

Praise for Lift Your Eyes

Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer echoes Luther's insistence that Christian life is not self-enclosed; it is a life lived outside of the self through faith in Christ and through love in service to the neighbor. The Christian lives with feet firmly planted in creation but with eyes fixed on the hope that is ours because Jesus is Lord over death. Pastor Pfeiffer demonstrates how our faith and the hope that it brings does not evacuate Christians from the world but enlivens believers for their callings in creation.

—John T. Pless, *assistant professor of pastoral ministry and mission,
Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana*

Lift Your Eyes is a much-needed pastoral guide for Christians shaped by a culture that urges constant self-focus. Joshua Pfeiffer redirects our gaze upward to Christ and outward to those around us, drawing deeply from Scripture and Luther's theology. This is not a self-improvement book offering empty promises but an invitation to true rest in Christ's righteousness—freeing you to love others in ways that truly count.

—Marcus “FLAME” Gray, *GRAMMY*-nominated and Stellar Award-winning
hip hop artist; author of Extra Nos: Discovering Grace Outside Myself and
Because Jesus Taught It: Christianity Through the Eyes of the Church Fathers*

This book heralds the arrival of a gifted new writer with a warm heart and a popular touch. In this book, Joshua Pfeiffer tackles some of the darkest, deepest issues in our self-absorbed society in a lucid, winsome way. He weaves a colorful tapestry of biblical, personal, practical, and pastoral insights into a bright, coherent vision of life in the world. With the eyes of a skilled artist, he explores various kinds of looking—*away* from ourselves, *up* to Jesus in faith and thanksgiving, and *out* to others in love, so that we can look honestly *into* ourselves and *forward* in hope to eternal life with God.

—Dr. John W. Kleinig

The strength of *Lift Your Eyes* lies in its call to look outside ourselves. Instead of navel-gazing and disputing with neighbors (Christian or not), our focus can be drawn up to God in faith and out to others in love. This book would be beneficial for laypeople as they consider their stance before the world as servants, not rulers.

—Jessica Bordeleau, MAR; theological media producer,
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri

LIFT YOUR EYES

How to Live
Outside Yourself

JOSHUA PFEIFFER

TO KIMBERLEY



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We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian.

He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor.

MARTIN LUTHER
(LUTHER'S WORKS, VOL. 31, P. 371)

CONTENTS

Foreword.....	7
Introduction.....	11

PART 1: Cultural and Theological Foundations

1. Looking In: The Problem	21
2. Looking Up and Looking Out: The Dynamic	37

PART 2: Christian Living as Lifting Our Eyes

3. Looking Up in Faith: The Heart and Center	57
4. Looking Up in Thanksgiving: The Joyful Response.....	73
5. Looking Out in Brotherly Love: The Christian Community	89
6. Looking Out in Neighborly Love: Service in the World.....	105
7. Looking In Rightly: The Daily Death of the Old Self	121
8. Looking Forward in Hope: The Anticipation.....	137
Conclusion	155
Scripture Index.....	161

FOREWORD

The direction of our gaze at our own lives and at our involvement in the world around us often turns inward. Martin Luther described those born without trust in their Creator as “turned in upon themselves” (*incurvatus in se*). This navel-gazing results in stumbling over the lives of others, slipping on the ice of a frozen world, or crashing into the walls that God has set in place to protect us from wandering from life as He designed it. Wrapping ourselves into a ball to protect ourselves or to find warmth in a frigid world cripples us. Tied up in ourselves, we grow stiff and lose the ability to move freely in the way God made us to as we care for His creatures.

In this book, Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer sounds the Holy Scriptures’ call to those turned in on themselves, to those turned away from their Creator and the creatures to whom He has connected them in various communities. This call summons us out of ourselves and gives us the gift of relaxing in the presence of our Lord. It summons us out of being all knotted up in ourselves, entangled in the shreds into which we tear our own lives. For, as Paul explained to the Romans, Jesus Christ has placed our sins in His grave and died under their weight. He has restored our righteousness, our identity as children of God, through His resurrection (Romans 4:25; 6:1–13; cf. Colossians 2–3). Through His incarnation, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity has

eradicated the identity of His people as sinners living in doubt and defiance over against God and His Word. He has taken our sins and sealed them in His tomb. He has raised us up to walk in His footsteps in self-sacrificial obedience to God's command to be His light and His salt among His human creatures and in His created universe.

