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## Not My Church: Confessional Living in an All-Consuming World

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## ***Not My Church: Confessional Living in an All-Consuming World***

*Cody MacMillin*

What I hope to offer in the following pages is a vision for the Church that is not our own in a world that is increasingly foreign to us. In a discussion of the Scriptures and the Sacraments, I would like to present three ways in which this Church is distinctly alien in nature. She presents alien standards, alien sentiment, and alien strength to which we are called to subscribe, submit, and surrender. In presenting the alien nature of this church, I offer points of contrast and comparison with the culture to which we are tempted to succumb. These comparisons will develop what I call an alien way of being—a humble, steadfast, and sacrificial kind of life that is not lived for our own sake or by our own strength. In this paper, I will ultimately seek to show how the Church, properly understood, is about confession rather than consumption, and how we as Christians receive consolation from that reality. Before we get into the argument, however, I would like to provide a brief illustration as to why this paper is necessary for the Church today.

Fewer places today encapsulate the crisis of Christianity better than college campuses. This is because universities are a microcosm of our society at large. As such, they reflect the myriad of stories and opinions we are all forced to encounter. The college experience is also branded as one of self-discovery. It is four years of unparalleled freedom, a unique season in which young people get to choose everything they want to do, from the classes they take to the friends that they keep. However, with so many choices available, there can often be more wandering than choosing when it comes down to it.

I remember being a freshman at Texas A&M and going to an open house the week after classes started. I walked through the doors of the Memorial Student Center, and there were two floors filled to the brim with students, tables, and fliers from different campus organizations. Everybody was looking to make their pitch, sell their club, or recruit new pledges. As for me, I was just looking for a church to call my home.

I didn't know what to look for in a church, but I was a confirmed Lutheran

and figured I should at least give their student ministry a chance. I went up to their table and met two student leaders, Sarah and Ann, who invited me to dinner at their church off campus. They were strangers offering me a free meal which, on a college budget, felt like I was getting a ticket into the Promised Land.

When I got to dinner that night, I immediately knew that the Lutheran student ministry was not going to be my church home. There were not many people there, and those who showed up were not the people I wanted to hang out with anyway. They were not cool. They were not contemporary, and it was not the church I was hoping for.

Determined to find a better fit, I started church shopping around campus until I could find one that was more my speed. I tried one of the larger Baptist churches only to get lost in the crowd. I tried one of the smaller Methodist churches only to realize I was not a Methodist. I even tried a Pentecostal church where I had my salvation questioned because I was baptized as an infant. I grew frustrated by this, and to my shame, I was still going to the Lutheran student ministry to get a free meal when I could. I eventually felt guilty for abusing their generosity, so I showed up one Sunday morning just to ease my conscience. Then something incredible happened, something I certainly did not expect.

We started the service with a time of confession, reciting words from the Divine Service, and immediately I felt like I was back home with my parents standing next to me. I heard these strangers, awkward as they were, saying the same words with which I had grown up. We went into a time of prayer where the words “Lord, in your mercy,” never sounded so sweet. We had communion, and the Words of Institution were the same as I remembered them! There was such familiarity in such a strange place, a touch of home in the sea of college life. The church was not what I was hoping for, but it was still mine whether I liked it or not.

### **What the Church is Not**

I do not share this story chiefly to give an apology for our liturgy, but rather to demonstrate a theological point. The Church is not our own. It does not belong to us but rather belongs to Christ. In other words, the Church is not a set of programs designed to meet our needs or a place to be entertained. It is a people who come



together to learn an alien language until it becomes their own. This idea of the Church goes against the grain of Western individualism, refusing to turn the Gospel into a buffet of best practices and a smorgasbord of target audiences. We are concerned about proclaiming the Gospel “for you,” rather than making the Gospel for us and our fancies. We are not scared of losing relevance because we live in a culture that is increasingly secular. Rather, we continue to treat our sacred story as such and offer ourselves to the world as something more than what they can find elsewhere.

