

# DYING TO LIVE

SECOND EDITION

THE FOUNDATION, FOCUS, AND  
SHAPE OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

HAROLD L. SENKBEIL



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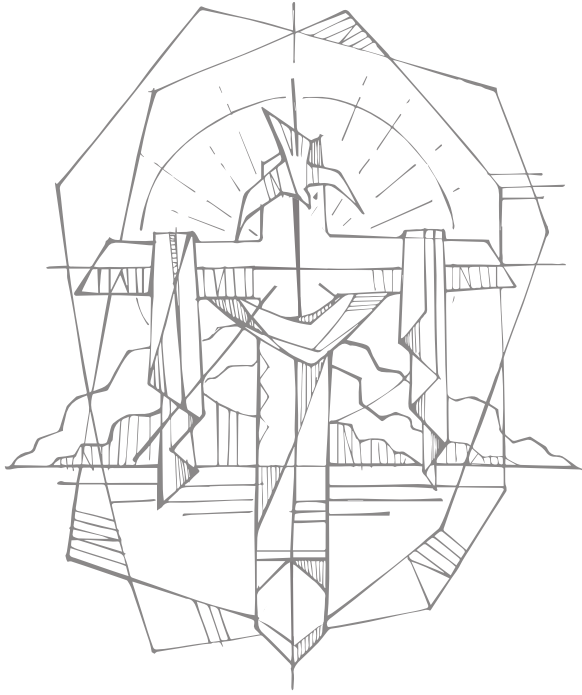
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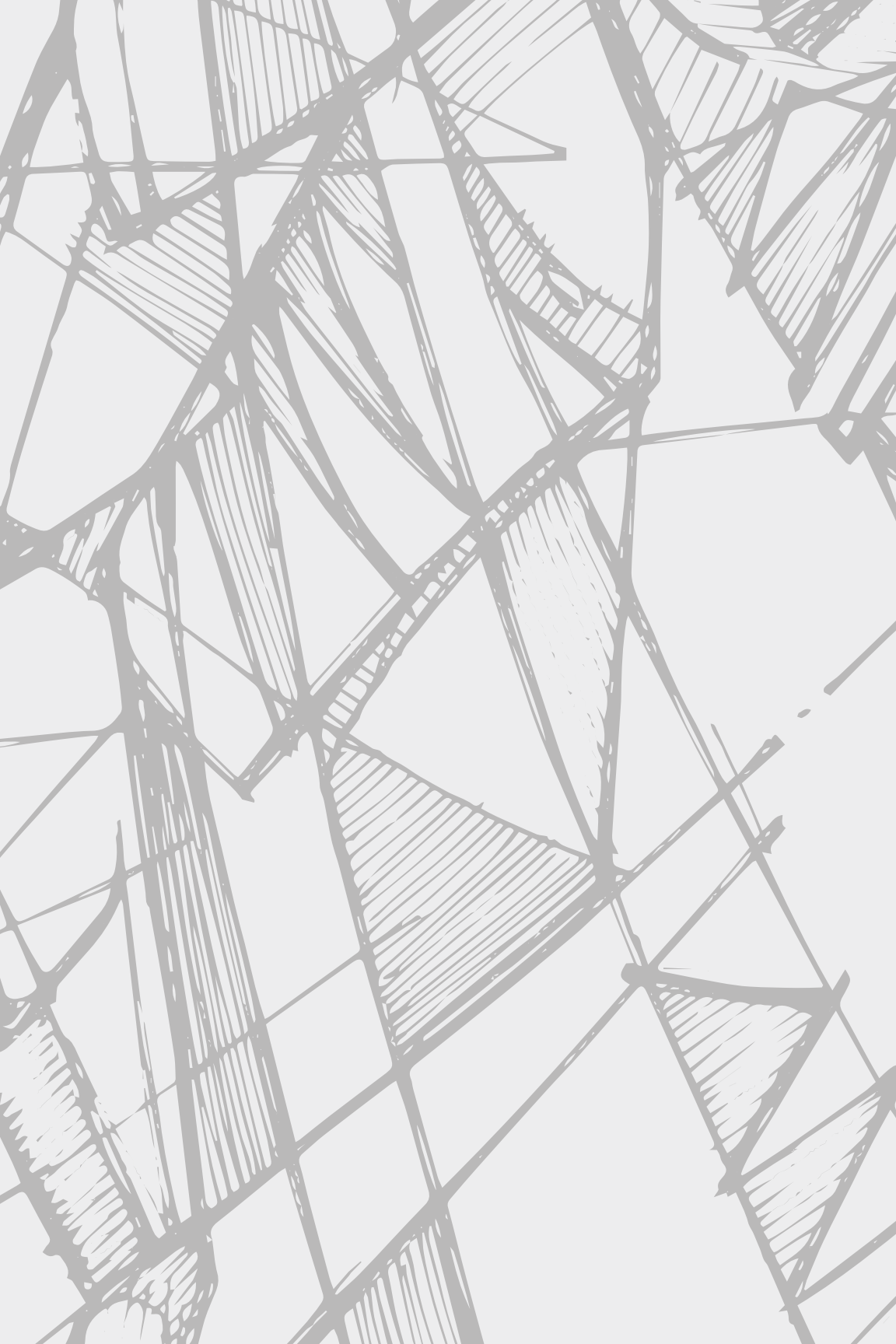
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*Let this be recorded for a generation to come,  
so that a people yet to be created may praise the LORD.  
(Psalm 102:18)*