God is deeply engaged in conversation with His human creatures, ever since He went looking for us and called out to Adam, "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9). God could not abide not being present in the lives of His human creatures. He came into human skin and bones as the Word made flesh and promised to abide with us into eternity. He has created community with us through His call to return to His family. He invites us to join Him at His Supper Table in the company of the others in the family from throughout the world. He wants us to stop singing, "I did it my way," and do it His way. He wants us to practice singing, "Glory to God and to the Lamb," already in the little acts of kindness and gentleness that convey His love in the midst of life as we experience it day in and day out. For this is His way—the only way, in fact—to enjoy His gift of life.

Pfeiffer guides readers to the fullness of blessing that comes from having life opened up to embrace our Creator and His world instead of wrapping our arms around ourselves. He points us to the biblical picture of life, which focuses on God and His expression of love for us. This is a way of life that takes seriously God's observation that it is not good for us to be alone (Genesis 2:18). It is a way of life that envisions true human joy and peace in being open to loving and serving Him by loving and serving other human beings in the self-sacrificial way that Jesus has modeled for us. Pfeiffer stimulates readers to open

their eyes to the full horizons that God has set for His human creatures as He placed Adam and Eve together as the founders of human community. The author's insightful exposition of Scripture opens readers' eyes to perceive more fully what it means that God has given us back our identity as His creatures and children after we had thrown it away by sinfully seeking to find our identity, and the security and meaning it gives, in persons or things that He has created.

As the basis of his exploration of the godly way of life that brings us the blessings God intends for us, Pfeiffer lays out the definition of being human that Martin Luther discovered in Scripture. The Wittenberg reformer affirmed in the preface to his Galatians lectures of 1531, published in 1535, that "our theology" *is* the distinction of our passive righteousness as the reborn children of God from our active righteousness, which consists of our thoughts, words, and deeds as His godly children. This anthropology—in Luther's own words, "our theology"—distinguishes our core identity, given by God when His re-creative Word of promise re-creates us as His reborn children, from our actions that match that new identity. We receive this core identity passively, as a gift; our secondary identities express themselves in our active thoughts, words, and deeds. Pfeiffer uses this definition of what it means to be our Creator's human creatures to encourage and empower readers to live according to God's plan for human life on the basis of their confidence in God's promise of new life in and through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

In his conversation with readers in this book, Pastor Pfeiffer leads us to think in the ways the biblical writers thought about living the God-pleasing life that brings life to its fullest, with

LIFT YOUR EYES

the peace and joy that only Christ's promise of new life under the guidance of the Holy Spirit bestows. This is a book to read a couple of times and come back to a few months later, for it refreshes and redirects our lives into the way of peace. It enlivens and stimulates our appreciation for God's gifts in daily life and our love for this Creator, who does not leave us or forsake us. *Lift Your Eyes* offers a feast to savor, a spread to chew on for a long time.

Robert Kolb

Lutherstadt Wittenberg, August 18, 2025

INTRODUCTION

[We] look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

The Nicene Creed

In the creeds of the church, Christians say what we believe. We believe in God the Father. We believe in Jesus Christ, His Son. We believe in the Holy Spirit. It has always struck me, however, that toward the end of the Nicene Creed, another verb appears seemingly out of nowhere. It has to do with the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. We say that we *look* for these things. Of course, we also *believe* these truths; in fact, one might say this looking is simply faith turned toward the future or that looking presupposes faith. Whatever the case, there is this different word. Why is that? What does it mean to *look* for resurrection and a coming new life? The church here, through her creeds, encourages us to adopt something like a spiritual posture in the world that can be described as looking in anticipation.

We *believe* in the resurrection and the life of the world to come, but we also *look* for them.

Looking is a metaphor for the orientation we have in our whole lives as Christian people, although there is a literal sense here

as well. We are to live as people who are spiritually alert and waiting in expectation for God's promised full redemption. Yes, we *believe* in the resurrection and the life of the world to come, but we also *look* for them.

The attentive Bible reader may notice a certain tension here. After all, Paul famously reminds us that "we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7) and that "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). John says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29). Even Luther was fond of speaking of the ear as the organ of faith. Often in life, we cannot see what God is doing or why He is allowing certain things to happen. As such, we are to trust not what we see with human eyes but rather what God promises us in His Word.

