church in Jerusalem. St. Paul organized a collection for that same Church of outcasts during the famine.<sup>4</sup> He willingly journeyed to his own arrest in Jerusalem so that he could personally deliver the offerings that he had collected.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredited by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me" (1 Corinthians 16:1-4); cf. 2 Corinthians 8:1-5.

<sup>5</sup> "And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, 'Thus says the Holy Spirit, "This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, 'What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.' And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, 'Let the will of the Lord be done.'" (Act 21:11-14)

In all his travels and travails, the faithful supported Paul with parchments, cloaks, bodily care, appeals to authority and personal visits. Only when Jesus Himself granted him the martyr's crown, did the Church adopt the posture of holy resignation. At that point, she could do nothing more than commend him into the faithful hands of the Crucified.

Martyrologies were written that catalogued many of our fellow-believers and how they were granted the martyr's crown. These martyrologies were not only meant to memorialize the past and encourage present Christians. They were also meant to teach the balance between holy resignation and material support of the faithful.

Eusebius of Caesarea, who wrote in 310 A.D. includes a second-century letter from the Church of Smyrna (modern Izmir, Turkey) memorializing the martyrdom of Polycarp (ca. 160). In the very first paragraph, the author strikes a central theme: “[Polycarp] waited for his betrayal, just like the Lord did, so that we might follow him, in looking out for the needs of others as well as ourselves.”

This teaching is underscored in the back-story that follows. Quintus, a Phrygian believer, rashly handed himself over to the proconsul. While appearing to be filled with a martyr's zeal, his initial willingness turned into cowardice. In the end, he cravenly offered the pinch of incense to save his own life. His lesson is spelled out in the fourth paragraph: “This is why we do not approve of voluntary martyrdom, something the Gospel does not teach us to do.”<sup>6</sup>

This is the “both/and” of the Church's response to persecution. She trusts in her Lord, fully, to care for those persecuted for their confession while at the same time lending material support to whatever extent that she is able. *Ora et labora*. Pray and work.

## ***Part II: The American Cultus and the Myth of Secularism***

Just as every culture in history, 21<sup>st</sup> century America has a cultus of its own. It demands its own rituals of virtue as conditions of inclusion and protection. Persons unwilling to virtue-signal with words and rituals that affirm the acceptability of sexual perversions, the legitimacy of false marriages, and the plasticity of sexuality are today's outlaws. The legal system no longer guarantees protection for such “heretics.” Governmental fines, corporate cancellation, and social shunning are signs that a new cultus dominates.

To tell the story, we need to go back at least to the formation of the LCMS. In 1846, during the lead-up to our constituting convention in Chicago, George Holyoake coined the term “secularism.”

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<sup>6</sup> *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*. Translated by J.B. Lightfoot. Abridged and modernized by Stephen Tomkins. Edited and prepared for the web by Dan Graves. <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/study/module/polycarp/>

Secularism defies the clear teaching of Jesus that “*Whoever is not with me is against me*” (Luke 11:23). It propounds the false doctrine that there exists a realm of society which is neither sacred nor demonic. Secularism invents a middle ground where pure reason holds sway. This new religious claim stakes out the halls of government as “holy ground” where Christian opinion is disallowed as illegitimate.<sup>7</sup>

During the LCMS’ centennial celebration, in 1947, the American Civil Liberties Union launched a sustained and pervasive campaign to inculcate secularism into American hearts and minds.<sup>8</sup> It has been spectacularly successful. Between 70 and 80 percent of Americans believe that “the wall of separation between Church and state” is a Constitutional statement. It is not.<sup>9</sup> Its widespread acceptance is, rather, the rotten fruit of the so-called Enlightenment.

