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Welcome to Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived.

Jesscia: We're exploring the ways in which  
theology permeates all aspects of life.  
Through conversations with faculty here  
at Concordia Seminary St. Louis, we will challenge  
you to deepen your theology and live out  
your faith in Christ.  
I'm your producer and host, Jessica Bordaleau.  
I'll talk with a variety of professors on  
a variety of topics, something different  
every episode, but all pointing to the  
intersection of faith and daily life.  
It's Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived.  
Today we're talking about our response as  
Christians to the declining influence Christianity  
has in our society and how that shapes our witness.  
This is the topic of the newly published  
book, *The Light Shines Through, Resilient Witness*  
in *Dark Times* from Concordia Publishing  
House, written by Dr. Chad Lakies.  
We have Dr. Lakies here in the studio today.  
He is the vice president for ministry  
engagement at Lutheran Hour Ministries.  
Dr. Lakies has a degree in psychology and  
philosophy from the University of Michigan,  
and he earned his master's of divinity  
and PhD right here at Concordia Seminary St. Louis.  
He was a theology faculty member at  
Concordia University Portland and served as regional  
director for North America at Lutheran Hour Ministries.  
Dr. Lakies, welcome to the show.

Chad: Thanks for having me, Jessica.  
I'm really excited to be here again.

Jesscia: The foreword to Dr. Lakies' book was  
written by Dr. Dale Meyer.  
We are blessed to have him in the studio as well.  
Dr. Meyer has served as a parish pastor,  
theology professor, and was the president of Concordia  
Seminary St. Louis for 15 years.  
But he is most known for his 12 years as  
the speaker of the Lutheran Hour.  
Dr. Meyer, it's always an honor to have

you back on the show.

Dale: Oh, my pleasure.

Jessica: Dr. Lakies, the introduction to your book is called *The Loss Your Feeling is Real*. You write that we live in a post-Christendom era. Christianity continues to lose its place of influence in our society. For the church at large, things are not what they used to be, and there's a sense of loss.

Chad: So this is a feeling that I've had to empathize with because I can't directly relate to. So many of the people who have influenced me have been living and serving in the church for much longer than I have been a part of it. For me, it's a little more than half my life that I've been a part of the church now. But my in-laws have served the church forever. Many of my seminary professors have been in the church forever. My wife was baptized the day that she was born. So many of the people that I imagined as being part of my audience are people who are those who've lived through a time when they have seen this drastic shift in culture. When I was born in the 80s, there was a sense still of a shared Judeo-Christian worldview, where we all kind of had a general sense of what was morally shared amongst us. We could imagine that we could talk to people. Even if they weren't Christians like we were, there was some semblance of something shared. That's been lost. The church had a voice of relevance. We hadn't fully declined into the times when in the 90s the church lost a lot of trust or began to lose a lot of trust as an institution. Now statistically, decline began in the 1950s, right about the time when we reached the heyday. Of Christianity post-World War II. It was the high point of church membership and church growth. And we've been clawing to get those days back ever since.

But it's just gotten worse and I think more depressing for people. So I tried to address that emotional state that a lot of ministers are in. Because I think theological training across the board, not just in our tradition but everywhere, prepared people for a time when everything was working well. The engine was well oiled from the 1950s and the few generations thereafter. They're the ones who have influenced all of us younger ministers who are going out there. And then it's those younger ministers who are influencing their laypeople, those that they shepherd. But so many of us have lived through this time where Christianity now seems irrelevant to many people. There's a sense of apathy out there, both in the church and outside of the church. No urgency for witness, apathy about what we have to offer to outsiders. Why does this even matter? We used to have respected voices at the table in our communities. Nobody cares to invite us to be a part of that anymore because of distrust, because of the separation of religion into the private sphere of life and far less influencing the public. And this has just been hugely lamentable for Christians. They just feel that loss, they're grieving something and then it turns into a lot of other emotions. If you're a minister and you're trying to get people into your church and active, if you're trying to grow, you're thinking of all kinds of programs that end up all falling flat. You're spinning your wheels, you get depressed, then you get frustrated, then you get angry. The lack of being respected in the public sphere might feel like humiliation. And so I use this great word that I borrowed from James Davison Hunter, the sociologist of culture. He borrowed it from Friedrich Nietzsche called resentment, which looks printed