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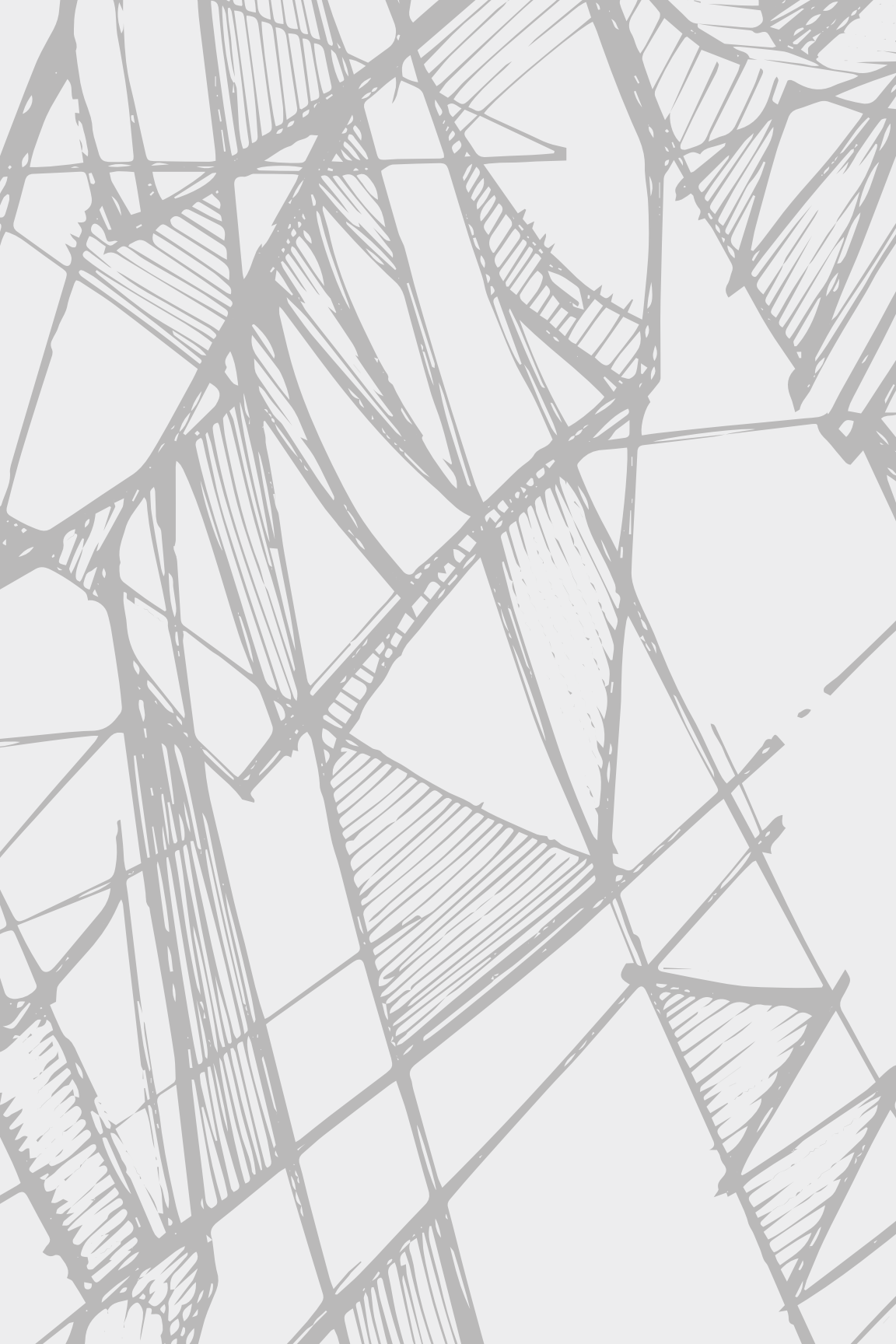
*To three special people, who  
are their parents' joy and pride:  
Michael Leigh Senkbeil  
Katherine Jane Senkbeil Lind  
Timothy Nessel Senkbeil  
Dying to live, God grant you life  
in all its abundance in Him who is our Life.*



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## FOREWORD

Martin Luther preached and taught the message of Holy Scripture with the needs of hearers and readers in mind. Between the poles of biblical faithfulness and pastoral care, the Wittenberg professor strove to bring his hearers to repentance and the mortification of their sinful desires. In this way, he intended to lead them to the Gospel of Christ, the liberating promise of forgiveness and restoration that delivered all the good things—the benefits—that Jesus had won for them by dying and rising to new life.

Over the past half century, Harold Senkbeil has practiced his callings as parish pastor and seminary professor in Luther's spirit of delivering what the Holy Spirit has to say to His people. Senkbeil has done so with a profound sensitivity to the needs of North Americans in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In the contexts of family, congregation, the wider church, and pastoral education, his genial way of announcing God's Word has opened up and applied God's biblical address of sinners recalcitrant and sinners repentant. Senkbeil's voice has extended beyond his congregations and classrooms to a reading audience around the world. Having grown up as a child of Luther's Small Catechism and in the spirit of the Augsburg Confession, he has recognized that his callings included addressing the whole church across denominational and confessional lines and geographical borders. His readership includes people in many nations and ecclesiastical traditions, readers whose faith has grown as Pastor Senkbeil has told the story of Christ's saving love with his gift of rendering Scripture clearly and winsomely for common Christians.