Meantime, many protestants have confused Secularism with Martin Luther’s Two Kingdoms doctrine, as though the temporal sword of Romans 13 is exempted from submission to the Word of God. Absent the Word of God, the holiness and goodness of temporal authority must also be denied. This denial gives rise to popular notions that government is merely “a necessary evil” and is purely “a consequence of the fall.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In a breath-taking example of this sentiment, Representative Gerry Nadler (D-NY) recently stated in the well of the U.S. House of Representatives, “what any religious tradition ascribes as God’s will has no concern of this Congress.” <https://www.cnsnews.com/article/washington/cnsnewscom-staff/rep-jerry-nadler-what-any-religious-tradition-ascribes-gods>. A significant change occurred in early 2009 when then Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, began to speak publicly and exclusively about “freedom to worship.” While sounding like a defense of the First Amendment, this phrase, in fact, represented a profound shift. It is a rejection of the First Amendment’s protection of the full and “free exercise” of religion in the public square. Rather, it would confine religion within the doors of the sanctuary. To historians, this is recognizable as the atheistic doctrine of Marxism that fueled the French, Mexican and Bolshevik revolutions.

<sup>8</sup> *Everson v Board of Education* (1947) kicked off a series of Supreme Court cases that instantiated this doctrine. “In 1948, the Supreme Court ruled in *McCollum v. Board of Education*, 333 U.S. 203 (1948) that religious education provided by churches on public school grounds in Illinois during the school day is unconstitutional. Then in 1952, in *Zorach v. Clauson*, 343 U.S. 306 (1952), the Supreme Court found that allowing New York students to leave school grounds for religious education is constitutional. Dissenting in *Zorach*, Justice Black wrote, “I see no significant difference between the invalid Illinois system and that of New York here sustained.” If Justice Black, the author of the court’s majority opinion in *Everson*, could not distinguish these cases, how could state, county, city, or municipal school officials be expected to make the distinction reliably?” Justin O. Smith, “The Fallacy of ‘Separation of Church and State,’” *The American Thinker*, August 7, 2017.

[https://www.americanthinker.com/articles/2017/08/the\\_fallacy\\_of\\_separation\\_of\\_church\\_and\\_state.html](https://www.americanthinker.com/articles/2017/08/the_fallacy_of_separation_of_church_and_state.html)  
<sup>9</sup> The phrase first appeared in an 1802 letter from Thomas Jefferson to the Baptists of Danbury Connecticut. <https://billofrightsinstitute.org/primary-sources/danburybaptists>

<sup>10</sup> “If we think of the left hand realm primarily or even exclusively in terms of the first use of the law, we will think of this realm as dealing primarily with the restraint of destructive human behavior. However, we might then view God’s left hand reign as primarily negative He reigns solely as judge, as punisher. When we think this way, we will tend to think of government as a burdensome thing, as more a necessary evil than an honorable form of service. This can lead to an unhealthy view of the vocation of service to society through government. For who would want to get their hands dirty with “the government” when we can serve God in the church and focus our work exclusively on the Gospel?” Charles Arand, “God’s Two Sustaining Hands,” *Concordia Theology*, July 2, 2012:

<https://concordiatheology.org/2012/07/gods-two-sustaining-hands/>. N.B.: The notion that government is exclusively a result of the fall has even been articulated in a CTCR report drafted in 1968: “The Creator instituted government as a means whereby He wills to preserve and order life in community among fallen men. It is an interim structure, designed to direct and regulate the political relationships among men during the interval between the Fall and the

These confusions contributed to a theological mood that muted the voice of American Christianity during the turbulent decades of the sexual revolution. Churches drew inward. The doctrine of creation and the fifth and sixth commandments, while still preached in the sanctuary, were largely muted in the public square. Some, perhaps, consider their public proclamation as casting of “*pearls before swine*” (Matthew 7:6). For others, it is a legalistic attempt to “legislate morality.”<sup>11</sup>

A corresponding political philosophy called “Fusionism,” was developed in the pages of Bill Buckley’s *National Review*.<sup>12</sup> Commentator David French remains one of its contemporary apologists. It asserts that the only way to prevent government from infringing on “the free exercise of religion” is for the Church, not the state, to abandon any transcendent moral claims in the public square.<sup>13</sup> The First Amendment’s guarantee to the “free exercise of religion” is completely collapsed into a more general “freedom of speech” where transcendent truth is tolerated the same as any other obscenity.

