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### Exploring What it Means to be a Faithful Christian in Twenty-First Century America

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This Major Applied Project is dedicated to my strong and faithful wife Megan.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Busacker, Scott, M. "Exploring What It Means To Be a Faithful Christian in Twenty-First Century America." Doctor of Ministry. Major Applied Project, Concordia Seminary, 2018. 187 pp.

This Major Applied Project seeks to explore what it means to be a faithful Christian in Twenty-First Century America. It explores the Biblical and Confessional Lutheran understanding of faithfulness. It then surveys the unique history of religion in America, highlighting the importance of both religious zeal and individual liberty. Christianity in America is going through a period of change. It is no longer culturally established. Thus, Christians need to deliberately consider how to live as Christians in a non-Christian culture. With a clear understanding of history and theology, the project charts a path forward for Christians to be faithful. The field research surveys Lutheran church members in a rural Midwestern congregation and gauges their understanding of faithfulness as it relates to different beliefs and specific acts. Based upon the field research and Biblical understanding, the author highlights fundamental actions and habits by which Christians can confidently live out their faith.



## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

On Saturday mornings, I enjoy turning on the TV and watching English soccer (or football, as they call it). It is quite the spectacle, complete with fans singing and chanting. Watching a game recently, I noticed a banner hanging in Old Trafford, the stadium for the Manchester United soccer team. It read, ‘Manchester United is our religion.’ My first reaction was frustration: How could someone write that? Pondering its meaning, it dawned on me that these people were simply being honest with themselves. A dedicated soccer fan devotes quite a bit of time to watching the matches. They know the players and the manager, the glories of the team history. A hefty sum of money is spent on game tickets, concessions, jerseys, and memorabilia. Discussions with friends center on the previous game or the upcoming season. One’s identity is found in being a fan, and meaning and purpose are derived from faithfully following the team.

This Major Applied Project (MAP) explores what it means to be a faithful Christian. Specifically, the research examines how faithfulness is understood in the context of a rural Lutheran congregation. The MAP notes the dramatic changes in religious observance over the past century and attempts to recapture the importance necessity of Christian faithfulness in the pluralistic and diverse contemporary culture of America.

Earlier, I described a few marks which identify faithful followers of a sports team. What does a faithful Christian look like? A Christian’s identity is grounded in their baptism into Christ.<sup>1</sup> The purpose in life is to be faithful to the Lord and of service to one’s neighbor. In Rev.

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<sup>1</sup> Rom. 6:4–5.

2:10, Jesus exhorts the church in Smyrna to, ‘Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.’<sup>2</sup> This oft-quoted verse leads to an important question: What does it mean to be a faithful Christian?

If you encounter a person wearing a jersey from a specific soccer team, their identity is made plain. Similarly, a man wearing a yarmulke is easily identified as a Jew. A man with a beard driving a horse and buggy is usually identified as Amish. Islam has five essential pillars of its religion; faith, prayer, charity, fasting, and a pilgrimage to Mecca. Christians do not have such distinct rules nor require a certain wardrobe. Nor does it mean aligning with a specific political party. Instead, Jesus called His followers to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. What does that look like? How might someone identify a faithful Christian?

### **Saved By Grace**

A Christian is someone who believes in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus defeated the power of sin, death, and the devil. A Christian is saved from eternal damnation by being united to Christ in baptism.

Paul writes, “By grace you have been saved, through faith, and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Eph. 2:8–9). Salvation from sin, death, and the devil is a free gift from God. The Lutheran reformers trumpeted the three solas, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *sola Christus*. This translates to grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone. In the words of a popular Lutheran hymn; “By Grace God’s Son our only Savior, Came down to earth to bear our sin. Was it because of your own merit that Jesus died your soul to win? No, it was grace, and grace alone, that brought Him from His heavenly throne.”<sup>3</sup> Behind these

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<sup>2</sup> All Bible quotations use English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2006), 566.

words is the doctrine that salvation is a gift of God. God is working alone to bring about salvation by grace through faith. This work of forgiveness, life, and salvation comes about through the power of the Holy Spirit, nurtured through the means of grace, God's Word and Sacraments. No amount of faithful living or good works can bring about one's salvation.

This MAP is not addressing the issue of salvation or who is a Christian. Instead, it is exploring the proper response of Christians to the gift of salvation. The Lutheran Confessions state, "After a person has been justified by faith, there then exists a true, living 'faith working through love' (Gal. 5:6). This means that good works always follow justifying faith and are certainly found with it, when it is a true and living faith. For faith is never alone, but is always accompanied by love and hope."<sup>4</sup>

We are saved by God's grace. This Gospel message can be a great comfort to us sinners. How then shall Christians live? What is our relationship to God's law? There are two ends of the pendulum which Christians must avoid. The first is known as legalism, the idea that obedience to the law is a requisite for salvation. When requirements are added in order to receive salvation, (e.g. a Christian is required to fast, attend church, tithe, eat Kosher foods) this is known as legalism. In Matthew 23, Jesus admonishes the Pharisees, who relied on their strict adherence to the law as a source of their salvation. During the Reformation, Martin Luther spoke out against a perceived legalism in the Roman Catholic Church of his day.

On the other end of the pendulum is antinomianism. This term derives from the Greek word for law, *nomos*. This is the notion that since a Christian is saved by God's grace; one does not need to perform works of the law. One can simply live however they see fit. This notion is

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), FC Ep 3, 11.

strongly countered in the Bible by Paul and James. Paul writes, “Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means!” (Rom. 6:1–2)

If legalism were the greater concern in the time of Luther, antinomianism is the greater cause for concern in the church today.<sup>5</sup> Some of the history and rationale behind this assertion will be presented later.

As a Lutheran, the book of James has always intrigued me. It speaks a word of challenge to Christians. It rouses the reader from any hope of a comfortable Christianity. “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” (James 2:14–18) It is folly to separate one’s justifying faith from one’s sanctified faithful living.

#### Faithfulness Is Love

Between the poles of legalism and antinomianism lies the proper response to God’s gift of salvation . . . fidelity to His will. Christians cannot simply dismiss God’s will (antinomianism); nor do we perform good works in order to gain salvation (legalism).

Christians hear God’s word and obey His will out of love, come what may. Jesus said in John 14:15, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” In Luke 9:23, Jesus said, “Take up your cross and follow me.” When asked which commandment is the most important, Jesus

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<sup>5</sup> Joel Biermann, *A Case for Character* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 116.

said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this, love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mark 12:30–31) Faithfulness, then, is loving obedience. While Christians should strive to be faithful to God’s commands, this side of heaven, no one can attain perfection. Christians are *simil iustus et peccator* (at the same time sinner and saint).<sup>6</sup> No one should not grow discouraged when perfection eludes them. When failure or disappointment comes, remember the words of 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Examining and defining Christian faithfulness is especially important in our context. The United States is experiencing a culture shift from Constantinian or Christendom to post-Constantinian Christianity. In the mid-twentieth century, Christianity was the established religion in the US. Societal norms promoted and reinforced faithful Christian behaviors. One such example was the Sunday Blue Laws, which required stores to close on Sunday. As a result, Sunday was the domain of church and family time. In the early twenty-first century, the Christian church is no longer the unquestioned bastion of truth and authority. Living as a faithful Christian is now viewed as extreme and irrelevant by some in society. Faithful acts such as praying before a meal in a restaurant or attending church instead of a youth sporting event are becoming as identifiable for Christians as a yarmulke is for Jews. Such differentiation from society at large is not a cause for shame. Churches and pastors need to encourage faithful living by reminding them that our goal is not to be united to the culture, but with the Lord. In my opinion, many Christians today do not desire to stand out from the culture. Perhaps others are unsure of what living faithfully looks like. A third option is that people’s understanding of

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<sup>6</sup> See Rom. 7.

faithfulness has changed over the years.<sup>7</sup>

One problem in the endeavor to promote faithfulness is the desire to seek a lowest common denominator for faithfulness. I have heard questions such as, ‘Do I have to go to church to get to heaven?’ or ‘Can an unbaptized person be saved?’ or ‘Do I have to pray before I eat?’ In certain pastoral situations, someone’s conscience may be troubled. Jesus’ comforting response to the thief on the cross in Luke 23 is often cited. But in many circumstances, these questions are asked in order to justify sinful behavior. Like the prophet Jonah, we confess our belief in the Lord (Jon. 1:9) but then flee from following His will (1:3).

Prevalent in our culture today is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer termed ‘cheap grace.’ In *The Cost of Discipleship*, he writes, “Instead of following Christ, let the Christian enjoy the consolation of His grace! . . . Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”<sup>8</sup>

A faithful Christian seeks to grow in love and trust of the Lord. How is that love exhibited? Some people point to their church attendance as a sign of faithfulness, others point to their personal habits, others point to their baptism and confirmation, but many simply do not know what it means to be faithful. The Barna Group released a study entitled, ‘*Many Churchgoers and Faith Leaders Struggle to Define Spiritual Maturity.*’ They noted, “An open-ended survey question asked churchgoers to describe how their church defined a ‘healthy, spiritually mature follower of Jesus.’ Half of churchgoers simply said they were not sure, unable to venture a guess regarding the church’s definition.”<sup>9</sup> For the sake of my study, I equate ‘spiritual maturity’ with

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<sup>7</sup> One example of changing perceptions is the rise of no-fault divorce over the past century.

<sup>8</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R.H. Fuller (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 44–45.

<sup>9</sup> “Many Churchgoers and Faith Leaders Struggle to Define Spiritual Maturity.” Barna.com, May 11, 2009, accessed: Dec. 17, 2015.

‘faithfulness’.

This lack of understanding is evident in modern American Christianity. In the book *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, N.T. Wright notes that for many people Christianity could be boiled down to the statement: “I believe in Jesus so I can go to heaven when I die.” Belief is the one normative act of faithfulness. Wright highlights this misconception of the essence of faith. It shows a lack of understanding regarding the purpose of being a Christian. This misperception can be seen by using an analogy from summer camp:

It’s a hot sunny day at a youth summer camp. Your group is taking a nature hike. At the end of the hike, everyone will gather back at the cafeteria for ice cream. The camp counselor instructs the group to pause beside an old tree stump. When asked to stand upon the stump, you oblige. You know what is coming next . . . the ubiquitous camping activity known as a ‘trust fall.’ You turn your back to the fellow campers, and are invited to fall back into their interlocked arms. As a result of this activity, you will build trust in your fellow campers; they in turn fall and build trust in you.

What if, instead of turning around and falling into the arms of the other campers, you proclaimed, “I trust you” then promptly stepped down from the tree stump. I am going off on my own now, come and get me when it’s time for dinner. Your camp counselor would likely have a bemused look on their face and tell you that you did not understand the purpose of the activity. You would reply, ‘Of course I got it! This is all about trust. I told them all that I trusted them.’

If you would claim to have trust in your fellow campers, but decline to fall back in their arms, your fellow campers would claim that you do not really trust them after all. Your trust, or faith, is made manifest not in words alone, but in action. If you quit the hike and simply wait for

the reward at the end, you are actively rejecting the command of the camp counselor. That is precisely the attitude of many who think Christianity is a matter of believing in Jesus and going to heaven when you die!

In the words of noted theologian and author Stanley Hauerwas, “In our time . . . , no matter how sincerely many believe what it is they believe about God, they in fact live lives of practical atheism.”<sup>10</sup> His assertion of practical atheism means living as though God did not exist, as though He had no impact upon one’s life. His words should come as a jarring challenge to Christians. If you praise Jesus with your lips but fail to bear fruit in keeping with repentance, that is not faithful but hypocritical Christianity. In a sermon delivered in 2017, Pope Francis made some sobering remarks regarding this topic, “A totally double life: ‘I am very Catholic, I always go to Mass, I belong to this association and that one; but my life is not Christian, I do not pay my workers a just wage, I exploit people, I am dirty in my business, I launder money . . .’ A double life. And so many Christians are like this, and these people scandalize others. But to be a Catholic like that, it’s better to be an atheist.”<sup>11</sup>

The influence of creeping antinomianism has led to the cognitive dissonance that one can say ‘I believe in Jesus,’ yet live their life as a practical atheist. This is lived out in our American culture today whereby personal freedom has become sacrosanct. Boiled down to its essence, life is just about the pursuit of happiness. If God is a loving God, then he must desire my personal happiness, and bless my pursuit of it. We can live, as it were, as modern Epicureans.

I would argue that being faithful to Jesus is not simply an intellectual assent to His deity. Nor is it an affirmative answer when a pollster asks if you believe in God. In the words of Martin

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<sup>10</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *A Better Hope* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2000), 140.

<sup>11</sup> Zauzmer, Julie. “Pope Francis Suggests it is Better to Be an Atheist than a Hypocritical Catholic,” [washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com), Feb. 23, 2017, accessed: Feb. 23, 2017.



Luther,

Faith is a living, bold trust in God's grace, so certain of God's favor that it would risk death a thousand times trusting in it. Such confidence and knowledge of God's grace makes you happy, joyful and bold in your relationship to God and all creatures. The Holy Spirit makes this happen through faith. Because of it, you freely, willingly and joyfully do good to everyone, serve everyone, suffer all kinds of things, love and praise the God who has shown you such grace. Thus, it is just as impossible to separate faith and works as it is to separate heat and light from fire!<sup>12</sup>

The book of Acts notes that some of the first Christians were known as “followers of the Way.” Christianity is a particular way of life patterned upon the teachings of Jesus Christ. In the words of noted Thomas Long, “This way of life involves beliefs, and it is done together with others, but the beliefs and the belonging are gathered up and expressed in the ways that Christians live life.”<sup>13</sup> It is more than saying, “I believe in God.” It is a new way of life, begun at Holy Baptism. It is neither legalistic nor pharisaical. Instead, it is a sign of love toward Jesus. After all, Jesus said in John 14:15, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

In the movie *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy and her dog Toto are transported from Kansas to the strange land of Oz. Trying to find her way; she is instructed by the munchkins to simply follow the Yellow Brick Road on her way to the Emerald City. Her journey is as simple as staying on the road. There is no such yellow brick road for Christians to obediently follow on their way to the emerald-like throne of God. (Rev. 4:3) Each individual's station of life provides different contexts for faithful living. Because we remain saints and sinners this side of paradise, no one can possibly live perfectly by faith. Yet that is no excuse to grow weary or give up. Instead, we lean all the more on our Lord in faith. A faithful Christian is a person who trusts in God by the power of the Holy Spirit. This trust is made manifest in love to God and love to the

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<sup>12</sup> All citations from the works of Martin Luther are from *Luther's Works. American Edition*. 55 vols. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress Concordia, 1955–86), 35:370

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves Into Being Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 36.

neighbor.

### **The Project Developed**

This MAP will highlight the importance for Christians to live faithfully. The Biblical witness will be presented. It will note specific marks of faithfulness through the ages. Due to a lack of understanding among laity regarding spiritual maturity or faithfulness, this study will explore and describe what it means to be a faithful Christian. It will utilize a rural Lutheran congregation as the context for this research and exploration.

The field research is an important aspect of this project. In an attempt to better understand how the members of the congregation I serve view this topic, they were asked to participate in a questionnaire. This questionnaire asked a variety of questions regarding the topic of faithfulness. The results of the research presented and examined in chapter five, offer a snapshot of how the people in my congregation understand this topic.

I desired to make this a useful and helpful study to my congregation members in their lives. A sermon series based upon the results of the survey was presented to the congregation. This series was crafted based upon the results of the survey. The sermons engaged specific areas of life. Following the sermon series, the congregation was asked if their understanding of faithfulness has changed based upon the survey and sermon series.

Following the results of the field research, the MAP will conclude with a brief, easy to digest, seven point summary. It is my hope that this will be used by pastors and laity to promote and encourage the importance of Christian faithfulness through specific activities, practices, and habits.

I endeavored to grow as a pastor throughout the reading, writing, and contemplation of the Major Applied Project. It has increased my understanding of faithfulness to Jesus. I believe that

my congregation members have also grown in their understanding of faithfulness through the questionnaire and the sermon series. Through the steps of the process, there was growth and enrichment.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

This chapter provides the results of my research on the Biblical and theological framework of what it means to be a faithful Christian. It surveys the Old Testament, the New Testament, the early church, and the teachings of the Lutheran Church.

For many American Christians today, faith is perceived to be a subjective, self-directed, and individualized enterprise. A person's religion is viewed as a private matter, something between an individual and their God. John Donne famously wrote, "No man is an island." This is true of faith — no one is a spiritual island. In the Bible, religion is not an individual endeavor, but rather quite public and communal in nature. In the Old Testament, faithfulness was expressed through incorporation into the people of Israel. In the New Testament, it is connected to Jesus, His apostles, and the community of believers in the church. Jesus said, "Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven" (Matt. 10:32). Faith is a belief and trust in God the Father Son, and Holy Spirit. That trust is lived out through obedience to God's word in the fellowship of a community of fellow believers. To be clear, obedience to God does not cause salvation, nor is it done to gain divine favor. Instead, the cause of obedience is Christian love for God and our neighbor. This is what Paul is referring to in Gal. 5:6 when he writes of "faith active in love."

One of the words which the Greek language employs for love is *agape*. *Agape* is the term used for God's undeserved, unconditional love for fallen humanity. His love is climactically displayed in the self-sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross. Jesus died to forgive the sins of the

world and give eternal life to all as a gift. Christ's self-sacrificial *agape* love is the model to which Christians should aspire. Jesus told His disciples, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another." (John 13:34). Christian faithfulness is obedience to Jesus Christ based upon *agape* love for God and one another.

### **Old Testament**

The Old Testament is the story of God's providence from the creation of the world until a few centuries before the earthly life of Jesus. In many ways, it could be considered the story of God's covenant faithfulness despite humanity's infidelity and unfaithfulness.

Faithfulness in the Old Testament is chiefly understood through the framework of covenants. There are two major covenants cut in the Old Testament; the Abrahamic and the Sinaitic. These two covenants are referred to throughout the Old Testament. When the people of Israel call upon God for mercy, they hearken back to God's unconditional covenantal promises made to Abraham. When God punishes the people for their unfaithfulness, He refers to the Sinaitic covenant. Faithfulness to God is rarely expressed except within the framework of these covenants.

The Abrahamic covenant was an unconditional covenant between Yahweh and Abraham. Yahweh promised to bless him and make him into a great nation. Abraham responded in faith by leaving his home country and departing for a promised land. When put to the ultimate test of faith, asked to sacrifice his son Isaac, Abraham was prepared to go through with this task. He showed his fidelity to the will of the Lord, even in the face of extremely challenging circumstances. This covenant blessed his descendants and looked forward to a future deliverer.

The Sinaitic covenant was a conditional covenant between Yahweh and the newly freed

Hebrew slaves. Cut on Mount Sinai, the condition of the covenant was that the people must remain faithful to Yahweh in order to receive the blessings of the covenant. By nature sinful, the people were unfaithful to their promises hear the word of Yahweh. While Moses was receiving the tablets of stone, the people were fashioning a false idol in the form of a golden calf.

Why are covenants so important in the Old Testament? They are the vessels through which faithfulness is measured. The Lord is always faithful to His covenant promises. In fact, one of the key attributes of Yahweh is found in the Hebrew word *kesed*, which means covenantal faithfulness or steadfast love. God’s faithfulness to His promises is unquestioned: “But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ps. 86:15), “Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep His commandments” (Deut 7:9). When the people disobey and repent, they praise Yahweh for His mercy exhibited in His covenant faithfulness. Psalm 136 proclaims God’s mighty acts while praising specifically His covenantal faithfulness.

As the Old Testament displays God’s faithfulness, it also catalogs Israel’s unfaithfulness to Yahweh, specifically their unfaithfulness to the Sinaitic covenant. Their inability to live in covenant with Yahweh highlights their original sin and inability to be holy. The Sinaitic covenant is explained in Exodus 19:

The Lord called to Moses out of the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed hear my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.” So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. All the people answered together and said, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do.”

The totemic symbol of the Sinaitic Covenant is the Ten Commandments. The preeminent Israelite confession of faith is found in Deut. 6:4; “Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” This confession of faith in a monotheistic God set the Israelites apart from their polytheistic neighbors. It is followed by a call for love for God by hearing and obeying His word.

The Israelites were called to be faithful to the Lord because He had delivered them from slavery in Egypt, through the waters of the Sea of Reeds, and into a land flowing with milk and honey. In response to the blessings of the Lord, the people were to faithfully worship him alone and observe the Torah.

In the Old Testament, obedience to God was clearly measured through the Torah. It included the ceremonial, civil, and political laws of the nation of Israel cut by the Sinaitic covenant. The book of Leviticus served as a catalog of how the people were to live. There was little ambiguity with regards to faithful living. Specific and visible actions included; following a kosher diet, circumcision, wearing garments of certain fabrics, and Sabbath day restrictions. These were well known and observable by all. For instance, if a Jewish man was plowing a field on the Sabbath, roasting a hog, or prostrating before an idol, his neighbor could clearly identify such acts as unfaithful to Yahweh.

Over time, it became clear again and again that the people had broken the Sinaitic covenant through their unfaithfulness. This is recorded in the laments of the prophets over Israel’s disobedience. As a result, Israel and Judah were conquered and destroyed by Assyria and Babylon.

The Lord, however, would not abandon His people. Perhaps the most dramatic recasting of God’s faithfulness is found in the prophet Hosea. Hosea is instructed to take a wife, who

eventually is unfaithful to her husband, leading an adulterous lifestyle. Hosea, in a dramatic display, takes back his erstwhile wife. Hosea metaphorically shows that despite Israel's unfaithfulness the Lord remains faithful to His people. The prophets proclaimed God's mercy, looking back not to Sinai, but to the unconditional patriarchal covenant cut with Abraham. Ultimately, the prophets foresee a renewed covenant.<sup>1</sup> This renewed covenant was sealed with the blood of Jesus Christ, who is Israel reduced to one. Jesus lived a perfect and faithful life in the stead of the people and satisfied the demands of a righteous God. Looking forward to this new covenant, Isaiah painted a picture of faithfulness, "The foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be His servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain" (Isa. 56:6).

### **New Testament**

Walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus called out to two simple fishermen: "Follow me." With those simple yet powerful words, Jesus inaugurated the New Testament interpretation of faithfulness . . . union with Jesus. Immediately, the fishermen cast aside their nets and literally walked with their master. Jesus is the mediator of a new and better covenant.<sup>2</sup>

In John's Gospel, Jesus is recorded as saying,

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing . . . Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in His love (John 15:9–10).

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of prophesying the new covenant are found in Jer. 31:31–34 and Isa. 40–66.

<sup>2</sup> Heb. 9:15; 12:24.



Whereas Israel was sinful and unfaithful, Christ remained faithful. The new covenant was sealed through the sacrificial blood of Jesus Christ on the cross. As Isaiah prophesied, “He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. We all like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:5–6).

There is continuity and discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments. Faithfulness was still lived out by keeping the commandments of God. However, entrance to God’s kingdom cannot be attained via observance of the ceremonial, civil, and political laws of the nation of Israel. For Christians, the purpose of faithful living is not justification, but sanctification. Christians are made holy by abiding in Christ Jesus, who is the faithful witness.<sup>3</sup> Good works are constitutive of those who have been justified or declared righteous by God’s grace. “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Christ Jesus for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:21–23). This righteousness is received by being born again of water and the spirit.<sup>4</sup>

The chief marker of Christian faithfulness in the New Testament is being united with Christ. How is one united with Christ? Through the hearing of God’s word (Rom. 10:17), being born again through the waters of Baptism (John 3 and Rom. 6), the confession of sins (1 John 1), the Lord’s Supper (John 6), and walking in love (John 13).

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<sup>3</sup> Rev. 1:5.

<sup>4</sup> See John 3.

It is written in the book of Titus, “He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works” (Titus 3:5–8).

To those united in him, Jesus presents a radically new way of living. This new way is expressed preeminently in the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5–7. In this sermon, Christians are exhorted to be salt and light in a sin-darkened world.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus explained what it means to be faithful. He showed how being His disciple was different from being a Torah-obedient Jew. Instead of abolishing the Ten Commandments, Jesus called His disciples to follow them not only in deed, but also in thought and word. One example is the discourse regarding murder and hate, “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire” (Matt. 5:21–22). Jesus took the Torah and interpreted it with a radically broad understanding. While a Jew may have been able to keep the command ‘Do not murder’ in the narrow sense, Jesus removed any aspiration of self-justification. Hearing these words of Jesus would lead a person to their knees in humility and repentance, for no one can perfectly obey His word. Repentance and confession are requirements for those following Christ.

In 1967, the Beatles released a hit #1 song entitled, *All You Need is Love*. Although not a Christian song, its title echoes the message of Jesus that love is essential for humans living

together in God's creation. Love is the character par excellence for Christian disciples. When questioned about the greatest commandment, Jesus responds in continuity with the Torah. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your might. And love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>5</sup>

Just as he reinterpreted the Ten Commandments in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reinterpreted what it means to love. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34). At first glance, this new commandment may appear to simply restate the golden rule of loving your neighbor as yourself. This commandment goes beyond that. Disciples are to imitate the love which Jesus has shown to them through His self-sacrifice on the cross. This is a key point. The primary characteristic for Christian faithfulness is the imitation of Christ's love, specifically for fellow Christians.

This new commandment is at the center of the new covenant. Noted theologian Raymond Brown writes, "The evangelist [John] shows that in speaking of love as the new commandment he is thinking of the last supper in covenant terms."<sup>6</sup> Central to the Sinaitic covenant was observance of the Torah. In the new covenant cut with the blood of Christ on the cross, love which imitates Christ is at the core.<sup>7</sup> This new commandment calls disciples to begin the task of living by faith in the community of believers. Followers of Christ need to care and serve one another. A damning criticism of the Christian church through the ages is its divisions and

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<sup>5</sup> This is a restatement of Deut. 6:5.

<sup>6</sup> Brown, Raymond E. *The Gospel according to John XIII-XXI: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* AB 29A. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 612.

<sup>7</sup> This commandment has the appearance of exclusivity, that only love for other Christians is necessary. However, Jesus refutes that notion when he calls His disciples also to love their enemies in Matt. 5:44.

denominations. At times, churches lack love, forgiveness, and reconciliation; hallmarks of life together in Christ.

Paul gives examples of love in 1 Corinthians 13; “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Paul Deterding notes, “For Paul, such love is the way in which faith is active (Gal. 5:6). The Christian’s believing and hoping shows itself by acts of love towards others.”<sup>8</sup> This is a common theme throughout Paul’s writings.<sup>9</sup>

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “Does not obedience follow faith as good fruit grows on a good tree? From the point of view of justification it is necessary thus to separate them, but we must never lose sight of their essential unity. For faith is only real when there is obedience, never without it, and faith only becomes faith in the act of obedience.”<sup>10</sup> This relationship is captured in Paul’s phrase, “If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal. 5:25).

For Christians who have received the Holy Spirit, Paul exhorts them to avoid certain actions and to bear specific fruit. “Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissension, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law” (Gal. 5:19–23).

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Deterding, *Colossians*, Concordia Commentary (St Louis, MO: Concordia, 2003), 33.

<sup>9</sup> See Rom. 12, Gal. 5, 1 Cor. 13, and 1 Thess. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 64.

The Bible is primarily a story, a story of salvation from the creation to the consummation. As such, terms such as faithfulness are more than mere abstractions. A prime example of this can be found in Hebrews 11. The examples of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, the Hebrew slaves, Rahab, and others are held up as heroes of faith. These heroes placed their trust in the Lord and boldly followed His calling. Noah built an ark. Abraham left his homeland. Moses stood up to the Pharaoh of Egypt and led the people. In many cases, hardship and persecution followed these actions. Hardship was not a sign of abandonment by God, but rather of His discipline, for God disciplines those he loves.

Hebrews 11 is a reminder that faith is not mere lip service, but a living trust in the Lord to follow His will. Following the Lord does not result in laud and praise, but suffering and hardship. As Jesus faithfully moved towards His cross, all Christians by faith bear their cross of suffering and hardship and so receive the marks of discipleship. Being a faithful Christian entails bearing one's cross and following Jesus.