“Experience makes the theologian,” Luther said on the basis of the course of his own life. The faith delivered to Senkbeil by his parents and his childhood congregation in western Minnesota continues to echo through his writing today. What he learned as a child and youth has been processed by experiences of joy and sorrow, blessing and loss, in his family and in encounters with members of his congregations and his students. His disciplined study of the writings of the prophets, apostles, and evangelists has created his realistic assessment of life in our world, as it is reflected in his several books, among them *Dying to Live*.

Luther paraphrased Romans 6:4 in describing the daily life of repentance that believers experience as they suffer the mystery of the continuation of sin and evil in their lives. On the basis of his experience, the Wittenberg reformer confessed that “the old creature in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily contrition and repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.” It is this life that Pastor Senkbeil seeks to cultivate in readers who also have received the promise of forgiveness of sins and new life lived out in Christ’s footsteps. *Dying to Live* places God’s Word, as the Holy Spirit conveys it in oral, written, and sacramental forms, before readers in meaningful ways that aid their own growth as conversation partners of the Holy Spirit. His Word enlivens His conversation partners, whose prayers respond to what He says to them in the midst of daily life. They engage His address to them from the pages of Scripture and in conversation with other Christians, in sermons they hear and texts they read in printed and electronic forms, in receiving the Lord’s body and blood and recalling the promise God made to them in their Baptism.

Pastor Senkbeil has experienced how God’s Word not only builds the faith of individuals but also welds them together in community. In that community, they enjoy—and suffer—a communion with one another that is molded in the routine of the liturgy of worship that frames their reception of God’s gifts and their response to Him. For as they worship together, Pastor Senkbeil shows, they become a family that, in spite of many differences and unique gifts and perspectives, has much in common: the same hope in God’s call to each of them, the same Lord, the same faith, the same

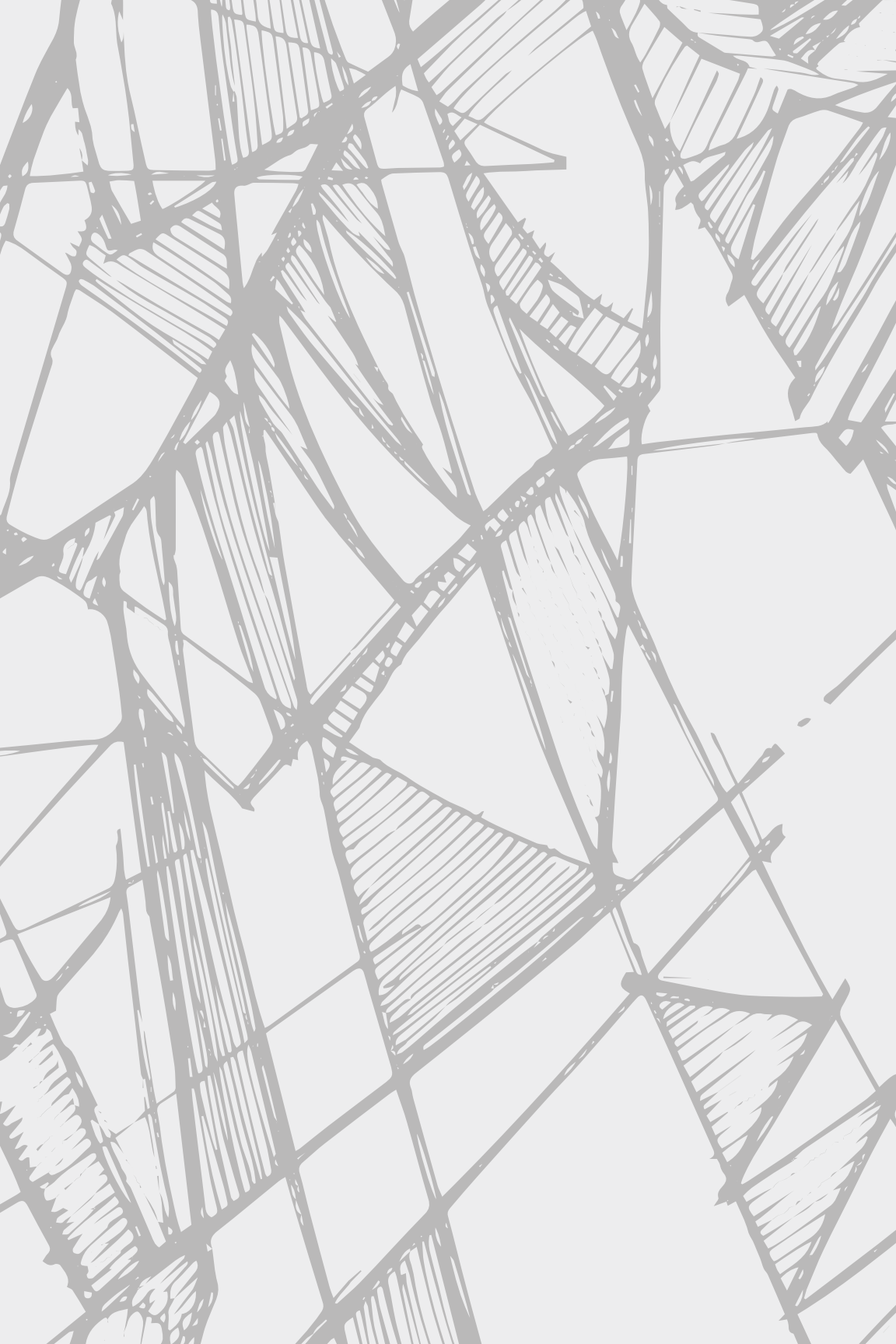
Baptism, the same God and Father. Their heavenly Father sustains their faith with the words of His promise, for instance, in giving His Son in body and blood conveyed in bread and wine and in other forms spoken and written. This communion joins God's people in one place as they turn to their Lord in praise and prayer.

