

Dying to Live

The Power of Forgiveness

Harold L. Senkbeil

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Let this be recorded for a generation to come
so that a people yet unborn may praise the LORD.

Psalm 102:18 RSV

To three special people, who are their parents' joy and pride:

Michael Leigh Senkbeil

Katherine Jane Senkbeil

Timothy Nessel Senkbeil

Dying to live, God grant you life in all its abundance
in Him who is our Life.

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To Start With

“The church is a mouth-house,” Martin Luther once said, “not a pen-house.”

“Christ himself wrote nothing,” he continued, “nor did he give command to write, but to preach orally.”

By vocation I am a preacher, and I know what Luther was talking about. Words ring in the ear differently than they appear on a page. The living voice of the Gospel loses something when muffled by ink and print.

That’s why sitting down to write about doctrine is risky. The sacred mysteries of the faith always suffer under dissection. Cold description won’t do; these truths call for lively dialog. No doubt that’s why the Wittenberg reformer—himself a prolific author—so highly prized the verbal interchange of fellow Christians. “Mutual conversation and consolation of brethren,” he called it.

The words on the following pages are half of my “mutual conversation” with you. A mutual journey, actually—a kind of joint pilgrimage.

In writing *Sanctification: Christ in Action* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1989), I outlined a Lutheran response to the challenge mounted by American evangelical Christianity at the close of the 20th century. There I described a personal pilgrimage into the heritage of the Lutheran church—a Christian life rooted in the objective realities of the Incarnation, the Word, and the Sacraments.

This book covers much of the same terrain, but without the academic luggage I carried last time. Since I’m traveling lighter, I hope the living voice of the Gospel speaks more clearly through these printed words. If so, I know our conversation will provide some consolation for you.

As my travel companion, please don’t be alarmed by the “Lutheran” label on the hiking garb. I hope to offer something for

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your own journey, no matter what label you wear. Lutherans, you see, have always held their doctrine to be both thoroughly evangelical and genuinely catholic. Far from a 16th century novelty, the Lutheran confessors saw their faith as nothing more than a summary of what Christians always and everywhere had believed: “the ancient consensus which the universal and orthodox church of Christ has believed, fought for against many heresies and errors, and repeatedly affirmed” (Preface to the Book of Concord, 1580). That “ancient consensus” and its application to the Christian life—its “so what?”—was the focus last time around.

This book is really an excursion into the “now what?” of the Christian life, and that means it’s no armchair travelog. I speak as one traveler to another. You could be a life-long Christian or a novice in the faith; perhaps you’re just curious. But no matter. For we’re fellow pilgrims, you and I. The road gets rough now and then. But it is Christ’s road. And that makes all the difference in the world.

Harold L. Senkbeil
All Saints Day 1993

Where Credit Is Due . . .

A book as conscientiously conversational as this one leans heavily on prior conversations. At the back of this volume I have listed some of the books which have been formative for me, but it would be impossible to list all the people who were important conversation partners. Still, there are certain individuals who deserve special thanks. Without them this book would not have taken shape as it did.

My first thanks go to my wife, Jane Nettet Senkbeil, for her help along the way. It's tough enough being a pastor's wife—but when he takes up writing, the challenge is multiplied. Jane managed the adjustment with both grace and good humor—one of her unique gifts. She helped me carve out time for this project and provided important feedback to the material as it took shape. She indeed lives up to her name: Jane is God's gift to me.

Special thanks are also due Dr. Robert Kolb, whose *Speaking the Gospel Today: A Theology for Evangelism* (CPH, 1984) first captured my imagination on the central Biblical themes of life and death. Despite heavy teaching and research responsibilities, he faithfully read each of the chapters as I completed them. His critique was eagerly anticipated, and his enthusiasm proved contagious, giving me renewed energy to continue.

It always helps to have someone keep you on target. University Lutheran Chapel, Minneapolis, Minn., provided needed “target practice.” During the writing process, members of University Lutheran Chapel field-tested the manuscript in their book study group. My thanks to these young men and women for their help and to their pastor, the Rev. John Pless, for his encouraging words.