As a result of this strategy, all of us—preachers and lay-leaders alike—have witnessed the destruction that the sexual revolution has wrought upon the sons and daughters of our congregations. We have counted the human costs in lost souls, fractured families, and compromised confession.

Beguiled by the promise of a truce, we allowed ever-increasing affronts to basic morality to become written into public law.<sup>14</sup> But the promised peace never came. The church’s reluctance to address a succession of issues from divorce to abortion to homosexuality, has not resulted in protecting the church from cultural attacks. Rather, it has only emboldened more. Each successive concession only provided the so-called secularists a new platform to launch the next assault.<sup>15</sup>

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Lord’s return. (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17)” “Christian Citizenship: A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod,” May 26, 1968.

<sup>11</sup> “Justifying his opposition to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Senator Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.) claimed that, despite his personal opposition to racial segregation, ‘you can’t legislate morality,’ and thus that he would oppose the bill.” Henry Glitz, “The Limits of Legislating Morality,” Merion West, October 20, 2017.

<https://merionwest.com/2017/10/20/the-limits-of-legislating-morality/>

<sup>12</sup> “Fusionism” combines social conservatism with economic libertarianism. It is most associated with Frank Meyer and his book, “In Defense of Freedom.” It was further developed under the editorship of William F. Buckley at the *National Review*. See Jonah Goldberg, “Fusionism Today,” *National Review*, November 15, 2018.

<https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2018/12/03/frank-meyer-fusionisms-impact-today/>

<sup>13</sup> David French, “Viewpoint Neutrality Protects Both Drag Queens and Millions of American Christians,” *National Review*, September 9, 2019. <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/viewpoint-neutrality-protects-drag-queens-and-millions-american-christians/>

<sup>14</sup> Hadley Arkes has spoken and published much to document the results of fusionism on American jurisprudence. See, for example, “The Moral Turn,” *First Things*, May 2017. <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2017/05/the-moral-turn>

<sup>15</sup> Most recently, demands for “tolerance” morphed into a new religious demand for “love.” This “love,” however, is redefined contrary to the Trinitarian God who is Himself Love (1 John 4:8). As a result, Christian love is not merely

American culture is increasingly defined by the atheistic cult of materialism. It has replaced the purposeful God of creation and redemption with the purposeless god of infinite time and random chance. At first blush, this seems to be the final break with every notion of deity carried over from the pantheon of the Greco-Roman world. In fact, it is not. Rather, the cult of modern America has returned to the primordial gods of Roman myth. *Chronos* (time) and *The Fates* (chance) are credited as the creators of our universe. They, in turn, have spawned their own pantheon of rival lesser gods, as President Hill so aptly noted in his opening essay.

### ***Same old religion***

“*There is nothing new under the sun*” (Ecclesiastes 1:9). Not only do we find ourselves, again, in a culture of paganism. But also, that culture demands that we pay lip-service to its tenets. It was never the government *per se* that threatened the Church’s confession and existence. Now, as always, it is the false cultus of the culture.

The Constitution in general, and the First Amendment in particular, are powerless to protect the truthful confession absent a broader cultural commitment to do so. America’s founders were fully aware of this. John Adams famously wrote, “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”<sup>16</sup>

Consider the story of Masterpiece Cakeshop. For nearly nine years this tiny bakery has been under incessant attack from the aggressive adherents of America’s emerging cult.<sup>17</sup> Beginning in the summer of 2012, the Colorado Civil Rights Commission (CCRC) used a novel interpretation of Colorado’s Anti-Discrimination Act to shut down 40 percent of Jack Phillip’s business because he could not lie by creating a wedding cake for a non-wedding.

In June 2018, the Supreme Court of the United States finally intervened to stop the Commission’s prosecution. Immediately, it opened a new investigation prompted by an activist lawyer who asked Phillips first to create an obscene cake celebrating Satan, then another celebrating his gender change from Adam to Autumn.<sup>18</sup> When the Commission was compelled to drop the investigation, he re-filed on his own.