Finally, Senkbeil expands the reader's vision and appreciation of God's calling him or her into the responsibilities of this world, where the Creator has shaped structures for serving and sustaining one another in our homes, our occupations, our social and political contexts, and in the congregation of the faithful. In the exercise of the callings God gives us in these contexts, we worship with fellow believers as God's people who have been called to care for His world.

Adventures of discovery and recollection await readers as they join Senkbeil in this book as he offers a guide for Christians following the path that God has designed for them as He leads them through life in this world.

*Robert Kollb*

Professor emeritus of systematic theology  
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis  
The Festival of St. Michael and All Angels 2024



## 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 twentieth 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 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 sixteenth-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). 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 lifelong 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

## DYING TO LIVE REVISITED

Time flies when you're having fun, they say. I've discovered that's true even without the fun part. Time flows by all too swiftly.

It's been well over three decades since I sat down at my computer to compose some words that might stand the test of time. In the interim there've been many joys—and not a few sorrows, ups and downs, twists and turns. That's the way it goes down here below as we await the return of Christ and the dawning of the new creation. I've buried people who were precious to me and mine: my aged parents, my youthful son-in-law, and my precious bride, who for over half a century loved me, overlooked my flaws, and forgave my sins.

My children, who then stood on the brink of youth, are now well into middle age with children of their own. And I approach fourscore years, considerably diminished from what I once was. But that goes with the territory here in our fallen world. “The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God” (Romans 8:19). On the day of resurrection, this tired world and all its inhabitants will be set free from its bondage to decay into the glorious liberty of eternal joy.

But not yet. In the meantime, we who are baptized into Christ move from one day to the next in quiet faith. We've learned that to know Him and the power of His resurrection, we must also share in the fellowship of His suffering (Philippians 3:10). Joy and sorrow, cross and resurrection. It's a package deal. As long as we go on living here in this world, we're all dying.

But we're dying to live; that's the point. The life that is in Christ Jesus stands the test of time and all the shifting challenges of this world. The more things change, the more they stay the same. This time around I've reframed the symptoms of our dying world to help communicate afresh the undying hope of all who place their trust in the Word made flesh for us and for our salvation.

*"And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32).*

*Harold L. Senkbeil*

June 29, 2024

## 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 late 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 lived up to her name: Jane was God's gift to me for more than fifty years.

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. I am humbled by his generous appraisal of my life's work as pastor and professor in the foreword he crafted for this book's second edition. His friendship and collegial partnership remain an important impetus in my writing nearly four decades later.

It always helps to have someone keep you on target. University Lutheran Chapel, Minneapolis, Minnesota, provided needed “target practice.” During the writing of the first edition, 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 the Rev. John Pless, who was then their pastor, for his encouraging words. A generation later John and I were colleagues on the faculty of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, where our conversation continued.

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

The second edition was first championed by Dr. Jonathan Mumme of Hillsdale College, who some years ago gathered a select group of his undergraduate theology students at Concordia University Wisconsin to consider how the book might be updated to better reflect the challenges of the digital age. More recently he helped me reflect on how the life embodied in Christ Jesus impacts the empty idols of virtual reality. His assistance is gratefully acknowledged.

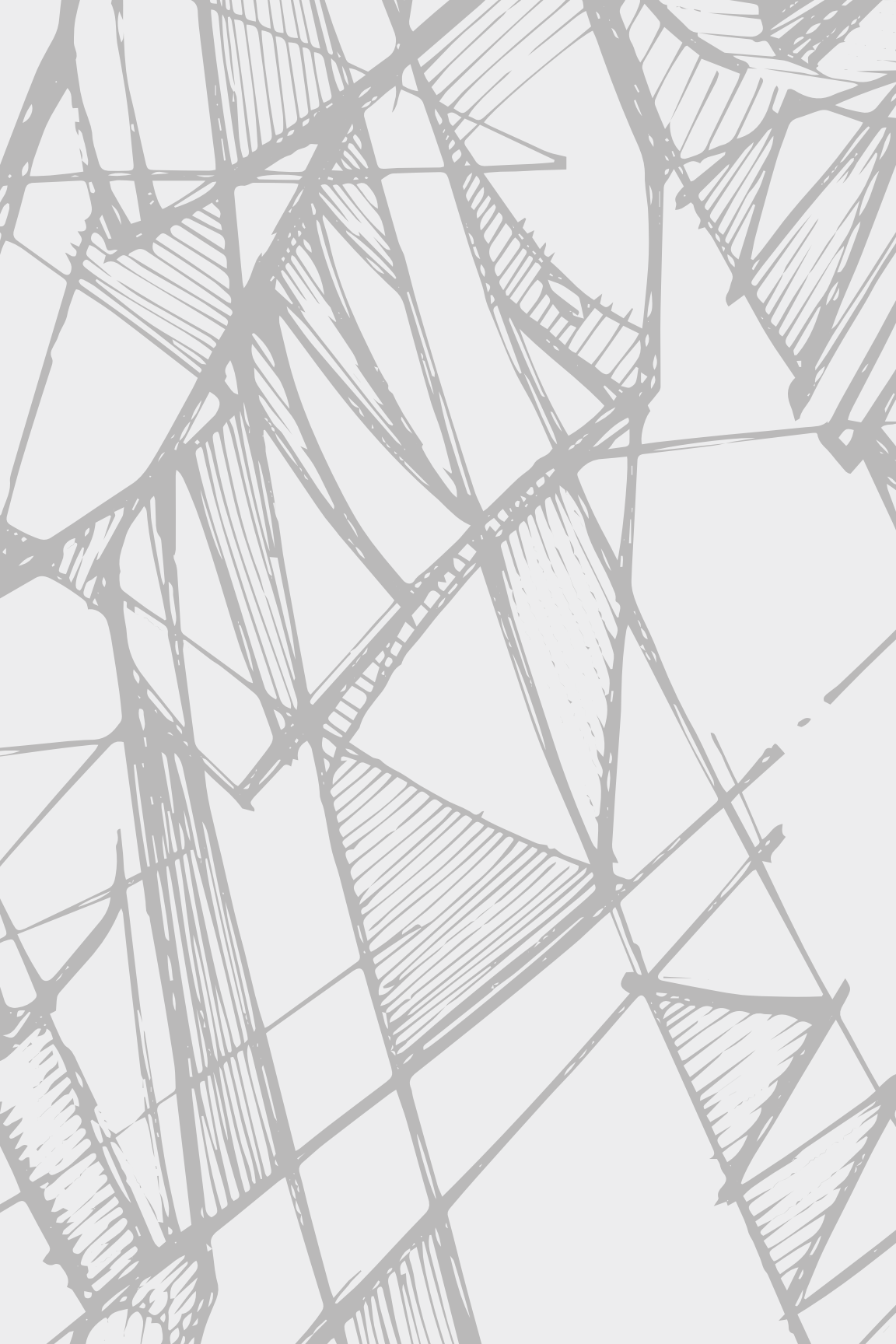
Almighty God, the giver of all good things, without whose help all labour is ineffectual, and without whose grace all wisdom is folly; grant, I beseech Thee, that in this my undertaking, thy Holy Spirit may not be withheld from me, but that I may promote thy glory, and the salvation both of myself and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