on paper like resentment.  
It is a feeling of resentment that we  
carry around at this loss, but  
resentment, I think, is a more pregnant word.  
It includes ideas like envy, anger,  
outrage, maybe that humiliation, maybe  
that sense of embarrassment.  
It's a real emotion that I think we should acknowledge.  
But the reason I wanted to acknowledge it  
was because while I can't control the  
fact that I experienced the emotion,  
I do have some agency over how I respond to it.  
And that response gets me to the idea of  
our public witness and what the world sees.  
And I think when we respond to it in  
certain ways, we unwittingly undercut our very goal,  
which is to winsomely witness for the  
kingdom, grow the kingdom as the Holy Spirit leads.  
And so the public face of the church is  
affected by how we respond to this grief,  
this loss, this resentment that we feel.

Jesscia: I'm glad that Dr. Meyer is in the room  
because I know he's had a long experience in the church.  
And I feel like mine is opposite. My  
parents became Christians when I was a kid.  
So I didn't have it. They didn't come  
with a long background of what the church was.  
But as an adult now in the church, as a  
church worker in the church, I've heard for so long,  
it used to be like this, but now it's  
like this. The club used to be great. Now it stinks.  
Welcome to the club. And it's not my fault either.  
You know, so I'm kind of plopped in there  
and I'm at a loss as to how to handle that.  
Yeah, good. Now, Dr. Meyer, you've gotten  
to see a lot of you're laughing. Are you  
laughing at me?

Dale: No, I'm not laughing at you. Both of you  
are right on in what you have been saying.  
I'm a fifth generation pastor. I mean, I  
was in the club before I was even a gleam  
in my father's eye.  
Fifth generation pastor, they're not in a  
straight line though. There's a few of us  
have been a little  
bit deviant. Okay. But the way you

described it as accurate, I guess I would just add on three things. One is that this time is really an opportune time for the church because we're learning again, or maybe for a lot of people, we're learning for the first time that church is about Jesus Christ. It's not about Martin Luther. It's not about Lutheranism, da, da, da, and no offense to that. I mean, we have been blessed from that, but ultimately it is about our Lord Jesus Christ. The second thing is that He is reigning now.

Fascinating to me that we talk a lot about Jesus in the first century AD, the things that he did for our salvation, and that's necessary. And then on the other side of the time spectrum, someday He's going to come back and there'll be a resurrection of all the dead. But I don't hear our pastors, and I'm sure I've been guilty of this myself, talk about what he is doing for us now. And the Bible has a lot of information, encouragement, what Jesus is doing for us now at the right hand of God. I won't get into all of that. In other words, our churches in many ways leave the impression of being first century religious museums. Well, who wants to go to a museum every Sunday morning? And when we talk about the coming resurrection, I think most people will admit if they're going to be honest, that's in the sweet by and by. It's irrelevant to us right now.

Fascinating to me, 2 Corinthians 5, 7, we walk by faith, not by sight. What we historically emphasize, the first century saving acts of God through Christ, and those are absolutely necessary, but those first century acts were seen, the eyewitnesses. When the resurrection comes, everybody's going to see it. What Christ is doing now, reigning over all things for the good of his church, and for us believers, that's a matter of faith. We can't see it. So this is a fascinating theological thing to me. The third point

that I would make,  
and this is where Dr. Lakies's book is  
just excellent, is that to reinvigorate the sense  
of mission in the church, we have to go  
to people who are outside of Christ and  
be with them in  
their problems. So Bonhoeffer has a great  
line. He was in America, and he was talking with  
somebody at, I think it was a Union  
Seminary. This guy was a priest, and he  
wanted to become  
a saintly ecclesiastical church man.  
Bonhoeffer said, well, yeah, I was  
impressed, and I bet he  
did become that. He said, but he has  
learned that by plunging yourself into  
the problems of people  
in this world, that's where you learn  
metanoia, repentance, and that is the way he said a person  
becomes a Christian. So I think our  
evangelism, generally speaking, is just  
out of sync with the 21st century. See the problems where people are  
living. Then all of a sudden theology,  
theology becomes tangible, Jessica, and the life of the  
church becomes vital, and the mission  
becomes urgent. Here endeth the text.