If the book of Hebrews illustrates the way of faith in the life of Old Testament believers, the book of James presents a stark challenge. James 1:2–3 states, “Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.” The context of the book of James is apropos to our modern religious *geist* in which antinomianism is rampant. James dismantles the notion that one can offer praise with their lips, yet not with their actions. “Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (James 1:22). “What good is it if someone says he has faith but does not have works? . . . Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works” (James 2:14, 18). The epistle of James is a strong reminder that a Christian's sanctification cannot be divorced from justification.

The book of Revelation weaves the different streams of faith and faithfulness together. It shows the importance of faith in the life of the believer: “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev. 2:10). Also, “Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus” (Rev. 14:12). It also highlights the centrality of Christ as the faithful one: “Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead” (Rev. 1:4).

### **Masks of God: Faithfulness Enfleshed**

Christian love is not an abstraction. A Sunday morning confession of love for God and one’s neighbor must be lived out in one’s Monday-Saturday lives. Christians can show their love through their vocations. God works through people in their vocations to benefit those in need. Martin Luther referred to Christians who perform their vocations as *larvae dei* (masks of God). His famous quotation on vocation highlights the sanctity of the mundane, “If you ask a lowly housemaid why she washes dishes or milks the cow, she can say, ‘I know that what I do is pleasing to God, for I have God’s word and command.’ This is a great blessing and a precious treasure of which no one is worthy.”<sup>11</sup> Such a clear confession regarding the sanctity of vocation is not always spoken today. There is a misconception that one’s actions must have religious significance in order to be faithful. (This is a carryover from the middle Ages when Monasticism was perceived as a higher spiritual calling than other vocations.) To relate this to modern times, this is the perception that being in a Bible Study is more faithful than spending time with family or visiting a friend in the hospital. For a well-rounded Christian, all three are important.

The doctrine of vocation is helpful because it allows people to see how they might connect

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<sup>11</sup> LW 30:83.

faith to their everyday lives. Whether the milkmaid milking the cows, a father teaching his son, or the trash man taking the trash, they are serving God and neighbor. This is love in action. God is hidden in their working. Martin Luther famously wrote, “God does not need our good works.”<sup>12</sup> Faithfulness to God is not doing something for God, but loving one’s neighbor.

If Christians are God’s masks in serving others, so too God is masked behind those whom people serve in their daily lives. There is a well-known story which serves as a metaphor for the masks of God: Once there was a woman who lived in the path of an oncoming hurricane. She was a Christian woman, and she prayed that God would deliver her from the oncoming storm. As the rain began, a fire truck came up her street offering assistance. She called out to them, ‘My God will save me.’ The rain continued to fall, the water rose. A rescue boat approached, also offering assistance. ‘No thanks, my God will save me,’ she replied. The storm persisted. The woman was forced to climb up on her roof because of the rising waters. A rescue helicopter came by, offering assistance. She declined, offering the same refrain, ‘My God will save me, I have faith.’ Eventually, the lady drowned. Approaching the pearly gates, she was a bit perturbed with her Lord. ‘God, I prayed to you to save me, why did you let me drown?’ To that, God replied, ‘I sent a fire truck, a boat, and a helicopter!’ God works through means to provide for His children.

In Matthew 25, Jesus paints a picture of the final judgment as the Son of Man separates the sheep from the goats.

Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. The righteous will answer him, saying, Lord when did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or

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<sup>12</sup> LW 44:iii.

naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you? And the king will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me' (Matt. 25:34–40)

In the above text, Jesus lists specific actions which Christians should perform to assist others. By assisting others the servants were also serving Jesus. To emphasize the point, the goats (unbelievers) are depicted as those who did not perform these acts of love and mercy for others. As a result, they were neglecting to serve Jesus.

### **Stewardship**

Faithfulness encompasses every aspect of life. Stewardship is a helpful way of explaining this. A steward is defined as a manager of someone else's property. All humans can be considered stewards of God's creation.

In Matthew 25, Jesus tells the parable of the talents. Three servants have been given talents each according to their ability (a talent was a large sum of money, about 20 year's wages). Two servants used the talents to create more talents for the master. A third servant simply buried his talent. When the master returned, he praised the first two saying, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:21). The master rebuked the third by saying, "You wicked and slothful servant" (Matt. 25:26). These servants were judged according to their stewardship of resources.

All Christians have been given gifts from the Lord. They are called to wisely manage the gifts the Lord has given . . . to be good stewards. As Adam and Eve were called to have dominion and care for the earth, Christians are to be good stewards of the environment and careful consumers of goods. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12 that all have been given different talents or gifts. A faithful Christian will endeavor to use their gifts to the glory of God. Honoring the Lord with their treasures is a marker of faithfulness. "The love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced



themselves with many pangs” (1 Tim. 6:10). “The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:6–7). Paul also writes, “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:15–16). Even time management comes under the guise of stewardship.

As this MAP is written for an American Christian audience, stewardship is of unique importance. Americans have been quite blessed when it comes to material possessions. “[Jesus said] everyone to whom much has been given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more” (Luke 12:48).

### **Bearing Fruit**

On several occasions, Jesus uses the analogy of a fruit tree to describe the life of his disciples. A healthy tree will, by nature, bear good fruit. In the same manner, a disciple of Jesus will perform good works borne out of faithfulness to Jesus Christ. The life of a fruit tree comes from three main things; the soil, the sun, and the rain. Without these outside agents, the tree would not exist. Likewise, the Christian is given life and grace through the means of grace. Another analogy Jesus uses in John 15 is of the vine and the branches. The branches bear good fruit, but only because of their connection to the living vine.

“Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 7:19–21). What does it mean to do the will of the Father? Jeff Gibbs writes, “Even in our day, to do the will of the Father is to repent and believe what John has proclaimed about Jesus. This

repentance and faith will issue forth in ‘fruit worthy of repentance.’ (3:8) Such deeds, however, are merely the inevitable result of repentance and faith in Jesus.”<sup>13</sup> In so doing, Christians imitate Christ. When looking at motivation, bearing fruit is not something done grudgingly, but something done out of love for Jesus.

Jesus Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, bringing peace between God and humanity. Baptized into Christ, Christians have been given new life as a gift. Made alive through His Word, Jesus has called Christians to share this gift with others. Faithful followers of Jesus steward what God has given them through their vocations.

### **The Early Church**

The writings of the church fathers contain a treasure trove of wisdom and knowledge, of which the depths cannot be plumbed in this MAP. Following are a few insights into what it meant to be a faithful Christian in the early church.

Books written about the early church often center around the doctrinal controversies which the era produced and usually resolved. The most well-known product of the early church is the Nicene Creed. Lutheran laity should be familiar with the Nicene Creed, as it is confessed during the worship service.

While the confession of the creed is certainly important, many early believers were brought to Christ and the church not through the doctrine of the creed but through the exemplary lives of Christians. In colloquial terms, belonging often preceded believing. People saw in Christians a counterculture, something different, something they wanted for themselves. The Christian difference was most evident in the moral commitment of Jesus’ followers. The willingness to

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<sup>13</sup> Jeff Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1–11:1*, Concordia Commentary (St Louis, MO: Concordia, 2006), 393.

forgive an enemy as well as love outcasts made a deep impression on non-Christians.

Christianity taught the spiritual worth of the poor, and in particular the worth of those cast aside by society. Christians in the first centuries “ran a miniature welfare state in an empire which for the most part lacked social services.”<sup>14</sup> According to the church father Justin, “We who formerly loved money and property more than anything else now place what we have in the common fund and share with everyone in need.”<sup>15</sup> The early church took the admonitions of Jesus in Matthew 25 and the Sermon on the Mount quite seriously.

Cyprian wrote regarding the role of the church in the life of a Christian. “He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the church for his mother. If anyone could escape who was outside the ark of Noah, then he also may escape who shall be outside of the church.”<sup>16</sup> Faith created by the Holy Spirit cannot be nurtured properly outside of the community of faith; the church. The church is the vehicle through which God delivers the means of grace and keeps us in the saving faith. Just as an uprooted tree can no longer bear fruit, so too a Christian who removes themselves from the Lord.

The *Didache* (Teaching) is a manuscript from around AD 100 written in Alexandria, Egypt. At that time, Christians were still a persecuted minority in the Roman Empire. The *Didache* encouraged faithfulness in the face of such persecution. It laid out an ethical code of conduct for Christians which contrasts the ‘Way of Life’ from the ‘Way of Death.’ It also served as a manual for the order and function of a congregation. This writing is important because of 1) its early date in the church and 2) its detailed code of conduct based on the Scriptures. It provides a blueprint for what it meant to be a faithful Christian in the early church. The *Didache* was so

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Atheneum, 1980), 75.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Scudieri, *The Apostolic Church* (Chino, CA: Lutheran Society of Missiology), 42.

<sup>16</sup> Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Church* 1.6 (ANF 5:423).

important in the first few centuries; it hovered on the verge of canonicity, and was used as a catechesis by Athanasius.<sup>17</sup>

It begins, “Now, this is the way of life: ‘First, you must love God who made you, and second, your neighbor as yourself.’ And whatever you want people to refrain from doing to you, you must not do to them.”<sup>18</sup> It exhorted Christians to follow the commandments of God, serve their stations in life, especially their familial roles, and be generous givers. Examples of faithfulness included: Fasting days for Christians on Wednesdays and Fridays and the declaration that Christians should pray the Lord’s Prayer three times a day.

In the Middle Ages, the seven cardinal virtues and seven deadly sins was a simple way in which the church systematized faithfulness and unfaithfulness for the masses. Ambrose of Milan was the first to use the expression ‘cardinal virtues.’ The seven cardinal virtues are: chastity, temperance, charity, diligence, patience, kindness, humility. These are contrasted with the seven deadly sins: lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride. Attesting to their catechetical efficacy, some people today are familiar with those categories.

There are many other ordinances and guidelines from the early church period which inform people’s understanding of Christian faithfulness. Some may appear challenging or even jarring to modern ears. For instance, in the early church: “People were required to receive communion once a year on pain of exclusion from the church and the denial of a Christian burial.”<sup>19</sup> Other ordinances may appear somewhat humorous, such as the prohibition of Christians becoming actors (a vocation deemed too ‘worldly’), or Tertullian’s criticism of old men who tried to cover up the gray hair of advancing age by dyeing it, or women who adorned themselves with makeup

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<sup>17</sup> Cyril Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 163.

<sup>18</sup> Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers*, 171.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Arand, *That I May be His Own* (St Louis, MO: Concordia, 2000), 42.

or jewelry. He saw such acts as an affront to the creator.<sup>20</sup>

The early church can certainly be instructive as the church learns again how to live in a non-Christian culture. It offers glimpses of counter-cultural acts of obedience to Jesus. This is an area for further study and exploration. In the words of Maximus Confessor, a saint who was persecuted and martyred for his faith, “The work of love is the deliberate doing of good to one’s neighbor as well as long-suffering and patience and the use of all things in the proper way.”<sup>21</sup>

### **The Lutheran Church**

During the Middle Ages, the gospel message of salvation by grace through faith had been muffled. Teachings regarding penance and purgatory had resulted in the selling of indulgences. An indulgence was a certificate which decreased the amount of time a soul spent in purgatory through the performance of meritorious acts or purchased at church. A popular phrase when purchasing an indulgence was ‘When the coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs.’ Faithful Christians were admonished to purchase indulgences for themselves as well as deceased relatives in purgatory.

Speaking out against the idea that salvation could be earned or purchased, the Lutheran reformers trumpeted the message of salvation by: ‘grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone.’ It is faith alone in Jesus Christ and not other works; penance, indulgences, or other actions, which are meritorious for one’s salvation. Due to the polemical origins of the Lutheran Reformation, most treatments of faith by the reformers usually referred to it in terms of justification.

On another front against the Radical Reformers, Luther needed to clarify that faith which saves is not a good work which saves. Instead, faith is that which receives the promises of God in

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<sup>20</sup> Carl Volz, *Faith and Practice in the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983), 181.

<sup>21</sup> George Berthold, trans., *Maximus Confessor Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 39.

Christ. In the words of Luther, “Faith apprehends Christ, who died for our sins and arose again for our justification.”<sup>22</sup>

For much of the five hundred year history of Lutheranism, debating and presenting what it means to be a faithful Christian (sanctification) took a back seat to the more pressing question of how a person is saved (justification).

The Lutheran Confessions help frame the Lutheran understanding of faith. The Augsburg Confession focuses upon justifying or saving faith. Saving faith is received and nurtured by the Holy Spirit through the Word and Sacraments. Article V of the Augsburg Confession states: “So that we may obtain saving faith, the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and the sacraments as through instruments the Holy Spirit is given, who effects faith where and when it pleases God in those who hear the gospel, that is to say, in those who hear that God, not on account of our merits but on account of Christ, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace on account of Christ” (AC 5, 1–3).

Article VI: Concerning the New Obedience recognizes the dynamic living effects of faith. Good works are the necessary and proper response of faith. “They teach that this faith is bound to yield good fruits and that it ought to do good works commanded by God on account of God’s will and not so that we may trust in these works to merit justification before God” (AC VI, 1).

Article XX: Concerning Faith and Good Works continues the understanding that faith is not mere knowledge, but trust in the promises of God in Christ. “People are also reminded that the term faith here does not signify only historical knowledge . . . but that it signifies faith which believes not only the history but also the effect of the history, namely, this article of the

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<sup>22</sup> LW 34:110.

forgiveness of sins, that is, that we have grace, righteousness, and forgiveness of sins through Christ” (AC XX, 23).

The Lutheran Confessions do offer specific guidelines for what it means to be a faithful Christian. The best example of this is found in The Small Catechism: Table of Duties. This includes a Scriptural referent for the work of many different vocations. It includes: For bishops, governing authorities, husbands, wives, parents, children, servants, masters, young people, widows, and all in the community. All people are to adhere to the general admonition of love for their neighbors as well as prayer. It also enumerates the individual roles or vocations which God has given, and the exhortation to fulfill them faithfully. The Table of Duties is a reminder that being a faithful Christian is not a one size fits all endeavor. Some aspects, like prayer or attendance in church will be the same, while others like the rearing of children or watching over employees or visiting the sick, will be different for different people.

Being a faithful Christian entails being united with Christ. As Romans 6 states, “We have been united with him through baptism.” Remembering one’s baptism can encourage someone in their individual vocation and life with Christ. The Large Catechism states, “Therefore let all Christians regard their baptism as the daily garment that they are to wear all the time. Every day they should be found in faith and with its fruits, suppressing the old creature and growing up in the new. If we want to be Christians, we must practice the work that makes us Christians, and let those who fall away return to it.”<sup>23</sup>

Martin Luther emphasized the inseparable connection between saving faith and faithful living. One example in which Luther puts these words into practice is the introduction of a Common Chest in several communities. A Common Chest consisted of material donations of

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<sup>23</sup> Large Catechism Fourth Part: 84–85 in Kolb and Wengert, 466.

money, food, and clothing to assist those in need. This connection has not always been emphasized in the Lutheran church.

As stated above, the dominant way of speaking about faith in the Lutheran Church has been regarding justifying faith. This is not without good reason. *Faith Active in Love*, a recent booklet of the Committee on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), document, offers helpful instruction;

If an assembly of people is to be and to live as church, then its central mission must be nothing other than to preach the Gospel and administer the holy sacraments. When this mission is lost, then faith is lost; and when faith is lost, salvation is lost and with it the energetic love and hope that accompany a true living faith. Fallen children of earth can create assemblies that, to outward appearance, do great deeds of love. But when deeds of love flow from something other than faith created by the Gospel, they are before God, sinful. (Rom. 14:23)<sup>24</sup>

Also in the CTCR document, “When the church is engaged in its central task of proclaiming the Gospel and administering the sacraments, an indirect yet intended result will be the active love seen in the daily life of believers.”<sup>25</sup> The role of active faith has not been a major point of emphasis in the Lutheran Church. Practically speaking, this has led to antinomianism, gospel reductionism, and quietism at times.<sup>26</sup> As a result, many Christians cannot offer an answer to the challenge of 1 Peter 3:15: “Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.” Through confirmation and Sunday School, churches attempt to teach and form young people. However, once such knowledge and salvation is gained, the church’s role is seen as ancillary or even unnecessary.<sup>27</sup> In his *Christian Dogmatics*, the

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<sup>24</sup> LCMS Committee on Theology and Church Relations, *Faith Active in Love: Human Care in the Church’s Life*. (St Louis, MO: Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1996) 17.

<sup>25</sup> LCMS CTCR, *Faith Active in Love*, 15.

<sup>26</sup> For more exposition on this critique of trends in modern Lutheranism, see Biermann, *A Case for Character*.

<sup>27</sup> A troubling side effect of this understanding is the loss of young church members following confirmation instruction. It is as though confirmation equates to graduation from church.



Lutheran theologian Francis Pieper wrote,

The church must demand of its members that they prove the faith of the heart by good works. The church insists on a justification by works. The further a Christian congregation departs from this practice, the more will license abound in her midst, the less she will fulfill her calling of being a light to the world and a salt of the earth. Let her never forget that Scripture calls for this justification by works. John 13:35: ‘By this shall all men know that you are my disciples if you love one another’ and Matthew 12:37: ‘By thy works shall you be justified, and by thy works thou shall be condemned.’<sup>28</sup>

In the LCMS, there is a disconnect between preaching of justification and preaching of faithfulness or sanctification. In one study among LCMS members, only 22% of members thought their church did a good job of showing love and concern for people in their community.<sup>29</sup>

This is a problem which deserves more attention. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote on this topic in *The Cost of Discipleship*:

Costly grace was turned into cheap grace without discipleship . . . It is under the influence of this kind of ‘grace’ that the world has been made ‘Christian,’ but at the cost of secularizing the Christian religion as never before. . . . The Christian life comes to mean nothing more than living in the world and as the world, in being no different from the world, in fact, in being prohibited from being different from the world for the sake of grace. The upshot of it all is that my only duty as a Christian is to leave the world for an hour or so on a Sunday morning and go to church to be assured that my sins are all forgiven. I need no longer try to follow Christ, for cheap grace, the bitterest foe of discipleship, which true discipleship must loathe and detest, has freed me from that.”<sup>30</sup>

It is common today for people to have misguided notions of faithfulness. A task of the parish pastor is to help the congregation identify the importance of living faithfully in love. When Sunday faith is not lived out the rest of the week, it is practical atheism. A person who regularly attends church may consider themselves faithful to Christ regardless of their Monday-Saturday activities. On the flip side, many people who do not attend church consider themselves

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<sup>28</sup> Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St Louis, MO: Concordia, 1951), 2:542.

<sup>29</sup> LCMS CTCR, *Faith Active in Love*, 10.

<sup>30</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 50–51.

faithful/saved simply because they have intellectually assented to the belief that Jesus is Lord at or exhibit acts of mercy. It is precisely these attitudes which young people today have decried as hypocritical. Saving faith cannot be divorced from active faith. Good works apart from saving faith is likewise futile.

Helpful here is the Lutheran framework of ‘The Two Kinds of Righteousness.’ There is a passive element, and an active element. Before God, Christians are passively declared righteous through the work of Christ. Before humanity, righteousness entails active love and service for one’s neighbor. Passive righteousness before God and active righteousness before one’s neighbor go hand in hand. Problems arise when one aspect is neglected.

This applies especially to Christians living in a non-Christian culture. People can become jaded by Christians and churches which appear to be professing but not living the faith. In the words of Bruce Hartung, “While the gospel may be preached in its truth and purity and the sacraments rightly administered, if the behavior of Christians toward each other does not coincide with this preaching, such behavior will likely trump content.”<sup>31</sup> Christians need to address that concern by highlighting the importance of faith active in love without neglecting the proclamation of justification by grace through faith.

Faithfulness permeates both ‘Sunday’ (church life) and ‘Monday’ (vocational life). Christians bear fruit in their lives by abiding with Christ, repenting of sin, and imitating him in their daily lives. A disregard for either Sunday or Monday in the life of a Christian results in an unbalanced, unbiblical perspective. When examining what it means to be a faithful Christian, there is a tendency to emphasize only Monday living. There was a movement around the turn of

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<sup>31</sup> Bruce Hartung, “Empathy & Community: Inviting Community in the Midst of Cultural Diversity.” in *Inviting Community*, ed. Robert Kolb and Theodore Hopkins (St Louis, MO: Concordia Seminary Press, 2013), 53.

the twentieth century known as the Social Gospel, led by Gladden, Rauschenbusch, and others. It placed a great emphasis upon social justice and action to bring about God's kingdom on earth.<sup>32</sup> They spoke against social ills of the time such as child labor and income inequality. They worked for better working conditions, better public schools, public health, and relief from poverty. Such causes are indeed just. However, the movement prioritized such kingdom activity while neglecting the role of the church in character formation. Walter Rauschenbusch, father of the Social Gospel movement, believed the church played but a temporary role in the early church. Modern Christians, in his estimation, should focus upon bringing about the kingdom of God through acts of mercy.<sup>33</sup>

After two World Wars, the dawn of the nuclear era, and continued social ills, the Social Gospel movement fizzled. The realization came that human progress cannot possibly overcome all social ills and its root cause—sin. One is reminded of Jesus' words in Matt. 26:11, "For you always have the poor with you." This is not an excuse to forget the poor, but a realization of the state of our sinful world east of Eden.

Robert Kolb writes, "They will not know that we are Christians by our love, even though Luther counted it as a mark of the church—which, to be sure, is not unique to the church. That is why simply being kind and gentle is not enough; God's kingdom comes through His word."<sup>34</sup>

There is an old Latin maxim: *Lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi*. (As we worship, so we believe, so we live) The words, symbols, sacraments, and fellowship of the church community

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<sup>32</sup> This was not a unified organization, but many disparate movements and actors. Historians today group these movements under the social gospel umbrella. This social gospel would be characterized as post-millennial. That is, they were trying to progressively make the world a better place, in the hope of eventually inaugurating Christ's return.

<sup>33</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Abingdon, 1917), 132.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Kolb, "God's Word Produces Faith and Fruit," *Concordia Journal* 40 (2014): 221.

form Christians for faithful living. When in the liturgy of the church service, believers confess their sins before God and receive forgiveness; this habit trains them for humble living with their neighbor. As they share the peace of the Lord, Christians share a sign of reconciliation and unity. The Word of God convicts of sin, proclaims forgiveness through Jesus Christ, and calls believers to faithfully follow him. The Lord's Supper is a communal meal, eating and drinking the Lord Jesus, who gave His life out of self-sacrificial love. As they depart the worship service, the pastor prays that God would strengthen Christians in faith towards him and fervent love for one another. God's blessing is spoken, sing a hymn, and Christians go out into the world.

Why is the church important? It is the source of covenantal life with God. Several studies and books have been published recently noting the rise of people identifying as 'spiritual, but not religious.' Spiritual implies some connection to God and holy living. Not religious implies a distrust or disassociation with the institutional church and organized religion. A challenge for the church today is to remind people of the centrality of the church in the life of a Christian. It is also a challenge for the church to remain faithful to her specific calling. "Overlooked, derided, and dismissed by the culture, the faithful church is nevertheless precisely the place most needed by the culture. Faithful churches proclaim the gospel. Faithful churches cultivate character."<sup>35</sup>

The church, through the Holy Spirit, is an excellent formational vehicle to bring people to faith and exhort them to faithful living. This begins by worshiping the Lord with brothers and sisters in Christ. The New Testament offers a snapshot of the early church community, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). "Do not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another as you see the Day drawing near" (Heb. 10:25). God gathers His people together to be

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<sup>35</sup> Biermann, *A Case for Character*, 199.

forgiven, taught, and sent. Christians can remember their baptism into Christ, each day dying to sin and rising to new life.

United to Christ, Christians are called to love one another and love the Lord. Love is lived out through vocations, stewardship of God's creation, and obedience to the Word of God. This is faithfulness enfleshed. It touches every part of life and every day of the week. It is self-sacrificial love borne of trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. "Be watchful; stand firm in the faith; act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love" (1 Cor. 16:13–14).

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RECENT RESEARCH**

#### **A Spiritual and Cultural Diagnosis**

As Americans witness the shift from living in a Constantinian society to a post-Constantinian society, a re-evaluation is needed as to how Christians might live out their faith. The focus of this chapter is threefold: 1) Examine the historical context of American Christianity. 2) Identify the current milieu of Christianity in America. 3) With the help of recent research, chart a way forward for Christians living in a post-Constantinian America.

As some American Christians comment on the cultural shift of the past few decades, they are often referring to the erosion of Christianity as the implicit guide and mold of societal norms. Over the past fifty years, America has shifted from a Constantinian to a post-Constantinian culture. What does Constantinianism mean? Many churches display the X P symbol (Chi Rho, the first two letters of Christ in the Greek alphabet) somewhere in their sanctuary. During the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 313, the pagan Roman Emperor Constantine had a vision that he should conquer in this sign. Marching out to battle with the X P emblazoned on shields and banners, Constantine was victorious. He interpreted this as divine intervention. Twelve short years after the Battle of Milvian Bridge, Constantine called the Council of Nicea. It was there the Nicene Creed, the official confession of faith for much of Christianity still today, was ratified. In a short period of time, Christianity went from being a persecuted minority to, under Constantine, a state-supported growing religion. Under his successor, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. From the fourth century until the mid-twentieth century, some form of Christianity has held preferred or official

status in most of the Western world.

Constantinianism refers to the period of time, inaugurated with Emperor Constantine, where Christianity held a preferred or even official status in society. A shifting to a post-Constantinian culture means that Christianity no longer holds the power, influence, or reverence it once did. Constantinianism should not be equivocated with the Christian faith. The end of Constantinianism in the United States does not at all mean the end of Christianity. The Christian church survived and even thrived in the time of persecution before Constantine. Despite, or even because of persecution, the church grew. The church father Tertullian once remarked, ‘The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.’

By many indicators, Anglo-American Christianity is declining as the baby boomers age. However, it would be erroneous to state that American Christianity is dying. It would be proper to state that the makeup of American Christianity is changing. The United States has witnessed an immigration boom from Latin America over the past few decades. “By 2050, approximately 128 million Americans will claim Hispanic/Latin origin. They will account for 25% of the population.”<sup>1</sup> Hispanic Christianity is a growing, but still overlooked, segment of the population.

Just as America is witnessing changes, there are shifts in Christianity throughout the world. “Contrary to myth, the typical Christian is not a white fat cat in the United States or Western Europe, but rather a poor person, often unimaginably poor by Western standards.”<sup>2</sup> Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Christian church is thriving in areas such as Africa, Asia, and South America. It is thriving without the support of the state, often times in the face of persecution. For example, the LCMS has about 2 million members. The Ethiopia Lutheran Church Mekane Yesus

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<sup>1</sup> Leopoldo Sanchez, “The Global South Meets North America,” *Concordia Journal* 37 (2011): 47.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Jenkins, *Next Christendom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 256.

has about 9 million members and the Malagasy Lutheran Church in Madagascar has 3 million members. Worldwide Christianity is not dying, but it is shifting from the first world countries of the northern hemisphere to two thirds world countries of the southern hemisphere. While those stories are amazing and need to be told, for the purposes of this study, the focus is upon Christianity in the United States. Before examining the present state of affairs, a look at the unique history of Christian faith and practice in America is helpful.

Similar to Hispanic immigrants in the twenty-first century, European settlers came to America in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries to find freedom, prosperity, and peace. Many immigrants desired to worship in a way not governmentally established and frequently persecuted in the Old World. Many European countries had official state churches such as the Anglican Church in England or the Lutheran church in Sweden.