—Samuel Johnson, *Prayers and Meditations*



# **PART 1**

THE INCARNATIONAL FOUNDATION  
OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE



## OUR DYING WORLD

### **In Adam all die. (1 Corinthians 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? Ultimately that’s what everybody wants to know. But most of us are busy with other questions: questions like “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 next worldwide pandemic?”

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; just fill in the blank. The details really don’t matter. For finally all questions like these boil down to one central issue: Where are we headed in this world of ours?

As the third millennium of the Christian era rolls relentlessly on, 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 “forever wars” and rumors of wars, fade in comparison. There’s only one bottom line in this world of ours: death.

## OUR SOCIAL CRISIS

The entertainment industry has come a long way since Rhett Butler uttered the first “damn” on the silver screen. Streaming media 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 cultural collapse on the doorstep of gaming companies, pop stars, and social media influencers. But they are not to blame any more than bathroom mirrors cause our pimples and wrinkles. They’ve simply learned how to capitalize on the social climate of our age. The source of the problem is elsewhere. In the immortal words of the classic 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 problems. If we could just stamp out online porn, we think, we could get rid of misogyny and sexual abuse. If we could clean up the lyrics to pop tunes, we could solve the tsunami of drug addiction and overdoses. But these are really only the symptoms of a much more drastic predicament.

Of course these issues do deserve our attention; we should clean up the cesspool as best we're able. But remember, cesspools aren't the source of sewage. Neither is the world the source of sin. The cause of moral pollution, Jesus said, is found much closer to home:

It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person. . . . Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. (Matthew 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 around us can be found inside our own hearts. This ugly truth is crucial in addressing the social disintegration in our age. If Christians are to have any lasting impact on the world we live in, 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 collective quandary. Let me warn you, it's not a pretty picture. The depraved atmosphere of our age is nauseating enough, but the real problem is far deeper. The ugly fact is, we ourselves add to the pollution. Our nostrils might be offended by the smell of our cultural 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. Maybe godlessness is the central problem. If the world could become less secular and more religious, we would solve our society's 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 perceive 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 the unknown god." 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 where religion is on the downswing. Old and new gods are in the mix of this brave new world, and religions are actually on the rise. People who are dying to live—but dying just the same—remain religious, even if they no longer talk in those terms.

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 used to be the whipping boy of the Christian church in the Western world, and not without cause. Material things do have a tendency to blind people to spiritual realities. The search for "stuff," as we call the merchandise of this world, became an international obsession. After the Second World War, Eastern Europe and the developing world acquired an insatiable appetite for the goods that seemed to define "the good life" in the West. Material things did tend to become "that to which we look for all good."

But in the digital age we invented different gods. So it was no longer just "stuff" that captivated us, but the endless pursuit of image. Many of us endlessly swipe our screens, obsessively searching for just the right image to present to those anonymous "friends" we accumulate on various social media platforms. Me, myself, and I are no longer the center of my universe, but my avatar. What "me" am I going to project to a watching internet

today? The choices seem infinite, and I can hide myself behind my preferred alias any time I want.

It feels real, but in the end, it's not. The chosen "me" takes over for the real me. That virtual me easily morphs into my refuge in every time of need and that to which I look for all good. When that happens, I've effectively become my own god.

## PLASTIC PEOPLE AND VIRTUAL IMAGES

The issue of materialism comes into focus when we remember Jesus' words: "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person" (Matthew 15:11). 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 with His humorous 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 in the twenty-first century are faced with plenty of other alternatives to the real God of heaven and earth. Pleasure and self-chosen images are among the chief false gods in an age of expressive individualism.