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marginalized. It is anathematized. Correspondingly, Christians are excluded from economic participation on main street as misanthropes (haters of mankind) or, as Tacitus once put it “*odium humani generis*.”

<sup>16</sup>John Adams, To the Massachusetts Militia, October 11, 1798. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-3102>

<sup>17</sup>Brittany Bernstein, “Jack Phillips will not back down: ‘Worth the fight,’” *National Review*, March 28, 2021. <https://www.nationalreview.com/news/jack-phillips-is-not-backing-down-after-a-decade-of-legal-battles-worth-it-to-fight/>

<sup>18</sup>Born Adam Charles Scardina, in 1978, (<https://www.mylife.com/adam-scardina/e751305402192>) he now lives as Autumn Charlie Scardina (<https://www.mylife.com/autumn-scardina/e100036035667206>). Colleen Slevin, “Colorado baker sued again over alleged LGBTQ bias,” Associated Press, March 22, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/us-supreme-court-jack-phillips-lawsuits-colorado-denver-a589873d7c2be64d07e1dc0433b13f64>



Thus, an agency of the state colluded with a culture warrior in perpetual lawfare to drain a tiny business of time and prohibitive legal costs.<sup>19</sup> This war of attrition is calculated to threaten any Christian who would confess the Christian faith by the conduct of business.

We see similar collusion between government and culture-warriors in social media giants that de-platform Christian information sources like LifeSite News.<sup>20</sup> We see international banks cancel the credit cards and financial services of Christian-oriented organizations like Mass Resistance<sup>21</sup> and the Ruth Institute.<sup>22</sup> We see the anti-Christian Southern Poverty Law Center libel Christian charities with the label “hate group,” to suppress fund-raising capacity. We see the American Bar Association abandon its own ethical guidelines<sup>23</sup> to block access to legal counsel for Christians like David Daleiden and Sandra Merritt.<sup>24</sup> We see corporate headquarters and human resources departments used to implement far-reaching and ungodly social policies regardless of their effect on the bottom line.<sup>25</sup>

Recall how we began. It was the synagogue of the Freedmen that dragged Stephen before the Sanhedrin. Stephen was martyred as much by the mob as by the Jewish legal system. Likewise, Hindu society punishes the Thomas Christians for living out their unity in the Gospel. Most often, it is Muslim mobs, and not government officials, that enforce dhimmi status on their

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<sup>19</sup> Brandon Showalter, “Colorado baker Jack Phillips back in court after refusing to make gender transition cake,” *The Christian Post*, March 24, 2021. <https://www.christianpost.com/news/colorado-baker-jack-phillips-back-in-court-for-cake-refusal.html>

<sup>20</sup> “BREAKING: YouTube shuts down LifeSite’s channel, every video completely gone,” *Lifesite News*, February 10, 2021. <https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/breaking-youtube-shuts-down-lifesites-channel-every-video-completely-gone>

<sup>21</sup> “Major US pro-family group MassResistance suddenly dropped by bank,” *Lifesite News*, February 22, 2021. <https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/major-us-pro-family-group-massresistance-suddenly-dropped-by-bank>

<sup>22</sup> “Another Scalp? Donation Processing Company Drops ‘Hate Group’ Christian Nonprofit Attacked by the Southern Poverty Law Center,” September 8, 2017. <http://www.ruthinstitute.org/ruth-speaks-out/another-scalp-donation-processing-company-drops-hate-group-christian-nonprofit-attacked-by-the-south>

<sup>23</sup> “Legal representation should not be denied to people who are unable to afford legal services, or whose cause is controversial or the subject of popular disapproval. By the same token, representing a client does not constitute approval of the client’s views or activities.” ABA Rules of Professional Conduct, [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/professional\\_responsibility/publications/model\\_rules\\_of\\_professional\\_conduct/rule\\_1\\_2\\_scope\\_of\\_representation\\_allocation\\_of\\_authority\\_between\\_client\\_lawyer/comment\\_on\\_rule\\_1\\_2/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/professional_responsibility/publications/model_rules_of_professional_conduct/rule_1_2_scope_of_representation_allocation_of_authority_between_client_lawyer/comment_on_rule_1_2/)