Jesscia: Thank you for that, Dr. Meyer. That's  
really insightful, very convicting.  
Plunging ourselves  
into the lives of others, you said.  
That's a huge investment of energy. It  
seems like as Christians,  
we are low on energy. We've been beaten  
down, kicked out, and it's time to curl  
up and lick our wounds. Is that the response you've seen?

Chad: Some of the response that comes next is ministry ends  
up being so challenging that pastors are  
considering leaving the call, resigning the call  
altogether. COVID exacerbated this. It  
was in the water prior. It increased  
severely during COVID  
because of the very unique challenges  
that that period of time brought, but  
it's still lingering.  
I think probably seminaries are having a  
challenge attracting students because

they're not becoming a pastor or a minister as a career track.  
Why would I want to take on something so difficult? It's hard to construe it as a noble task within the context of all of this empirical decline and difficulty of ministry. I think those are some of the responses. For laypeople, there's apathy. The world hates us. Just let them be. I don't know that laypeople are going so far as to say, well, just let them go to Hell. But it is a possible reaction. I also think there's at times a sense of living in the wrong way toward accepting decline as if it's a good thing, as if through decline and the shrinkage of our congregations, somehow God is showing us who the true faithful are.

Jesscia: So I've heard it said that after 2020, people didn't come back to church, and that's because they weren't really Christians anyway, so it's probably good they're not coming back because they were never really here. I didn't know how to respond.

Dale: If I can jump in, that's the theology of glory. Luther is so strong on this. We don't know what God is up to. So to attribute the decline of the church to this is God, we're getting way too big for our britches. So that sentiment is the theology of glory, not the cross.

Chad: Yeah, it's taking a negative experience and saying it's revelatory of knowing the will of God. I just don't think that we should go there. When that argument's made, I think it's a heresy of which we need to repent.

Jesscia: In your book, you described three responses within the church at large, and it was trying to become relevant again, resigning and resistance. So we talked about what happens when we resign and we're saying, oh well, they were

never here. In what ways has trying to be relevant not been helpful? Because it seems like it should be good. Be relevant.

Chad: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, I'll just say right out of the gate, if we're preaching the gospel and we believe it's the truth, it's always relevant. So trying to do something more, especially with a kind of attractional method of programming, or we build really beautiful church buildings that mimic super hospitable secular organizations and so on, places that appear to be friendly. There are all kinds of ways that we can get off track of what we're really trying to do, and that's preach the gospel to people and become carers of souls in our churches. So it ends up being a distraction. It's hard then for outsiders to really get a sense of what you're for, what you're after, when it's all about the experience when they come into your building. And this doesn't have to be even new contemporary places. It can be the old traditional places that are curating kind of a very ancient, rich, liturgical form of sharing the gospel and gathering as God's community of people. But when it becomes all about that form and not about the message that it communicates, that goes back to us being a museum piece, right? And so both of them can be equally distracting and problematic. The message, right? The mission, the core thing that we're about, it's always got to be front and center. It's always got to be clear. And sometimes when you observe it from the outside, you can easily get confused about what people are really about. So it unwittingly misleads. It unwittingly misleads.

Dale: There was a worker at Lutheran Hour Ministries, Dr. Oswald Hoffman. Man, what



a great guy.

And I was talking to him once and he was talking about the means of grace, which is a shibboleth, you know, the means of grace. And Dr. Hoffman said, the emphasis is on the grace. It's not on the means. It's the grace.

Chad: That's right.

Jesscia: Tell me what that means.