The archetypical story of European American exploration centers on a group of English Puritans known as the Pilgrims. The Pilgrims offer a glimpse into the early American religious landscape. Exiled from their native England, they came to America because they insisted upon a more radical and austere form of Christianity than Anglicanism offered. They sought a purified form of Christianity. Moving to America allowed people to shed the 'corrupt' Anglican Church and combine their Christian faith with the liberty offered in America. Thanks to the push to explore and colonize the New World, religious outcasts like the Puritans, Quakers, and Congregationalists, found a place to flourish in the colonies. Unlike the European norm of *cuius regio, eius religio* (Whose realm, His religion), the diversity of denominations in America combined with the freedom of democracy allowed many different groups to survive and flourish. While religious tolerance was greater in some colonies (Rhode Island, Pennsylvania) than others (Massachusetts), by the time of nationhood, religious disestablishment was codified into law



through the First Amendment of the US Constitution.<sup>3</sup> The founding fathers were not attempting to make America free from religion. Rather, they were avoiding the European model of an official state church. The peculiar state of religion in America goes hand in hand with the American ideals born of Enlightenment thought of freedom, liberty, and individualism. In the New World, faith was set free from the governmental sponsored moorings of the Old World. The heritage of the first European settlers had a two-pronged effect which resonates to this day: 1) Strong and idiosyncratic religious beliefs; 2) A belief in personal freedom.

In one of the ironies of history, the Puritans and Quakers—fervent religious zealots by most standards—paved the way for modern freedom of religion. Whereas in the Old World a person’s faith could be lived out simply by being a proper member of society (i.e. to be English was to be Anglican, to be German or Scandinavian was to be Lutheran), faith in the New World was not an act of civic duty but of religious freedom. This shift began during the Great Awakening of the 1740s, a time of great religious fervor. The preacher George Whitefield was the central figure of the time. “In simplest terms, [The Great Awakening] represented by Whitefield marked the passing of Puritanism and the rise of evangelicalism as the dominant Protestant expression in America. In this new form, loyalty to a particular church was less important than a vibrant religion of the heart.”<sup>4</sup> Religious zeal went hand in glove with newfound American liberty. The amalgamation of the two became the foundation for American Christianity.

In the 1830s the French statesman and historian Alexis de Tocqueville ventured to the United States to examine its curious amalgamation of freedom, religion, and liberty. His book

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<sup>3</sup> By 1640, Massachusetts had a heresy law that required the death penalty for any person who denied that the Bible was the Word of God.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 52–53.

*Democracy in America* provides a helpful, if anecdotal, snapshot of the American religious scene. He writes;

In France I had almost always seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom marching in opposite directions. But in America I found they were intimately united and that they reigned in common over the same country . . . The Americans combine the notions of Christianity and of liberty so intimately in their minds, that it is impossible to make them conceive the one without the other . . . In the United States, the sovereign authority is religious . . . there is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America, and there can be no greater proof of its utility and of its conformity to human nature than that its influence is powerfully felt over the most enlightened and free nation of the earth.<sup>5</sup>

DeToqueville's observations, along with the zeal of the Great Awakenings, led to the popular (albeit misleading) notion that the United States in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century was a harmonious and devout Christian nation.

America was not uniformly devout or faithful. According to historian John Butler, "On the eve of the Revolution, only seventeen percent of adults were church members and spiritual lethargy was the rule."<sup>6</sup> One prominent exemplar of American liberal Christianity is found in President Thomas Jefferson.<sup>7</sup> "Thomas Jefferson would have been forced to reject Jesus if he had seen him as a take-it-or-leave-it proposition. Jefferson, as bold in religion as in politics, refused to grant Christians the right to serve as exclusive interpreters of the Bible. Christ he could not accept, but he was determined to revere Jesus."<sup>8</sup> Jefferson published his own version of the Gospels, entitled 'The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth.' Similar to the ancient heretic

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<sup>5</sup> Alexis deToqueville, *Democracy in America*, <http://www.leaderu.com/orgs/cdf/onug/detocq.html>, accessed: Feb. 24, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> James Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2004), 44.

<sup>7</sup> Many of the Founding Fathers, influenced profoundly by Enlightenment philosophy, may properly be categorized not as Christians, but as deists.

<sup>8</sup> Prothero, *American Jesus*, 12–13.

Marcion, he cobbled together a variant Bible, retaining the moral teachings but discarding the miracles and prophecies. Ever since the Enlightenment, some Americans have, following Jefferson, omitted the supernatural elements of Christianity and framed religion as a moral endeavor. American religion was mainly not beholden to institutions. Rather, it took on increasingly individualistic forms.

The history of Lutheranism in America serves as a microcosm for the changes between European and American ecclesiology. The state church was (and still is) the major ecclesiastical structure in European Lutheranism, specifically Germany and Scandinavia. The origins of the LCMS had similarities to the Pilgrims. Both movements were seeking to retain orthodox worship in a land where the state church (Prussian Union for the LCMS; Church of England for the Pilgrims) demanded their adherence to practices they believed to be unfaithful or heterodox. As the Saxon Lutherans immigrated to the Midwest, they adopted the freedom of American ecclesiology broadly rejecting a church hierarchy for a form of congregationalism. The Lutherans institutionalized American liberty via congregational autonomy. This stands in opposition to Roman Catholicism, where there is no questioning of canon law. Because of congregational autonomy, instilling uniform religious observance can be akin to herding cats. This is but an example of religious zeal combined with zeal for liberty.

The early history of American religion teaches us two broad lessons which are informative. 1) Early Americans were zealous for their particular religious beliefs. 2) The dialectic between religious institutions and liberty has produced a uniquely American expression of faith resulting in the tacit sanctity of personal freedom. By examining the history of US religion, one can better understand how we arrived at the present cultural state of religious observance.

## The Twentieth Century: American Christendom

While eighteenth and nineteenth century history is informative, it is the last seventy-five years of American history which is crucial to understand how we arrived at the present state of religious observance.

The epochal event which ushered in the modern era is World War II. As the soldiers returned home from the war, the United States was entering an unprecedented period of prosperity and population growth known as the baby boom. The decades following World War II were a unique period of heightened religiosity, akin to the Great Awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. As Robert Putnam writes, “In the 1950s, the institutional commitment embodied in church membership burgeoned from 49% in 1940 to 69% in 1960.”<sup>9</sup> Church pews were packed. In Lutheran circles, ancillary organizations such as the Ladies Aid and Walther League were at their apex. “In 1952, 75% of Americans told Gallup that religion was very important to their lives, an all-time record. 81% said religion can answer today’s problems.”<sup>10</sup> The 1950s and 60s had the appearance of a golden age for Christianity in America.

It would be a fallacy to equivocate the high church attendance of that period with greater faithfulness. Theological conviction was not the sole reason for church attendance. Other factors, primarily patriotism, led to the waxing influence of the churches. The phrase “In God We Trust” was being printed on US currency and the phrase “One Nation under God” was added to the Pledge of Allegiance. Such actions were taken not necessarily to promote Christianity, but rather as a bulwark against the burgeoning threat of atheistic communism. Church attendance, while an act of faith, was also an act of patriotism and social conformity. “For many of the families

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Putnam, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 86.

<sup>10</sup> Putnam, *American Grace*, 87.

packing the pews, religious attendance was less an act of piety than an act of civic duty, like joining the PTA or Rotary, organizations whose membership rolls, not coincidentally, were also exploding in these same years.”<sup>11</sup> Social pressures as well as obedience to convention and habit, not necessarily doctrinal convictions, saw people flocking to the local church. This period was the height of American Constantinianism. That is, Christianity was culturally established and supported. There was little persecution or questioning of the status quo.

During that time, going to church was a powerful unifying force in America. The loss of such unity affects America today, especially in the political realm. “At midcentury, religiosity and politics had been barely corrected: Liberals were common in the pews of the 60s, and they were matched by plenty of unchurched conservatives. By the end of the century both groups had become rare.”<sup>12</sup> At midcentury, Protestants across the political spectrum were united in ways which seem unfathomable in the twenty-first century. One example is the opposition during the 1960 presidential campaign of John Kennedy, not because of His policies, but because he was Roman Catholic.

This period was the closest the US came to making Christianity the state religion. The Sunday Blue Laws were in full effect across the nation. When Blue Laws were transgressed, guilty legislators tried to make amends, “When a Vermont railroad began running trains on the Sabbath in the 1850s, the state legislature made sure that conductors read a passage of Scripture to the riders.”<sup>13</sup> The Lord’s Prayer was said in public schools, school schedules accommodated church activities, and Sunday was seen as a day for church and family. What this meant

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<sup>11</sup> Putnam, *American Grace*, 87.

<sup>12</sup> Putnam, *American Grace*, 82.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Goddard, *Getting There: The Epic Struggle between Road and Rail in the American Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994), 8.

practically is it was relatively easy to be a cultural Christian. The peculiar identifying marks of being a faithful Christian, which meant persecution during the time of the Apostles, were subsumed into the American culture. For example, in second-century Rome, a person attending church might be arrested and fed to the lion. In 1950s America, a person not attending church might have been suspected of being a communist traitor. Christianity had become so established (but not officially, of course) that it had become an indistinguishable feature of America.

In the Lutheran context, churches grew in the 50s and 60s via larger families, longer life spans, and affinity-seeking individuals. The correlation between residences of ethnic Germans and Lutherans was, and still is, remarkably high. Church growth and evangelism were culturally segmented. German families attended the German (Lutheran) church because it was the primary gathering point for the community. Was faithfulness an important issue during this period? Yes. Was this the golden age for faithful Christianity? Not necessarily. The roles of cultural unity and civic duty cannot be underestimated as factors in church growth during that time period.

Following the domestic tranquility of the 1950s came a cultural earthquake in the 60s. This is expressed in the lyrics from the 1964 Bob Dylan tune, *The Times, They are a Changing*:

*Come mothers and fathers Throughout the land  
And do not criticize What you cannot understand  
Your sons and your daughters Are beyond your command  
Your old road is rapidly agin' Please get out of the new one  
If you cannot lend your hand For the times they are a-changin'*

In the 60s the nation found itself dealing with substantial issues such as race relations, women's rights, the sexual revolution, civil disobedience, and the vocal objections to the Vietnam War. This ushered in a new attitude. Following the Vietnam War and President Nixon's resignation, institutions such as the government and the church went from being instinctively trusted to distrusted. The old ways were changing. In the words of Sydney Ahlstrom:

The decade of the Sixties was a time, in short, when the old foundations of national confidence, patriotic idealism, moral traditionalism, and even of historic Judeo-Christian theism, were awash. Presuppositions that had held firm for centuries, even millennia—were being widely questioned . . . It was perfectly clear to any reasonable observant American that the postwar revival of the Eisenhower years had completely sputtered out, and that the nation was experiencing a crisis de conscience of unprecedented depth.<sup>14</sup>

The cultural Christianity of years past was being replaced by cultural agnosticism. Popular opinion of Christianity was at best irrelevant or at worst harmful. In 1966, the cover of *Time* magazine asked, “Is God dead?”

The effects of this cultural revolution had a major impact on American Christianity. Just as the religious Puritans rejected the institutional church in England for the freedom of worship in America, the second half of the twentieth century was a diminution of the formal Christian institutions for a freedom to express their faith in a more personal way. One example of the rejection of religious institutions (but not faith) popularized in the 60s is ‘Sheilaism.’ “I believe in God. I am not a fanatic. I cannot remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It’s Sheilaism. Just my own little voice . . . my own Sheilaism . . . is just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other.”<sup>15</sup> God is not rejected. Sheilaism is one iteration of the notion: ‘spiritual, but not religious.’ Faith and the golden rule are mentioned. But gone are any moorings to Christ, the Bible, or the church. Faith in God became one’s individual construct, unencumbered by any institution or doctrine. Where this has implications for faithful living today is that people are encouraged to follow their heart instead of following the Bible. Freedom of religion led to more idiosyncratic iterations of faith.

From anti-war protests, to civil rights, to sexual freedom, to equal rights, expressions of

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<sup>14</sup> Putnam, *American Grace*, 92.

<sup>15</sup> Putnam, *American Grace*, 97.

freedom and individuality in the 1960s have been well documented. This shift affected even the LCMS. The LCMS had a student protest in 1973–1974 that began as a walkout from classes and ended in the formation of an alternative seminary, Seminex (Seminary in Exile). Some have theorized that these events occurred as a direct result of the 60s counter-cultural anti-war movement.

The 60s revolution had political undertones which continue to shape the political and religious landscape to this day. The end of Constantinianism has divided America between believers and unbelievers, forced to take sides on a multitude of issues. Politically, the earthquakes of the 60s began with fissures in the 1920s. In the Scopes Monkey Trial, William Jennings Bryan served as prosecuting attorney against a man teaching evolution in school. Bryan was a passionate Christian concerned about social justice. In the trial he was defending Biblical creationism. Richard Fox paints a picture of the dividing walls that were erected in the aftermath of the trial:

The Scopes Trial made people forget that Bryan had been a liberal in his prime, not a conservative. The public humiliation he suffered at the hands of Darrow and Mencken cement the linkage between secularism and liberalism, on the one hand, and evangelicalism and conservatism on the other. Meanwhile, the conservative evangelicals, far from accepting the place northerners assigned them—extinction—went about raising money and radio antennae . . . They gladly hailed the name of Jesus, causing liberal realists—already reticent for political reasons about proclaiming Christ in public—to speak of him less and less frequently. As a result of their silence, ‘Jesus’ uttered in public came more and more to connote anti-modernist convictions.”<sup>16</sup>

Ironically, it was William Jennings Bryan, a strident creationist Christian concerned about social justice issues, who in part made those two positions seemingly incongruous for modern politicians with the Scopes Trial. In a divided America today, people are still presented with cut

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<sup>16</sup> Prothero, *American Jesus*, 328.



and dry either/or options on issues such as: creation/evolution, abortion, marriage, schooling, etc. A person's stance on certain issues or voting for a certain political party has become more important than being a faithful Christian.

Returning to the 60s, two flash points in the cultural clash came over equal rights for women (feminism) and the sexual revolution. Although the Equal Rights Amendment was not codified as the law of the land, it has largely been ratified in the behaviors of people today. In some churches today, women are ordained. Many women are working outside the home and serve important roles both in the church and at work. Some Christians, however, did push back against the sexual revolution on two specific points, 1) liberalizing sexual ethics and norms, and 2) the legalization of abortion with Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision in 1973. As a result, these issues took a prominent place in the debate over what it means to be faithful, while other important issues took a back seat.

In 1976, Jimmy Carter became the first southern evangelical Christian elected President of the United States. While the Democrat spoke openly of his faith, he did little to oppose the progressive social agenda of the Democratic Party which evangelical Christians found offensive. He did, however, take a strong stand on first article stewardship issues such as energy usage, caring for the environment, and civic pride. He lived out certain aspects of faithfulness while neglecting others.

During that same time period, the Moral Majority emphasized sexual morality while neglecting to care for the environment. Citing decaying morals, Jerry Falwell and others started a movement called the 'Moral Majority' in 1979. The purpose of the organization was to mobilize the citizenry, the silent 'moral majority', to take a stand politically specifically on issues of sexual morality. With the election of Republican President Ronald Reagan and the eventual

Republican majority in the House of Representatives in 1994 (the first time in forty years), the 1980s is seen as a reactionary pendulum swing from the revolution of the 1960s. President Carter and the Moral Majority are but two examples of how modern Americans, in their quest to be faithful Christians, have picked and chose certain issues deemed more important than others.

Sexual ethics became the new ground zero. Constantinianism's last gasp, the hope that Christianity could still be the driver of culture and public policy. Robert Putnam notes, "In 1976, the Republican platform was more or less neutral on abortion. By 1980 it unequivocally endorsed a constitutional amendment to ban abortion, language that has been preserved ever since."<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, "1980 was the first time the Democratic Party firmly established its opposition to the curtailment of federal funding for abortions. Beginning in the 1980s, voters had a choice on abortion."<sup>18</sup> It became a lightning rod issue.

Another debate has been ongoing, and has reached a zenith in the 2010s, regarding same sex marriage. This too, has a connection to religiosity and identification with the political party. However, the connection between being pro-life and against same-sex marriage seems to be dissipating. Homosexuality has become increasingly acceptable in society. On the other issue, "people born after 1965 are less pro-choice than their baby boomer parents."<sup>19</sup> While sexual ethics have continued their slow but steady liberalization since the 60s, the pushback against abortion appears to be an outlier, possibly because of medical advancements and sonograms.

These issues have important connotations for modern Christians desiring to be faithful to Christ. Many Evangelicals and LCMS Lutherans believe that life begins at conception and have traditional views of gender and marriage issues. Positions on these issues have become, in a

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<sup>17</sup> Putnam, *American Grace*, 391.

<sup>18</sup> Putnam, *American Grace*, 391.

<sup>19</sup> Putnam, *American Grace*, 408.

sense, the *sine qua non* litmus tests for Christians in politics and society. Devout Christians have been praised or attacked simply because of their stance on these particular issues. As mentioned previously, there seems to be little room for a politician with the views of William Jennings Bryan, a staunch Christian as well as a social justice crusader. These select few lightning rod issues, in our society, stand in for the whole of Christianity. Several Christian commentators, this author included, note this has had disturbing consequences for Christianity. For many, the crusade of the moral majority was a misguided attempt to conquer America for Christian sexual ethics. People turned off by Jerry Falwell equated him with all Christians. Thus, they rejected the faith, thereby throwing the baby out with the bathwater. This is precisely why Christians today need to recapture what it means to be a faithful Christian. Overemphasizing sexual ethics has had negative consequences for American Christianity. Further, Christians cannot be equated with republicans or democrats. Faithfulness is above the realm of petty politics. Moving forward, Christians need to examine their history and develop a holistic understanding of faithfulness, which includes liberty as well as zeal.

### **Modern Religious Observance**

The pendulum swings in American culture over the past seventy-five years have had a profound effect on its churches, including the LCMS. Similar to mainline Protestant denominations, the LCMS has witnessed a staggering 24% membership loss in the past half century. In 1971, the baptized membership stood at 2,886,207. In 2016, it dropped to 2,017,834. While that number is informative, more instructive is the average church attendance, which in many congregations is about a third of total membership. This number may be more helpful because it does not look simply at people on the rolls, but those who take an active part in the life of the church.

The question remains, why is this exodus happening and what can be done about it? Shifting cultural norms have had an effect. Just as the boom in church membership was partly due to non-theological factors, the decline in membership can also be traced to non-theological reasons. For the LCMS, these include: 1) The Baby Boom. As family sizes are shrinking, that naturally impacts the church. 2) The population shift away from the Midwest heartland of Lutherans to the Southwest and other locales where the Lutheran and German/Scandinavian populations are not as predominant.

Such non-theological issues may indeed be a major cause of numerical decline in the LCMS over the past forty years. There is a feeling by some people in the LCMS that we need to repristinate the ‘faithful’ spirit of the mid-twentieth century and once again fill the pews. That is simply not possible.

There are non-theological reasons for the increase or decrease of particular churches. (i.e. The closure of the local coal mine may impact attendance and giving at the local church.) In the face of macro changes (the shift from a Constantinian to post-Constantinian society; rise of social media) and micro changes (closure of a coal mine; loss of family farms to large corporate operations), what is the church to do? One possibility is to essentially change the doctrine of the church to make it amenable to ‘modern day’ people. Several mainline Protestant denominations have attempted to ‘modernize’ Christian doctrines on subjects like sexuality and the role of women among other issues. The Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, United Church of Christ, and Presbyterian Church-USA have all liberalized their positions on sexuality in recent years but have witnessed precipitous drops in reported membership. To single out Lutherans, the ELCA lost 12.3% of baptized members or about 600,000 from 2009 to 2012. In that same period, the LCMS decreased numerically 7% or about 140,000. One bright spot in

American Christianity is the growth of Hispanic-American Christians, now estimated at about 25 million.

How can the church relate to the culture of the day and be ‘faithful’ in the midst of a changing world? What does it mean to be a faithful Christian? Belief in Jesus is central, but what are the external entailments of such faith? Rom. 12:2 states, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Jesus prayed for His disciples while making an important distinction, “I have given them your word, and the world hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world” (John 17:14). If churches are persecuted and dying because they are doctrinally faithful, little can be done. The prayer continues, “I do not ask you that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one” (John 17:15). The church called to engage the world with the word of truth. There is a difference between being faithful to Christ and being faithful to certain forms of worship and practice.

Five hundred years ago during the Lutheran Reformation, the Reformers discarded practices which were harmful but were careful to retain beneficial ones. Article XII of the Augsburg Confession states, “The church is the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly. And it is enough for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings be alike everywhere.”<sup>20</sup> This article is refreshing in its clarity and remarkable in its liberty. It upholds the essentiality of Word and Sacrament ministry. It also makes clear that uniformity of practice is not necessary.

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<sup>20</sup> Augsburg Confession VII, 3–4 in Kolb and Wengert, 43.

How might rituals and traditions in the church help or hinder faithfulness? There is certainly benefit in the routines and rituals of our traditional Lutheran way of worship. “We do not abolish the Mass but religiously retain and defend it . . . We also keep traditional liturgical forms, such as the order of readings, prayers, vestments, and other similar things . . . Ceremonies should be observed both so that people may learn the Scriptures and so that, admonished by the Word, they might experience faith and fear and finally even pray.”<sup>21</sup> Such useful forms are not abolished simply for the sake of novelty.

What happens when ceremonies, rites, and structures do not inculcate faithfulness in the manner they once did? Many Christian authors have written about the disconnect between the church and those attempting to be faithful Christians but disenfranchised from the church. In his book, *They Like Jesus, But Not The Church*, Dan Kimball examines common perceptions young people have about the church. One woman named Alicia remarked, “Why do I need church? It isn’t necessary. I have a relationship with God, and I pray a lot. But I do not see the point of having to add on all these organized rules like the church leaders think you should do.”<sup>22</sup>

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes “I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings” (1 Cor. 9:22–23) No matter what Christians do, there will always be people in the world who are hostile to the Gospel of Jesus. Despite that, how might we faithfully engage disenfranchised believers and the spiritually curious while simultaneously not harming the faith of established believers? In short, how can we proclaim the same orthodoxy, but be open to new doxology, orthopraxy and ecclesiology?

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<sup>21</sup> Apology of the Augsburg Confession, XXIV, 1–3 in Kolb and Wengert, 258.

<sup>22</sup> Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 74.

Stanley Hauerwas precisely defines our situation: “By being established, at least culturally established in liberal societies, it became more important that people believe rather than be incorporated into the church . . . Particularly awkward in the present day situation is the very characterization of Christianity as a system of beliefs that was correlative of our cultural establishment in liberal societies.”<sup>23</sup> He quotes Thomas Jefferson, “Hence religion is to be perfectly free as long as it is perfectly private—mere belief—but it must bend to the political will (law) as regards conduct.”<sup>24</sup> Such a system works swimmingly when patriotism and faithfulness have common ideals. Such a system existed in the mid-twentieth century. Many Christians during that period viewed the Christian faith as assenting to particular beliefs. Worship was a time when people with the same views gathered together.

Younger, post-Constantinian Christians seem to view faith differently. As the old adage goes, ‘actions speak louder than words.’ For them, there must be an organic connection between beliefs and actions. Further, many of them feel that there is little room for them to wrestle with their questions of faith in church, so they seek to live out their faith, however frustratingly, apart from the organized church which is perceived to be in league with the world.

Christianity in America is in a state of exploration and rediscovery. It is transitioning from Constantinian Christianity of the twentieth century into a post-Constantinian society in which Christianity is no longer established or dominant. It is as though a pane of glass has been shattered into countless fragments. Any attempt to reconstitute the glass pane is in vain. Similarly, any attempt to recapture 1950s American Christianity is pointless.

The church is learning how to set herself apart from the values and dominant narrative of

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<sup>23</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1991), 24–25.

<sup>24</sup> Hauerwas, *After Christendom*, 30.

the society. When an addict of drugs or alcohol seeks to remedy their addiction, they enter a process of detoxification (detox) whereby poisonous or harmful substances are removed from their body. They are then freed from the dependence upon the toxic substance. Currently, the church is going through a period of Constantinian detox. No longer can the church lean upon the government or cultural sentiment for support. Christians are no longer driving the culture. It is a painful, but ultimately necessary, process. Just as addicts are usually unable to come to grips with their situation on their own, the church sometimes has a problem admitting the faults of its dependency upon the old forms. The church of the 1950s was built in part on a baby boom and a patriotic nation united against communism. Things have changed. The baby boom of white America has been replaced by an influx of Hispanic immigrants. There is a Lutheran Church in Cuba. Their bishop once quipped, “Here in Cuba we are conservative, charismatic, and communist confessional Lutherans.”<sup>25</sup>

The practices and beliefs of yesteryear are vanishing. An example: Sunday is no longer reserved church and family time. Instead, sports, activities, and consumerism have changed what the ‘day of rest’ consists of. The Christian veneer to culture has been replaced by a secular humanist veneer masquerading as freedom. The Christian way of doing things or liturgy, has been replaced by a secular liturgy. James K.A. Smith, in his book, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation*, explains that culture is not an objective marketplace. Instead, our modern culture inculcates certain habits, beliefs, and visions.

Secular liturgies are fundamentally formative, and implicit in them is a vision of the kingdom that needs to be discerned and evaluated. From the perspective of Christian faith, these secular liturgies will often constitute a mis-formation of our desires – aiming our heart away from the Creator to some aspect of the creation as if it were God. Secular liturgies capture our hearts by capturing our imaginations and drawing

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<sup>25</sup> Sanchez, “The Global South meets North America,” 43.



us into ritual practices that ‘teach’ us to love something very different from the Kingdom of God.<sup>26</sup>

There is no official secular liturgy. Instead, there are societal norms, beliefs, and actions which are learned popular media like television and the internet.

So what does the modern religious landscape look like? “By world standards, the United States is a highly religious country . . . It is not always clear what people mean when they believe in God or pray, and many people believe in a God that is quite untraditional.”<sup>27</sup> In America, people are free to worship whatever whenever and however. As a result, some believers today are attempting to combine the Christian faith with the modern secular humanism. What is clear from a survey of American history is that it is, in general, religious and at the same time fiercely independent. “As many Americans believe in heaven (86%) and hell (73%) now as did several decades ago . . . And even after a decline since the 1950s, almost everyone (93%) still states a belief in God or a higher power. At the same time, unmistakable trends emerge in two key areas: the decline of belief in the Bible’s literal truth and the rise of a diffuse sort of spirituality.”<sup>28</sup> The notion that one’s ‘personal relationship with God’ matters most has risen over the years. For the typical American, their personal experiences and the secular liturgies profoundly shapes their understanding of faith and religion, more so than the Bible or church doctrine.

The gathering of people into congregations continues to be the primary model for faith to be expressed. In fact, involvement in a congregation (62%) is the #1 form of fraternal association in America today, more than hobbies, fraternal, or other organizations.<sup>29</sup> While Christianity in

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<sup>26</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation* (Ada, MI: Baker, 2009), 88.

<sup>27</sup> Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 1.

<sup>28</sup> Chaves, *American Religion*, 33.

<sup>29</sup> Putnam, *American Grace*, 29.

America in the early twenty-first century certainly does not look like it did in the 1950s, the political and cultural revolution of the 60s did not ‘kill God’ as Time magazine famously quipped. However, it did change behaviors, understandings, and perceptions.

The following section highlights four areas which paint a picture of the unique modern state of religious observance. They are: 1) God and Jesus 2) Doctrine and Worship 3) Politics and Religion, and 4) Habits of Believers.

### God and Jesus

As cited above, 93% of Americans believe in God or a higher power. At first glance, such a figure may imply that America is a unified nation under God . . . a ‘Christian nation.’ Perhaps that was the case in the 1950s, but that is not true today. The survey asked if people believe in God. The question behind the question is fundamental to the Christian faith . . . Who is God? There are many different religious groups which can all rightly claim to believe in ‘God’ (e.g. Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and Jews).