<sup>24</sup> Dr. John Eastman, Henry Salvatori Professor of Law & Community Service at Chapman University’s Fowler School of Law and Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for Constitutional Jurisprudence at Claremont Institute, said, “The Left has been trying to cancel legal representation for positions they disagree with for near[ly] 20 years.... I remember when I tried to file a brief in support of the Boy Scouts way back in 1999 at a fairly conservative-leaning law firm, I was told ‘we’re not allowed to do that.’ And yet there were hundreds of briefs coming in from major law firms on the other side. The same thing went on in the David Daleiden exposé of Planned Parenthood selling baby parts. No major law firm would allow their lawyers to work on his behalf, so he’s got a small little non-profit helping him with scores of lawyers on the other side with some of the most prominent law firms in the country. This is an attempt to deprive people of valid representation.” Dan Hart, “Liberals launch attack against conservatives’ right to a lawyer,” *Lifesite News*, November 13, 2020.

<https://www.lifesitenews.com/opinion/liberals-launch-attack-against-conservatives-right-to-a-lawyer>

<sup>25</sup> We can see this same phenomenon unfolding as New York City implements a “vaccine passport” not by exercising state power to coerce, but by deliberately enabling private industry to deny services to the non-vaccinated. We see this in commissioner Brad Avakian soliciting the long-time friend of Baronelle Stutzmann to sue her.

Christian neighbors. The demand for total cultural acquiescence, enforced by an alliance of government and private entities, may be new to us, but it is the natural state of societies that are not shaped by a Christian worldview.

### ***Part III: Where do we go from here?***

The first order of business is to learn the stories of Christian persecution across space and time. Martyrs—ancient and modern—are as much a part of our heritage as Gerhardt’s hymns, Luther’s Works, and the Lutheran Confessions. God gave us the martyrs.

That’s why our churches teach, “that the memory of saints may be set before us, that we may follow their faith and good works, according to our calling” (AC XXI.1). We “*are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses*” (Heb 12:1). Their stories inform, equip, and encourage all who study them. It is the vital work of our time and place to regain a “martyr’s eye perspective” that has been dimmed to a great extent by centuries of freedom and prosperity.

#### ***A. Fear not.***

To speak of a “martyr’s eye perspective” requires some definition. By it, I mean not how we see the martyrs, but how they view us. It is a way of viewing the world that cannot be taught fully by words alone. Only the experience of persecution itself can bring the gift. Consider the report of Eric Foley, founder of Seoul USA. He is one of a handful of Western Christians who has direct contact with the underground church in North Korea.

These brothers and sisters in Christ face some of the most severe persecution in history.<sup>26</sup> American Christians often ask Foley, “How can we pray for the North Korean underground church?” His answer is stunning: “When I put this question to Christians in North Korea, they often answer: ‘You, pray for us? We pray for you ... because South Korean and American churches believe challenges in the Christian faith are solved by money, freedom, and politics. It’s only when all you have is God do you realize God is all you need.’”<sup>27</sup>

These persecuted saints make clear that talk of persecution is not for the purpose of spreading woe and dread. Persecution does not mean that the sky is falling upon the Church. It means, rather, that the Church is falling into the embrace of her crucified Lord. Fear not! You were baptized for this moment. The rising cultural pressures are answers to many fervent prayers. God Himself is leading His Church into ever greener pastures.

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<sup>26</sup> “Religious freedom conditions in North Korea are among the worst in the world. The North Korean constitution nominally grants freedom of religious belief, but it also prohibits the use of religion for “drawing in foreign forces or for harming the State.” Anyone caught practicing religion or even suspected of harboring religious views in private is subject to severe punishment, including arrest, torture, imprisonment, and execution.” United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, <https://www.uscirf.gov/countries/north-korea>.