Dale: The form of the worship service is a means. And I'm not saying it's irrelevant. It doesn't matter how you do it. There are some essentials that have to be there. But sometimes we elevate the form of the service above what the service is actually doing. God breaking into our lives with Jesus and his word. So that's the grace. How that is shaped in worship or in many other things in the church, it's important. But the dominant thing is the grace. John 6:37, whosoever cometh unto me, I will in no wise cast out. And the structure of the service, the structure of the church, the building, our friendliness or lack thereof should never keep a person away from Jesus.

Jesscia: The third response that you described is resistance. That when the church has the knee-jerk reaction of fear to becoming less relevant, that there's a hostile resistance. Tell me about that.

Chad: Yeah, we become prone to start to try to leverage mechanisms of power to keep things the way that they are. So a prime example of that nowadays would be Christian nationalism. But reduced ways of that would simply be trying to get Christian-friendly people into the leavers and the positions of government in order to legislate things the way that we want them to be. It's an attempt to, as we would call it

at the seminary, to bring about a realized eschatology, to bring about the kingdom in America. So it's kind of the marrying of God and country in ways that in our tradition for sure have always been taught as inappropriate. But for so long, the church in America has had that experience where the church and state have been co-mingled in a way. And part of the loss that we're experiencing that we talked about earlier is the loss of that co-mingling, where we could play off of secular power in order to kind of keep our moral values primary, front and center, and so on. And so the decline of moral values is just one of those really concrete ways that people experience and observe the loss that we're experiencing. Luther was attuned to that. Just the two kingdoms, which we apply to the division of state and the church and state. How to be in this world but not of it. That's so much what that division is meant to help us and guide us kind of figure out. We did a two-part episode series on this show on Christian nationalism. And as Dr. Biermann was talking about the two kingdoms and the separation between them, I thought there was a cool tie-in between what he said and what you wrote in your book about how we sometimes combine country, culture, and Christianity as if it was one thing. And if we can just get one of those things to be prevalent, then the other ones will follow.

Chad: Yeah. Yeah, I would say something like Christian nationalism, as we're experiencing it now, is an outcome of this resentment idea that I talked about earlier, right? It is a way of

reacting to the loss that we're experiencing. It is like, phenomenologically, it would be like, just grasping and holding as tightly to something that is dying and fading away as we possibly can.

It's poisonous to the church, right? God is not calling us to hold on to the past. He's not calling us to be nostalgic people. He's calling us to be an eschatological people. He has got us on a trajectory which he's constantly drawing us forward toward, right? His and his consummation of all things in the future.

Dr. Meyer, in the foreword of Dr. Lakie's book, you shared a story of a woman who didn't like one of your sermons. You said in the sermon that it's a great time to be the church. She came up to you after the service and said, how can you say that? Look around.

What did you mean when you said that it's a great time to be the church?

It occurs to me that, having a great time to be the church, we may well be going through a renaissance of true Christian faith and life. Phyllis Tickle. That may be happening now.

Jesscia: Who is Phyllis Tickle?

Dale: Phyllis Tickle was an author who specialized in church history. She observed that every 500 years, the church goes through a garage sale. 500 years ago was the Reformation. You get rid of things that are not essential to the message of Jesus, the Church, and you come out stronger for it. She documented how every 500 years that happens. Well, we're 500 years away from the Reformation. All the things we're talking about, grief at the loss

of so much that we've grown comfortable with in the church, grief at changes in America. We might just be in a renaissance, a rebirthing of vital Christianity. Time will tell, but I think the things we're talking about, what Dr. Lakies writes about in his book, is a signal of hope.

Jessica: I would like to hear more about that because if there are problems with the church being resistant and hostile to the world around us, there are obvious problems when we resign and have no urgency to share the gospel, and there's problems attempting to be relevant with an overemphasis on means and form. So what should I be doing? Where do I find hope?