“As iron sharpens iron,” Solomon wrote, “so one man sharpens another” (Prov. 27:17). This book has a sharper edge because of a very patient friend, Edward Treptow. He waded through the developing manuscript line by line; the result is a more penetrating book.

WHERE CREDIT IS DUE . . .

The themes which find voice in these words were first sharpened in our mutual conversation—my brother's help and consolation are gratefully acknowledged.

ALMIGHTY GOD, the giver of all good things, without whose help all Labour is ineffectual, and without whose grace all wisdom is folly, grant, I beseech Thee, that in this my undertaking, thy Holy Spirit may not be withheld from me, but that I may promote thy glory, and the Salvation both of myself and others; grant this, O Lord, for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.

From *Dr. Johnson's Prayers*, Elton Trueblood, ed. [Dublin, Ind.: Prinit Press, 1981], p. 7.

PART I

**The Incarnational
Foundation
of the Christian Life**

Our Dying World

...in Adam all die. (1 Cor. 15:22)

“This looks good,” she thought to herself. Such shiny fruit; it fairly cried out to be eaten, to be enjoyed. And what a broadening experience such enjoyment would be—the knowledge of good and evil, the Mighty One had said. How could He want less than the very best for His own? “My husband and I will be like God Himself,” she reflected. “Now, could that be so bad?” The serpent made sense: it would be much better to know both good and evil than to know only good.

“Here, have some.” She handed the juicy pulp to her husband. “This is good stuff.

“By the way, Adam, do you know what He meant by that word—I think it was die?”

Our Predicament

Where are we headed? Everybody wants to know, but strangely enough we’re not asking. Most of us are too busy with other questions: questions such as “How can we defend ourselves against terrorism?” “Was the nuclear holocaust nightmare just a bad dream?” “When is the next international crisis coming?” “What about the AIDS epidemic?”

Or maybe other questions: “Will my contract be renewed when I come up for review?” “Will I be able to keep up the mortgage payments?” “Will my children survive the perils of adolescence?”

Or maybe more personal questions: “Why am I empty inside much of the time?” “Why did my mother die?” “Why does my best friend have cancer?”

You may have still other questions. The details really don’t matter. For finally all questions boil down to one central issue: Where are we headed in this world of ours?

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As the 20th century draws to a close and the third millennium of the Christian era looms large, this old world of ours is filled with a confusing mixture of hope and despair. On the one hand, great optimism and confidence in expanding technology, and yet on the other, perplexing fear and anxiety over the unknown.

One thing's for sure. We're all DYING TO LIVE. We'd like to have our crack at life, and we'd give anything to taste everything it has to offer. But we know it won't last. Ultimately, all of life is lived graveside. We are all dying—from the youngest newborn to the oldest nursing-home resident. We might be dying to live, but we're all dying.

That's our predicament as human beings on planet earth. All other issues, from the win/loss record of the local Little League team to the international war on drugs, fade in comparison. There's only one bottom line in this world of ours: Death.

Our Moral Crisis

The entertainment world has come a long way since Rhett Butler uttered the first *damn* on the silver screen. Television and movie producers scramble to find enough titillation to grab the attention of an increasingly jaded audience. Under the guise of authenticity, viewers are treated to graphic scenes of torture and dismemberment, illicit sex and perversion.

Some would lay the blame for our declining morals on the doorstep of filmmakers and TV producers. But the media aren't to blame any more than bathroom mirrors cause our pimples and wrinkles. The entertainment industry simply reflects the moral climate of our age. The source of the problem is elsewhere. In the immortal words of the cartoon character Pogo: "We have met the enemy and he is us."

Too often we look to the world around us as the source of our moral problem. If we could just stamp out pornography, we think, we could get rid of sexual abuse. If we could clean up the lyrics to rock music we could solve the drug problem. But these are really only the symptoms of a much more drastic predicament.