<sup>27</sup> Angela Lu, “North Korean Christians Pray for ‘Free’ Christians to ‘Realize God is All You Need,’” *Christian Headlines*, November 4, 2013. <https://www.christianheadlines.com/blog/north-korean-christians-pray-free-christians-realize-god-is-all-you-need.html>

### ***B. Reclaim Luther's ecclesiology***

The second thing we must do to face the changes coming upon us, it to stop thinking of the Church primarily in institutional terms. All faithful Christians know that the Church does not consist of property, buildings, health care plans, or educational institutions. Nevertheless, as pressure on Church institutions mounts, we are tempted in two equally errant directions.

One error concentrates on the marks that identify the Church—"the Gospel...rightly taught and the Sacraments...rightly administered" (AC VII.1)—to the exclusion of the temporal needs of the saints. The other concentrates on protecting ecclesial institutions to the exclusion of individuals.

In 2015 we saw the sad results of this second error when the overwhelmingly Mormon legislature of Utah cut a deal with the LGBT lobby that earned the derisive moniker, "the Utah Compromise." This deal created legal protections for the \$100 billion-dollar LDS organization, Roman Catholic institutions, and other denominational players. But those same protections were stripped from individual Christians in their persons and businesses.<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand, the path of indifference to temporal concerns can overlook our duty to care for the bodies and material needs of Christ's members. Just as the first Christian martyr was not a "servant of the word," but a "server of tables," so also today, the first to feel persecution are not the preachers and ecclesial institutions, but the people in the pew. Long before the threats of fines and incarceration come to ecclesial institutions and clergy, their flocks will have been driven from the marketplace, discharged from government posts, and brushed off the corporate ladder.<sup>29</sup>

The ecclesiology of the Smalcald Articles is most helpful in this regard. "[A] child seven years old knows what the Church is, namely, the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd" (SA XII.2). While Luther teaches us to mark the location of the Church by Word and the Sacrament, he teaches us to view the substance of the Church in terms of people, not institutions. Such clarity helps the Church recognize that persecution is not on the horizon. It is already upon us.

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<sup>28</sup> Russell D. Moore, "Is Utah's LGBT-Religious Liberty Bill Good Policy?" *Christian Post*, March 6, 2015. <https://www.christianpost.com/news/is-utahs-lgbt-religious-liberty-bill-good-policy-135283/> cf. how the Chinese Communist Party plays the Roman Catholic Church in China; how the Bolsheviks played the Russian Orthodox Church; and how American ecclesiastical institutions from Yale and Princeton to Concordia Portland and Dallas Theological Seminary have been coopted by attempts at self-preservation.

<sup>29</sup> Students, from preschool through graduate school are facing persecution in the classroom, on the playground and across the campus. Corporate employees who refuse to participate enthusiastically in the culture demanded by human resources department are being passed over for promotions or fired outright. Small businesses that refuse to signal pagan virtues face canceled insurance policies, denied financial services, exclusion from government contracts, perpetual investigations and more. Government employees—from the mail carrier to the soldier, to the teacher's aide—are already being dismissed for wearing Christian jewelry, refusing to endorse ungodly documents, and otherwise speaking the truth.

### **C. Teach**

*“When [Jesus] went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things”* (Mark 6:34). The Church’s response to the culture’s harassment of our sheep must begin with teaching.

Christ’s flock must be taught in very concrete terms how to respond to the challenges they face in their various vocations. This is exactly what John the Baptist did when the crowds asked him how they should live. *“Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise”* (Luke 3:11). John went on to give specific instructions to tax collectors and soldiers, as well.

Faithful shepherds must not simply leave each individual lamb of God to figure it out in isolation from the flock. The teaching office should explain what to confess in the face of cultural pressures and ever new temptations to contradict the good confession. The principles are timeless, immutable, and rooted in creation itself. But as deceptions multiply, God’s word needs specific application.<sup>30</sup>

Demands for “a pinch of incense” always emphasize that it is only a very small pinch. Satan ridicules sheep who refuse by pointing out that it is too small of a hill to die on. In the Upper Room, Peter professed his willingness to die rather than deny Jesus before kings. But in the courtyard, he was unwilling to make the same confession before a servant girl.