Even so, the authors of Scripture offer us various images of the Christian life. In addition to the need for the literal hearing of God's Word in order to live by faith, we also learn of a spiritual posture that can be described as a type of looking. Paul himself, having emphasized the hearing aspect of faith, speaks somewhat paradoxically of looking to what is unseen as a dimension of our faith (2 Corinthians 4:18) and of "the eyes of [our] hearts" being enlightened (Ephesians 1:18). The author to the Hebrews describes the whole Christian life as a race of perseverance in which we are always "looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2). Jesus encourages His disciples to lift up their eyes and look around at the fields ripe for harvest (John 4:35), and His parables testify that His disciples should be alert and keeping watch for His return (Matthew 24:42–44). Hearing God's Word in faith is

indeed crucial. Yet the Scriptures also present to us a theme of *looking* in faith.

In this book, I use this spiritual posture of looking to explore the Christian life in the context of today's world. While there are powerful forces at work encouraging us to look inward for hope, identity, purpose, and meaning—indeed, for life itself—Christians are fundamentally to look elsewhere, to lift our eyes from

The Scriptures also present to us a theme of *looking* in faith.

ourselves. We look *up* to God in faith, and we look *out* to our neighbor in love. Martin Luther was insistent on this point. God and neighbor. Faith and love. Looking up and looking out. When we get that right, we do truly look forward in joyful anticipation to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, and there is even a sense in which we can rightly look in at ourselves.

The following chapters explore the dynamics of the Christian life using this spirituality of looking, as well as how it interacts with literal activities of looking in our lives. This book will especially take into consideration the contemporary cultural context of the Western world and will draw deeply on the Bible and Luther's theology. However, I'm confident that Christians from all traditions will resonate with many of the insights offered here.

The book is in two parts. In part 1 (chapters 1–2), I offer brief cultural analyses and theological foundations to set the stage for the rest of the book. In part 2, I unpack the biblical foundations and theological insights in detail and present a practical application for the Christian life.

In chapter 1, I explore a trend identified by a number of authors that is sometimes referred to as expressive individualism. This way of understanding the world and our lives pervades both the wider culture and the church. It is complex and multifaceted, as most things are in life, but something of its essence is captured by the phrase “looking in.”

In chapter 2, I begin to offer the alternative vision for life that God reveals to us, articulated especially using Lutheran theology. We live in two realms—before God and before the neighbor. To be rightly related in those two realms is to be in a twofold state of righteousness. This means there are primarily two different ways to inhabit these realms—by faith and by love. This is the two-dimensional vision of what it is to be truly human.

Chapter 3 begins part 2 of the book. I go to the heart and center of this life—namely, the passive righteousness of Christ we receive from God by faith and in Baptism. This righteousness grants us a new identity as children of God. Here is the primary contrast between the Christian and the expressive individualist: Christians don’t begin by looking in at ourselves; rather, we look up to God and His grace in Christ. This is an ongoing dimension of our life as we lift our eyes in faith to God’s promises in His Word and in the Lord’s Supper.

In chapter 4, I consider our initial response to God’s grace in Christ—a second dimension of looking up to God, but now in thanksgiving, prayer, and praise. The modern person often lives with a sense of gratitude, but where or to whom is it directed? Christians live by looking up to God for grace and then by looking up to Him in thanksgiving for that grace.

In chapter 5, I move to another aspect of our response to God’s action for us—looking out to others in love. We first consider

especially our relationships with fellow brothers and sisters in Christ and the implications this response has for Christian community. The same God who restores us to Himself places us in a family with brothers and sisters. This is the life of the church. In an individualistic age, the authentic communal life within the local congregation can be a powerful witness.

In chapter 6, I cast a wider vision of looking out, lifting our eyes to consider how we serve our neighbor more generally. This is the primary place for a Christian's good works. The Christian is freed from having to earn God's favor because of the gift of righteousness. As such, we are free to serve in the vocations in which God places us. In a time when many people are disoriented as to their direction in life, the life of loving service in vocation can provide concrete and practical guidance.

In chapter 7, I return to the theme of looking in. Initially, this was our main problem, but now I explore how there can be a proper way of looking in. There is an active putting to death of the old, sinful self and a striving for holiness that require self-examination. Once we know that we primarily look up to God in faith to find peace and security, we can rightly look in without fear.

In chapter 8, I return to the opening words of this introduction, that having oriented our lives around looking up to God and out to neighbor, we also look forward in hope to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. This is an active but patient looking in anticipation, as we do not know when Jesus will return.