This leads to the question: Who is God and who is Jesus? Many modern Americans appear to have an individualized understanding of who Jesus is. For some, he is a savior, for others, a wise teacher, for others an encouraging friend. According to a 2017 Barna research poll, 93% of Americans believe Jesus Christ was a real person who actually lived. 43% believe Jesus was God. 59% believe that Jesus will return to earth some day.<sup>30</sup> Beginning with President Jefferson’s creation of a humanist gospel, Americans have found no problem in fashioning Jesus as their own personal totemic symbol. Fox writes, “Making Jesus a wise man like Socrates, rather than a sacrificial lamb, a healer, or an apocalyptic prophet, made him serviceable to Americans keen on

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<sup>30</sup> “Jesus: Man Myth or God?” Barna.com. April 13, 2017, accessed: Jan. 12, 2018.

enlightenment as well as individual advancement.”<sup>31</sup> For many, Jesus is a wise friend that can be occasionally consulted rather than a Lord which calls for repentance and discipleship. For others, His command to ‘love’ has been lifted from its context so that loving acceptance becomes the only thing that matters in life.

Citing the data stating Americans are more religious than most other developed nations does not necessarily imply greater orthodoxy. Thanks to the freedoms established in the Constitution, America has a high rate of religious diversity. This diversity results in greater toleration of various religious views.

According to a Faith Matters study, “11% of believers say that people of other faiths cannot reach heaven.”<sup>32</sup> (Their study does not define ‘other faiths.’ It is a quite different thing for a Lutheran to believe a Catholic is going to heaven opposed to a Muslim going to heaven.) In their words, only 11% are the ‘true believers.’

Most Americans are intimately acquainted with people of other faiths. This we argue, is the most important reason that Americans can combine religious devotion and diversity. We call it the ‘Aunt Susan’ principle.’ We all have an Aunt Susan in our lives, the sort of person who epitomizes what it means to be a saint, but whose religious background is different from our own . . . But whatever her religious background, you know that Aunt Susan is destined for heaven.<sup>33</sup>

Life experiences and personal connections have an integral role in shaping one’s theology. The cognitive dissonance between theological claims and experience is solved by the notion that conscience trumps dogma. “A whopping 89% of Americans believe that heaven is not reserved for those who share their religious faith.”<sup>34</sup> This tendency towards universalism has resulted in more diffuse spirituality among Americans.

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<sup>31</sup> Putnam, *American Grace*, 123.

<sup>32</sup> Putnam, *American Grace*, 542.

<sup>33</sup> Putnam, *American Grace*, 526.

<sup>34</sup> Putnam, *American Grace*, 534.

While atheists may not make up a substantial percentage of Americans, the rise of the religiously unaffiliated or ‘nones’ has become a recent trend. According to the 2006 Faith Matters Survey, 17% of Americans, when asked their religious tradition, answered ‘none.’<sup>35</sup> The statistical increase of ‘nones’ correlates with numerical declines among most Protestant church bodies. Some younger people do not feel that their beliefs are expressed in the church today.

In his 2011 book *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith*, David Kinnaman further examines this group. He uses the titles ‘nomads’ and ‘prodigals’ to describe young adults who have a complex relationship to the Christian faith. He has five characteristics of the nomad: “1. They still describe themselves as Christian. 2. They believe that personal involvement in a Christian community is optional. 3. The importance of faith has faded. 4. Most are not angry or hostile to Christianity. and 5. Many are spiritual experimentalists.”<sup>36</sup> Here are a few characteristics of prodigals: “1. They feel varying levels of resentment toward Christians and Christianity. 2. They have disavowed returning to church. 3. They have moved on from Christianity. 4. Their regrets center on their parents. 5. They feel as if they have broken out of constraints.”<sup>37</sup>

Robert Putnam uses the term ‘liminals’ in his writing to describe this group. What is intriguing in his research is that many of the self-reporting ‘nones’ are not ardent secularists, but Christians who are ‘on the fence.’ That is to say, one year a person may be a Lutheran, the next a none, the next a Baptist, the next a none. This phenomenon is not the exclusive domain of the church. In Robert Putnam’s other magisterial work, *Bowling Alone*, he describes the transitory

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<sup>35</sup> Putnam, *American Grace*, 17.

<sup>36</sup> David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 64–65.

<sup>37</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 68–69.

state of Americans. Whereas joining a lodge or a bowling league or a church was an integral part of society years ago, today we are witnessing an individualization and segmentation of society.

It is this nomadic segment of the population which is ripe to receive authentic Christian evangelism. Putnam writes, “What sort of religion might appeal to the new nones? If we are right that a major factor pushing them away from religion is an aversion to what they see as the merger of religion and politics—specifically because of an emphasis on sex and family issues by evangelicals allied with the Republican Party—then they would be pulled toward religion that deemphasizes such politically resonant matter for other priorities.”<sup>38</sup> This brings us to our next area of study: doctrine.

### **Doctrine and Worship**

What specifically do people today believe? A high number of people believe in heaven, and (to a slightly lesser extent) hell. Researcher Mark Chaves notes, “Unmistakable trends emerge in two key areas: the decline of belief in the Bible’s literal truth and the rise of a sort of diffuse spirituality.”<sup>39</sup> This agrees with the polling that showed people are more willing to follow their consciences if they disagree with a church doctrine. The church is viewed as a moral authority so long as it does not clash with one’s personal ideology. Although liberal mainline church bodies may not be growing numerically, the doctrinal beliefs of Christians are in general slowly becoming more liberal.

Another term bandied about to describe the belief system of people today is ‘Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.’ People are supposed to be following the golden rule (moralistic), religion is a sort of therapy (therapeutic), and they believe in god in a general sense (deism). “Today, US

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<sup>38</sup> Putnam, *American Grace*, 176.

<sup>39</sup> Chaves, *American Religion*, 33.

suburbs are filled with ‘Golden Rule Christians’ who, like Thomas Jefferson, believe that the essence of true religion lies in right living rather than right thinking, and that service to others is the highest form of prayer.”<sup>40</sup> Such thinking impacts the worship patterns of modern believers. Many today would dismiss the words of the third century church father Cyprian, ‘Outside the church there is no salvation.’ The late 60s-early 70s was a turning point in the confidence factor of institutions in America, specifically following the Tet Offensive in 1968 to President Nixon’s resignation in 1974. Implicit trust in institutions and leaders declined. “Between 1973 and 2008, the number of people with a great deal of confidence in religious leaders declined from about 35% to 25%. Confidence levels are higher among regular church attendees, but the trend is the same.”<sup>41</sup> A clearer picture is painted when one looks at more of the data and polling. In a 2009 General Social Survey study, 62% of people said that following one’s conscience, even if against church teachings, is highly important for being a good Christian. “Following one’s conscience ranks higher than following the teachings of one’s religion on the list of what it means to be a good Christian or Jew.”<sup>42</sup>

It is overly simplistic to claim people are rejecting the Christian faith. Personal agendas and emphases of leaders and church bodies play an integral role. One thing that is clear is that, in our society, liberty is becoming more important than Christian doctrine.

### Politics and Religion

It has been said that neither politics nor religion makes for polite dinner conversation topics. Both topics incite personal, passionate feeling on zero sum arguments. Political agendas

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<sup>40</sup> Prothero, *American Jesus*, 33.

<sup>41</sup> Chaves, *American Religion*, 76.

<sup>42</sup> Chaves, *American Religion*, 8.

do not always align with Christian doctrine. An example from recent history: a Christian citing the sanctity of life may agree with President George W. Bush's stance on abortion yet, based on Christ's Sermon on the Mount, disagree with his decision to invade Iraq in 2003. In the 2004 presidential election, that person had to choose between the two and fit their religious beliefs onto the political grid.

According to many researchers, religious beliefs have proven to be more malleable than political beliefs. "People changing their religious identity and practice to align more closely with their politics is more common than generally appreciated."<sup>43</sup> As Barna notes, "Beginning in the 1980s, sex and family issues—which had long been aligned with religiosity—also became aligned with positions taken by America's two major political parties."<sup>44</sup> As the 2006 Faith Matters Survey shows, religiosity matters a lot when it comes to attitudes about abortion and sexual issues, but makes little difference when it comes to other political issues such as the death penalty or foreign aid.

A strong Christian was likely to vote for George W. Bush because of his stance on abortion because cultural Christianity places a higher importance on the abortion issue than unjust war. A nonbeliever was more likely to vote against him because of those positions. Our present political climate bifurcates people into two camps. As a result of their stance on abortion and sexual issues, the Republican Party is seen as the party of believers. The Republican Party's stance on other issues is then tacitly seen as Christian. This is problematic because one particular party should not be decreed the 'Christian party.' A liminal believer may have viewed supporting the 2003 invasion of Iraq as the 'Christian position' because of the correlation with religiosity

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<sup>43</sup> Chaves, *American Religion*, 105.

<sup>44</sup> Putnam, *American Grace*, 387.

and the Republican Party. The relationship between religion and politics, complex as it is, has led to some false dichotomies.

### Habits of Believers

Are modern Christians different from other members of society? Is religious observance more than replying ‘yes’ when a pollster asks if a person believes in God? According to recent polling data, faithful Christians are different from non-believers. “Frequent churchgoers are more likely to: give money to charity, do volunteer work, give money to a homeless person, donate blood, spend time with someone who is ‘a bit down’”<sup>45</sup> “The annual average donations by religious Americans to charitable causes are vastly larger than the average donations by secular Americans.”<sup>46</sup> “Practicing Christians are more than twice as likely to adopt than the general population . . . While only 2% of all Americans have adopted a child, this rises to 5% among practicing Christians. 38% of practicing Christians say they have considered adoption, compared to 26% of all adults.”<sup>47</sup> What causes this inclination is, according to Barna, not so much religious believing but religious belonging. He writes:

Whether or not you went to Sunday School as a child seems to have no direct effect on your current civic behavior or your current generosity. What counts is not how well you learned the catechism or Golden Rule as a child, but how involved you are nowadays in religious networks, as marked by churchgoing.<sup>48</sup>

As further evidence, a fundamentalist Christian who rarely attends church is viewed as less trustworthy by others than a non-fundamentalist who attends church often. Church attendance, not doctrinal belief, appears to be the flagship symbol of a Christian living distinct from non-

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<sup>45</sup> Putnam, *American Grace*, 451.

<sup>46</sup> Putnam, *American Grace*, 447.

<sup>47</sup> “5 Things You Need to Know About Adoption,” barna.com, Nov. 4, 2013, accessed: Jan. 12, 2018.

<sup>48</sup> Putnam, *American Grace*, 468.



Christians. Not everyone who professes to be Christian attends church. Polls cite between 25–40% of Americans attend worship on a given week.<sup>49</sup> Christian belonging or fellowship provides and encouraging incubator of faithfulness. Regarding the spike in adoption among practicing Christians, receiving support and love from others can be quite helpful when raising a child.

Who are those people in the pews? Women make up 61% and men 39% of average church attendees. Their average age is fifty-four, compared to the national median age of forty-four. 66% of worshippers are married, compared to the national average of 50% married people.<sup>50</sup> Anecdotally, at my local church anywhere from 30–50% of church members are in church on a given Sunday. That number rises to 80% on Christmas and Easter. There are more women, and the makeup trends a bit older than the national average.

One significant aspect of church attendees is the family structure. “The most important factor predicting religious retention is whether a person’s family of origin was religiously homogenous and observant, or not.”<sup>51</sup> “Married people with children at home are twice as likely to say they attend services at least weekly . . . The strong connection between family structure and religious involvement is important because the proportion of Americans living in traditional families, meaning two parents plus children, has dramatically declined in recent decades.”<sup>52</sup> This reinforces the notion that belonging precedes believing. This aligns with the theory that the church boom of the 1950s was not so much a time of orthodoxy but rather civic and familial unity in the wake of the Great Depression and WWII. Today’s Christians are not necessarily more heterodox, but have more diffuse and individualized lives in part because families are more

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<sup>49</sup> Chaves, *American Religion*, 45.

<sup>50</sup> Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *A Field Guide to US Congregations*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 12–13.

<sup>51</sup> Putnam, *American Grace*, 142.

<sup>52</sup> Chaves, *American Religion*, 52.

diffuse. The church needs to find ways to adapt to the new realities of American families.

The local church, while important as a point of engagement, is no longer the center of people's social calendars. "The majority of worshipers are attending services but participating in little or nothing else in their congregation . . . Despite these behavioral patterns among worshipers, they feel connected to their parish or congregation."<sup>53</sup> While research suggests that there is some differentiation between church goers and non-attendees, those differences are becoming less distinct. While some highlight a general liberalizing of theological viewpoints, the observed changes likely are more closely correlated to declining church attendance. In the words of Mark Chaves, "If half of all the social capital in America—meaning half of all the face-to-face associational activity, personal philanthropy, and volunteering—happens through religious institutions, the vitality of those institutions influences more than American religious life. Weaker religious institutions would mean a different kind of American civic life."<sup>54</sup> Lower rates of church attendance, not necessarily fewer believers in God, is an important cause of modern cultural disharmony.

The above quote proved to be prophetic during the 2016 presidential election. The rise of secularism on the left and apathy for churchgoing on the right of the political spectrum led to the popularity of two polarizing figures, Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump. This is noted in a 2017 *Atlantic* magazine article entitled 'Breaking Faith: As American churchgoing has declined, politics has grown more vicious and convulsive than ever.' The author writes, "Trump does best among evangelicals with one key trait: They do not really go to church. [In the primaries] Trump led Cruz by a whopping 27 points among non-church goers."<sup>55</sup> He noted that when people

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<sup>53</sup> Woolever and Bruce, *A Field Guide to US Congregations*, 60.

<sup>54</sup> Chaves, *American Religion*, 113.

<sup>55</sup> Peter Beinart, "Breaking Faith," *Atlantic* (April 2017), 16.

disengage from church fellowship, they become more intolerant of others. They deemphasize morality and religion, while emphasizing race and nation. The church is a bulwark against such discrimination. The Bible teaches there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, for all are one in Christ. When people are taught that Asians and Africans and Hispanics are their brothers and sisters in Christ, or when people converse with others at coffee hour after church, a common bond of love connects them. When Christ's command to love one another is displaced by a gospel of economic prosperity which pits Americans against Mexicans or Asians, one's ideology shifts. The role of the church is also exemplified among African-Americans. "The difference between the Black Lives Matter movement and the civil-rights movement is that the civil-rights movement, by and large, was first out of the Church."<sup>56</sup> The neglect of social interactions at the local church has led to greater hostility in American culture.

Technology has played a profound role in the formation of contemporary society. A seemingly infinite amount of information is now at our fingertips, at the click of a Google search. There is a notion that people can know everything they need to know. A person can now curate the sources of information they receive via applications and social media. We are now able to live in a isolated social bubble, listening to our 'friends' on social media, and deleting those with whom we disagree; subscribing to websites we like and dismissing those that we dislike. This has been termed silo mentality. Some theorize that the internet has led to increased tribalism and social isolation.

Likewise, television has had a transformational effect on American society. Television audiences demand entertaining content, which has created a unique branch of Christianity tailor made for an entertainment driven culture using the tools of mass-marketing. In the words of Neil

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<sup>56</sup> Beinart, "Breaking Faith," 17.

Postman:

Television is not well suited to offering people what they need. It is ‘user friendly.’ It is too easy to turn off . . . As a consequence, what is preached on television is not anything like the Sermon on the Mount. Religious programs are filled with good cheer. They celebrate affluence . . . Their featured players become celebrities. Though their messages are trivial, the shows have high ratings, or rather, *because* their messages are trivial, the shows have high ratings.<sup>57</sup>

How does technology affect Christianity? The democratization of information and transparency are good things. As a reminder from history, before Martin Luther translated the Bible into the vernacular German, the Bible and its interpretation was in the hands of select priests. It was good to allow all to read the Bible. In the same manner, it is a good thing that all people have access to information.

Christianity is not merely information. As the flawed logic goes, if a person know about God, and they have all the information they need, why go to church? At church, they might be confronted with Bible passages they do not like or people that are different than then who cannot be deleted like a Facebook post. While churches often are groups of homogenous people, at times they force people to think and operate outside their usual circles. It is a reminder that the purpose of Christianity is not to entertain but to make disciples.

In recent years, church attendance has been declining even among regular church attendees. Every week attendance is being replaced by every month attendance. Carey Nieuwhof, a Canadian pastor, has a helpful diagnosis in a blog post entitled, ‘10 reasons even committed church attendees are attending church less often.’ “1. Greater affluence; 2. Higher focus on kid’s activities; 3. More travel; 4. Blended and single parent families; Online options; 6. Cultural disappearance of guilt; 7. Self-directed spirituality; 8. Failure to see a direct benefit; 9. Valuing

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<sup>57</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, (New York: Penguin, 2005), 121.

attendance over engagement; 10. A massive cultural shift.”<sup>58</sup> Younger people are looking for faith in action. Others are twisting faith into an intellectual assent so that they are free to pursue their personal endeavors. Faith is not a compartmentalized piece of life. Faith is an orientation of the total person, giving purpose and meaning to one’s life.

This data offers a snapshot of modern American religious practices. Some of it is encouraging, like the fact that church attendees differ from the rest of society in their charitable giving. Other facts are cause for concern, such as the declining attendance numbers.

### **Charting a Way Forward: My Thoughts**

The primary focus of this MAP is to explore what it means to be a faithful Christian. Along the way, I realized the valuable insights of recent history needed to be included to give greater depth to the MAP. It has been said that we walk backwards into the future. That is, we can see the past, but the future is unknown. Many local churches (mine included) are wrestling with the shift from a Constantinian to post-Constantinian culture. Following are my suggestions to chart a way forward. Some of my thoughts in this section informed my crafting of the questionnaire and the sermon series in the field research aspect of the MAP.

When looking our modern society, many Christians have lamented the dramatic changes. I find solace in the words of Stanley Hauerwas who views this as an exciting adventure.

The demise of the Constantinian worldview, the gradual decline of the notion that the church needs some sort of surrounding Christian culture to prop it up and mold its young, is not a death to lament. It is an opportunity to celebrate. The decline of the old, Constantinian synthesis between the church and the world means that we American Christians are at last free to be faithful in a way that makes being a Christian today an exciting adventure.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Carey Nieuwhof, “10 Reasons Even Committed Church Attendees Are Attending Church Less Often,” [careynieuwhof.com](http://careynieuwhof.com), Feb. 16, 2015, accessed Nov. 1, 2017.

<sup>59</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1989), 17–18.

Instead of lamenting the death of Constantinianism, pastors should encourage people along this ‘exciting adventure.’ It is their duty to equip them with the ability to walk faithfully with their Lord as a member of His Bride, the church. The death of Christendom should not be equated with the death of Christianity. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, there is exponential church growth in Africa, Asia, and South America. These are places where Christianity is not the culturally established norm. There are now more Lutherans in Ethiopia than in the US. Here in the United States, Hispanics account for a growing percentage of Christians. Christianity is not dying, but the global face of Christianity is indeed changing.

It is precisely an ‘exciting adventure’ that people in this amused to death culture (through sports, technology, and entertainment) are yearning for.<sup>60</sup> In the words of David Kinnaman, “We have a disciple making problem. The church is not adequately preparing the next generation to follow Christ faithfully in a rapidly changing culture.”<sup>61</sup> Pastors and laity do not need to entertain youth (the world does a fine job at that), but show them how to imitate Christ in their lives. One student whom Kinnaman interviewed challenges Christians to be like Jesus.

I want you to be someone I want to grow up to be like. I want you to step up and live by the Bible’s standards. I want you to be inexplicably generous, unbelievably faithful, and radically committed. I want you to be a noticeably better person than my humanist teacher, my atheist doctor, than my Hindu next door neighbor. I want you to sell all you have and give it to the poor. I want you to not worry about your health like you’re afraid of dying. I want you to live like you actually believe in the God you preach about. I do not want you to be like me; I want you to be like Jesus. That’s when I’ll start listening.<sup>62</sup>

“What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such

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<sup>60</sup> I am borrowing from the seminal Neil Postman book entitled *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. His book displays how media (specifically TV) has shaped our culture so that people are now obsessed with banal and trivial pursuits. The pursuit of entertainment has usurped the pursuits of wisdom and morality.

<sup>61</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 21.

<sup>62</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 232.

faith save him?” (James 2:14) Faithfulness is not mere recitation of orthodox information; it is a living trust in the Lordship of Jesus Christ. As we examine how to live by faith, we are really asking, “How do we display trust in God throughout our lives?”

There are three major areas of life in which we can live by faith and display our living trust in God. 1) Be engaged in a community of believers; 2) Faithfully serve in God-given vocations; and 3) Serve as God’s stewards in the community and the world.

To be clear, these are marks of faithful living. Doing these things does not offer a framework for salvation, but a framework for how those redeemed by God in Christ are to live.

### Be Engaged in a Community of Believers

How or where can people connect with God? By going to where the Lord has promised to be, with other believers gathered around His Word and Sacraments of Baptism and Communion. Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there with them” (Matt. 18:20). Through the means of grace and the mutual consolation of the fellow believers, faith is sustained and enriched.

“Without the church the world literally has no hope of salvation since the church is necessary for the world to know it is part of a story that it cannot know without the church.”<sup>63</sup> That story is the story of salvation, from creation to the consummation; it is the story of a loving God and His creation, of which we are a part. Through baptism, we are born again into the living body of Christ, the church. Through communion, we are fed and nourished with Christ’s very body and blood, given and shed for us on the cross. In those actions; the hearing of the Word and the reception of the sacraments, we are formed into a new community.

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<sup>63</sup> Hauerwas, *After Christendom*, 36.

“Salvation in Christ means inalienable incorporation in His ‘body.’ Life through His saving action is impossible apart from a common life with the members of this body.”<sup>64</sup> One cannot speak of faith in Christ apart from His body. “Faith requires community, and in fact, a community whose features clearly distinguish it from the rest of society.”<sup>65</sup> The modern notion of being a Christian without the church is attractive to those who value freedom, yet it is Biblically untenable. If one desires to attend a marriage feast but wants nothing to do with the bride, how would you expect the groom to respond?

The classic bridge illustration depicts a chasm between God and humanity. That chasm can only be bridged through the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ, through which our salvation was won for us and we are received by grace through faith. But, as Kimball notes, “In our post-Christian culture, people encounter a second chasm, the chasm of the Christian subculture. Some Christians have created this chasm with their rhetoric and attitudes, which have led people today to harbor negative perceptions of Christians and Christianity. Such perceptions prevent them from trusting the church and hearing the gospel. This new chasm keeps them from ever getting to the sin chasm. Christians need to be the light of Jesus and the living gospel to them, building their trust in us so that they will be ready to listen. The church is sometimes seen as too inward-focused, concerned about raising money for the church, and bringing people to church. Christians need to bridge this chasm of the Christian subculture by befriending people outside the church and creating community with them.

Sometimes, when people are turned off by the church, it is not the doctrine but the people and the sub-culture of the church. There are insiders and outsiders, a special vocabulary.

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<sup>64</sup> Gerhard Lohfink, *Does God Need The Church? Toward a Theology of the People of God* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 252.

<sup>65</sup> Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?*, 320.



Christians, sinful as they are, can say hurtful things. In the words of Henri Nouwen,

When we have been wounded by the Church, our temptation is to reject it. But when we reject the Church, it becomes very hard for us to keep in touch with the living Christ. When we say, 'I love Jesus, but I hate the church,' we end up losing not only the church but Jesus too . . . But the church as an often fallible human organization needs our forgiveness, while the Church as the living Christ among us continues to offer us forgiveness. It is important to think about the Church not as 'over there' but as a community of struggling, weak, people of whom we are part and in whom we meet our Lord and Redeemer.<sup>66</sup>

In the church, one cannot always expect a shining city on the hill, but one can expect a group of fallen sinners seeking the mercy of the Lord.

At times, the Christian subculture has produced hypocrisy and faithlessness instead of faithfulness. The image of church in pop culture is riddled with figures like Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, Joel Osteen, and Jerry Falwell. The idea of an impervious, out of step institution is only reinforced when one hears stories like the Roman Catholic sex abuse scandal or closer to home the LCMS's bickering over participation at interfaith gatherings like the 9/11 memorial.

As Christians disengage from Constantinianism and re-engage the culture in a new way, tools to communicate the Gospel and live by faith in a new way will be developed. In the words of William Willimon, "We serve an interesting God. He is far more than the god indoctrinated into us by our culture. That god was busy bowing down to other idols."<sup>67</sup> Those idols, of wealth, power, money, and large membership, are destructive for the church.

As the false idols serving as roadblocks to church are removed, Christians can get down to the business of engaging with the culture and inculcating faith in believers. The work of evangelism in a post-Constantinian age is not a simple task. Using a stark analogy, Will Willimon explained what is really going on when a Christian asks someone to come to church

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<sup>66</sup> Kimball, *They Like Jesus, but Not the Church*, 253.

<sup>67</sup> William Willimon, Lecture: "Resident Aliens: 25 Years Later," Toronto, Canada, May 20, 2016.

with them. He said, “It’s like you’re mingling at a bar. You go up to someone and ask them to sleep with you . . . just because you are a nice person. It goes against everything they believe in. Instead, what we need to do is build relationships and trust with others.”<sup>68</sup> His point is that cold calls such as the Kennedy evangelism method which asks, ‘Where would you go if you died tonight?’ or attempting to simply ‘prove’ objective justification to someone are exercises in futility. Such forms may have worked fifty years ago, but what the church needs to be doing now is building relationships and building community. Belonging precedes believing for many today.

Building faithful Christians in a faithful church community entails building relationships. That is difficult work. It requires rethinking church not as a building but as a people gathered by God and sent into the world. It begins with a lot of listening and reflection. It may lead to things that put Christians in uncomfortable or awkward situations. Through it all, the church’s one foundation remains Jesus Christ her Lord. He is the Christ—the anointed one—whom Isaiah prophesies to “bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God” (Isa. 61:1). Only through Jesus does God’s kingdom come.

Following Jesus entails leaving behind the security of the known and following him into the unknown. Martin Luther once called security the ultimate idol. Too often, we cling to what we know and what keeps us safe. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we find that we are indeed on an amazing adventure into the unknown. While the church avoids security or a fortress mentality on the one hand, she must avoid novelty on the other. Attempts to be modern or relevant do nothing to encourage faithful living. The contemporary culture is preaching a form of secular therapeutic humanism. Smith writes, “Christian worship needs to be intentionally liturgical, formative and

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<sup>68</sup> Willimon, “Resident Aliens: 25 Years Later.”

pedagogical in order to counter such mis-formations and mis-directions. While the practices of Christian worship are best understood as the restoration of an original, creational desire for God, practically speaking, Christian worship functions as a counter-formation to the mis-formation of secular liturgies into which we are ‘thrown’ from an early age.”<sup>69</sup>

The Church’s liturgy is the visible enactment of our faith in God. The body of Christ is gathered by the Lord to receive forgiveness, life, and salvation won through Christ’s cross and delivered through the means of grace. The church is also gathered for a purpose; to “proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness and into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). Such faith is enacted and molded through a community’s formative liturgy. As the Savior came not to be served, but to serve, so too His church is called to service.

A faithful church is dissimilar to other community organizations. “We want to claim the church’s ‘oddness’ as essential to its faithfulness . . . In worship, we are busy looking in the right direction.”<sup>70</sup> The church gathered in worship is shaped by faithful and true doctrine. The Divine Liturgy is used because it reflects the apostolic faith. The Latin phrase *lex orandi, lex credendi* is helpful here. What Christians teach and how they worship matters because teaching and preaching have a formative influence. The words Christians hear and speak, the songs sung, and the sacraments received mold the people gathered into a community of faith. Christian worship reflects doctrine, which leads Christians to see the world through a transformed perspective.

In this community Christians learn what it means to be faithful disciples of Jesus by hearing the Word, experiencing it through the Sacraments, and living it each day. Stanley Hauerwas writes, “From this perspective, the church is the organized form of Jesus’ story.”<sup>71</sup> He

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<sup>69</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 88.

<sup>70</sup> Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 95.

<sup>71</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013),

continues, “The task of the church, therefore, is to be the kind of community that tells and tells rightly the story of Jesus . . . We, like the early Christians, must learn that understanding Jesus’ life is inseparable from learning how to live our own.”<sup>72</sup>

As heirs of Enlightenment epistemology, modern Americans are trained to think of themselves as individuals. When that thinking is brought into the realm of Christianity, it leads to the idea that being faithful to Jesus can be done as an isolated individual believing rightly or behaving rightly. “There can be no separation of Christian morality from Christian worship. As Christians, our worship is our morality for it is in worship we find ourselves engrafted into the story of God. It is in worship that we acquire the skills to acknowledge who we are – sinners.”<sup>73</sup> In worship, the law and the gospel are proclaimed. In worship, sinners are killed and made alive in Christ. This cannot be done in isolation from others. One’s conscience cannot mold itself into the image of Christ.