In the same way that a college freshman walks through an open house filled with tables and fliers, Christians are daily bombarded with options for idols to worship. Influencers, pundits, and advertisers all clamor for our attention, offering us thousands of paths to choose. More importantly, we are told that the only way to navigate this terrain is by choosing the path that is best for us, all the while figuring out who we are in the first place. The tragedy here is that choice is advertised as a freedom but lived as a burden. When we look to make our lives our own, much less our Church, we embark on a tireless quest whose end is nowhere in sight. We become wanderers more than we become choosers. We become products of our changing desires as well as our changing times, and it is hard to tell which of these two realities is more concerning.

### **Subscription to Alien Standards**

One of the things that has recently driven Western culture away from the Church is the fact that she still subscribes to alien standards. The Church has always believed that the standards she holds to, expressed in God’s Law, have come from a place distinctively outside herself. Far from being common sense, God’s Law was given to his people because of their explicit lack of understanding. The Law was not given to be a reminder of what we already know or as a helpful articulation of what was written on our hearts. It is a distinctly alien proclamation which comes from the outside in and shakes God’s people to their very core. It is a foreign set of values which ultimately condemns God’s people because of our sinful rebellion. This is why the apostle Paul can testify to his own personal experience with the Law as troublesome and traumatic.

What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died (Romans 7:7-9 ESV).

Paul talks about the Law as a distinctively alien and intrusive force. It is a foreign standard of righteousness which breaks into his heart and convicts him of his sin. This conviction has powerful and damning effects on Paul and all those who hear it. If we were to read only these words from Paul, we might think that the alien standard of the Law is just as awful as sin itself. While it comes from God, the Law seems only to bring judgment, shame, and death to his creation. Paul goes on to commend the Law, however, sharpening the distinction between the effects of the alien standard from the standard itself.

The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure (Romans 7:10-13 ESV).

This is a remarkable rhetorical move by the apostle. On the one hand, the Law appears to be his adversary, yet he concedes that the commandment itself is holy, righteous, and good. It was not the alien standard of the Law which brought death to him but his own alienation from the standard because of his sinful rebellion. The importance of this distinction cannot be overstated. The Law is not bad because it is alien to us. We are bad because we are alien to the Law. Our separation from God was not caused by the Law but realized through it. We are now all the more responsible for our alienation, and such responsibility is an impossible burden to bear.

What Paul reveals at the end of this chapter is also telling. He testifies not only to the goodness of God's Law, but also explains the competing standard of sin that we place upon ourselves.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin (Romans 7:21-25).

Here the apostle reminds us that God's Law is not the only standard that confronts us. Wherever we go, whatever we do, we are also confronted with the standard or

the “law” of sin. The conflict between these two standards boils down to a conflict between God’s will and our own. Sin is our own standard of living which promises us a better quality of life so long as we do life our way. It convinces us that our best life can be lived now if only we chase after it. It tells us that our dreams can be realized, that we can be good people, and that the world can be a better place if only we would follow our hearts.

In this way, it is important to recognize that sin is not simply an absence of standards but rather an imposition of our own. By going our own way, doing our own thing, and living our own truths, we are telling the world that the only standard which exists is the one we make for ourselves. This becomes an insidious idea when we realize the world is selling thousands of ready-made tools to help us reach whatever standards we set. Does your standard call you to financial success? Here are a dozen catalogs, courses, and conferences that can get you there. Does your standard call you to relentless self-expression? Here is how what can pay to be heard on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. Does your standard call you to a towering and masculine persona? Here are the supplements you need to take, the weights you need to lift, and the clothes you need to wear to make sure that no woman ever ignores you again. The irony here is that the more we try to become our own person and live by our own standards, the more we allow others to set those standards for us. We work hard to be individuals, but we become slavish consumers at best. We see this trend continue in the Church when she misunderstands her mission. When congregations spend more time trying to create self-actualized citizens than they do obedient disciples, there is little room for God’s standard to come through as the top priority. When this happens, it does not mean that churches no longer preach and teach the Bible. It just means that the Bible becomes a means rather than an end. Parts and pieces of God’s standard become just another set of tools for Christians seeking their own version of the good life. Dogmatics are pushed to the side so pragmatics can take center stage. The standards which preachers put before God’s people are not alien but intentionally familiar, resonating with the values they have created for themselves.