Not all that 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. Thomas Jefferson wrote of the right to "the pursuit of happiness." Americans seem to have become blind to his conditional view of happiness. They've rewritten the Declaration of Independence; happiness has become an inherent right. Happiness is no longer the result of relationships and work. We demand happiness. We want it now, and we want it on our terms and defined on our own terms: personal pleasure and our own free choice.

You don't have to look at lifestyles to see this change; our language gives us away. People usually communicate using "I" talk. "I think" has

become “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 still are packaged and sold with an eye toward satisfying taste buds more than dietary needs. “You deserve a break today” and “Have it your way” were successful sales pitches back in the day, but the hallmarks of the digital age are just as self-centered: “I” phones, “I” robots, and “I” tunes. It’s no longer just “I” talk, but an “I” world.

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 makes us happy, pure and simple. Surprisingly, instead of resisting such blatant propaganda, we buy into this package. It seems perfectly obvious to most people that life should center around private choice and personal pleasure.

No wonder, then, that increasing chunks of our time and energy are given over to toys: activities, gadgets, and apps designed primarily to promote our image and give us pleasure. The satirical bumper sticker of the last century pretty closely describes the actual values of our own time: WHOEVER DIES WITH THE MOST TOYS WINS.

And that’s just the problem, isn’t it? The world we live in is a cyberspace toyland. The things we’re told will bring us pleasure are just things or merely ephemeral virtual images; 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 everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind. And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after

wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.  
(Ecclesiastes 1:14; 2:10–11)

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

## SOCIAL DISTANCING

As people look for meaning in a virtual world, 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 community; we aren't designed to go solo in this world. We were made to live in mutually satisfying harmony with other humans 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. We all want to avoid needy people. Sometimes out of fear, sometimes out of frustration. Digital tools enable us to reach other people across the globe without ever leaving our homes. We can see their images on our screens and hear their voices, but we cannot touch them. It's convenient, but it's not real contact.

Distance learning may work to a certain extent. But long-distance communication can't sustain deep relationships between embodied humans. Virtual community is a very poor substitute for the real thing. And it all adds up to the same thing to anyone left on the outside looking in: loneliness.

Crime frightens merchants and homeowners alike. We reflect a fortress mentality. Business is good for bulletproof glass manufacturers. Not only the sheriff's receptionist but also convenience store attendants sit behind barriers of steel and glass, hermetically sealed against intruders. We live increasingly in a contactless, virtual world. Fast food is ordered from apps and kiosks rather than live employees. Big box stores and internet

sales portals enable us to buy the things we need without ever leaving our homes or encountering real human beings. New homes and condos are built to screen and shield people from the outside world. Once front porches invited passers-by to sit and chat; now garages shield us from our neighbors, and we sit securely in climate-controlled environments till 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 one another. Now we're increasingly content with digital images on screens. Electronic tools connect us nearly instantaneously with people on the other side of the planet. Yet paradoxically, for all these wonderful communication tools, we live increasingly isolated and fragmented lives, starving for genuine human contact.

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 the images they project of themselves. We pay a great price for all this plastic and virtual reality. For when you get right down to it, beneath the hum of nonstop communication and the frenzy of daily routine, we lead increasingly lonely lives. We've walled ourselves off from reality; we've convinced ourselves that plastic will do and virtual is good enough. But it's not. Beneath 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 glib chatter of the internet. 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 people would tell you they're too busy to be lonely. From dawn until the wee hours of the night, we jam our schedules with the myriad of activities we call living. For when it comes right down to it, we like our

privacy; other people actually make us anxious. In fact, we probably think our real problem is not loneliness, but too much togetherness.

And so we settle for surface talk that keeps people at a distance. “How are you today?” somebody asks, not really wanting to know. “Just fine, thanks,” we reply, not wanting to let him know either. We paste on our plastic grin as he gives us an obligatory “Have a nice day.” “You too,” we say pleasantly, our thoughts actually a million miles away.

That’s of course just when we’re forced to venture out in public. Most of the time we simply use our devices to interact with others—if we really have to. We call them “phones,” but we use them to keep others at arm’s length. Why actually talk to another human being when you can get by with an email? Better yet, a text. And why share a real feeling if a simple emoji will do?

Surface talk is all right once in a while; indeed it’s vital at times. But as a steady diet it leaves us decidedly empty, even starved. We learn to cover up our real thoughts and to bail out of conversations when they get too uncomfortable with a casual “You know what I mean.” But how could anyone know unless we tell them? When we keep our true feelings to ourselves, no one really knows what we mean. Emojis are no substitute for emotions, let alone real thoughts. If that’s not loneliness, what is it?

We claim to have lots of friends. We might even brag about the number of friends and followers we’ve collected on social media. But what we call “friends” are in fact mere acquaintances—even those few we’ve actually met in person. We may work with them; we play with them sometimes; occasionally we eat or drink with them; we might routinely chat with them. But what we don’t do is talk with them. Not really. Somehow we’ve learned to keep our guard up when we’re around other people. And if we don’t ever have to meet up, so much the better. We can hide pretty well if we keep all our interaction virtual and digital. “That way we won’t get burned,” we tell ourselves. We’re afraid to risk being honest—it takes too much energy, and it leaves us too vulnerable. What will that person think of me if I share my real fears or weaknesses? And what might he do with that information?

That’s why we keep our true feelings to ourselves. It’s better that way, we think, because then we won’t need to bother about anyone else’s problems either. “I’ve had to handle my life; let him deal with his own problems” is

our attitude. And still we call them “friends.” But they’re not. In fact, they’re not a whole lot different than the images on our screens: busy, chattering, perhaps even entertaining, but not real. Real friends are more than that.