Worship is a hollow shell of faith if not accompanied by “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6). In *You Lost Me*, one interviewee named Kate put it well, “I do not want to be a part of a church that constantly rails against sin and sinners. I want to be part of a church that also helps people who are affected by the results of sin. This seems like what Jesus did.”<sup>74</sup>

In the Gospels, Jesus often rebuked the ways of the Pharisees. “You tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others” (Luke 11:42). One cannot have orthodoxy without faithful orthopraxy. Christians are faithful when in their lives the love of Christ is displayed to others. This includes

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<sup>72</sup> Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 52.

<sup>73</sup> Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 108.

<sup>74</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 177.

compassion to those in need, and a gentle rebuke to those who err. Christians need to be less worried about pointing out specks in others eyes and instead humbly imitate Christ. “Today, one of the first questions many people new to our church ask isn’t what denomination we belong to. Instead, the question is, ‘What are we doing for the poor?’ . . . Those who like Jesus but not the church are watching to see if we are taking the poor and oppressed as seriously as Jesus did.”<sup>75</sup>

Being a Christian is quite a radical adventure. It does not always entail dramatic choices, but seemingly mundane acts. Hauerwas writes, “Little, habitual, seemingly insignificant practices like going to church, not having sex with people to whom we are not married, not telling a racist joke, and telling the truth take on new significance in the present struggle.”<sup>76</sup> Faith is lived out in everyday practices which the world either mocks (such as praying at mealtime) or dismisses (going to church).

In living distinct from the world, Christians are being the salt and light Jesus called for in the Sermon on the Mount. As the old saying goes, ‘You catch more flies with honey than vinegar.’ The same applies to the mission of the church. Christians should learn to express the faith not as a judgmental dictation but in a loving and caring manner. This entails listening to the cares and needs of others. Bonhoeffer wrote, “It is God’s love for us that He not only gives us His word but also lends us His ear. So it is His work that we do for our brother when we learn to listen to him.”<sup>77</sup> Sitting on the side of a hospital bed of a broken, agnostic man and simply being there for him can provide a much more powerful witness of faith than a diatribe against addictions.

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<sup>75</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 111.

<sup>76</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Where Resident Aliens Live* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 92.

<sup>77</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 20.

The Lord Jesus hung on the cross with His arms opened. As His witnesses, Christians are to go into their communities with the vulnerability of open arms, hear their frustrations, and display to them the agape love found by being in Christ.

There is a pattern to life as a faithful Christian in the church community. Christians gather together to be fed and nourished. Then they go out and to do their vocations in service to their neighbor. They return again to gather as church. In a time when faithfulness is becoming more of a lonely way, Christians need to effectively express and communicate the uniqueness and dynamic power of the mission of God.

The political task of the church is primarily to be the church. It is at its finest when it stands as a bulwark against culture. It stands as a people faithful in doctrine and practice to Jesus Christ.

Hauerwas writes,

Baptismally engrafted into a new people, an alternative polis, a countercultural social structure called church. It seeks to influence the world by being the church, that is, by being something the world is not and can never be, lacking the gift and vision which is ours in Christ. The confessing church seeks the visible church, a place, clearly visible to the world, in which people are faithful to their promises, love their enemies, tell the truth, honor the poor, suffer for righteousness, and thereby testify to the amazing community-creating power of God . . . The church knows that its most credible form of witness (and the most 'effective' thing it can do for the world) is the actual creation of a living, breathing, visible community of faith.<sup>78</sup>

Above all, the church exists to proclaim the truth of God's word and display love for others.

Venturing into the post-Constantinian age, the process of discerning how to be faithful Christians continues. Christians encounter a world sometimes hostile, sometimes ambivalent, and sometimes accepting of their ways. The church cannot be just another institution concerned with self-preservation. It can survive without Christendom. (The Coptic Church is a prime example of that.) It cannot simply reconstitute the disciplines of the early church. Instead,

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<sup>78</sup> Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 46–47.

Christians look to the Lord where he has promised to reveal himself, in the word and sacraments. For it is there that the tools to live by faith are given. In the words of a prayer used in the Lutheran liturgy, “We give thanks to You, almighty God, that you have refreshed us through this salutary gift, and we implore You that of Your mercy You would strengthen us through the same in faith toward You and fervent love toward one another; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.”<sup>79</sup>

Formation into the likeness of Christ is not accomplished by always getting what we want. In ages past, choice was not heralded as a Christian’s right. In fact, relinquishing our choices by submitting to a spiritual mentor or community was prerequisite to growth in Christ. Believers were guided through formative and corrective disciplines – most being activities we would never choose if left to our desires. But surrendering control ensured we received what we needed to mature in Christ, not simply what we wanted.<sup>80</sup>

When talking about the marks of faithfulness, why begin with corporate worship? At church, people are busy looking in the right direction. It comes before action because, as Hauerwas writes, “We must get our vision right before we get our actions right.”<sup>81</sup> Here then, are several marks of faithfulness found by being engaged in a community of believers.

- Attend worship services
- Be Baptized / Remember it daily
- Hear the Word of God
- Confess sins and receive absolution
- Receive Holy Communion
- Engage in the mutual consolation of brothers and sisters in Christ

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<sup>79</sup> *Lutheran Service Book*, 166.

<sup>80</sup> David Peter, “The Challenge of Church Membership in the Twenty-First Century.” in *Inviting Community* (St Louis, MO: Concordia Seminary Press, 2013), 163.

<sup>81</sup> Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 102.

-Give financially to the mission of the church

-Invest time and talents in the life of the church

With these marks, the firm foundation of faith is laid. The faith nurtured in corporate worship permeates into the rest of life. “Communities brought together by Word and sacrament can also be instruments for facilitating ways that Christians express that love and hope that accompany a true living faith.”<sup>82</sup> Pastors are reminded that while Word and Sacrament ministry are their primary focus, they must also equip people to live faithfully in the world.

### Faithfully Serve in God-given Vocations

The primary community service a Christian can offer is to do their vocation, and do it well. The word vocation is Latin for calling. Each human being has a calling or in life. In fact, each person has multiple callings. In the Small Catechism, Martin Luther categorized various callings in the Table of Duties. He lists,

The Household Chart of Some Bible Passages for all kinds of holy orders and walks of life, through which they may be admonished, as through lessons particularly pertinent to their office and duty: to bishops, pastors, and preachers; what the hearers owe their pastors; of civil government; of citizens; to husbands; to wives; to parents; to children; to workers of all kinds; to employers and supervisors; to youth; to widows; to everyone.<sup>83</sup>

In his exposition of the Psalms, he wrote, “What else is all our work to God – whether in the fields, in the garden, in the city, in the house, in war, or In government – but just such a child’s performance, by which He wants to give His gifts in the fields, at home, and everywhere else? These are the masks of God, behind which He wants to remain concealed and do all things . . . He could give children without using men and women. But He does not want to do this.

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<sup>82</sup> LCMS CTCR, *Faith Active in Love*, 13.

<sup>83</sup> Small Catechism: Table of Duties in Kolb and Wengert, 365.



Instead, He joins man and woman so that it appears to be the work of man and woman, and yet He does it under the cover of such masks. We have the saying: ‘God gives every good thing, but not just by waving a wand.’ God gives all good gifts; but you must lend a hand and take the bull by the horns; that is, you must work and thus give God good cause and a mask.”<sup>84</sup> That means that when one serves in their vocation, it is really God serving through them.

Faithful Christians serve in their vocations not to curry favor with God. Vocations are fulfilled to earn a living and to be of service to one’s neighbor. How can someone know what their vocation is or is supposed to be? Veith writes, “Essentially, your vocation is to be found in the place you occupy in the present. A person stuck in a dead-end job may have higher ambitions, but for the moment, that job, however humble, is his vocation. Flipping hamburgers, cleaning hotel rooms, emptying bedpans all have dignity as vocations, spheres of expressing love of neighbor through selfless service, in which God is masked.”<sup>85</sup>

It is the duty of the Christian to serve faithfully in the vocations which one is called. There is a misperception among some that vocations need to be ‘Christianized’ by making proselytization a central tenant of one’s job. However, such an approach is not beneficial to the neighbor nor is it feasible in many situations. For instance, a faithful Christian trash collector does not need to hand out tracts or emblazon trash cans with crosses. He or she should simply do an efficient job, thereby serving their neighbor.

How might people be exhorted to be faithful in their God-given vocations? First, it should be noted that there are indeed certain vocations which are out of bounds to Christians. The early church father Hippolytus mentioned that Christians should abstain from becoming actors or

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<sup>84</sup> *LW* 14:115.

<sup>85</sup> Gene Veith, *Spirituality of the Cross* (St Louis, MO: Concordia, 2010), 80.

soldiers. While those seem acceptable for Christians today, vocations where sin is an integral part of the job are discouraged. In our capitalist society, there is the overarching problem of institutional greed. The primary objective of many vocations is to make money for the company. At this, it can be stated that no vocation is pure from the stain of sin. There are occupations that the Christian must, in good conscience, resign from in order to remain faithful to Christ.

Two important vocations many people serve in are found in their familial role and their job. At birth, we take on the role of child. After a few years, the role of student is added. Some people add the roles of husband or wife, later father or mother. In a post-Christian culture, their importance must not be dismissed. Children are central to the Christian mission. Stanley Hauerwas writes, “A community’s willingness to encourage children is a sign of its confidence in itself and its people. For children are a community’s sign to the future that life, in spite of its hardship and tedium, is worthwhile.”<sup>86</sup> Family life is an important sphere in which faithfulness is lived out. Teaching the faith to children is a primary part of the parental vocation. In Eph. 6:4, Paul writes, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”

Jobs are important as well. One is faithful if the duties of the job are fulfilled. In this culture, it is common to hold many and various jobs throughout life. A key in being faithful is being content in the vocations one has. 2 Cor. 9:8 says, “God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.”

People do not always have the ability to choose their vocations. The needs of one’s neighbor is an important factor in determining vocations. Leopoldo Sanchez writes,

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<sup>86</sup> Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 209.

Without the neighbor, law, vocation, and justice remain abstract and static realities. The neighbor is relentless because he is our burden and cross, in a good sense. Vocation becomes the God-established cross that by leading us to serve our neighbors prevents us from designing our own crosses as a means to become holy and seek God's favor. The neighbor teaches us what it means to act as a Christian, as one formed by the Spirit of Christ, to live under the cross through the daily sacrifices and prayers made for others."<sup>87</sup>

For instance, a family member injured in a car crash would bring about a new and important vocation. A Hispanic family moving into the neighborhood may offer a new vocation, namely learning Spanish to engage them and share the Gospel with them.

One final aspect of vocation is those stations of life in which Christians are served.

Vocations are not one-way streets. It is a blessing to receive the service of others. This can refer to people receiving end of life care at hospitals, nursing homes, hospice, and assisted living homes. It can also refer to listening to friends and neighbors and learning from them. In order to feel valuable, many people have a need to do something. However, as body and mind break down, one is no longer to fulfill the active duties of their previous vocations. This is a reminder that vocational service in this world is not a one way street. "In God's earthly kingdom, we are to receive His blessings from other people in their vocations, and they, in turn, are to be blessed through us."<sup>88</sup> In essence, receiving care can be a vocation. The way in which one reacts to the service of a nurse is an opportunity to be a blessing, to show others how to receive.

Following are marks which show how Christians can be faithful to Christ by serving in their vocations.

- Identify your vocations, make sure it does not lead people into open sin, and examine how you are serving your neighbor in this vocation

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<sup>87</sup> Leopoldo Sanchez, "The Human Face of Justice," *Concordia Journal* 39 (2013): 129.

<sup>88</sup> Veith, *Spirituality of the Cross*, 76.

- Embrace your familial vocation
- Do your vocation to the best of your ability
- Be content with your station in life
- Look at the role that morality plays in your vocation
- Be a blessing to those who serve you in their vocation
- Be a vocational mentor

### Serve as God's Stewards in the Community and the World

So far I have examined how Christians might be faithful in their worship life and their vocations. Those two areas provide the foundation of the Christian life. But they do not encompass the totality of life. A third area encompasses roles in the community and the world. The twenty-first century is the era of the global village. How one uses their time, talents, and treasures, can now have a direct impact upon people across the world. This is certainly an example for Christians expressing a living faith. As the CTCR document *Faith Active in Love* states, "Living faith, active in love, addresses the needs of whole persons, persons loved by those who know themselves loved by God in Christ."<sup>89</sup>

When God created the earth, He commissioned human beings to have dominion over it, to be stewards of the earth.<sup>90</sup> A steward is not an owner. A steward is entrusted to care for something which belongs to their master. The concept of Christian stewardship permeates all facets of life. When viewed through the lens of stewardship, a Christian's time, talents, and treasures are not their own, but entrusted to them by God. Since humans received this commission while still in the bliss of Eden, everything done in this creation can be viewed

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<sup>89</sup> LCMS CTCR, *Faith Active in Love*, 6.

<sup>90</sup> Gen. 1:28.

through the lens of faithful or unfaithful stewardship.

In recent decades, much ink has been spilt regarding the relationship between human beings and the environment. More and more people are recognizing the ecological impact humans are causing around the globe. Some non-Christians view earth as our ‘mother’ and wish to deify the creation. Some Christians have been wary to align themselves with the environmental movement. This has led to the misperception that the Christian faith does not regard environmental issues and important. The importance of caring for our creation by being faithful stewards of God’s good creation should to be emphasized.<sup>91</sup>

This happens tangibly through recycling, reusing, and conserving energy among other things. Simply understanding how one’s actions affect the earth can lead to a greater sense of responsibility and engagement. This encompasses all of life. From throwing away a large percentage of food purchased, to burning fossil fuels, to wasting time, to putting tons of steel into the ground via burials, to keeping watch over finances, this subject touches on a multitude of issues.

One example of how we can faithfully care for creation is the local food / vegetable gardening movement. As people are more aware of the great distances most commercial grade food travels to reach the consumer and the possible illnesses in that food, there is a desire to get back to a more organic or wholesome way of eating. The Bible says the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. We should treat it as such. People who attend local farmers markets know that they will have to pay a premium for such food, yet they do so willingly because of their passion for responsible curation of their food from the earth. Churches and schools can start community

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<sup>91</sup> An excellent resource on this topic is the CTCR document: “Together with All Creatures: Caring for God’s Living Earth,” (St. Louis, MO: The LCMS, 2010). It details our connection to God’s creation with Scriptural referents. It also informs people with detailed ways in which people can be good stewards of God’s earth.

vegetable gardens. These demand hard work to maintain, but they foster community building and display the wonders of God's creation. Discussions with people passionate about food and the earth can naturally flow into a discussion on the Apostles' Creed First Article with people who may not otherwise be open to discussing the faith. Two examples: 1) Someone who is eating healthily desires to take good care of their body. A Christian may respond that the body is an amazing creation, the temple of the Holy Spirit. 2) Someone desiring to eat organic or local foods may show an interest in caring for the earth. A Christian may respond that the earth is God's amazing creation. As people recognize the fragile ecology of this earth, it may lead to a feeling of helplessness. At that, Christians can point to the redemption of all things on the last day, which comes through Jesus Christ. Christians can live as good stewards of God's creation, while looking forward in hope to the day when Christ shall restore creation.

Christian faithfulness in the twenty-first century is lived out in a global village. Through amazing advances in technology, people have benefitted by the ability to communicate and interact with people across the world. A side effect is that local communities are suffering as a result. This change has economic, spiritual, political, motivational, and other effects. Shopping online or at the big box retailer has replaced the traditional community marketplace. While Paul was able to preach and witness at the Aereopagus, such communal gatherings places have now been diffused into individual niches. The book *Bowling Alone* by Robert Putnam identifies this phenomenon in American culture, noting that Americans are increasingly isolated when compared to previous generations. The two biggest factors are electronic entertainment and generational change. He believes that the privatizing of our leisure time, especially with television, might account for 25% of the social capital decline. We are less motivated to get out of the house and interact, formally or informally, with our neighbors since it is easier to watch a

screen: TV, movie, or computer.<sup>92</sup>

Such isolated individualism is ultimately harmful both to the individual and the society at large. Tim Keller, a noted pastor and author in New York City, writes, “If every individual seeks his or her own meaning, we will have fewer shared values and meanings, which will erode social solidarity and public institutions. All this will lead to intractable polarization and fragmentation.

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How does this relate to faith? If anything, it underscores the stark contrast between the Christian church as the body of Christ, a community of believers brought together; and the rugged individualism of everyday American culture. Getting to know the neighbors and being visible in the community opens the door to providing hospitality when the need arises. In turn, it opens the door to witness the Gospel. Engaging the community via involvement in activities, clean up days, picnics, and other events are just a few possibilities.

The United States is experiencing a period of stark economic inequality, especially since the so called ‘great recession’ began in 2008. There are a large number of people classified as the working poor. It is the charge of the church to care for the least of these. This hearkens to the words of Jesus in Matthew 25, “I was hungry and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me . . . Whatever you did to the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.” How we treat the ‘least of these’ in our communities is a sure sign of our faith in action. This requires more than a disengaged monetary donation to the Red Cross. It requires Christians to go in the trenches and engage people personally.

Christians can also put their faith in action by making their voices heard in the public

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<sup>92</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 284.

<sup>93</sup> Tim Keller, *Making Sense of God* (New York: Viking, 2016), 70.

square. Now, unlike ever before, individuals from across the globe can have a profound impact simply through their public testimony. Avenues to express the truth of God’s Word include the internet, social media, newspapers, and videos. The advent of social media has allowed people to facilitate faith active in love. For instance, apps are now available that inform people of events, rallies, and servant opportunities that allow people to serve their neighbor in need.

One other avenue for living the faith in a new way is in the digital world. Whereas twenty years ago, computers were viewed as little more than typewriters and telephones were used to make calls, things are now drastically different. With the internet, any imaginable piece of information is at one’s fingertips. Texting, sharing photos, video chatting, and posts on social media have replaced talking as the dominate modes of communication via phone. Many of the Millennial Generation cohort sees their digital identity as real and quite important to their sense of self-worth. Left unchecked, it can fundamentally change our society.<sup>94</sup>

As a result, the church needs to learn to communicate effectively through this new medium. Just as Martin Luther harnessed the power of the printing press, Christians today need to be able to use modern technology to spread the Gospel message. How can this be done? Churches can establish a digital presence with a website or social media pages. Some churches also have apps that inform members and offer Bible verses or tips for being the hands and feet of Christ. Churches and pastors can encourage members to engage the digital age by having a social media account to connect with other people. It allows one’s voice to be heard and provide encouragement for fellow Christians.

The church must hear the voice of those seeking authentic Christianity. Following are the

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<sup>94</sup> For a statistical glance at how it is affecting the behaviors of teenagers, see “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?” *Atlantic* Sept, 2017.



top 5 answers given to a Barna study when exile-Christians were asked about their faith: “1. I want to find a way to follow Jesus that connects with the world I live in. 2. God is more at work outside the church than inside, and I want to be a part of that. 3. I want to be a Christian without separating myself from the world around me. 4. I want to help the church change its priorities to be what Jesus intended it to be. 5. I am a Christian, but the institutional church is a difficult place for me to live out my faith.”<sup>95</sup>

Of course, there are pitfalls to the digital age. Games, apps, videos, social media, and other things can consume one’s time. It can be a forum for petty debates, gossip, and mindless chatter. Yet when used in a ministerial sense, the internet can be a helpful tool of communication. The faithful Christian of the twenty-first century will learn how to properly use the internet to be informed, inform others, and be a witness to Christ. Here are a few marks of faith for serving as God’s stewards in the community and the world:

- Engage the community by getting to know neighbors
- Care for creation by being a good steward of the earth
- Engage the local food / gardening movement
- Investigate how to reduce humanity’s ecological impact
- Harness the power of the digital age
- Encourage and communicate with people via social media
- Use the new tools of the world to proclaim and live the gospel of Jesus
- Care for the ‘least of these’ in the community

### **Conclusion**

How do Christians live faithfully? This is a question that needs to be addressed and

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<sup>95</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 79.

discussed in churches today. Many Americans today live as modern Epicureans, concerned about pleasure, comfort, and entertainment above all else. How do Christians live in such a culture? Instead of caving to our culture, the church of today needs to be challenging people to be bold in their faith. The notion of faith as a living trust in God's promises, a trust that does not stop on Sunday morning, but that continues throughout the week, should be emphasized. This faith articulates who God is and what he has done for us in Christ. It then goes out and bears good fruit in keeping with repentance. Such good fruit can be seen in various ways, but it must be seen. Being a steward of God's creation is a sign of faith, as is being a good father or daughter, as is being a member of a church community, as is supporting the local food pantry, as is doing one's job well, as is forgiving others.

Throughout American history, religiosity and freedom have both been valued. This is a fascinating time in American history. Christians are learning what it means to be Christian in a society where the Christian religion is no longer the dominant shaper of society. It is my hope that this MAP has shed some light for the path ahead. Thus emerges the question: How might all this be seen in a rural context such as the one I serve. The specific research done in my parish follows in the next chapters.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **PROJECT DESIGN**

#### **Design of the Field Research**

Martin Luther once wrote, “We have no other reason for living on earth than to be of help to others. If this were not the case, it would be best for God to kill us and let us die as soon as we are baptized and have begun to believe.”<sup>1</sup> That quote should shake Christians out of complacency. It reminds them of their purpose in life—to imitate Christ’s sacrificial love and service in all that is said and done. Yet what exactly do buzzwords such as ‘love’ or ‘service’ mean? A pastor cannot simply preach love or service to the neighbor in general and leave it at that. These words must finally be removed from the comfortable space of abstract discourse. One cannot love or serve in a general sense, but in specific actions. At the end of the previous chapter, I presented three areas in which faithfulness is lived out: in the church, in one’s vocation, and in the world at large. Specific actions in each area were then enumerated. That information provided a starting point for my field research.

The field research is designed to identify and examine specific actions whereby faithfulness is lived out. Its intent is to encourage people to think deeper about how their lives reflect their faith.

The universe for the field research was the members of Trinity Lutheran Church in Harvel, IL, a rural LCMS parish. Through a questionnaire and a sermon series, their understanding of faithfulness was identified and quantified. This project began by researching materials,

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<sup>1</sup> LW 30:11.

manuscripts, and articles that pertained to this subject matter. A theological foundation for undertaking this project was laid out. Information from the social sciences was also used to enhance the project. With a clear sense of the present context of ministry, the field research was undertaken. Specific instruments were introduced in order to quantify their understanding of faithfulness in the church community. With that knowledge in hand, specific recommendations were made for future ministry so that such faithfulness can be encouraged and cultivated.

This study was designed specifically for my pastoral context, a rural farming community in the Midwestern United States. A similar study undertaken in a different context could very well produce some different results.

A study such as this is beneficial to me as a pastor. Through this work, I have gained a better grasp of what church members believe. There were parts of the questionnaire in which there was little difference between the congregation and myself. There were also some surprises from the results. I hope to address those surprises in a pastoral manner so that I may grow as a pastor and the congregation may grow in understanding a full-bodied sense of faithful living. For instance, some presuppositions that I brought into this study include: a correlation between faith and churchgoing; a correlation between everyday life and Christian faith, and the importance of vocation. It was interesting to see how congregation members responded. The questionnaire also included questions on the relation between patriotism and faith, charitable giving questions, doubt, and confidence of salvation. Some of the questions have been borrowed from Robert Putnam's *American Grace*. Where applicable, answers from my congregation were compared to Putnam's survey results. The intent was not to trick church members or make them choose right or wrong, but simply to get their opinions. There are some things that caused me to reexamine my presuppositions. In all, this research has helped me be a more effective pastor and the

congregation more aware of their stations in life and how their actions affect and form their faith.

Before I engaged in my research, I looked for similar research which had been conducted. In the early church, the *Didache* provided a helpful baseline understanding of faithfulness. During the Reformation, Luther and others conducted the Saxon Visitation, a series of catechetical visits to bolster the local congregations. Luther understood the importance of faith formation.

The flaw of some modern research data with regards to Christian faith is that it centers only upon the intellect. It devolves into a sort of Bible trivia. An egregious example of this was an exam given in 2016. The United Kingdom Home Office administered a litmus test for Christian refugees seeking asylum.<sup>2</sup> Some questions were fundamental; such as reciting the Lord's Prayer. Others were rather pointless bits of Bible trivia, such as 'how many chapters are in the book of John?' or 'Is Easter celebrated on the same day each year?' (The litmus test was eventually rescinded following backlash.) Such trivia is more of a parlor game and not a true measure of a person's faith. The Biblical story about the Temptation of Christ reminds us that the devil can also quote Scripture quite persuasively.

In my search for academic field research on this field, I came up with only one somewhat related study entitled, "Measuring Communities of Faith: A Preliminary Investigation."<sup>3</sup> The study investigated the key characteristics of faith communities by polling older adults who are practicing Christians. The questions looked at tangible support, spiritual support, and emotional support from a pastor as well as other rank and file members. They looked at specific actions,

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<sup>2</sup> Zylstra, Sarah, "Can You Name All 10 Commandments? If Not, This Could Get You Deported," christianitytoday.com, June 7, 2016, accessed: August 9, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Neal Krause and R. David Hayward, "Measuring Communities of Faith," *Journal of Religion, Spirituality and Aging* 25 (2013): 258–76.

such as giving someone a ride to church, a pastoral visit when ill, listening to others, help find solutions in the Bible, and many other actions. Their data concluded that the most important element for nurturing faith and community in Christian churches is ‘emotional support from rank and file church members.’ This survey confirmed that faithfulness cannot be quantified simply using doctrinal questions alone. Caring for the well-being of fellow church-goers, that is, showing love is quite important. It is much more important than knowing how many chapters are in the Gospel of John. This research helped me as I crafted the research instrument for the congregation. My survey tries to include both doctrinal and behavioral questions to provide a holistic understanding of faithfulness.

### **Research Tools and Methodology**

While I have been collecting anecdotal information regarding member’s faithfulness via naturalistic observation for several years, this Major Applied Project allows the opportunity for more deliberate and quantifiable research to be done. I have utilized three primary research instruments.

#### **An In-depth Questionnaire and Follow-up Discussion**

This instrument uses the Likert scale, multiple choice, and other methods to build quantifiable research data on varying questions about faith. The universe for the questionnaire is the confirmed membership of Trinity Lutheran Church. The questionnaire was mailed out to each individual member. Members were asked to fill it out and return it to a drop box in church or mail it back to church. Anonymity was maintained in order to allow members to be completely honest in their answers. A small group discussion forum was also offered to go into more depth on certain topics or answer questions that people may have. Follow-up events were crafted based on the results of the questionnaire and discussions.

The questionnaire is the primary research vehicle of the study. There are a total of seventy questions, each with its own intentional inclusion in the study. When engaging the topic of faithfulness, it is important to know that raw data alone cannot offer a complete picture of faithfulness. For instance, there is no magic number of how many times one should attend church, a specific dollar amount for how much someone should give, a specific amount of hours one should pray, or a set amount one should volunteer their time. Instead, the answers given begin to paint a picture of how people understand this important topic.

The text of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix One. The following is a brief rationale behind each question:

Question 1 asks: Do you see yourself as a faithful Christian? Question 5 asks: I believe that Jesus is my Savior, has forgiven me, and gives me eternal life? Yes, no, or unsure. In essence, it asks if they believe the Gospel and are following Jesus. I expected a high percentage of yes answers to both questions. (If people do not know the gospel, I would need to reevaluate my whole pastoral ministry!) Perhaps there are a sizable amount of unsure answers to question #1. That would align with the Barna study mentioned elsewhere which states many Christians do not know what spiritual maturity entails.