What is needed now, and what the Church is when she gets her job right, is a relentless proclamation of the alien word which confronts the standards we set for ourselves. It takes pastors recognizing the idols of their congregation and not being afraid to call them out. It takes preaching the Law as holy, righteous, and good and our own sinful nature as completely and undeniably bad. In this way, the Church proves herself to be a confessional body rather than a consuming or commercial one. We speak the truth which has been revealed to us, including what it says about us, that we are poor and miserable sinners in need of the grace of God. We do not make the Law our own by bringing it down to our own level and speed. Rather, we make the Law our own by conforming our lives humbly and totally to what it calls us to be.

### Submission to Alien Sentiments

One of the ominous heralds of the past generation has been the near universal push towards self-love. Already conceding that we fall short of the standards we set, this oft-quoted call for self-love has convinced us that it is okay not to be okay. This contradiction might play out well as a song lyric, but it is utterly void of any lasting consolation. If these words are true, we might ask, then why try to be okay to begin with? If we refuse to call a bad thing bad, then what is the point of trying to feel good (or do good) in the first place? These questions are both natural and logical for anyone tasked with loving themselves, but it is through these questions that the premise of self-love ironically leads many to existential dread and despair. We are told to love ourselves, but first we must convince ourselves that we are actually worthy of our own affections.

We need a standard to ground our sentiments toward ourselves, but given the reality of our imperfections, the question becomes how we can ever set a standard low enough to reach! If self-love means our constant self-affirmation, then it eventually requires the complete destruction or delusion of our conscience. We must be able to say to ourselves at some point or another, "What you did was good enough, even if it was not truly good." We have to lie to ourselves to love ourselves, and we must dress these lies under the guise of positivity rather than confess them rightly as moral atrocities, as crimes against ourselves first and foremost. This self-deception might be easy if you are a complete narcissist, but for the rest of us it is a restless struggle. For mere mortals with a shred of self-awareness, self-love can only be described as a cruel game whose finish line is bitterness and resentment, and the etchings of any trophies we receive from playing all but testify to the magnitude of our ignorance.

As human beings, we are destined to fall short of our own standards, and the sentiments we have towards ourselves are bound to be less than loving. We need a different kind of love to sustain us. We need an affection that both validates our existence and acknowledges our brokenness. In short, we need to be fully known in order to be fully loved. How can such love exist, we might ask? What kind of affection attaches itself to something that is unworthy of it? This is the mystery of the Gospel; it is an alien sentiment that announces God's gracious disposition towards his fallen creation and restores it from the outside in. It describes God's eternal favoritism for his people that is neither earned, nor deserved, nor subject to change. Rather, it is a sentiment which has been fought and won by Jesus Christ. This is not the kind of sentiment we are used to receiving as people. It is something utterly and totally different from anything we have ever known.

One of the ways the Gospel's alien sentiment is seen most clearly is in the sacrament of Holy Baptism. Specifically, the image of adoption in Baptism articulates how we are brought from the darkness of our sin into the light of an entirely