This is life as it was meant to be in Eden—harmoniously related to both the Creator and His creation rather than turned in on ourselves.

It's not only that this way of life—lifting our eyes to look up and out, rather than in—is what God teaches us to do, and so we obey. It's also that this is good for us. Orienting our lives this way brings true freedom, peace, and joy. This is life as it was meant to be in Eden—harmoniously related to both the Creator and His creation rather than turned in on ourselves. In this fallen world, our looking up and out will continue to be marred by sin. But a life so oriented is the life God intends for our flourishing, and even in this broken world, this life is the beginning of God's great renewal of all things.



PART 1

Cultural and Theological Foundations

CHAPTER 1

LOOKING IN

The Problem

*The heart is deceitful above
all things, and desperately sick;
who can understand it?*

JEREMIAH 17:9

LOOKING IN

A father and his young adult daughter sat down to talk. His daughter tried to express what she was going through: “I’m so confused about who I am and where I’m going in life. When I was a child, life seemed simpler. Now my friendships seem to come and go. The dreams I had for my career haven’t been working out the way I had hoped. I look inside and ask myself who I really am, but I’m not so sure anymore. I search my heart to try and discover what my passions are and where I should go next in life, but there, too, it all feels hazy and uncertain.”

The father listened, noting her pain and confusion. He loved her dearly. Yet he was struck by how much she had been influenced by a trend he had noticed in many places: the tendency to look *inside* for a sense of identity, purpose, and meaning in life. As a Christian father, he slowly and gently considered

how he might encourage her to lift her eyes from herself to the God who created, redeemed, and sanctified her, to where God had placed her in life to serve others. It would seemingly be a long journey.

The Christian faith has always offered clear and, for many people, compelling answers to life's big questions. For the person asking about his or her identity, a Christian response might point them to their creation in the image of God, to their status as a child of God through their Baptism into Christ, to their being part of the Body of Christ in the life of the church, or to their being a person in whom the Holy Spirit dwells. For someone asking about their purpose in life, a Christian reply might direct them toward humanity's role as stewards of creation, to the

Within a Christian framework, these big questions can be answered.

central reality of knowing God through His Son, Jesus Christ, or to the call to love one's neighbor. Within a Christian framework, these big questions can be answered

in varying ways with different accents and emphases, but the main point is that there have always been answers to give. And because Christianity served as a foundation for much of Western culture, many people in the past felt a sense of stability.

Now, however, that stability is challenged in various ways. One way is by simply seeking alternative answers to the ones traditionally given by Christianity. People have increasingly turned to other religions, spiritualities, philosophies, and worldviews to find answers to questions of identity, purpose, and meaning. A more radical way is by giving up on the questions themselves. This approach suggests that trying to find a stable

identity and a reason for being is naive because this world and our lives in it are simply the result of unguided, random chance.

But there is another, more common impulse in Western culture today that challenges the Christian faith and our sense of stability. Most people do continue to search for deeper truth and do desire to live what they consider to be good lives, but rather than looking to Christianity or any other external source, they look inside themselves to find answers. From a Christian perspective, this is a problem, and it's this problem I seek to respond to in this book.

EXPRESSIVE INDIVIDUALISM

A number of people in recent decades have noticed and talked about this trend. One phrase that captures much of what I have in mind is “expressive individualism.” First coined by Robert Bellah and his fellow sociologists as they studied American culture, the phrase was picked up by Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor to describe what he noticed in contemporary life. Most recently, Carl Trueman has built on this work in pointing out how the trend has manifested in an even more powerful way in connection with movements linked to the sexual revolution. So, how do these authors describe this thing called expressive individualism?

It has been Taylor, in his widely acclaimed book *A Secular Age*, who has most helpfully investigated both the historical roots of expressive individualism and what it looks like in our culture today. Before we get to the specifically “expressivist” part, let’s briefly explore what Taylor has to say about individualism more generally.

Taylor's book is mainly about how the Western world has changed over the last fifteen hundred years and why it was once basically inconceivable not to believe in God, whereas now, it's not only conceivable but perhaps the default position. His arguments are incredibly detailed and complex, but overall, he identifies five major shifts that have led to our secular age. The first two shifts hold the most relevance for our discussion. First is the shift from an enchanted world, in which everything is charged with spiritual power or sacred meaning, to a disenchanting world. This also involved a change in how people see themselves, from "porous" to "buffered" selves—that is, from people who can be influenced by outside spiritual forces to those who are shielded from these. The second major shift is toward a more individualistic approach to life, and interestingly, Taylor links these two shifts together.