Questions 2, 3, and 4 ask gender, age group, and length of membership at the church. With these answers, the survey was sorted and dissected by gender and age group to mine any differences.

Question 6 asks how often a faithful Christian should attend church. In practice, many people come a few times a year, or perhaps once a month. However, I doubt that many people understand that as being faithful. My guess is that some people emphasize the Third Commandment as well as habit and answer 'every week' while those who do not attend often

answer that one does not need to attend to be a faithful Christian to either justify their behavior or because they do not fully grasp the treasure of receiving Christ gifts at worship.

Question 7 asks if faith has an impact of daily life. In essence, can Sunday life be divorced from Monday life . . . is faith a private matter? Related to that is question 8, which asks if faithfulness is a matter of right belief (orthodoxy), right actions (orthopraxy) or a combination of both.

Questions 9–43 are a block of Likert scale (1–5) questions asking how important each item is to being a faithful Christian. Several items are church related. They are: 9-Memorizing Bible verses, 17-Reading the Bible, 18-being baptized, 24-telling someone about Jesus, 28-confessing your sins, 38-receiving communion, and 39-volunteering at church. I expected these items to rank high (4–5) for most people because it is common to associate such actions with the Christian faith. What I paid close attention to here is the second grouping of items, associated by theologians with the first article of the creed and vocation. These are not generally seen as markers of faithfulness by laity. These are: 11-doing your job well, 13-visiting someone in the hospital, 16-preparing food for someone whose spouse just died, 20-living within your financial means, 21-conserving water, 22-keeping your promises and commitments, 26-eating healthy food and drinks, 27-regular physical exercise, 30-helping a friend get through a crisis, 34-recycling, 35-keeping a garden, 36-using your talents, 37-treating people with kindness and respect, 40-forgiving people who wronged you, 42-using your time wisely, and 43-being a wise consumer. While I personally believe such actions are integral to life, I would guess that these receive lower marks simply because they are not ‘church related.’ A third grouping of questions involves family life, which will likely get high marks as faith and family go hand in glove for many Christians. They are: 10-eating with family, 19-caring for sick family members, 25-



disciplining your children, and 41-being faithful to your spouse. The next category is items I feel ambivalent about their relationship to faith: 12-practicing good land management (inserted because I live in a farming community), 15-being a patriotic American citizen (Do Lutherans think like Evangelicals regarding the connection between God and country? Is there ordained favor towards the USA?) 23-having children in extracurricular activities, 29-supporting local businesses, 31-supporting the local school (29 and 31 are quite important in small Midwest towns, but do people connect those items with faith?) and 33-advocating for certain legislation. The final category is a control group involving items I believe most people will view as detrimental to faithfulness. 14-supporting local pro sports teams, 32-drinking alcohol, and 44-watching television. If these items rank high, it indicates to me that someone is likely not taking the questionnaire seriously.

The topic of doubting occasionally comes up in conversations. To address doubt, I included question 45: do you believe that it is OK to doubt God sometimes and still be a faithful Christian? I assumed a substantial numbers of people answering yes, no, and unsure for this question.

Questions 46 and 47 deal with practical money matters. The first is: I save for emergencies and retirement. The second is: If someone asks me for money, I will usually give it to them. The first deals with personal discipline. When answering the second, I think people consider their friends, but also panhandlers asking for money.

Question 48 asks if Jesus is the only way to heaven. This engaged people on the topic of universalism or, in the words of Robert Putnam, the 'Aunt Susan principle.' That is the modern idea that most people have an acquaintance (Aunt Susan) which adheres to a different, or even no religion. Because they see their aunt Susan as a generally good person, they will convince

themselves that she also is going to heaven.

Question 49 asks if the person says grace almost daily. It looks at a personal practice of piety, which is likely a common practice for Christians. This survey question was also asked by Putnam in *American Grace* (p. 276).

Question 50 engages the prosperity gospel movement by asking: if you are a faithful Christian, God will bless you financially.

Question 51 goes back to personal money matters and ethics by asking if it is important to pay your taxes. It also engages Paul's interpretation of the state and our responsibility to it in Romans 13.

Questions 52–56 look at the importance of financial giving to both church and non-church organizations, also asking what percentage a person should give. I wondered if people take the 'cheerful giver' approach, the 10% tithe approach, or if people do not really think about it. The last in this section asks if church/charitable giving is in their will. This is an example of how one's faithfulness can reach even beyond the grave.

Questions 57–68 will be interesting as this subset is taken from Putnam's research in *American Grace*, 386. It looks at stances on issues ranging from poverty, abortion, the death penalty, and other items. How does the data from my congregation align with Putnam's study?

In question 69, I invite the respondents to take a little time to deliberate by offering a forced choice ranking. I ask: in the list below, pick the top 5 things you believe are most important to being a faithful Christian. The list includes: do not gossip about others, forgiving people, try to take good care of your health, care for your family, care for people in need in your community, support the government, care for pastor and spiritual leaders, do your job well, be content with your station in life, and pray. Here is an opportunity to take the different aspects of

life and assign a rank. Pray will likely get high marks. Vocational and familial duties should be high as well. I was interested to see where people place items like supporting the government, supporting the pastor, and being content with your station in life. It is my guess that people do not often think of such items, nor associate them with faith.

Finally, question 70 asks why is being a faithful Christian important? Check all that apply. They include: A. it is a sign of my trust in God, B. so I can go to heaven when I die, C. It is just what people in society are supposed to do, D. to please God, and E. to serve my neighbor. C is a cheeky nod to the post-WWII cultural ethos, which few people will likely mark. I hope A, B, D, and E all receive high marks. I do wonder if some people single out B so I can go to heaven when I die as especially important. If so, that would confirm the suspicions of N.T. Wright in *Surprised by Hope*, his masterful reorientation of the telos of Christianity. He postulates that many Christians boil the purpose of their faith down to ‘so I can go to heaven when I die.’

At the end of the questionnaire is a section for additional comments. It was my hope that there would be a large number of congregation members responding and that some helpful considerations could be drawn.

#### A Worship/sermon Series on Faithfulness

This sermon series focused upon faithfulness and its role in the life of a believer. The sermon series utilized the results of the questionnaire. For instance, if an unusually high number of people thought financial giving was not an important factor in faithfulness, that topic would be addressed. Another example: if a high number of responders view American patriotism as a function of faith, that topic could be discussed.

This sermon series was a way in which a maximum amount of people can be engaged. The first sermon was an overview of the general concept of faithfulness. The next looked at the

history and present content of religion in America. The final two sermons highlighted areas of the questionnaire which I found especially intriguing. It is my hope that this series inspired members to live as faithful Christians in their specific vocations. The series equipped, engaged, and critiqued members in a Biblical and Lutheran way.

### Follow-up Survey

Following the sermon series, a brief survey was disseminated. The purpose of this step is to discover if any change have occurred in the members understanding of faithfulness due to the services.

In order to gain valid and useful research information, I assured all participants that their responses remain confidential. In the publication of the data I have kept the responses anonymous and did not include details that might be traced back to specific individuals. Those who filled out the questionnaire were assured of their privacy. Participants were notified that they may withdraw at any time from the research and were invited to discuss any concerns which they have.

### **Implementation of the Project**

The Major Applied Project in the Doctor of Ministry degree program is a capstone to several years of reading, contemplation, and study. I have been enriched during this time of reading and learning. I hope the congregation members have been enriched as they engaged the project via the questionnaire, sermon series, and further learning. Together as pastor and congregation, it is my desire that I may better preach and teach to them in their context and that they may be better equipped for faithful living.

The time line for the research and writing of this project was as follows:

Begin the Doctor of Ministry degree program: Summer 2013

Submit MAP proposal to Project Research professor: August 2014

Research literature to be used in the MAP: Summer 2014-Summer 2016

Identify and select an advisor—Dr. Bruce Hartung: July 2015

Take the D.Min. Independent Study Course and begin writing: December 2015

Deliver the MAP Proposal to the D.Min. Committee: February 2016

Prepare the research questionnaire and group discussion: February 2016

Implement Step 1: Have Congregation members complete questionnaire and hold small group discussion forums: March 2016

Register for the MAP: Fall 2016

Conduct sermon series and follow-up survey: June 2017

Write the project portion of the MAP: Summer 2017

Present the semi-final draft of the MAP: February 2018

Present and defend the final version of the MAP: March 2018

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **EVALUATION**

The purpose of this chapter is to reveal and evaluate the findings of the field research. The results of the questionnaire given to the congregation members are analyzed. The crafting, delivery, and reception of the sermon series on faithfulness follows after the questionnaire. Specific data points where my initial hypothesis was confirmed as well as places where it was challenged are noted. Based upon the research, study, and observation, conclusions are drawn which may help to guide further study in this field.

#### **Findings of the Questionnaire**

The universe for the research questionnaire was the confirmed membership of Trinity Lutheran Church in Harvel, IL. There were 146 confirmed members of the church as of March 1, 2016, when the questionnaire was mailed out. Members were given one month to complete the questionnaire, from March 1 to April 3, 2016. (In 2016, Easter Sunday fell on March 27) This time period was chosen in the hopes of attaining a maximum amount of participants by promoting it during the Holy Week services. The springtime also was chosen to catch farmers before the busy planting season, and others before the hectic summer months. I estimated that the questionnaire should take between ten to fifteen minutes to complete. There were no essay or short answer questions so that no one would feel embarrassed or afraid for not offering eloquent theological answers. Instead, all questions were multiple choice so that the answers would be more quantifiable.

I debated between handing the questionnaires out during a church service or mailing them

out. I chose the latter because only about half of members regularly attend worship. There was some trepidation that, by sending them via mail, a high number of members may not return them. I mailed out questionnaires to 140 members. (I was unable to obtain addresses for six of the 146 confirmed members). Members were asked to either mail them back to the church or place them in a basket in the church narthex. Anonymity was guaranteed to all participants. Fifty-eight people, or 41% of the confirmed membership, completed and returned the questionnaire.

Following are the results along with my responses to the data and the conclusions I drew from it. The results of the questionnaire can also be found in Appendix Two.

1. Do you see yourself as a faithful Christian? Yes 89% No 0% Sometimes 11%

I was not too surprised here. Most people who desire to identify as Christians also believe that they are doing a decent job of follow the Lord. Of course, this question allows respondents some gray area in that it does not define what it means to be faithful! I did think that a few people, who are wrestling with their faith, their belief in God, or their actions, would answer 'sometimes.'

2. Are you: Male 34% Female 66%

3. Please identify your age group:

12–25 9% 26–40 16% 41–55 12% 56–70 40% 71 + 24%

4. How long have you been a member of this church? Answers vary widely

The purpose of questions 2, 3, and 4 allowed me to break down the results gender and age in order to spot differences among the segments. (I will get to that at the end of the analysis.) Questions 2 and 3 confirmed that the survey was completed by a fairly representative cross-section of the congregation. Looking back, I think I would have rephrased question 4. By leaving it open ended, I received answers such as '40 years' or 'since 1990' or even 'all my life.'

Different types of answers made this not very quantifiable. I did notice that relatively few new members completed the survey.

5. I believe that Jesus is my Savior, has forgiven me, and gives me eternal life?

Yes 98% No 0% Unsure 2%

I was quite relieved to see such an overwhelming response here. I take this as a result of good preaching and teaching over the years. Also, people identified this short statement as a brief creed or summary of Christianity.

6. How often should a faithful Christian attend church?

a. every week 71%

b. once or twice a month 5%

c. a couple times a year 0%

d. one does not need to attend church to be a faithful Christian 23%

This is one of the results that surprised me. If one was to answer based upon their actual habit, the answers would be evenly distributed between a, b, and c. However, almost no one answered b or c. This implies that Christmas and Easter attendance, or once a month attendance, (which is the actual practice of many) is not thought of as a faithful. Many of those who answered 'a' are likely habitual churchgoers who understand the importance of the Third Commandment and the Biblical admonitions to gather together, confess your sins, receive the Lords Supper, offer prayer, praise, offerings, and gather with brothers and sisters in the presence of the Lord. I was surprised that a quarter of people answered 'd.' However, based upon my research of religious trends in America, it should not have surprised me. For some, this is a critique to the notion that Christianity is just about Sunday morning. Being a Christian is



certainly a whole week endeavor. However, the notion that church is unnecessary is like saying a person can survive without a head. Rejecting the Third Commandment, the admonition of Jesus to ‘eat His body,’ and the call to gather together with other Christians surprised me and caused me to highlight this issue in the sermon series.

7. My faith has an impact on my daily life? Yes 96% No 0% Unsure 4%

Simply put, the members believe that Christianity is not just a ‘Sunday morning thing’ which can be put on the shelf for the rest of the week. Through love, forgiveness, prayer, and other means, the faith received from the Holy Spirit affects the way we live each day. Great!

8. Being a faithful Christian means

- a. believing that Jesus died and rose for me 4%
- b. following Jesus’ commands and doing His will 0%
- c. a combination of a and b 96%

Answers to this question surprised me in a good way. A critique of our Lutheran church by some other denominations is that we have ‘too many creeds but not enough deeds.’ Our Lutheran theology does emphasize the cerebral aspect of faith. Because of that, I thought that more people would have answered ‘a.’ ‘C’ is the answer I would have chosen. If someone is going to talk the talk of being a disciple of Jesus, they also need to walk the walk.

The following section (Questions 9–44) provided some of the most fascinating data points. The questions were answered on a Likert scale (from 1–5) with 1 being not important to being faithful, to 5 being very important to faithful. I then ordered the answers based on their aggregate scores. I tried to offer a variety of real life, everyday activities in which my members engage. There were five segments; church related activities, family activities, First Article activities (general life), activities ambivalent to living faithfully, and a control group. Each action is also

marked by its segment. The segments are denoted as follows: Church activity - A; Family activity - B; First Article activity - C; Ambivalent activities - D; and Control - E.

How important are the following items to being a faithful Christian?

*Rank items from 1 to 5 1-not important to be faithful 3- somewhat important 5-very important*

Action Group (in parentheses) Average Ranking (on a 1–5 scale)

- 38. Receiving communion (A) 4.84
- 41. Being faithful to your spouse (B) 4.84
- 18. Being baptized (A) 4.72
- 37. Treating people with respect and kindness (C) 4.67
- 28. Confessing your sins (A) 4.66
- 40. Forgiving people who have wronged you (C) 4.60
- 22. Keeping your promises and commitments (C) 4.59
- 24. Tell someone about Jesus/inviting them to church (A) 4.46
- 19. Caring for sick family members (B) 4.42
- 39. Volunteering at church (A) 4.40
- 30. Helping a friend get through a crisis (C) 4.35
- 17. Reading the Bible (A) 4.30
- 25. Disciplining your children (B) .13
- 11. Doing your job well (C) 3.93
- 10. Eating with family (B) 3.88
- 20. Living within your financial means (C) 3.82
- 13. Visiting someone in hospital (C) 3.79

16. Preparing food for someone whose spouse just died (C) 3.79
42. Using your time wisely (C) 3.74
36. Using your talents (C) 3.72
12. Practicing good land management (D) 3.64
15. Being a patriotic American citizen (D) 3.62
21. Conserving water (C) 3.42
26. Eating healthy foods and drinks (C) 3.38
31. Supporting the local school (D) 3.37
43. Being a wise consumer (C) 3.33
9. Memorizing Bible verses (A) 3.30
29. Supporting local businesses (D) 3.25
27. Regular physical exercise (C) 3.15
34. Recycling (C) 2.77
23. Having children active in extracurricular activities (D) 2.73
33. Advocating for certain legislation (D) 2.69
35. Keeping a garden (D) 2.45
14. Supporting local pro sports teams (E) 1.72
44. Watching television (E) 1.70
32. Drinking alcohol (E) 1.45

I will examine the church activities group first. My presupposition that people make a strong correlation between church activities and faithfulness was confirmed by the results of the church segment (9, 17, 18, 24, 28, 38, and 39). The highest overall answer came from this group (Receiving Communion at 4.84). Three of the top five and five of the top ten activities were from

this group. All items of this church activities group except one got a 4.30 or higher. The outlier was ‘memorizing Bible verses.’ I personally think that is quite important and was surprised to see it score a 3.3. Whatever the case, I took this as a necessary point of emphasis for future preaching and teaching. I desire that people have Psalm 23, John 3:16, Eph. 2:8–9, John 14:6, and others in their permanent memory banks!

The results from this segment indicate that members of Trinity Lutheran associate church related activities as positive indicators of faithfulness. I was puzzled that, although a quarter of people responded in question #6 that church is unnecessary; in this section receiving communion, being baptized, confession, and inviting people to church were all ranked almost unanimously as very important.

The next section involved family activities (10, 19, 25, and 41). Not surprisingly, these also scored quite high. Two items of this group were in the top ten overall. All items of this group were in the top fifteen overall. People understand that the way one lives out their familial vocations has a deep impact upon their spiritual life. Many people recognize that caring for sick family members or eating with family is important. I was impressed that people made the connection between these activities and their faith.

Being faithful to your spouse tied with receiving communion for the highest overall score at 4.84 out of 5. The members identify this as a ‘super-sign’ of faith. While I certainly applaud that answer, it confirms the assertion made by Putnam, Kinnaman, and others that twentieth century Christianity made sexual ethics a cause célèbre, at times conflating it with faithfulness. This has led to widespread debates over the past fifteen years. What I am saying is this, an issue like sexual ethics, while important, should not be over-emphasized to the detriment of other aspects of the faith. Moving forward, Christianity should be presented as a whole-life mission.

Although they scored considerably lower on the survey, activities such as ‘using your talents’ (exhorted by Christ) or ‘eating healthy foods and drinks’ are (the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit), I would argue, just as important to living as a faithful Christian. Our society views adultery as much more shameful than other sins (its repercussions are indeed considerable). The next section is those items termed First Article activities. (11, 13, 16, 20, 21, 22, 26, 27, 30, 34, 36, 37, 40, 42, and 43)<sup>1</sup> These are items that could be fulfilled by either a Christian or non-Christian and no one would know the difference. (i.e. doing your job well, conserving water, keeping your promises.) I paid close attention to this section. I assumed that church and family would get high marks as they have historically been connected to church and faith. But to truly see if faith has an impact upon daily life, this section is a litmus test.

‘Treating people with respect and kindness,’ ‘forgiving people who have wronged you,’ and ‘keeping your promises and commitments’ were three items from this section which scored quite high. These align with the classical notion of Golden Rule Christianity. The Golden Rule is shorthand for Christ’s words from Luke 6:31 ‘Do unto others, as you wish others would do to you.’ Similar wisdom is also found in other religions. It serves in American society as a type of established civil religion, thus the high rankings.

Actions not associated with the Golden Rule ranked rather low. This confirms my thoughts that most people view acts of faithfulness as those which principally relate to the second and third articles of the Apostles’ Creed. For many people, first Article activities such as recycling, conserving water, or being a wise consumer are not connected as closely to faithfulness. In my opinion, there certainly is a connection. Christians need to recapture the importance of our

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<sup>1</sup> First Article refers to the First Article (and Luther’s explanation) of the Apostles Creed.

relationship to the rest of creation. The LCMS recently published a pamphlet entitled ‘Together with all creatures: Caring for God’s creation’ which is quite helpful on this topic. The idea of ‘going green’ to care for the environment is quite popular right now. Perhaps the church can outreach by recognizing our common call to care for the creation as God’s stewards.

The fourth section included those items I termed ambivalent to being faithful (12, 15, 23, 29, 31, 33, and 35.) This section contains salutary acts, such as supporting local businesses or advocating for certain legislation. These are items I personally do not correlate to faithfulness. All items had middle of the road responses. One item I paid particularly close attention to was 15 - Being a patriotic American citizen. Based upon previous research that noted a close connection between religiosity and patriotism, I thought that this item would score quite high. It was surprising to see that the church members did not see a close connection between patriotism and faithfulness.

The fifth and final section was the control group. These items (14, 44, and 32) ranked as the bottom three activities. For instance, one of the three was Watching television. It received a 1.70 aggregate rank out of 5. The low results of the control group served as a good indication that people are indeed taking the questionnaire seriously and answering each question individually.

45. Do you believe that it OK to doubt God sometimes and still be a faithful Christian?

Yes 37% No 52% Unsure 11%

The question ‘Is it OK to doubt God?’ has occasionally been asked in my pastorate, thus its inclusion in the study. This was one of the most balanced answers in the survey. A person can make a good case for answering any of the three.

Please read the statement, and as a faithful Christian do you agree or disagree with the statement.

46. I save for emergencies and retirement Agree 85% Disagree 4% Unsure 11%

47. If someone asks me for money, Agree 22% Disagree 38% Unsure 40% I will usually give it to them

This introduced the topic of stewardship in the questionnaire. The first question relates to personal fiscal responsibility. The 85% agreement led me to believe that my members are saving at a much higher level than the general public, or at least they view it as an important action.

The second question asks of charitable giving. Earlier in the survey, I asked if they would give to a friend in need, which ranked very high. My assumption is that when people read this question they had in mind giving money to a panhandler. The fact that 40% answered unsure means that giving, while important, is dependent on circumstances.

48. Jesus is the only way to heaven Agree 98% Disagree 2% Unsure 0%

I was pleased to see that the answers here were almost unanimous. The question behind this question was ‘Is universalism incongruent with faithful Christianity.’

49. I say grace almost daily Agree 84% Disagree 11% Unsure 5%

One of the simplest, quickest, and easiest acts of publicly living your faith can be found in giving thanks at mealtime. An overwhelming majority 84%, answered agree. Robert Putnam reported his findings on this same question in his book *American Grace*. “Almost half (44%) of the American population reports saying grace or a blessing before meals at least daily, while almost precisely the same percentage (46%) says grace occasionally, or never. We are hard pressed to think of many other behaviors that are so common among one half of the population and rare among the other half - perhaps carrying a purse.”<sup>2</sup> Saying grace is, as the data suggests, another ‘super-sign’ of Christian faithfulness. It is something most all of the church members

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<sup>2</sup> Putnam, *American Grace*, 10.

agree upon. As Putnam highlights, it is one action that clearly demarcates one part of society from another.

50. If you are a faithful Christian, Agree 28% Disagree 48% Unsure 23%  
God will bless you financially

Curious about the impact of the prosperity gospel among my church members, this question was inserted. Most agreed that being faithful does not necessarily result in financial gain.

51. It is important to pay your taxes. Agree 88% Disagree 4% Unsure 8%

In Romans 13, Paul exhorts his hearers to remit taxes to the government. Even though we may not agree with the policies of the government or the way the money is spent, it is still our duty to pay taxes.

52. Do you believe it is important as a faithful Christian to give financially to church?

Yes 95% No 5%

53. How much do you think a faithful Christian should give as a percentage of after-tax income?

Less than 2% 4 2 - 6% 50 over 6% 46

54. Do you believe it is important as a faithful Christian to give financially to charitable organizations?

Yes 77% No 23%

55. How much do you think a faithful Christian should give to charitable organizations as a percentage of after-tax income?

Less than 2% 35 2 - 6% 59 over 6% 6

56. Is it important for charitable / church giving to be included in your will?

Yes 67% No 33%



Questions 52–56 relate to financial giving. Just as “Jesus is the only way to heaven” received a near unanimous positive answer, so too is giving to church seen as very important by 95% of people. In retrospect, I may have changed the possible responses for question 53. For some, the 10% tithe is seen as a benchmark. For others, the statement ‘The Lord loves a cheerful giver’ sums up their habits. I wish that would have been a possible answer. Nevertheless, the responses show that members think it is important to give a substantial amount to church, as almost no one answered ‘less than 2%.’

Questions 54–56 attempted to look at how non-church stewardship can serve as marks of faithfulness. While 77% answered giving to charity is important, it is twenty percent lower than giving to church. It is indeed a sign of faith to give to those in need, but because it is not connected to church, there was a drop-off. Not surprisingly, the percentage of giving also declined from church to charity. According to Barna research, 79% of Evangelical Christians made a charitable contribution in 2012.<sup>3</sup> In the research of Woolever and Bruce, 18% of worshippers give 10% or more of their income to church. 57% of churchgoers give at least 5% of their income to the congregation. 74% of churchgoers contribute to a charity outside of church.<sup>4</sup> The research I conducted aligns with the research conducted by others.

Faithful financial giving can extend even beyond one’s life through gifts of trusts or beneficiaries in a will. In anecdotal studies, this is a little used and little talked about idea. For many people living on a fixed income, they are unable to give as much as they want to. Giving via a will or trust is one way to leave a lasting legacy. I was glad to see 2/3rds of members view this as important. This again is one example of helping people to broaden their horizons when it

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<sup>3</sup> “American Donor Trends,” barna.com, June 3, 2013, accessed: September 11, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Woolever and Bruce, *A Field Guide to US Congregations*, 55, 69.

comes to the ways we can live faithfully.

How much does your faith impact your stance on the following issues?

1- not at all, 2 - a little, 3 - somewhat, 4 - somewhat significantly, 5- very significantly

Issue Aggregate Score (on a 1–5 scale)

58. Abortion 4.63

65. Sex and Family Issues 4.24

66. Death Penalty 3.80

62. Environment 3.67

57. Poverty / Welfare 3.63

68. Choosing a political candidate to support 3.47

64. Immigration 3.46

59. Gun rights 3.36

61. Government Spending 3.31

67. Choosing a political party to support 3.18

63. Foreign Policy 3.13

60. Income Inequality 2.98

This section examines the mindsets of people instead of their actions. The idea for this section came from *American Grace*, pp. 385–86, which asks several of these exact questions. Not surprisingly, ‘abortion’ and ‘sex and family issues’ ranked high. In fact, they ranked well above the other issues. As noted elsewhere, there has been an overemphasis of these particular issues since at least the 1980s. For some Christians, they are totemic symbols for faithfulness, for others they serve as stumbling blocks to Christianity. The emphasis on these issues is something the church will need to reexamine in the years ahead as we determine how to reach out to non-

believers with the Word of God. These answers align with those of *American Grace*. Putnam writes, “Religiosity has a tight connection to attitudes regarding abortion and gay marriage, and a more modest correlation—or none at all—to issues that do not pertain to sex and the family.”<sup>5</sup>

While other issues may be important, the respondents did not connect them to their faith.

69. In this list below, pick the top 5 things you believe are most important to being a faithful Christian.

<u>Activity</u>	<u>Percent of Respondents who picked an activity</u>
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Forgiving people	95%
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Pray	93%
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Care for your family	91%
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Care for pastor and spiritual leaders	65%
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Care for people in need in your community	41%
-------------------------------------------	-----

Be content with your station in life	29%
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Try to take good care of your health	25%
--------------------------------------	-----

Do not gossip about others	22%
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Do your job well	21%
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Support the government	2%
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What made this question unique is that members needed to pick and choose certain activities. Five items needed to be picked. There was no ranking of the items picked (which, in retrospect, would have been helpful to analyze). While a case could be made for each act, only five could be chosen. Here again, the top three items were related to church and family, all three

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<sup>5</sup> Putnam, *American Grace*, 384.

receiving over 90% support. This reaffirms the notion that faithfulness is lived out primarily in church and familial vocations.

I was surprised by the very low percentage of respondents who picked ‘support the government.’ After analyzing contemporary literature and research which found connections between the two, I assumed more people would connect ‘God and country.’ Perhaps political gridlock and frustrations with the government has led to disillusionment over the past few years.

70. Why is being a faithful Christian important? Check all that apply

- A. It is a sign of my trust in God. 91%
- B. So I can go to heaven when I die. 69%
- C. It is just what people in society are supposed to do 10%
- D. To please God 83%
- E. To serve my neighbor 45%

At last . . . the final question! The only ‘unsatisfactory’ answer in my opinion was C. My only qualm with the responses here is that I wished ‘E. To serve my neighbor’ would have received a higher percentage of the vote. In several of Jesus’ discourses, care for the neighbor is held up as a primary marker of faithfulness.

Statistics can also be broken down by gender and age bracket. On many of the questions, the differences between the groups were negligible. I have highlighted a few distinctions which the survey revealed.