new world, an alien world called the Church. We are children of the Church, learning and growing in the disciplines that accompany this strange sort of place. We have new responsibilities and relationships that are initially foreign and appropriately burdensome. Much like our biological family, the Church is not a place or a group of people we would choose for ourselves. It is given to us as a gift (a very human and messy gift) and there is no receipt that comes with the package. We could not return it or exchange it for another one even if we tried. While on the one hand Baptism brings us into an alien home, it also unites us with Christ in a death and resurrection that is not our own. There is much to say on this point, but I would like to point out a crucial detail that typically gets lost. Luther's Small Catechism discusses Baptism by answering four main questions: 1) what it is, 2) what it gives, 3) how it works, and 4) its significance. In answering the fourth question, the Small Catechism discusses the importance of being buried and resurrected with Christ with Romans 6:4 as a supporting text. What is not mentioned, however, is any specific word of the Cross and how we have been crucified with Christ in our baptism (Rom 6:6). In my assessment, we miss a profound opportunity with this omission, in effect short-selling Baptism through our ignorance. This is because the Cross is the means by which the Gospel's alien sentiment was fully demonstrated, and it is only by our participation in the Cross of Christ (through Baptism) that we can say our sins have been forgiven. There are two events here, both of which have historical and soteriological realities. We must not neglect one as we talk of the other, and we must always connect the two if we are to teach either in their fullness.

In a world that has turned inwards in search of love, the alien sentiment of the Gospel invites us to turn outwards and receive an affection that is not our own. We are not saved by our own self-love, but instead by the self-giving love of Christ. We are not redeemed by our own delusions of conscience, but by his death on the Cross. It becomes imperative for the Church to keep these things straight. While we are tempted to turn the Gospel into just another form of self-love, we cannot do so without losing the essence of the Gospel itself. We are never told anywhere in the Scriptures to love ourselves, but rather to love our neighbors as ourselves. This requires our proclamation of the alien sentiment given to us in Christ, extending to the world an other-worldly and alien invitation to die and rise with Him who has called us to be his own.

### **Surrender to Alien Strength**

Those who pride themselves on their own reason and strength will typically place a high value on rationality. These people exist both inside and outside the Church, but in both cases they base their decisions chiefly on what makes sense to them. If something does not make sense to them, they will simply not be persuaded or be able to change their minds. They struggle with ambiguity in particular and with a



lack of control more generally. They are not really looking for truth but certainty. They want a forcefield for their ego, regardless of what they might otherwise say, but you can typically spot their true motives when that forcefield starts to crack. You fight their logic, and they get defensive. You push their buttons, and they buckle down. They are here to fight the good fight, and they are willing to fight dirty if they have to.

While it would be difficult to speak more on what this person looks like in specific circumstances, Martin Luther developed a theological category which captures the root issue of their struggle. Luther called this logic-obsessed soldier a Theologian of Glory, someone who tries to uncover the hidden God and examine his depths completely. This may sound like an innocent quest at first, but Luther makes clear that a Theologian of Glory is far more interested in proving God than in proclaiming Him. They want to have all the facts about God straight so that having faith in God becomes a much easier task. They turn faith into primarily an intellectual ascent and treat God as a mental mountain to climb by their own reason and strength.

The problem with the Theology of Glory is twofold. First, and perhaps most obviously, it grossly overestimates the human capacity to understand a supernatural God. It does not take into account the utter blindness of our sinful condition, and as a consequence it exposes us to the vulnerabilities of our own poor judgement. More importantly, however, the Theology of Glory is problematic because it takes God and turns Him into a product to be bought and sold in an ideological marketplace. He is something to be bought into and believed in chiefly because He is rational and makes sense. The sales pitch goes something like this: God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-loving, so you would be a fool not to follow Him. How do we know God is all these things? Because we can prove it. We can find the right textual evidence, dismantle opposing views, and ultimately think our way to the truth. All we have to do is lay out the facts and pray that people are not dumb enough to walk away from them. Our faith is strong because our evidence is strong, and there is no way that our God cannot make sense.