And so we look for surrogate friends. We hire a therapist we can pay to keep our deepest feelings in confidence. We don’t mind opening up the darkness of our hearts hidden behind an online alias because no one will ever find out who we actually are. Counselors and online chat rooms are much better than no help at all, that’s for sure. But when you think about it, confidentiality based on money or anonymity is a pretty poor substitute for real friendship.

People are increasingly gathering massive amounts of data on gaining friends and keeping them. We have a genuine hunger for meaningful friendships; it’s just too risky, we tell ourselves. And so we live alone in a sea of togetherness. We’re drowning in chatter while thirsting for talk—real talk from one human heart open to another. I’d call that loneliness, wouldn’t you?

And loneliness is a big problem for human beings amidst our friendship famine. In fact, it’s a regular epidemic; an epidemic of loneliness in our dying world. In point of fact, loneliness has become a major medical issue impacting the economies of many countries in the West.

## THE DIGITAL AGE

We’re victims of our own technology. In rural societies whole families once lived and worked together; neighbors depended on one another for their living and their very lives. Raising animals and growing crops, men and women had something to show for their labor. They found satisfaction and fulfillment in their work. They could see the fruits of their labor in their barns and granaries, not just in their bank accounts. It was the same in cottage industries: artisans worked in their own homes, turning out useful and finely crafted items with pride. With the dawning of the industrial age, however, fathers left home for work, with nothing to show when they returned except a paycheck. Work began to be an end in itself instead of a means of producing necessary goods. Job satisfaction began a steep decline. Over the last couple of centuries that’s the way it’s been in the West.

Recent decades introduced a new phenomenon. Technology has drastically altered the home and the workplace alike. Business is increasingly geared to the transfer of information, which is even less tangible than goods mass-produced on the assembly line. People can literally work digitally 24/7, with nothing to show for it except money. And frustration. And exhaustion. And loneliness.

Telecommuting and working remotely have only exacerbated the underlying problem. Even if we go into an office and work among people some of the time, the bottom line is we're still solo entrepreneurs. We may be told we're a valuable part of the team, but we can see right through that. We know most of that talk about teamwork is just talk. The truth is, at work we're all rivals. Every one of us is a potential candidate for promotion—and when that time comes, teamwork won't count for much. Mostly, it'll be a matter of how we've performed. And so we perform because we know we have to in order to save our own necks. It's all part of gaining an edge over other people. And it might make for promotions. But it doesn't do much for friendships.

We're moving faster and faster, but we don't seem to be getting anywhere. We're more "successful," but we're less satisfied. For the god of pleasure and choice will never be satisfied. No matter how many plastic toys we accumulate in the "I-verse" we live in, the self-made god of pleasure demands still more. "Have it your way" is his insistent plea. But we never have it our way, not entirely.

And so we move on from one job to the next, stuck in the same familiar routine, looking for satisfaction and fulfillment via our screens. But we have no roots. And so we have no friends. Not real friends, anyway, or precious few of them. Is it any wonder we lead lonely lives?

## THE LOVE FAMINE

Even the closest human relationships come under attack. In a me-centered world, some no longer bother with marriage. Or they redefine it around personal satisfaction and orgasmic preference. Children become an optional choice, and as a result historically sound economies are threatened by plummeting birth rates in many parts of the world. Demographics

are in steep decline, undermining the very fabric of society. Those families that do form are frequently broken apart, and children are raised by one parent or by the parent's new partner. Many children are raised by people who don't really "raise" them at all. And so the ugly cycle repeats itself: anger, bitterness, and more anger. Alarming numbers of children grow up with no place they can really call home, no safe place where they can learn what it means to love and to be loved. And these children grow up to be adults who don't know how to give and receive love.

Can you grasp the depth of this self-perpetuating tragedy? You can fill a food-starved stomach, after all; but how do you heal a love-starved soul? Worse yet, how can a person love anyone else if the word means nothing to him? We have a nice clinical phrase to describe this social disaster. We call it "dysfunctional relationships." But what it adds up to is brokenness. And under that brokenness is sin. And under that sin lies death.

The threat of wars and global terrorism, social unrest, climate change, political chaos, and unknown pandemics has people running scared. But the potential impact of the loneliness epidemic is just as scary. Hundreds of thousands of people in our age have never learned to love. And I'm not talking only about friendships; the loneliness epidemic impacts sexual connections as well.

## THE SEXUAL DISASTER

God designed men and women to share in the closest of all human relationships, the strongest bond, the most intimate human union—marriage. This union is expressed in sexual intercourse, sharing their bodies with each other, which the Bible describes as "knowing." From a modern viewpoint, when sex has become essentially a mere mechanical bodily function and crude expletives for it are used most everywhere, the word *knowing* seems a little quaint, just the sort of thing you'd expect from old-fashioned prudes who blush to speak directly about sex. But it's no euphemism. Rather, "knowing" accurately describes sex as it really is: transparent mutual disclosure through the intimate union of body, heart, and soul.

Even a casual observer can tell you something has gone horribly wrong with sex in our time. But sex itself isn't the problem. God invented sex, after

all, and He called it “very good” within His perfect creation (Genesis 1:31). The bodily union of husband and wife resulting in procreation of children mirrors the mysterious union of Jesus and His earthly Bride, the church (Ephesians 5:32). There’s nothing wrong with sex in and of itself within the bond of matrimony as the gift of our loving Creator. The problem with sex in our fallen world lies in the very nature of the plastic me-centered toyland we live in—and the plastic people playing around in that toyland.