Of course these issues do deserve our attention; we need to clean up the cesspool. But remember, cesspools aren't the source of

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sewage. Neither is the world the source of sin. The cause of moral pollution, Jesus said, is found much closer to home:

“What goes into a man’s mouth does not make him ‘unclean,’ but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him ‘unclean.’ . . . Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man ‘unclean.’ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.” (Matt. 15:11, 17–19)

This is strong language. It’s tough to take. Reality is sometimes hard to stomach. And this is one reality we need to face head on: every last one of the horrifying sins in the world outside can be found inside our own hearts. This ugly truth is crucial in addressing the moral crisis of our age. If Christians are to have any lasting impact on the world at the end of the 20th century, we’ll have to address the real problem. We must attack the cause, not merely the symptoms.

Let’s take a look at the real source of our moral quandary. Let me warn you, it’s not a pretty picture. The filthy atmosphere of our age is nauseating enough, but the real problem goes deeper. The ugly fact is, we ourselves add to the pollution. Our nostrils might be offended by the smell of our moral climate, but we need to sniff more carefully. A stench filters out of our own pores. It is the stench of death.

A World in Crisis

To all appearances, our world seems increasingly godless. And godlessness must be the problem, we think. If the world could be more religious, we would solve our moral crisis. However, maybe the problem isn’t the godlessness of our age, but rather the gods of our age.

St. Paul’s description of the sophisticated Athenians applies just as well today: *“I see that in every way you are very religious”* (Acts 17:22). He then proceeded to describe the idols he had observed in their city, including the altar inscribed *“To an unknown god.”*

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This “unknown god,” he claimed, had made himself known in Jesus Christ.

That’s not a bad mission strategy, and it could serve Christians well in proclaiming the Gospel in our own day. But first we have to get rid of the idea that we live in a godless world.

In his Large Catechism, Martin Luther wrote: “A god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need.” By that definition our world is anything but godless. It’s just that we have manufactured our own gods.

Materialism has been the whipping boy of the Christian church in the western world for decades, and not without cause. Material things do have a tendency to blind people to spiritual realities. And the search for “stuff,” as we call the merchandise of this world, has become an international obsession. Eastern Europe and the Third World are developing an insatiable appetite for the goods that have defined “the good life” in the West. We all have to admit it: material things tend to become “that to which we look for all good”

But I wonder if the problem doesn’t run deeper. Maybe our problem is the plastic toyland we live in.

The Plastic Toyland

The issue of materialism comes into focus when we remember Jesus’ words: “What goes into a man’s mouth does not make him ‘unclean,’ but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him ‘unclean.’” That is to say, it’s not the material things of this world that are the issue, but our attitude toward those things.

Jesus warned his disciples about the pitfall of wealth in His comical comparison between the rich man entering heaven and a camel trying to squeeze through the eye of a needle. The real problem wasn’t the riches, Jesus was saying, but the rich man. It wasn’t what the rich man owned, but what owned him. In other words, it was a First Commandment issue: here was a man with the wrong god.

Christians at the dawn of the 21st century are faced with plenty of alternatives to the real God of heaven and earth. But I would suggest that the chief false god of our age is pleasure.

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Not long ago people found happiness even when they had little or no pleasure. Happiness was viewed not as an end in itself, but as a by-product of relationships forged on the anvil of family, friends, and vocation. Now, however, the focus seems to have changed. Thomas Jefferson wrote of the right to “the pursuit of happiness.” Americans at the end of the 20th century seem blind to this conditional view of happiness. We have rewritten the Declaration of Independence; we now see happiness as an inherent right. And we have also redefined happiness. No longer is it the result of relationships and work. We *demand* happiness. We want it now, and we want it on our terms and according to our own definition: personal pleasure.

You don't have to look at lifestyles to see this change; our language gives us away. Americans increasingly communicate with “I” talk. “I think” has been replaced by “I feel.” “I would like” has given way to “I want.” In each example the second “I” is bigger than the first. In “I” talk, the self speaks in louder and louder tones until rational thought is drowned out in emotion.

Increasingly people are less and less concerned with truth and more and more concerned with pleasure. Despite the move toward health foods, hamburgers are packaged and sold with an eye toward satisfying our taste buds more than our dietary needs. “You deserve a break today” and “Have it your way” have been successful sales pitches, but they could just as well be slogans for our age.