As he summarizes the reality of disenchantment, Taylor writes, "This involved the growth and entrenchment of a new self-understanding of our social existence, one which gave an unprecedented primacy to the individual."¹ In the age of enchantment, not only was the world charged with the sacred, but society itself was understood as being embedded in a sacred order. Community members understood themselves to interact with a transcendent realm through communal ritual. This perspective changed with disenchantment: The self became buffered not only from spiritual forces in the world but from other selves as well, which created a sense of private space that further fragmented social relations. In other words, according to Taylor, this trend toward individualism started a long time ago.

1 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 146.

Let me offer an illustration to show the depth of this problem. In my garden, there are sometimes weeds that have taken root in a relatively shallow way and so are easy to remove. Occasionally, though, what I think will be a bit of quick weeding becomes a backyard battle that gets more difficult the more I get into it. What I had thought was a simple, small weed is actually the outgrowth of an underground system of roots that spreads right across the yard and goes deeper than I had anticipated. In this case, rather than quickly pulling out a single weed and thinking I've attended to the issue, it's worth taking a step back to consider the bigger picture and the actual depth of the problem. The trend of expressive individualism is like this. It's not a shallow weed, an aberration that we can expect to pull out easily. It has deep roots and requires thoughtful responses.

The trend of expressive individualism . . . has deep roots and requires thoughtful responses.

While some trace individualism back to the Enlightenment in the 1600s and 1700s, Taylor would say it simply took on a particular form during the Enlightenment—namely, with a focus on reason and what he calls instrumental control. However, there were also movements that reacted strongly against this emphasis on reason, such as Romanticism, which emphasized art, creativity, emotion, and subjectivity. This, too, was individualistic in many ways. In that stream, Taylor finds the roots of the specifically *expressive* form of individualism. From that Romantic period in the 1800s, we can fast-forward to the 1960s, where we'll find a consumerist culture after World War II and a people increasingly encouraged to express their own preferences and tastes. The next step is that this sense of individual

self-expression comes to be seen not only as an important part of life but as the defining characteristic of each person's life.

NEW SENSE OF SELF

Taylor summarizes how expressive individualism has resulted in a whole new understanding of being human, in which people look inward for identity, purpose, and meaning. In a discussion of what Taylor calls the Age of Authenticity, he offers something of a definition of expressive individualism:

That each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.²

Notice first the use of the word *outside*. The major contrast here is between receiving something from outside oneself and cultivating something from inside. That outside reality could be a human community of some kind—hence, individualism—or

Self-expression becomes the way we determine a fuller sense of who we are and our very purpose in life.

another authority, including the church or even God Himself. Second, note the reference to this individualism as a way of realizing our very humanity. This is what makes expressive individualism

so radical and such a challenge to Christianity. This outlook is deeper than wanting an opportunity to express one's personal

2 Taylor, *Secular Age*, 475.

preferences—self-expression becomes the way we determine a fuller sense of who we are and our very purpose in life.

Taylor also speaks specifically about the influence of expressive individualism on religion and spirituality. In a discussion of the era when people began to choose their own Christian denomination rather than simply belonging to the one associated with wherever they lived, Taylor writes:

But the expressivist outlook takes this a stage farther. The religious life or practice that I become part of must not only be my choice, but it must speak to me, it must make sense in terms of my spiritual development as I understand this. This takes us farther. . . . If the focus is going now to be on my spiritual path, thus on what insights come to me in the subtler languages that I find meaningful, then maintaining this or any other framework becomes increasingly difficult.³

Expressive individualism is not only something that is happening in the culture outside the church, but it is well and truly a trend *within* the church and that Christians have absorbed to one degree or another. This is why expressive individualism matters for this book. Let me offer another illustration.

The area where I currently live is prone to bushfires. Nearby national parks full of trees and bushland provide ample fuel for a fire after a lightning strike. If the winds pick up, it can be a dangerous situation. As firefighters battle these fires and the winds swirl and sometimes change direction, it can be difficult to know on which front to focus their attention. Then there is the phenomenon of spot fires. This happens when a team is

3 Taylor, *Secular Age*, 486.