Many will stumble and fall at these supposedly insignificant confessions. The fallen may even join the chorus urging other Christians to follow their example. Satan will use such peer pressure among Christians to pick off sheep one by one. But clear teaching that unifies the flock can prevent many from falling to temptations to their eternal harm and to the weakening of the flock’s unity.

Shepherds, therefore, must be in constant discussion with the members of the flock to understand the temptations that they face in their professional, educational, and social lives. These precious sheep need clear and definite answers. They need to know both the principles upon which decisions are made, as well as the consensus of the Church on these matters. Pastors should compare notes in conference with fellow shepherds. They should also teach these things plainly from the pulpit.

In short, the Christian response to public false doctrine should be so well known that even the unbelieving world will know ahead of time how true Christians will respond to specific ethical demands.<sup>31</sup> Policymakers may require blasphemies despite all our entreaties. But the Church

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<sup>30</sup> The proper distinction between law and gospel will prevent this guidance from becoming a new legalism. Omitting specific guidance altogether will not. The flock of Christ desperately needs it to avoid snares of false confession and living that could shipwreck the faith. They need it, also, to be comforted and encouraged by knowing that they are not alone but unified with the whole flock.

<sup>31</sup> Early Christian preachers, like St. John Chrysostom and Leo the Great, abound with sermons that mix the profound heights of Nicene orthodoxy with such direct practical instruction. To American ears, they seem almost

must not allow unbelievers to remain ignorant that specific policies will be disobeyed as blasphemies. The Church, after all, has a duty to “*teach all nations*” (Matthew 28:19)—including those in government office.

**D. Care for the canceled.**

When Jesus led His flock to the green pastures of His Word, He simultaneously led them out of the towns and villages and into “*a desolate place*” (Mark 6:31). There, the harassed and helpless flock suffered real hunger that threatened their well-being. Jesus recognized the concrete bodily consequences that His disciples paid in following Him: “*I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way*” (Matthew 15:32). So, Jesus not only taught them, He also fed them.

The feeding that followed is not only an account of Christ’s miraculous work, it serves also as instruction to the Church of Christ. Still today, the flock who follows Christ’s guiding will not only be hated on an emotional and verbal level. Some sheep will suffer concrete, economic and physical consequences. Jesus commanded his disciples, “*You give them something to eat*” (Mark 6:27).<sup>32</sup>

From the very day of Pentecost, the church heeded this command both physically and sacramentally. Sacramentally, “*they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers*” (Acts 2:42). Physically, “*they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need*” (Acts 2:45). In short order, the apostles appointed seven deacons (establishing a new church office) dedicated to the physical care of the needy.<sup>33</sup>

As the government itself becomes increasingly complicit in depriving Christian citizens of their livelihood, it cannot be counted on to justly distribute welfare to those whom it deems “haters” (cf. *odium humani generis*).<sup>34</sup> Again, this should not be seen as a dire threat. This dawning

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“legalistic.” Rather than dismissing them for this reason, modern Lutherans should relearn why John was deemed, “the golden-mouthed” and Leo was “the Great.”

<sup>32</sup> “In the second place, Christ commands the disciples to set the loaves before the multitude, by which he shows he will administer his work and gifts through the instrumentality of human agencies. He thus also teaches those who have an office or commission (especially the office of the ministry) and those who stand before others, that they should, in obedience to Christ, faithfully and conscientiously serve the people by cheerfully and meekly giving of their own and imparting to others what God trusted and gave to them.” Martin Luther, “Sermons of Martin Luther” ed. John Nicholas Lenker, Grand Rapids, Baker, 1904, vol. IV. p. 230, para. 42, etc. cf. Martin Luther, “Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils, ed. Eugene F.A. Klug, Grand Rapids, Baker, 1996, p. 331, para. 15, etc.