Differences between men and women:

<u>Top 5 for Men (1–5 section)</u>	<u>Top 5 for Women (1–5 section)</u>
4.95 Receiving communion	4.8 Being faithful to spouse
4.9 Being baptized	4.78 Receiving communion

- 4.9 Being faithful to spouse                      4.65 Treating people with kindness  
 4.85 Confessing your sins                      4.63 Being baptized  
 4.8 Keeping your promises and commitments 4.56 Confessing your sins

Men emphasized the church related activities, as well as faithfulness to spouse, and keeping promises. Women emphasized the church related activities, as well as faithfulness to spouse, and treating people with kindness. Overall, quite similar except that men view civil righteousness in terms of keeping promises whereas women emphasize kindness and respect.

#49 I say grace almost daily

	Women	Men
Agree	78%	95%
Disagree	16%	0%
Unsure	6%	5%

This question brought the greatest disparity among the sexes. I was quite surprised by this and quite frankly, I am not sure what to make of it!

69. In this list below, pick the top 5 things you believe are most important to being a faithful Christian.

<u>Activity</u>	<u>Percent of Respondents who picked an activity</u>	
	Women	Men
Forgive others	95%	95%
Pray	92%	95%
Care for family	87%	100%
Be Content	37%	15%
Care for pastor, etc.	53%	90%

Do not gossip	26%	15%
Be in good health	26%	25%
Care for community	42%	40%
Do your job well	18%	25%
Support government	0%	5%

A higher percentage of men selected ‘care for family’ and ‘care for pastor’ and ‘do your job well.’ Women voted higher on ‘do not gossip’ and ‘be content with your station in life.’

Differences between age groups:

The results showed fairly consistent responses when broken down across the age spectrum. Here I will highlight Question 6 ‘How often should a faithful Christian attend church?’

	Every week	Once a month	Couple times a year	Church not necessary
People under 70	65%	2%	0%	30%
People 70 +	75%	5%	0%	19%

Although the difference is rather small, the older members place a slightly greater importance on churchgoing than the younger members. This is consistent with outside polling data.

### **Overall Conclusions from the Research Questionnaire**

The questionnaire served as a useful instrument in my MAP research. As noted above, in some places, my presuppositions were confirmed. At other places, they were challenged.

Following is my summary of the results.

For the confirmed members of Trinity Lutheran Church, Harvel, IL, living as a faithful Christian is a foundational aspect of life. The object of faith or trust is Jesus Christ, who they strongly believe is their savior, has forgiven them, and gives them eternal life. Almost unanimously, the members adhere to Jesus’ words in John 14 that He is the way, truth and the

life.

Faithfulness, for them, is not just an intellectual assent to Christ's lordship, but also a sign of trust in God. This trust entails obeying God's will and following His commands. Again, almost unanimously, they see it as affecting their everyday life, in the decisions they make and things they say and do. While most saw its effect on their relationship with God, only half said that serving one's neighbor is a fundamental motivation for being a faithful Christian.

Where and how is this faith lived out? 75% of members who took the questionnaire view regular churchgoing as a fundamental aspect to faithfulness, while 25% think it is not necessary to faithful living. This partially reveals a generational gap in attitudes and habits. Several 'super signs' of faith were revealed in the results. These are: receiving communion, being faithful to your spouse, giving financially to church, caring for sick family members, and saving grace daily. This reveals that church and family activities are most closely associated to faithfulness. 'Golden Rule' Christianity or civil righteousness impacted perceptions of faithfulness. Examples here include: treating people with kindness and respect, keeping your promises and commitments, and forgiving people who have wronged you. Other activities in the realms of vocation or caring for the creation or community, which could be signs of faith, were ranked lower across the board. When asked to pick between several options, praying and caring for the family ranked higher than caring for community, doing your job well, and taking care of your health.

The members recognize that living as a faithful Christian does not guarantee material prosperity. Personal fiscal responsibility, paying taxes, and preparing charitable giving in a will are all quite important. Giving to church and charity were seen as important, with giving to church receiving higher marks as well as a higher percentage of giving.

When asked how their faith influences their attitudes about hot button social issues and topics such as abortion, gun control, immigration, or the environment, only two issues stood out where faith has a significant effect on their stance. Those two issues were abortion and sex & family issues. This reflects a decades old emphasis upon these two as totemic symbols for Christianity.

While ‘God and country’ went hand and glove in the twentieth century, members saw almost no connection between faithfulness and patriotism.

The results were insightful, encouraging, and inspiring. They drove me to examine the topic in new and different ways. I was glad to see the respondents have a solid grasp of the Christian faith and the foundational importance of church and family. I was surprised that the religion/patriotism connection was not an issue. That was something I was prepared, but did not need to, engage.

There are a few areas where I believe more emphasis can be given:

Importance of First Article duties such as care for creation, community, and self.

Importance of churchgoing for Christians.

Importance of service to neighbor.

A de-emphasis of sex and family issues.

### **Small Group Discussion**

A small group discussion to discuss the questionnaire results with church members was offered at Trinity Lutheran Church on April 17, 2016 at 7 p.m. The purpose of this meeting was to give an in depth analysis of the results. The results of the questionnaire were disseminated to members in a handout. Questions or comments about Christian faithfulness were also on the agenda. This event was mentioned in the questionnaire itself. It was also published in the church



bulletin for several weeks. Unfortunately, no one attended. A reason for this could be that there were no controversial results in the responses to the questionnaire.

### **Sermon Series**

Having conducted the questionnaire and offered to conduct a small group discussion, I moved to the next stage of field research, the sermon series. The purpose of the sermon series was to speak about the importance of faithfulness in the life of a Christian. What better setting to address such a topic than in corporate worship? The sermon series was delivered on four consecutive Sundays; June 4, 11, 18, and 25, 2017. It was based in part on the results of the questionnaire. I tried to emphasize important points where I agreed with the congregation as well as points I believe needed further examination.

Sermon 1 was entitled: What does it mean to be a faithful Christian? The Biblical texts for the Sunday included Exod. 20:1–17, Eph. 2:1–10, and Luke 10:25–37. This sermon was meant as an introduction to the subject, impressing upon the hearers the importance of faithfulness. I made clear that our works of faith are not the cause of salvation, but its resultant fruit. Several questions from the questionnaire impacted this sermon. These include: 5-I believe that Jesus is my Savior, has forgiven me, and gives me eternal life? 8-Being a faithful Christian means: a. believing that Jesus died and rose for me, b. following Jesus' commands and doing His will, and c. a combination of a and b. 70-Why is being a faithful Christian important? Check all that apply: a. It is a sign of my trust in God, b. So I can go to heaven when I die, c. It is just what people in society are supposed to do, d. To please God, and e. To serve my neighbor. This sermon laid the groundwork for the series. There was a consensus among the congregation members in these questions. Faithfulness is not lived out by words alone, but also in actions. These actions are in response to God's saving work. One area which I emphasized is that service to one's neighbor is

important. In survey question 70, only 45% of respondents saw ‘to serve my neighbor’ as important to being faithful. In establishing its importance, I highlighted the parable of the Good Samaritan, in which the Samaritan man is commended for coming to the aid of a battered man.

In sermon 2, I wanted to engage my members in some of the fascinating research I have discovered. Thus the title of the sermon was: A history of faithfulness in America— Opportunities and challenges. The text was Heb. 13:1–8 and Matt. 9:14–17. It showed how there are some aspects of faithfulness that have remained the same across generations, while others have changed. I wanted to specifically address the ‘church boom’ of the mid-twentieth century and the waning influence of religion in modern American culture, of which the repercussions are being felt in our churches today. The false notion that the church is in league with the government was rejected. A great majority of questionnaire respondents recognized that the church is no longer a supporting agency for the government. It received just 2% of the vote in question 69 and a relatively low 3.69 out of 5 in question 15. The particular agenda of some Christians was addressed. Its influence was seen in the results of questions 58–68, showing respondents had a high correlation between sex and family issues (issues which have been prioritized in twentieth- century Christendom) and their faith. Finally, the hearers were challenged and inspired to live out their faith in new ways in a post-Christian society.

In sermons 3 and 4, the practical implications of faithfulness were explored. For inspiration, I read Jesus’ exhortation to ‘Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself.’

Sermon 3 was entitled: Love the Lord your God. The Biblical texts utilized were: Psa. 145, Nehemiah 10, and Luke 14:12–24. It looked at the ways in which we live out our faith in love towards God and His creation. This addressed our First Article responsibilities as well the

benefits of attending church and being active in the church community. Question 7-‘My faith has an impact on my daily life’ was discussed. The block of questions 9–44 was also addressed.

(This was the group of specific actions, broken up between church actions, First Article actions, family actions, ambivalent acts, and the control group.) I affirmed the high rankings for the church and family actions. I also encouraged the hearers to reconsider the importance of First Article actions such as using your talents, conserving water, and getting regular exercise. While they are not commonly correlated with faithfulness, I highlighted humanity’s role as caretakers of creation and the sacredness of the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit.

This sermon, concerned with our love for God, also addressed the importance of the church community in the life of a faithful Christian. The idea of ‘me and Jesus’ faith was addressed. I also commended people for holding communion, baptism, confession, and evangelism in high regard. However, in question 6-‘How often should a faithful Christian attend church?’ 23% responded that one does not need to attend church to be a faithful Christian. A person’s salvation does not depend upon their church attendance habits. However, a Christian should seek Christ where He has promised to be found, namely in His word and sacraments (which, in questions 38, 18, and 28, were held in almost unanimously high regard). I tried to show that going to church is not another burden Christ places upon His followers, but a joyful opportunity to receive His mercy and share in His loving presence.

Sermon 4 was titled: Love your neighbor as yourself. The Biblical text used was Matt. 25:31–45, in which Jesus shows actions towards the poorest, most marginalized, and forgotten people was equivalent to one’s actions of love to Jesus. I explained how our faithful living relates to our interactions with others. It begins in our family, extends to the community we live in, and eventually all of humanity. In the words of Jesus, ‘Whatever you did to the least of these

you did unto me.’ Faithfulness is not something heroic, but the fulfillment of our vocation duties and the utilization of talents and blessings. In the sermon, concrete examples of acts of faithfulness were offered. These aligned with some of the questions in the questionnaire. The purpose of the sermon was to equip people with the confidence that faithfulness is lived out in daily actions ala question 7 - ‘My faith has an impact on my daily life.’

The full texts of the sermons can be found in Appendix Three.

### **Sermon Series Follow-Up Survey**

Following the conclusion of the sermon series, I asked the congregation members to complete a brief survey about their impressions of the sermon series.

The results of the follow-up survey can be found in Appendix Four.

The survey was distributed to church members during the church service on June 25, 2017. A total of 31 people completed the survey. 31 people said the sermon series did aid their understanding of faithfulness. Zero respondents said the sermon series did not aid their understanding of faithfulness. Several people jotted down a comment or two. Following are the comments received:

- I realized how important it is to be faithful to God—to hear and act on His word—to love God and man.
- Encouraging to realize that even though we cannot fix everything . . . it is comforting to know that even simple acts of kindness please God and make a difference.
- Well done! Disappointed that so many do not see that going to church every Sunday isn't important.
- It is important to attend church.
- I Love your special messages.
- The sermons reaffirmed what I know.

- How time has changed society in going to church.

These comments were helpful to me as a preacher. After each of the sermons, I had several people approach me to tell me that it got them to think deeper about the subject. I was pleased with the results. After all, my initial intent was to get people to think critically about what it means to be a faithful Christian! The series did its duty. I painted a picture of what it means, and the people got thinking about their own journey of faithfulness.

## CHAPTER SIX

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The process of writing the Major Applied Project has been informational as well as formational for me as a pastor. The primary question of this MAP was not merely academic, but eminently practical. In a culture which increasingly views faithful Christians as irrelevant or extreme, Christians should consider the importance of faithfulness.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky wrote, “If God does not exist, everything is permitted and one can do anything.”<sup>1</sup> Any society or individual who would turn from a belief in God must examine the motivation for moral obligation. What we are witnessing in twenty-first century America is the end of Christendom. This shift has profound effects. Church membership is down. People are attending church less often. Morality is viewed subjectively and situationally.

Where do we turn? Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has prescient advice:

What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition or the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict.<sup>2</sup>

Who was Benedict and why do we need another? Born in 480, Benedict is considered the

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<sup>1</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux), 589.

<sup>2</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame), 245.

father of Western Monasticism. Having witnessed the morass and decay of urban society, he set out to establish many monasteries. The purpose of which was to create a beachhead of virtue, civility, and Christian faithfulness. The monks of his monasteries are credited with helping to shepherd civilization through the dark ages.

Twenty-first century America is witnessing the end of American Christendom. Many Christians today are aware that the culture is not an incubator for faithful living. What we need today, as MacIntyre wrote, is a different St. Benedict and ‘the construction of local forms of community.’ Christians can gather together in the community we call church to encourage and admonish one another in the faith. Adrift in a sea of relativity, Christians have a sure anchor through faith in the Lord Jesus.

Christians have identities as baptized children of God. We have a purpose in life; to love the Lord and serve our neighbor. Our lives are full of meaning, whether serving in our vocations, caring for creation, donating to a worthy cause, or talking to God through prayer. Too often, modern Christians are caricatured as vindictive, narrow minded, and unwilling to change. As Christians, we need to recapture the beauty, richness, and diversity of being faithful to Christ. Lip service to the Lord is meaningless. In the words of the church father Ignatius of Antioch, “We have not only to be called Christians, but to be Christians.”<sup>3</sup> Actions always speak louder than words.

This is displayed starkly in one of my favorite movies, *Gran Torino* starring Clint Eastwood. In it, Eastwood stars as Walt Kowalski, a bitter, lonely, xenophobic man. His wife just died. His Detroit neighborhood is populated with people of different ethnicities. One of the new neighbors even attempts to steal his prized automobile. Walt is frustrated that ‘his’ world is

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<sup>3</sup> Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers*, 95.

falling apart. Slowly but surely, he displays care for his ‘enemy’ neighbors. He even takes the time to learn about their culture. When they are faced with gang violence, Walt sacrifices himself to help his neighbors. His last line in the film, ‘I’ve got a light,’ is a double entendre. Standing before local gang members, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a lighter from his days in the army. But it also refers to his faith in the Lord. He is a living example of being a light in the darkness. Because of his death, the gang members are finally brought to justice, and his new neighbors are able to live in peace. His small actions of service for his neighbors turned into the greatest act of love and faith, laying down his life for his friends. So too, in the lives of all Christians, there are those little opportunities to live out one’s faith; to be salt and light in the world. When the situation presents itself, there may also be life-altering opportunities. May God grant all Christians strength to bear witness in those situations.

### **Contributions to Ministry**

For the first disciples, faithfulness to Christ meant literally following Jesus. For Christians after Christ’s ascension, that was no longer possible. We have been wrestling with the implications of following Christ ever since. Throughout the ages, the centrality of receiving God’s grace through the Word and Sacraments in the fellowship of the church community and responding in prayer and praise and vocational service to one’s neighbor has been and will be the foundation of Christian faithfulness.

My aim in this Major Applied Project was to identify markers of faithfulness and examine its central role in the lives of Christians. My hope is that it will enhance my future ministry as well as the church at large. This topic can be incorporated into preaching, teaching, and catechesis. This MAP had two major, complimentary sections. The first examined the recent historical shifts from American Christendom to post-Christian America. The second section



engaged in field research to highlight specific actions which Christians can perform in their vocations to live out their faith, using my rural congregation context as the place of study. The two sections go hand in glove.

It is important to interpret the times. For instance, had this MAP been written in the 1950s-80s, there may have been encouragement to engage in door to door evangelism, proclaiming the objective truths of Christianity and touting the patriotic, anti-communist, community-building programs and functions of the local church. Trumpeting the objective truths of the faith has little currency in today's marketplace. Christians cannot try to legislate morality via government or a bully pulpit. Over the past few decades, that approach has driven people away from the faith. Instead, change and evangelism occur at a grassroots level. What matters today is living authentically, building relationships, and serving those in need. One example of this new cultural milieu was the 2014 ALS Ice Bucket challenge on social media. A person would dump a bucket of ice over their heads, make a donation to ALS, and then call on or 'tag' a friend to do the same thing. There were 2.4 million tagged videos on Facebook, which garnered \$41 million in donations to ALS, double the amount of donations the previous summer. This is but one example of the new outside the box possibilities to living out one's faith. We can always challenge ourselves to find similar new avenues to be salt and light.

American Christians will be pushed beyond their comfort zones. This provides an excellent opportunity. During the time of Jesus, when Jews needed to travel from Galilee to Jerusalem, they would follow a circuitous route around, not through, Samaria. At that time, Samaritans were considered outcasts and inferior to the Jews. Jesus blazed a new path. He dared to walk from Galilee to Jerusalem directly through Samaria. There he engaged the woman at the well. Jesus showed that there was mission work to be done there. Further, in a parable on mercy and service

in Luke 10, mercy is exemplified by a good Samaritan man. The Jews could learn from the Samaritans.

There is a mission field today in American ‘Samaria.’ Instead of avoiding those in need, Christians can follow the example of Jesus. Christians can seek to serve the poor, the broken, the depressed, the drug-addicted, the immigrants, and the otherwise marginalized. This is not a one-way street. As Christians engage modern ‘Samaritans,’ Christians will be enriched in new and untold ways. One exciting new venture among American Lutherans is People Of the Book Lutheran Outreach or POBLO. This is a service organization which focuses upon Muslim immigrants and refugees in the United States. They provide material support of food and clothing. They also share the Gospel of Jesus with them. The workers remark that they have been enriched by learning about different customs and new foods. Each and every Christian should consider how they might engage the ‘Samaritans’ in their midst.

I hope that this MAP caused people to think critically and in new ways regarding an important, multifaceted topic. What if we present Christianity as not a set of rules to follow (which, of course, is a misrepresentation of Christianity), but as a new way of living? Faithful Christianity is a way of living which often finds itself in contrast with the ways of the world. What if we truly hear the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount? We are called to be the light of the world, the salt of the earth. Faithfulness takes on unique forms in different times and places. The Small Catechism’s Table of Duties is a good starting place, but it is not exhaustive. There are specific actions that people may take to live out their faith. (For instance, a mother caring for children is an act of faithfulness via her vocational and familial responsibilities.) It is my hope that people can identify the ways in which their faith is lived out and find meaning and purpose in their calling. As pastors preach and teach in their congregations, it is my hope that

they preach the law and gospel clearly. We are dead in our sins and trespasses and cannot save ourselves. God, in His great mercy, has given us forgiveness and new life through the death of Jesus Christ.

It does not end there! While we do not actively participate in our salvation, we can certainly be active participants in the kingdom work by bearing good fruit. Pastors can challenge their congregations not simply to ‘be faithful’ or to love or be patient or kind, but to live out their faith in specific actions. A father can provide for the financial well-being of the family and pray with His children. A neighbor can rake leaves for an elderly neighbor. A person can donate money to their church or charity. In so doing, these people are living out their faith. I desire that people be encouraged and inspired by everyday actions to be the light of the world.

Seemingly small actions can take on great significance. An example: One of the great successes in twentieth century America was the drastic reduction in crime in New York City from the 1980s to the early 1990s. Its reduction has been credited to the ‘Broken Windows’ theory. A broken window, a burned out streetlamp, trash on the street, or graffiti on a subway car served as little signifiers that crime was tolerated. Thus, the city undertook actions to repair windows, whitewash graffiti, and remove the trash. Amazingly, this environment improvement led to dramatically fewer major crimes.<sup>4</sup>

How does this translate to faithfulness and the Sermon on the Mount? Little things are important. Not all Christians will be martyrs or Mother Theresa. Yet that does not diminish the importance of our faith life. The little everyday acts of faith and obedience can lead us to a deeper relationship with the Lord and have a profound effect on others. Our culture is full of Christians who are ‘practical atheists.’ What if, instead, we lived as imitators of Christ, as though

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<sup>4</sup> For more on this vignette, read *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell.

every act, every interaction was made with Christ himself?<sup>5</sup>

### **Contributions to Personal and Professional Growth**

This Major Applied Project has helped me to grow both professionally as well as personally. In my ministry, I attempt to integrate the topic of faithfulness in all its multifaceted aspects into my preaching and teaching. It has also caused some introspection. It has given me comfort that I am living my faith, albeit imperfectly, through the callings of pastor, husband, father, and community member. It has also challenged me to think of meaningful new ways in which I might bear the good fruit of faith. There is a quote attributed to Luther, (which turned out to be apocryphal) ‘A Christian cobbler does not put little crosses on shoes with little care for craftsmanship, but rather makes quality shoes.’ Indeed, faithfulness entails doing your vocation well. Thinking outside the box, there are ways to serve the community, seek to comfort others, and care for God’s creation which I had not previously considered. The mountain of books I have gone through to research this topic have greatly increased my knowledge of the subject matter. It has inspired me to continue learning about this subject and helping others to live out their faith.

### **Recommendations**

What does it mean to be a faithful Christian? A faithful Christian trusts in Jesus Christ for life and eternal salvation. This is a trust given by the Spirit through the waters of baptism, nurtured through God’s word, prayer and the community of believers. This faith is lived out by being active in the church and one’s family. It extends to care for neighbors, community, and all of creation. Everything we as Christians do can be an act of faith when we use our vocational

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<sup>5</sup> See Matt. 25:31–46.

talents in love for God and service to the neighbor. Endeavoring to be faithful is not something that can be perfected. We are fallen, sinful creatures. We acknowledge our lack of faithfulness and give thanks that we have a loving, forgiving, sanctifying Lord. Our quest to live as faithful Christians in this passing away world is summed up beautifully in our Lutheran liturgy. These words of confession are a powerful reminder of our calling: “Most merciful God, we confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean. We have sinned against You in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved You with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We justly deserve Your present and eternal punishment. For the sake of Your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in Your will and walk in Your ways to the glory of Your holy name. Amen.”<sup>6</sup>

It is my hope that all Christians consider how they might use their God given talents in many and various ways in God’s amazing creation. May they find meaning and purpose as they serve in their vocations. May they challenge themselves to follow Christ by being the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Below is a summary of recommendations based upon my academic reading and field research. A pamphlet form of these recommendation, which can be disseminated for easy reading, can be found in Appendix Five.

### What Does it Mean to Be a Faithful Christian Today?

Jesus calls us to be salt and light. When we follow Jesus by faith, we are different from the world, and that’s a good thing!

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<sup>6</sup> *Lutheran Service Book*, 151.

Be active in your church. This is where God promises to give you His love, forgiveness and hope through His Word and Sacraments of Baptism, Communion, and Confession. Learn God's Word of truth. Help the church with your time, talents, and treasures. As God serves us through Word and Sacrament, care for your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Take time to pray and meditate regularly. In prayer, we talk to God and find quiet time from the busy world. In His life, Jesus often made time to be alone in prayer. We should model Christ's behavior. We can glorify Him, thank Him for our daily bread, present our requests to Him, and pour out our heart to Him. Opportunities for prayer abound: in the morning, at mealtime, with family, before bed, in times of blessing and need.

Care for your family. Your family is your primary vocation. In familial relationships, we model love, forgiveness, faithfulness, care, and service. Spouses, be faithful to one another. Parents, train up your children in the Lord. Children, honor your parents.

Be good stewards. A steward is a manager of someone else's property. Hence, we are stewards of God's creation, stewards of our bodies, our finances, our talents, etc. How we care for what God has entrusted to us is a sign of our faithfulness.

Love, do not judge, those who are different from you. Jesus said, "First take the log out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye" (Matt. 7:5). "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). All people are in need of the love and forgiveness which is found by being baptized into Jesus. Christians do not condone sin, but rather are called to "speak the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15).

Do your vocations with 'Jesus-vision.' In Matthew 25, Jesus said, 'Whatever you did to the least of these, you did unto me.' Monday through Saturday daily living is connected to our Sunday faith via the vocations to which we are called. God has infused our hum-drum, daily life

with meaning and purpose. “Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Cor. 15:58).

Forgive. Forgiveness is one of the hallmarks of the Christian faith. Anger, bitterness, and vindictiveness are soul-devouring cancers. As Jesus has forgiven us our sins, we are called to the difficult task of forgiving those who have wronged us. Contrary to the popular saying ‘forgive and forget,’ forgetting is not a requisite for forgiveness. It is not advisable or even possible to forget past atrocities. However, it is a mark of a mature Christian to forgive and move on. Forgiveness is a primary way in which we can imitate the love of Christ in our lives.

Don’t lose your grip on love and loyalty. Tie them around your neck; carve their initials on your heart. Trust God from the bottom of your heart; don’t try to figure out everything on your own. (Prov. 3:3, 5 The Message).

This listing is meant as a guidepost for Christian pilgrims navigating through these spiritually murky and difficult times. Christians are not defined by race or ethnicity or political party but by following Jesus Christ. As Christians survey the culture, we can confidently go forth following a more excellent way. We venture forth in love, striving to be faithful followers of Jesus.

One of the joys of the Christian journey is found in singing. As we go forth in faith, may we sing God’s praises, led by His abiding presence.

“Let us ever walk with Jesus, follow His example pure, through a world that would deceive us and to sin our spirits lure. Onward in His footsteps treading, pilgrims here, our home above, full of faith and hope and love, let us do the Father’s bidding. Faithful Lord with me abide; I shall follow where you guide.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Lutheran Service Book*, 685.

## APPENDIX ONE

### RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE

#### Doctor of Ministry Research Questionnaire Conducted by Rev. Scott Busacker

You have received this because you are a baptized and confirmed member of Trinity, Harvel. Your input is greatly appreciated. Data from this questionnaire will be to assist Pastor Scott Busacker in his Doctor of Ministry Major Applied Project: “What does it mean to be a faithful Christian?”

This survey is intended to gauge your understanding of what it means to be a faithful Christian. This survey is not asking, ‘how is a person saved?’ As Lutherans, we believe that nothing we do can earn our salvation. Our salvation comes through the work of Jesus Christ.

This questionnaire is anonymous to ensure your privacy.

If you wish, you may attend the small group discussion to talk about your understanding of faithfulness and any questions you may have. The small group discussion will take place on: Wed, April 13 at 7 p.m. The questionnaire results will be available to the congregation this summer.

This should take 10–15 minutes to complete.

Please return to the basket in back of church or mail to church by April 3.

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1. Do you see yourself as a faithful Christian? Yes No Sometimes

2. Are you: Male or Female

3. Please identify your age group: 12–25    26–40    41–55    56–70    71 +

4. How long have you been a member of this church? \_\_\_\_\_

5. I believe that Jesus is my Savior, has forgiven me, and gives me eternal life?  
Yes No Unsure

6. How often should a faithful Christian attend church  
a. every week



- b. once or twice a month
  - c. a couple times a year
  - d. one does not need to attend church to be a faithful Christian
7. My faith has an impact on my daily life? Yes No Unsure
8. Being a faithful Christian means
- a. believing that Jesus died and rose for me
  - b. following Jesus' commands and doing His will
  - c. a combination of a and b

How important are the following items to being a faithful Christian?