Chad: Yeah, so almost every chapter is about how to be a winsome witness, right, in a way. Really tackling the challenging issues and questions that the church faces that often we feel like we're on our heels to address, right? We always end up in reactionary mode. I'm trying to help the church be more prepared. Just be a bit of a counselor, serve the church in that way, of how we can approach some of these really sticky questions that have been difficult for us in order to prevent antagonism and open a space for more winsomeness. But then at the end of the book, I try to reach back to the early church because it's been 1700 years since we've been in a minority position, which I think we're in now. And they have some practices and ways of being we can lean into. They had a huge reputation that was positive, despite the fact that they were persecuted. So that reputation

played a role in the 1700 year period that we've long enjoyed, where church and state have been commingled because Emperor Constantine sat up and paid attention to this church that had a huge reputation at the time. How did that develop? A lot of what I've tried to look at, and it's really narrow what I have to say. There's a number of other great resources that I point to in some of my footnotes, but they were people of patience. And I think part of what we've got to lean into now is a period of patience. But that winsome witness is a way of building trust, is a way of improving our social reputation, not being seen as the people who are only known for what we're against, not being seen as people who are only antagonistic to the world outside of us, but approaching the world outside of us in the way that Jesus did. He was for the world. He came for the life of the world. What is our life for? Our life as followers of Jesus is also for the life of the world. And we have got the greatest thing to offer them. The words of eternal life. Jesus for them.

Dale: The words of eternal life. Well, there's an interesting book written by Dr. Alan Nouse, now sainted. He's a pastor, but also a psychologist. And when we get the word of God into our brain over and over and over again, it goes into the prefrontal cortex. And that changes how we react. So I think one of the challenges we've got now is getting people really to live, to soak themselves in the scriptures. And I'm not talking about dogmatic truths from the 16th century. To soak ourselves in the actual word of God. And that does make a change

in how we react.

And I think that's one of the keys to renewed vitality in the church. The word does not return void, but we've got to learn it, people. We've got to live in it.

Jessica: Dr. Lakies, you wrote in your book that the church is primarily known for what it is against instead of what it is for. What did you mean by that?

Chad: Yep. Yeah.  
I think people sometimes react to that as if you know, they're sick of hearing it, or it comes off as a cliché. But we've got to be attuned to how we're perceived. We've got to be attuned to our reputation. Right? Despite all of the promises that, you know, the gates of hell will not prevail against the church, which I believe, teach and confess, right? We do have some agency of helping ourselves out in terms of our approach, the way that we engage, we can affect perception, we can affect reputation. The evidence is in the life of the early church, right? Tertullian wrote, see how they love one another. That was the public reputation of the church. How did it get to be that way? People did it, right? People did it. They were encouraged by their own leaders. They were encouraged by the scriptures. They gathered together everyday to sort of lean in to this resilient life. Despite the fact things weren't going there way. Well, things are not going our way now things feel uncomfortable. Things feel difficult. We've got all this emotional baggage now that we're carrying around. We've got to work through that and I think there is wisdom in the advise and the exhortations of the early church. As much as in well, you know Dr. Meyers favorite book of the Bible First Peter. right? Writing to a persecuted group of Christians, Peter's constantly encouraging them to live in a way that their public witness matters, right? Be the question is kind of what he's exhorting in chapter three. So

that people will ask, right? It's not about apologetics. It's not about training in Christian worldview and being able to answer all of the objections. It's about living in such a way that you're different and people wonder about that. Why do you keep doing this? Why do you keep living this way? You're not treated well. It's not going well for you. You're not, you know, you're not winning at life. It isn't all cakes and rainbows. Your experience is rough and it's that suffering, right, that we talked about in the earlier session. He's encouraged them to keep going, nevertheless, and the only way to do that is together, right? Not singularly alone. I can't just read First Peter alone and be like, I'm going to do it. No, I need to do it with others, right? It'd kind of be like trying to fast from my phone and digital technology. I'd fail on my own, but if a whole bunch of us did it, that'd be a movement.

Dale: But of course, you have to listen to the Tangible podcast. You cannot fast from this.

Chad: That's true.

Jessica: I agree with you. So in my personal witness, I look back. I've noticed a tone of antagonism in the way that I talk about non-believers and the way that I talk to non-believers. Like, they're the enemy and I don't know that I'm doing it consciously. I want to share God's love. God loves all of us. How do I get rid of that little tone of, I know you're evil?