You and I live in a “me first” era. We're conditioned to have it our way; we're told to have whatever we want. And we're told in no uncertain terms what we should want: whatever pleases us, pure and simple. Surprisingly, instead of resisting what amounts to blatant propaganda, we buy into this package. It seems perfectly obvious to most people that life should be focused on personal pleasure.

No wonder, then, that increasing chunks of our time and energy are given over to toys: activities and things designed primarily to give us pleasure. The satirical bumper sticker of the '80s is turning out to be a prophetic description of the '90s: WHOEVER DIES WITH THE MOST TOYS WINS.

And that's just the problem, isn't it? The world we live in is a toy-land. The things we are told will bring us pleasure are just things;

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they have no happiness to give in themselves. Their promise is an empty promise; no possession or activity comes with happiness attached.

The Old Testament preacher said it long ago:

I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. . . . I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun. (Eccl. 1:14; 2:10–11)

Sadly, the world goes on chasing after the wind as the clock winds down. It is a world of glitz and glitter, but it's just a toyland. Ultimately, even people with the most toys must die.

Plastic People

As people look for something real in a world of plastic, they reach out to others. This is as it should be, for the Creator of heaven and earth has made humans in His own image. In part, being created in God's image means we have a built-in need for fellowship; we aren't designed to go solo in this life. We were made to live in mutually satisfying harmony with our neighbors on planet earth. But tragically, we frequently find dissonance instead of harmony.

Reaching out to others, too often we run into a wall of isolation or rejection. We ask a colleague for help, and she ignores us. We gather our courage to reveal our true feelings to a friend, and he nervously changes the subject. These walls are built for self-defense; to one degree or another we all sense a need to protect ourselves from others' demands. Sometimes it's out of fear, sometimes out of frustration. Yet it feels like the same thing to the person on the outside looking in: loneliness.

Rising crime rates have frightened merchants and homeowners alike. We reflect a fortress mentality. Business is good for bullet-proof glass manufacturers. Not only the sheriff's receptionist, but also gas-station attendants sit behind barriers of steel and glass, hermetically sealed against intruders. New homes and condos are

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built to screen and seal people from the outside world. Once front porches invited passers-by to sit and chat; now our garages shield us from our neighbors, and we sit securely in climate-controlled environments until it's time to venture out again in our motorized cubicles. Once we practiced the fine art of communication, that most delicate balance between words, posture, and expression by which human beings open their hearts to each other. Now we are increasingly content to be entertained by shadowy electronic images on video screens.

Such is life in the real world, we say. But it's not real. It's a plastic world we've made for ourselves, populated with plastic people. And we pay a great price for all this plastic. For when you get right down to it, beneath all the busyness and hype of our daily routine, we lead lonely lives. We've walled ourselves off from reality; we've convinced ourselves that plastic will do and counterfeit is good enough. But it's not. Underneath the surface we still have a deep hunger for reality. The desperate longing of human hearts to unload their joys and sorrows to one another is dimly echoed in the empty chatter of celebrity talk shows. But it's a pretty cheap imitation. And, if you listen closely, you can hear something under all this trivial chatter. It is the voice of a profound emptiness in our culture, which has settled for plastic instead of reality. It is the voice of despair. It's really the empty echo of our own voice; for, each in our own way, you and I too cry out from the death in which we live.

The Loneliness Epidemic

Most Americans would tell you they have no time to be lonely. From dawn until the wee hours of the night, we jam our schedules with the myriad of activities we call living. *And besides*, we like to think, *how can we be lonely if we're around so many people so much of the time?* In fact, we probably think our real problem is not loneliness, but too much togetherness. Like the late Hollywood recluse, Greta Garbo, we cherish our privacy. "I want to be alone" is our motto, too.

And so we settle for surface talk that keeps people at a distance. "How are you today?" greets the checkout clerk, not really wanting to know. "Just fine, thanks," we reply, not wanting to let him know