<sup>33</sup> We do not have time, here, to trace the history of the Church’s physical care for her members. Much could be said about St. Lawrence in Rome, Luther’s concern for the Community Chest in Leipzig, and Loehe’s work in Neuendettelsau. Suffice it to say, here, that the recent American development of allowing the federal government to take over sole responsibility for the physical welfare of our members demands serious reconsideration. It is yet another consequence of capitulation to the lie of secularism.

<sup>34</sup> Styling Christians as “haters” is strikingly similar to the crime attributed to Christians by Nero. According to Tacitus, they were killed “not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind (*odium humani generis*)” (*Annals* 15:44).

situation should be received as a gift from God and as an answer to many fervent prayers. How else can we be so blessed to relearn the joy of our complete interdependence as the family of God in Christ Jesus? But relearn it we must. It is nothing less than an answer to the Church when she prays:

“Grant us hearts, dear Lord, to give You Gladly, freely of Your own.  
With the sunshine of Your goodness Melt our thankless hearts of stone  
Till our cold and selfish natures, Warmed by You, at length believe  
That more happy and more blessed ‘Tis to give than to receive” (LSB 851.2).

As with the first Christians, so with us, some will pay an economic price for their good confession while others in the congregation are yet unscathed. The Wyoming District’s own Ruth Neely was made the first public example of one whose reputation and livelihood was taken by the government for not bending the knee to the progressive cult.

Many in the Church came to the defense of her name, but few ever learned that she also lost her job. By God’s grace, this did not make her destitute. For others, it will. The incessant attacks on Masterpiece Cakeshop have, in fact, caused severe economic, familial and social consequences to Jack and his wife, all of his children and all of his grandchildren.

When similar events happen in your congregation, will the saints of God honor a faithful confession by concrete and significant contributions of rent, education, automobiles etc.? Or will they say, “*be warm and filled*” (James 2:16) while directing them to the nearest food bank and government welfare office? Let us pray and prepare for the former and not for the latter.

## ***Conclusion***

The changes that we are seeing in our world cannot be denied. American culture is undergoing a rapid and catastrophic collapse. But we should not delude ourselves into thinking either that it is new to America, or that it is new to Christendom. Our current situation is best described as the sudden unmasking of cultural changes that have been at work for centuries.

The false doctrine of secularism has served as a smokescreen to obscure the advance of neo-paganism and to provide Christians a plausible reason to deny that advance. By unmasking it, the Lord of the Church Himself is blessing His Church to experience what He promised His disciples—and what most Christians have experienced throughout space and time.

The Christian Church, from the day of Pentecost, has always confessed her Lord in open conflict with the culture. As that becomes more apparent in our world, the American Church has a golden opportunity to relearn our roots by studying the lives of our brethren across space and time. This reclamation of our Christian heritage drives home the utter inseparability of the Spirit and the flesh, soul and body, faith and love, justification and good works.

Bodily persecution for the beliefs of the soul means that confession of Christ cannot stop at words, but must be lived out in deeds. Faithful confession involves concrete words and specific behaviors that openly contradict the false confession of the cultus that surrounds us. The consequences of this bodily confession are themselves bodily. Real people with real families will suffer economic, social and bodily consequences for their faithful confession.

This reality, in turn, hands the Church a golden opportunity to relearn and reintegrate the spiritual care of her members with the bodily care of her members. As the Church of Jerusalem learned from the moment of its inception, the integrated care of our members is itself a confession that the Word has become flesh.

Looking to the witness of martyrs across space and time, we can and will learn to thrive amid the challenges that are new to us, but old hat to the Church catholic. As the Church's teaching, confession and mutual community becomes more and more deeply integrated, we will learn—as the Church in every place has learned before us—that concrete care for one another is far more than a practical necessity in an increasingly hostile world. It is of the essence of the Church itself.

Supporting Christians who are persecuted for their confession is itself the good confession. This is what John, the Evangelist and Apostle, wrote in his first epistle. *“By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth”* (1 John 3:16-18).