Ironically, the toughest truth for the Theologian of Glory to swallow is not the hidden God but the One that has already been revealed. Christ intentionally called his Church to a way of living and being that would confuse people around them. His body was meant to be so mind-bogglingly different that its sheer uniqueness and mystery would be its chief attraction. The early Church came about any way but rationally. Against all odds and opposition, early Christians convinced rich and poor people alike to give up their worldly possessions. They commanded feuding people groups like Jews and Gentiles to humble themselves and be reconciled. Perhaps most shockingly, the early Church willingly endured suffering, persecution, and death for the sake of their beliefs. Surely these people were not in the business

of being understood. To the contrary, they were in the business of turning the logic of the world absolutely on its head as they announced the inbreaking rule and reign of the Kingdom of God. Theirs was a Theology of the Cross rather than a Theology of Glory, a theology which allowed them to surrender their reason and strength to an alien strength provided by the Gospel.

One of the practical ways the early Church surrendered to this alien strength was by participating in the Lord's Supper. This ritual was instituted by Christ Himself and was meant to be a means of providing tangible assurance to the people of God that His promises remained intact. This meal was not chiefly a doctrine to be understood but a gift to be received. It was a proclamation rather than a proof, because it had to be taken in faith rather than reason. It was a metanoia meal in the truest sense, one which demanded repentance rather than intellectual ascendance for participation. Christians were meant to have their hearts and minds challenged and changed at this table. They were meant to feast on the mysteries of God rather than conquer them.

Whether it is in the first or the twenty-first century, faithful Christianity requires a surrender of our reason and strength that simply does not make sense to our contemporaries. In a time when we are surrounded by religious options and ideologies, it might make better sense for us to choose a belief system that makes life easier and not more complicated. It might make better sense for us to share a story that avoids nonsense altogether and just helps us know what we need to know. It seems horribly irrational to consent to anything else, especially when doing so appears backwards, outdated, and strange. Why would we go against the grain of a postmodern age by confessing a comprehensive and objective truth? Why would we throw ourselves to the lions of science by proclaiming things like miracles, the resurrection, and a six-day creation? Why would we hand ourselves over to the perils of pragmatism by insisting that we and others turn the other cheek? We do so because it is faithful rather than rational. Our chief hope is not that we would make sense but that we would make space for the Gospel to be made known to those around us.

### **Living Faithfully in the Open House**

Perhaps the reason why Christianity is such a tough sell is because it was never meant to be sold, but seen. As I think back to my first time visiting the Lutheran student ministry, one of the things that has become clear to me is that I simply was not looking for a church. I did not know exactly what I was looking for, and for that reason I treated every place I went as if I was just looking. It was the theological equivalent of window shopping, and it was unbelievably stressful. I spent months agonizing over what church was right for me without once considering that the church was not about me in the first place. I always had plenty of excuses for leaving a church but very few reasons to stay.

Perhaps what grew on me most about the Lutherans was their overwhelming hospitality and grace. While I spent all my time freeloading off their donated meals, they always had a way of making me feel wanted. They followed up with me throughout the week. They encouraged me as I adjusted to the stresses of college life. They opened their house to me and did their best to make it feel like home. It was something different than what I had seen elsewhere, not just a different style or a different program but a different way of being. It was awkward and it was weird, but I grew to love it and to love them as they had first loved me.

Whether we like it or not, the Church today finds herself enmeshed in an ever-growing open house of worldviews which are competing for people's attention. Such a competitive environment, like any other marketplace, forces people to emphasize their differences. The question for the Church therefore becomes not only how to be different but how to embrace our differences faithfully. How do we subscribe to the alien standard of God's Law, submit to the alien sentiment of the Gospel, and surrender to the alien strength of the Cross in a world that is immersed in its own definitions of success, love, and logic? The answer is simple but not easy: we must open our house as well as our hearts to others with the grace and truth of Jesus Christ.

We must confess our imperfections, connect with one another as imperfect people, and ultimately consent to the only story that has the power to redeem our imperfections and bring us into everlasting life. We are not our own, yet we can take ownership of the Good News that has been given us. In so doing, we declare to the whole world that we belong to Christ.



*University Lutheran Chapel, Class Photo, Spring 2017*