The whirlwind of animalistic sexual behavior and depravity we’re witnessing all around us is actually the death throes of a society that has lost its moorings, empty and adrift on a sea of loneliness. People keep on looking for reality but find only plastic. Seeking closeness and intimacy, people look everywhere—and so they find it nowhere. Wanting to be up close and personal, people try sex without commitment, but they end up even more alone and farther apart. Still more tragic, sex becomes a solo sport.

Once immorality meant a one-night stand or a visit to a prostitute. But the multibillion-dollar porn industry enables people to gratify their sexual cravings virtually. Artificial intelligence and digital enhancement tools create lifelike sex toys or virtual sexual avatars with infinite orgasmic appetites. It’s no longer sex without love; now it’s sex with no intimacy at all. No wonder some settle for autonomous sex enhanced by digital technology. Is this what sex has come to in our anonymous world: disembodied orgasm? You can call it sick, to be sure. But besides being sick, it is tragic. Horribly, sadly tragic. Could there be a more dismal commentary on the loneliness epidemic of our age?

Others turn their back on sex entirely. Rejecting autonomous sex as too much bother, they regard the physical body itself as a prison confining their true-gendered self. Amputation, plastic surgery, or hormone suppressors provide a convenient way to escape their sexed body and project an alter ego as an avatar of their gender identity. Babies, if they accidentally intrude on the relentless pursuit of self-fulfillment, can be easily discarded at various stages of gestation.

Now we can begin to see the close connection between adultery and idolatry. The situation today is just as St. Paul described it twenty centuries ago:

Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves. . . . Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them. (Romans 1:22–24, 32)

The sexual aberrations of our age are wrong and sinful, but they're also extremely sad—actually, inhuman. Flesh-and-blood humans are created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26). When virtual sex takes the place of real marital union, people give up the glory of the immortal God to worship virtual parodies of the real mortal beings who were truly made in His image. This situation calls for something more than outrage; it calls for genuine sorrow. Before we can ever clean up our world we must weep for it. For what we see in today's sexual disaster is just another tragic symptom of the disease we all share in this dying world—a disease called sin. Our sin of choice may be different, but still we are all sinners. And those who do such things deserve death. To paraphrase Pogo's maxim of long ago: "We have met the victims, and they are us."

Faceless, empty sex is an ugly fact in the empty world we live in. Still more ugly is the fact that most of us refuse to face facts. We continue to pretend that everything is just fine in this world of ours.

## THE BIG LIE

Most of the time the things I've talked about here are not problems for many of us. We manage to cope quite well with life. Even if we're not quite happy just yet, we'd like to think we can get there soon with a bit more effort, the right diet and exercise—and maybe the right meds. We're content to go on accumulating toys, designing our preferred images and demanding pleasure and calling it happiness. We've grown accustomed to plastic things and virtual relationships; we've even come to prefer them

over the real thing. We don't mind working remotely or living behind barricades and in our private cubicles. We're perfectly content to spend our lives walled off from other people. And we've learned to live with surface talk and empty communication. We've actually grown satisfied with loneliness; we call it drive and self-preservation.

But maybe it's time we take another look at the world we live in and evaluate it in the sober light of day. Maybe it's time to quit fooling ourselves into believing that we are "just fine" and that things are "just fine" and that everything will turn out "just fine."

## THE NAKED TRUTH

Remember the old children's fable about the emperor's new clothes? An impostor had convinced everyone that he could weave magic clothes out of golden thread. To be sure, some noticed this thread was invisible. "Ah," said the tailor, "that's because only very wise people can see this cloth." Suddenly everyone pretended to see it, including the king, who ordered a full set of clothes made of the tailor's fictitious fabric. When the tailor pronounced his project finished, the king donned the make-believe wardrobe—and paraded down the street in his birthday suit! He was unwilling to admit he couldn't see the beautiful golden fabric. No one else was willing either. No one, that is, except for a small boy who had the audacity to say out loud what everyone already knew in their hearts: "The king isn't wearing anything at all!"

Who has the courage to take an honest look at this world of ours and call out the naked truth? Who has the heart to point out what we all know but are afraid to admit? Who will take a look at all this virtual reality and emptiness and loneliness and cheap imitation and describe what it really is? Who will call it?

God will call it. He calls it by one name. And it's a painfully simple name: death.

You and I can't go back to Eden. We live in a dying world. It's been in the process of dying ever since Adam and Eve elected themselves gods and thereby excluded themselves from the Tree of Life (Genesis 3). We can deny it if we want. We can ignore it and try to escape it, but it won't work.

For the truth is, you and I are dying too. Our laughter rings hollow in the playground we've tried to make of this world. And we've furnished this playground of ours with empty images and ugly plastic.

The plain truth is, life isn't all we'd like it to be. Not only will we die one day; we are dying every day of our lives. We're dying to live, but we're dying just the same. Like it or not, that's the bottom line in the world we live in—everything else is pure sham. We're going to have to look somewhere else for real life.

## THE SURPRISING ALTERNATIVE

Christianity is the unbelievably good news that there is forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation to be had in the midst of this dying world of ours. And this is the real thing; not just the same old rat race traded in for yet another treadmill. This is God's gift of life in exchange for death; LIFE in Person, in fact. In the person of Jesus Christ, who came that they may have life, and have it to the full (John 10:10).

And He is the one who shapes our life now and in every age ahead.