Chad: Yeah, I think one of the places that it's going to start is from the shepherds of congregation, professionally trained church staff, because they're looked to as the leaders. They shape the imagination and the discourse of the communities that they lead and shepherd.

And so that's a big responsibility that we have to be mindful of. But then, you know, like every community that you're a part of, you pick up a way of speaking from the people that you're around. It's the same with how we use slang. It's the same as how you go and learn a foreign language if you want to become fluent. You've got to immerse yourself in an environment that talks a particular way. I think that's one of the wonderful things about the Christian tradition and especially the Lutheran tradition. We're always concerned about words, how we talk, how they mean. And so paying attention to that leads on to realizing that the way we talk shapes imaginations about what's possible, how life could be lived. And coming from pulpits, Bible studies, Sunday school classes, the hymns you choose, the contemporary songs you choose, all of that. We have so much hope and positivity in the sense of what we're for because of what Jesus is for, right? The life of the world. We have so much of that to offer that were we to double down on talking that way instead of lamenting the loss or being angry that the world's values are changing, we could put out a totally different kind of energy that when people encounter us, they do see something different in that way that Peter meant it, I think. I've worked with youth long enough to see that there's a difference between the words you say and your tone of voice when you say it. And sometimes helping teenagers understand why their parents are upset at them is because they're saying the right words but the tone of voice is telling me what you actually think. And I think that maybe as



Christians that might have been my tone of voice.

Dale: I teach a Bible class and I will always try, you know, what's on your mind? Open up. Very, very hesitant to do that.

Jesscia: Because you're terrifying.

Dale: Well, in some ways I guess I am.

Jesscia: Sure you are.

Dale: And don't you do that again, Jessica.

Jesscia: Exactly, see.

Dale: I was working with somebody once and she said she could see my face and that turned her off because she knew I was, she thought I was disagreeing vehemently with her position. I don't think it was true. But yeah, I'm not a nice person.

Jesscia: You are a nice person but you're an intimidating figure. How do you avoid that? What do you do?

Dale: I try and be real and honest but if I don't have the opportunity to have multiple conversations with a person and reveal a little bit more of the Dale behind the facade, it doesn't happen. The fact is, especially now in the 21st century, that these personal stories that show our vulnerability to a point but they open up a hearing for whatever the doctrine is that we're speaking about.

Chad: Right.

Dale: But you have to be very personal in any conversation.

Jesscia: Our final question on the show is always this. What do you want our listeners to remember?  
Dr. Lakies, what do you want our listeners to remember?

Chad: I want them to think about our time as a time of opportunity. And part of that opportunity is going to mean reaching back to the past to remember how the church has been here before. It's not exactly the same but we've got a lot of deep wells to draw from. And those deep wells come from them being shaped by Jesus and the Holy Spirit, leaning into the practice of patience, humility, seeking peace, seeking the good of those around us despite the fact that they don't always agree. These are our moves that we see Jesus making and the early church emulating and it made a difference for them and I think it can make a difference for us today.

Jesscia: Dr. Meyer, what do you want our listeners to remember?

Dale: Well, I think of a hymn. When through the deep waters I call thee to go, the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow for I will be with thee, thy trouble to bless and sanctify to thee thy deepest distress. It'll be fine. That's it for today. We've been discussing one aspect of Dr. Chad Lakies' book, *How Light Shines Through Resilient Witness in Dark Times*. You can find it on our website and a link to it on our website. You should probably read it. I did. It's pretty good. I'd like to thank our guests. Dr. Lakies, thanks for being here.

Chad: Thanks for having me, Jessica.

Jesscia: Dr. Meyer, thanks for being on the show again. Glad to leave retirement. And thank you for listening. You can find more episodes of *Tangible* on all the major hosting apps or on our website, [ConcordiaTheology.org](http://ConcordiaTheology.org). Check it out. I'm your producer and host, Jessica Bordeleau. Join me next time when we talk about the intersection of

theology and daily life

because it's Tangible: Theology learned and Lived.