*Rank items from 1 to 5 1-not important to be faithful 3- somewhat important 5-very important*

- 9. Memorizing Bible verses 1 2 3 4 5
- 10. Eating with family 1 2 3 4 5
- 11. Doing your job well 1 2 3 4 5
- 12. Practicing good land management 1 2 3 4 5
- 13. Visiting someone in hospital 1 2 3 4 5
- 14. Supporting local pro sports teams 1 2 3 4 5
- 15. Being a patriotic American citizen 1 2 3 4 5
- 16. Preparing food for someone whose spouse just died 1 2 3 4 5
- 17. Reading the Bible 1 2 3 4 5
- 18. Being baptized 1 2 3 4 5
- 19. Caring for sick family members 1 2 3 4 5
- 20. Living within your financial means 1 2 3 4 5
- 21. Conserving water 1 2 3 4 5
- 22. Keeping your promises and commitments 1 2 3 4 5

23. Having children active in extracurricular activities 1 2 3 4 5
24. Tell someone about Jesus/inviting them to church 1 2 3 4 5
25. Disciplining your children 1 2 3 4 5
26. Eating healthy foods and drinks 1 2 3 4 5
27. Regular physical exercise 1 2 3 4 5
28. Confessing your sins 1 2 3 4 5
29. Supporting local businesses 1 2 3 4 5
30. Helping a friend get through a crisis 1 2 3 4 5
31. Supporting the local school 1 2 3 4 5
32. Drinking alcohol 1 2 3 4 5
33. Advocating for certain legislation 1 2 3 4 5
34. Recycling 1 2 3 4 5
35. Keeping a garden 1 2 3 4 5
36. Using your talents 1 2 3 4 5
37. Treating people with respect and kindness 1 2 3 4 5
38. Receiving communion 1 2 3 4 5
39. Volunteering at church 1 2 3 4 5
40. Forgiving people who have wronged you 1 2 3 4 5
41. Being faithful to your spouse 1 2 3 4 5
42. Using your time wisely 1 2 3 4 5
43. Being a wise consumer 1 2 3 4 5
44. Watching television 1 2 3 4 5
  
45. Do you believe that it OK to doubt God sometimes and still be a faithful Christian?  
Yes No Unsure

Please read the statement, and as a faithful Christian do you agree or disagree with the statement.

46. I save for emergencies and retirement Agree Disagree Unsure

47. If someone asks me for money, I will usually give it to them Agree Disagree Unsure

48. Jesus is the only way to heaven Agree Disagree Unsure

49. I say grace almost daily Agree Disagree Unsure

50. If you are a faithful Christian, God will bless you financially Agree Disagree Unsure

51. It is important to pay your taxes Agree Disagree Unsure

52. Do you believe it is important as a faithful Christian to give financially to church?

Yes No

53. How much do you think a faithful Christian should give as a percentage of after-tax income?

Less than 2% 2 - 6% over 6%

54. Do you believe it is important as a faithful Christian to give financially to charitable organizations?

Yes No

55. How much do you think a faithful Christian should give to charitable organizations as a percentage of after-tax income?

Less than 2% 2 - 6% over 6%

56. Is it important for charitable / church giving to be included in your will?

Yes No

How much does your faith impact your stance on the following issues

1- not at all, 2 - a little, 3 - somewhat, 4 - somewhat significantly, 5- very significantly

57. Poverty / Welfare 1 2 3 4 5

58. Abortion 1 2 3 4 5

59. Gun rights 1 2 3 4 5

60. Income Inequality 1 2 3 4 5

61. Government Spending 1 2 3 4 5

62. Environment 1 2 3 4 5

63. Foreign Policy 1 2 3 4 5

64. Immigration 1 2 3 4 5

65. Sex and Family Issues 1 2 3 4 5

66. Death Penalty 1 2 3 4 5  
67. Choosing a political party to support 1 2 3 4 5  
68. Choosing a political candidate to support 1 2 3 4 5

69. In this list below, pick the top 5 things you believe are most important to being a faithful Christian.

- Do not gossip about others
- Forgiving people
- Try to take good care of your health
- Care for your family
- Care for people in need in your community
- Support the government
- Care for pastor and spiritual leaders
- Do your job well
- Be content with your station in life
- Pray

70. Why is being a faithful Christian important? Check all that apply

- A. It is a sign of my trust in God.
- B. So I can go to heaven when I die.
- C. It is just what people in society are supposed to do
- D. To please God
- E. To serve my neighbor

Additional Comments:

**Thank you for completing the questionnaire!**

## APPENDIX TWO

### RESULTS OF RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE

Snapshot of Results April 13, 2016

This survey was intended for communicant members of Trinity Lutheran Church, Harvel, IL. Trinity has 146 communicant members. I was unable to get addresses for 6 members. Thus, the survey was sent to 140 people 58 people or 41% completed the survey.

There is a great amount of information which can be extrapolated from the data. In the future, I will present a sermon series based upon the findings of this survey.

1. Do you see yourself as a faithful Christian? Yes 89% No 0 Sometimes 11%
2. Are you: Male 34% Female 66%
3. Please identify your age group: 12–25 9% 26–40 16% 41–55 12% 56–70 40% 71 + 24%
4. How long have you been a member of this church? Answers vary widely
5. I believe that Jesus is my Savior, has forgiven me, and gives me eternal life?  
Yes 98% No 0 Unsure 2%
6. How often should a faithful Christian attend church
  - a. every week 71%
  - b. once or twice a month 5%
  - c. a couple times a year 0%
  - d. one does not need to attend church to be a faithful Christian 23%
7. My faith has an impact on my daily life? Yes 96% No 0 Unsure 4%
8. Being a faithful Christian means
  - a. believing that Jesus died and rose for me 4%
  - b. following Jesus' commands and doing His will 0%

c. a combination of a and b 96%

How important are the following items to being a faithful Christian?

*Rank items from 1 to 5 1-not important to be faithful 3- somewhat important 5-very important*

- 38. Receiving communion 4.84
- 41. Being faithful to your spouse 4.84
- 18. Being baptized 4.72
- 37. Treating people with respect and kindness 4.67
- 28. Confessing your sins 4.66
- 40. Forgiving people who have wronged you 4.60
- 22. Keeping your promises and commitments 4.59
- 24. Tell someone about Jesus/inviting them to church 4.46
- 19. Caring for sick family members 4.42
- 39. Volunteering at church 4.40
- 30. Helping a friend get through a crisis 4.35
- 17. Reading the Bible 4.30
- 25. Disciplining your children 4.13
- 11. Doing your job well 3.93
- 10. Eating with family 3.88
- 20. Living within your financial means 3.82
- 13. Visiting someone in hospital 3.79
- 16. Preparing food for someone whose spouse just died 3.79
- 42. Using your time wisely 3.74
- 36. Using your talents 3.72
- 12. Practicing good land management 3.64
- 15. Being a patriotic American citizen 3.62
- 21. Conserving water 3.42
- 26. Eating healthy foods and drinks 3.38
- 31. Supporting the local school 3.37

- 43. Being a wise consumer 3.33
- 9. Memorizing Bible verses 3.30
- 29. Supporting local businesses 3.25
- 27. Regular physical exercise 3.15
- 34. Recycling 2.77
- 23. Having children active in extracurricular activities 2.73
- 33. Advocating for certain legislation 2.69
- 35. Keeping a garden 2.45
- 14. Supporting local pro sports teams 1.72
- 44. Watching television 1.70
- 32. Drinking alcohol 1.45

45. Do you believe that it OK to doubt God sometimes and still be a faithful Christian?

Yes 37% No 52% Unsure 11%

Please read the statement, and as a faithful Christian do you agree or disagree with the statement.

46. I save for emergencies and retirement

Agree 85% Disagree 4% Unsure 11%

47. If someone asks me for money, I will usually give it to them

Agree 22% Disagree 38% Unsure 40%

48. Jesus is the only way to heaven

Agree 98% Disagree 2% Unsure 0%

49. I say grace almost daily

Agree 84% Disagree 11% Unsure 5%

50. If you are a faithful Christian, God will bless you financially

Agree 28% Disagree 48% Unsure 23%

51. It is important to pay your taxes

Agree 88% Disagree 4% Unsure 8%

52. Do you believe it is important as a faithful Christian to give financially to church?

Yes 95% No 5%

53. How much do you think a faithful Christian should give as a percentage of after-tax income?

Less than 2% 4 2 - 6% 50 over 6% 46

54. Do you believe it is important as a faithful Christian to give financially to charitable organizations?

Yes 77% No 23%

55. How much do you think a faithful Christian should give to charitable organizations as a percentage of after-tax income?

Less than 2% 35 2 - 6% 59 over 6% 6

56. Is it important for charitable / church giving to be included in your will?

Yes 67% No 33%

How much does your faith impact your stance on the following issues?

1- not at all, 2 - a little, 3 - somewhat, 4 - somewhat significantly, 5- very significantly

58. Abortion 4.63

65. Sex and Family Issues 4.24

66. Death Penalty 3.80

62. Environment 3.67

57. Poverty / Welfare 3.63

68. Choosing a political candidate to support 3.47

64. Immigration 3.46

59. Gun rights 3.36

61. Government Spending 3.31

67. Choosing a political party to support 3.18

63. Foreign Policy 3.13

60. Income Inequality 2.98

69. In this list below, **pick the top 5** things you believe are most important to being a faithful Christian.

Forgiving people 95%

Pray 93%

Care for your family 91%



- Care for pastor and spiritual leaders 65%
- Care for people in need in your community 41%
- Be content with your station in life 29%
- Try to take good care of your health 25%
- Do not gossip about others 22%
- Do your job well 21%
- Support the government 2%

70. Why is being a faithful Christian important? Check all that apply

- A. It is a sign of my trust in God. 91%
- B. So I can go to heaven when I die. 69%
- C. It is just what people in society are supposed to do 10%
- D. To please God 83%
- E. To serve my neighbor 45%

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Statistics can also be broken down by gender and age bracket.

Below - highlighted a few distinctions which the survey revealed

Distinctions between age group have not been calculated yet

<u>Top 5 for Men (1–5 section)</u>	<u>Top 5 for Women (1–5 section)</u>
38 - 4.95 receiving communion	41 - 4.8 being faithful to spouse
18 - 4.9 being baptized	38 - 4.78 receiving communion
41 - 4.9 being faithful to spouse	37 - 4.65 treating people with kindness and respect
28 - 4.85 confessing your sins	18 - 4.63 being baptized
22 - 4.8 keeping your promises and commitments	28 - 4.56 confessing your sins

#49 I say grace almost daily

	Women	Men
Agree	78%	95%
Disagree	16%	0
Unsure	6%	5%

#69 choose the top 5

	Women	Men
Forgive others	95%	95%
Pray	92%	95%
Care for family	87%	100%
Be Content	37%	15%
Care for pastor, etc.	53%	90%
Do not gossip	26%	15%
Be in good health	26%	25%
Care for community	42%	40%
Do your job well	18%	25%
Support government	0	5%

## **APPENDIX THREE**

### **SERMON SERIES**

#### **Sermon #1. What does it mean to be a faithful Christian?**

**Texts: Exodus 20:1–17; Ephesians 2:1–10; Luke 10:25–37**

#### Introduction

What does it mean to be a faithful Christian? As many of you know, I have been working on my Doctor of Ministry degree. It entails several classes and a final research paper. The focus of my paper has been examining the question: ‘What does it mean to be a faithful Christian?’ I am doing that because I want to better equip you to do just that! Maybe it means receiving communion. Or maybe it means coming to church, or serving others, such as taking a meal to an ill neighbor . . . all sorts of things. Maybe this topic confuses you or challenges you. That’s ok—it IS a challenge to know what it is that makes us faithful.

Faithful . . . I am sure you have heard the Bible passages: ‘well done good and faithful servant,’ or ‘be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.’ But what does it mean to be faithful? During these 4 weeks, we will look at that question, and engage the questionnaire you took last year. This morning is part 1 of a 4 part sermon series - 1. Saved by grace to live by faith. Our faithfulness, the things we do, like coming to church, caring for our family, caring for our friends, doing what God wants us to do—they are important. But our good works will not get us to heaven. It is God’s grace that saves us. The things we do are in response to God’s grace. Next week Sermon 2 is a Cultural Diagnosis of faithfulness. It will look at recent history, and

how things have changed over the years, and how it affects us today. Sermons 3 and 4 will get down to nuts and bolts, a guide or roadmap if you will, for living faithfully. 3 - Our relationship to God—Love the Lord your God with all your heart. 4. Our relationship to others and this world—Love your neighbor as yourself. What does that look like in day to day life? And at the end of the 4 weeks, there will be a brief survey to ask if this series was beneficial to you in any way. I want to say thank you for your support and feedback in this endeavor.

### Saved by grace

Imagine you're on a boat out in the middle of the ocean, and your boat starts taking on water. More and more water, until finally the boat sinks. What do you do? You can try to swim, you can doggie paddle for a while, but anything you do is futile. On your own in the middle of the ocean, you cannot swim to safety; all you can do is drown. Your only hope is that another ship comes by, and throws you a life preserver. And brings you to safety.

As an analogy, in the ocean of life, we cannot save ourselves. Sin has shipwrecked us. And as Romans tells us, "The wages of sin is death." We need a life saver, a rescuer. Do not be afraid. Your life saver is Jesus. Isaiah 41:10 says, "Fear not, for I am with you, be not dismayed for I am your God, I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will hold you up with my right hand." Jesus has rescued you through the waters, the waters of baptism, and given you new life.

It is Jesus alone who saves us. Good works cannot get us to heaven.

This is precisely what sets Christianity apart from other religions. Other religions focus on works. Judaism—follow the Torah, eat Kosher foods. For Muslims—obey the 5 pillars. Mormons—obey the covenant. Other religions say do this! But in Christianity, Jesus says I did it all . . . For you. On the cross Jesus shouted out on the cross, "It is finished." No matter what life throws your way—you have eternal life with Jesus.

If there is one thing that the Lutheran church is known for—it is proclaiming that salvation comes by God’s grace, not our works. (Eph. 2:8–9)

I pray that you hear that message loud and clear, through sermons, through songs, through liturgy.

We are saved by the grace of God.

Last year, I sent out a survey on faithfulness to all 140 confirmed members of Trinity. And 58 people, or 41%, completed it. I wish more would have completed it, but it’s still a good sample size.

One of the survey questions asked: ‘Do I believe that Jesus is my savior, has forgiven me, and gives me eternal life?’ 98% said yes. I am glad for that response. Another question asked: ‘Is Jesus the only way to heaven?’ 98% said yes.

### Saved . . . for a purpose

We are saved . . . great! Now what . . . and that’s where my study begins. We are saved, Now what . . . can I just do whatever I want? When someone says, God saved me; I am forgiven; now I can do whatever I want, that missing the point. Do not just give God lip service. God has saved you . . . for a purpose. To be faithful and do His will.

Let me show an example from the Bible. The Exodus from Egypt is one of the most well known stories. God’s people are slaves to the Pharaoh in Egypt. Toil in the mud and the heat. Moses goes before the Pharaoh to proclaim, “Let my people go.” By God’s mighty hand, he sends the 10 plagues, finally the angel of death on Passover, and the slaves are freed. They cross through the waters of the Red Sea from slavery into freedom. They are free! God feeds them manna and quail, and they are on their way to the Promised Land. On their way to the Promised Land, something very important happens. Do you know what it was? The 10 commandments. At Mt Sinai, God gives Moses and the people the 10 commandments. Instructions for faithful living.

He tells them, follow them and things will go well for you, disobey it and things will not go so well. It was a guide for life in the Promised Land.

God saves His people, then calls them to follow him.

In the same way, God has saved you from eternal death. Through the waters of baptism, you crossed the Red Sea out of slavery and into freedom. You too have the hope of a promised land, the new creation foreseen in Revelation 21. But along the way, God gives you instructions for being His disciple.

God doesn't want lip service, he wants disciples. Someone may say, 'I believe in Jesus.' But what does that mean?

In the survey some of you filled out, one of the questions said: Being a faithful Christians means: A. believing that Jesus died and rose for me; B. following Jesus' commands and doing His will; and C. a Combination of A and B. 96% of you said C. That's what I would say too. Faithfulness means both talking the talk and walking the walk of faith.

In the Gospels, Jesus talks about walking the walk of faith, by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan. A man was severely beaten, lying by the side of the road. The first two men to approach were a priest and a Levite, a man who probably was working in the temple. They knew their stuff; they knew the Scriptures better than most. But they walked on by. The third man to come near was a Samaritan, an outcast. He stooped down, had mercy on the man and showed him love. 1 John 3:18 – "Let us not love in word and talk, but in deed and truth." The Samaritan man showed love for His neighbor. He did what Jesus would do. How many opportunities have you passed by in your life, even this week to love your neighbor as yourself? Change and be faithful to God's command.

Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and love your neighbor as

yourself.” He tells the disciples, “A new command I give you love one another as I have loved you.” Living by faith means living in love; for God, for others, for His creation. In the words of the great Beatles song, “All You Need Is Love,” Love is the key to living by faith. The key to life itself. Always remember the greatest example of love, the cross of Jesus, where Jesus laid down His life out of love for you. We are called to be imitators of Christ.

What does it mean to be faithful? Let me take an example from our St Louis /southern Illinois area. What does it mean to be a faithful Cardinals fan? How could you tell apart a St Louis Cardinals fan from say, a non baseball fan? Well, a fan probably watches the games on TV, maybe even goes to a game at Busch stadium. They know the players, some of their past greats like Musial or Gibson or Pujols. A fan probably owns a Cardinals hat or t-shirt. If there was a great game, you’d talk about it to your friends the next day. These are identifying marks of a faithful St Louis Cardinals fan. That’s easy! And it’s fun to have a passion in something like this. We know what a Cards fan does. What about a faithful Christian? If someone knew you, would they think you were a Christian? Or as the old saying goes, if you were on trial, would there be enough evidence to convict you of being a Christian? And what is that evidence. Many people are shy or secretive about their faith. Why? Jesus has given you eternal life! No Cardinal or Cub or Yankee can ever do that. Being a faithful Christian means trusting in Jesus and obeying His commands. Let your light shine before others. Now, no need to be like the Pharisees, gloating and carrying on.

Maybe it’s going to church, or praying, or giving to church and charity, and helping your family, or serving in a local organization, or doing your job well, or helping people in need. It can be all of this and much more. As you begin your Monday morning, there may be someone that needs your smile, or warm greeting, or a quick conversation. There is always something to

do, no act is too small. Challenge yourself to grow in faith, in love, in service, imitating Christ. Another question in the survey asked ‘Why is being a faithful Christian important? Check all that apply’ The top answer 91% said It is a sign of my trust in God. Every time we obey, we are trusting God. That’s great. 83% said To please God. Good. One area where I would push back is that only 45% said to serve my neighbor. But that is important. He served His neighbors, even those who persecuted him.

### Closing

Jesus tells a story about a master giving three of His servants talents or coins. Two of the servants went out and made something, multiplied them. The third servant, took his talent, dug a hole, and just put it in the ground. Didn't really do anything, just kept it safe. When the master returned he commended the first two for doing something. He told them well done good and faithful servant! But he scolded the third man for not doing anything.

Each one of us has different opportunities, different talents, different struggles in life. But God has blessed each and every one of us in this gift called life. Be a blessing. As God has loved you, you are called to love, Love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself. How do we do this? By doing our vocations well, by caring for family, being stewards of this earth, by joining together in worship, by sitting by someone’s hospital bed, not judging your neighbors, and much more. Every little thing we do can be a witness, a sign of our faith. Galatians 5:6 says “In Christ Jesus, the only thing that matters is faith active in love.” You can make a difference! To the world, you may be just one person. But to someone in need, someone hurting, you mean the world.

We are saved by grace to live by faith. Love the Lord, love your neighbor as yourself. To imitate Christ in all we do. This is our purpose in life. Jesus said, “Be faithful unto death, and I



will give you the crown of eternal life.” We know that what sustains us ultimately—is God’s faithfulness, His faithfulness to His promises, to care for you for. Amen.

**Sermon #2. A History of faithfulness in America—Opportunities and Challenges**  
**Texts: Hebrews 13:1–9, Luke 5:33–39**

This is part 2 of 4 in our sermon series: “What does it mean to be a faithful Christian?” Today we look at the history of faithfulness in America and how it affects us today. Then I’ll offer a few challenges and opportunities for the future. Understanding the past informs the present, and guides us in future.

Over the years, I’ve heard a lot of anecdotes about the way things were 40–50 years ago in the church. Churches were full, mission festivals with hundreds of people, Sundays were reserved for faith and family, life was different. If only we could get back to that. So I was curious, why was it like that, what is different today, how does it affect us now.

I’ve identified the two main factors for our shift in our culture, (of course there are more factors). They are 1. A loss of cultural Christianity or Christendom, and 2. American individualism. Then we’ll try to chart a path forward, looking at some opportunities and challenges for faithful living.

Change Factor #1 - End of Christendom

A while back, someone gave me an old newspaper clipping from the early 1950s. Allow me to read, “Trinity Lutheran Church Harvel, will again sponsor Vacation Bible School this year. The pastor, H. Wendler, said that if parents want to strike a crippling blow against communism then they should give our future American citizens all the Christian education they can. It doesn’t seem likely that the reds will defeat America on the battlefield but they have been successful by boring from within nations with their communism. To prevent this in America, a

greater emphasis on Christian teaching is needed.” A little snapshot on the way things were . . . I am sure it was a fine VBS. As I read that, did you notice what was absent? There was nothing about Jesus, or Bible stories, or singing songs . . . the focus was on America defeating communism. VBS would be one tool in the arsenal.

This little flyer is helpful in understanding the times. A lot of people look back at the 50s and 60s as a sort of golden age. The anecdotes go . . . ‘remember when the church was packed full on Sunday,’ or ‘We had x amount of children in Bible School.’ What led to such high churchgoing in the 50s and 60s? After all, it was the highest in history! Going further back, I found out that churchgoing during the Revolutionary War was only about 20% of people, less than it is today. That 1950s-60s was a unique period. Were more people faithful Christians or was something else going on?

Let me paint a picture of that unique era. The Great Depression and World War II were in the rearview mirror. There was unprecedented economic prosperity, the baby boom, innovation, and more. There was a new threat in the world . . . Communism. And the official religion of Soviet Union was atheism . . . no god. The post war world was set up as a dichotomy, atheistic communists on one hand, and Christian Americans on the other. Of course many people who were proud Americans were ambivalent to church. But in the 50s you've got Joseph McCarthy trying to identify commies and other things, so the choice between a communist or an American became tantamount to the same as an atheist or a Christian. Going to church was seen as a sign of patriotism. It was in this time that ‘under God’ was added to the pledge of Allegiance. The Sunday Blue laws were in full effect. Stores were closed on Sunday because that was church day. I read where some trains that operated on Sundays forced conductors to recite scripture over the loudspeaker so that people would get some religion. As mentioned above, even the purpose of

VBS was co-opted into our nation's goal of defeating communism.

If you wanted to be a good citizen, you went to church. Anti-communism, economic prosperity, blue laws, post WW II baby boom, it was the perfect storm for high church attendance.

What I am saying is this: were there faithful Christians in the 50s and 60s? Yes of course. Should we view that period as a golden age of the Christian church? No. People then were not necessarily more faithful than Christians today. What we had was cultural Christianity or Christendom. Church and government and culture were all on the same page. Living by faith took a back seat to simply being a good citizen.

Over the past few decades, people have been ringing their fists, our culture is changing. What we are seeing, specifically, is the end of Christendom. Its last gasp may have been in the 80s with the moral majority. But being a good member of society no longer entails being a good Christian.

We're left today to pick up the pieces. Communism is no longer a threat. Blue laws are gone, you can choose to attend youth sports or whatever on a Sunday morning. Vietnam and Nixon shattered trust in government. The government no longer props up Christianity, if anything it runs against Christianity. I was speaking to a pastor friend in Africa, he mentioned that the US is giving aid to the country, but want them to adapt non-Christian social policies if they want the aid money.

What is happening is this . . . we are returning, albeit in different ways, to the time of the early church. 2000 years ago, Christians lived in a Roman empire that was at best indifferent to them and at worst sent them to die with the lions in the coliseum. Both 2000 years ago as well as today, the governments had overgrown military complexes, and social ethics decayed. Both then

and now, cultures obsessed with entertainment, materialism, and decadence.

Maybe you remember the movie *Back to the Future*. Well, our culture is going forward to the past, the time of the early church. Being a faithful Christian is now counter cultural. So that is change factor #1.

### Change factor #2 - American Individualism

The standard story of settling American begins, of course, with the Pilgrims. Their story is one of religious freedom. Back in England, Anglicanism was the official state religion. In fact the same is true today. Even in Germany, it's the Lutheran Church, same in Sweden and Denmark or in Greece the Orthodox church.

The Puritans wanted to purify the state church. First, they found refuge in Holland, and eventually in Massachusetts. The pilgrims were not Anglicans, but make no mistake, they were very zealous Christians. But on their own terms.

Down through the ages, Americans have valued individualism, pull yourself up by your bootstraps, that kind of mentality. Living in a democracy, we expect our faith to be like a democracy, we can pick and choose what we like. Maybe someone likes John 3:16—the verse about God's love, but they do not believe that God created the world. Or people pick and choose which of the 10 commandments they believe in. Cafeteria Christians pick and choose what to believe and what to ignore. The prime example in Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson once took the Gospels, cut out all the miracles, and just left the moral sayings of Jesus. That's the Jesus he believed in. People have all sorts of ideas about various things. With the result that their god is no longer the god of the Bible, but rather just what they want to hear. It's the pursuit of happiness. But the pursuit of happiness and self-fulfillment isn't what Jesus teaches. Sometimes it runs counter to Jesus' teaching of loving our enemies or even laying down our life for our

friends.

American individualism went to a whole new level beginning in the 60s and on to the present day. Different from other cultures and other eras in history, Americans are profoundly shaped by an innate sense of individual freedom. An example, later today you can hop in a car, go anywhere, do about anything you want. Sometimes we forget how unique that really is. There are benefits to this way of thinking, and there are drawbacks. And now with the advent of smart phone technology, radical individualism is just part of our culture.

As we move forward, Christians need to better engage the culture and bring people to the love of Christ. Christians no longer dictate the culture. When we try to, the results aren't good. An example would be prohibition in the 20s. Some Tee totaling Christians thought they could legislate drinking away. It was a disaster.

Neither can we scapegoat certain groups. An example of this was in the 1980s with the moral majority. They focused on one issue, sexual ethics, and as a result, turned many people off. Christians today need to speak God's will, His commands, but also His forgiveness and love. We cannot cherry pick an issue or two. Being a faithful Christian encompasses all issues of life. More than ever, we need to realize that every individual is unique, has a story. We can reach people where they are. So many people are living broken, isolated, hurting. Each individual is loved, and special, created by a loving God.

### Our present context

In Matthew 9, Jesus talks about changing times. He says, "No one puts new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into new wineskins." What is Jesus talking about there? The people of Jesus'

day were still living in the Old Testament, the way of the Pharisees and tradition of the elders. But now that Jesus was here, they must think differently. The Sermon on the Mount is example A of how Christians shall live as His disciples.

We Christians cannot live like it is the 1950s anymore. Our culture, our communities, have changed. There may be poll data that says most Americans claim to be Christian. But we are not a Christian nation—actions speak louder than words. (I would argue that 1950s America was not entirely Christian either.)

So where do we go? We need to look forward. As Jesus said new wineskins for new wine, we need to ask ‘How can we be faithful Christians now?’ What might change in our actions? What might look the same? This isn’t something to fear. We are on a new adventure! How can we be different from the world?

Some have described our culture today as post-Christian or non-Christian. We must live more like the early Christians. Despite their struggles, in those early centuries the church grew. Because Christians were different. See how they love one another. In a world of meaninglessness, they lived with a purpose. In a culture of individualism, they sacrificed and cared for others.

This way is not always easy. I Peter 1 tells us “You will encounter various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith may be tested.” Blessed when you do good and suffer. Think of the example of Jesus, who did not come to overthrow the government, but lived humbly, walked faithfully and served others in love. Eventually dying at the hands of the Roman government. We can see our country is having a hard go of it as a post-Christian country. This may mean the end of Christendom, but not the end of Christianity. Moving into a non Christian culture, we navigate this by faith, together in boat of the church.

We proclaim that being with Christ in heaven is our end goal, our purpose in life is to be faithful Christians. To love the Lord, love our neighbor as yourself. Not just self-fulfillment.

I want to offer a few challenges and a few opportunities for being a faithful Christian in a changing culture. First, a few challenges.

1. Opposition to faith in culture: what is truth?
2. Entertainment: When sports runs up against faith, there are decisions, and consequences.
3. Increased technology: Makes some ethical questions more difficult and nuanced.

A few opportunities:

1. Technology and wealth: We have opportunities to affect and help others in ways that were not possible a generation ago.
2. We have a purpose: Young people today are seeking for purpose in a world of noise and clutter and materialism. Being a faithful Christian gives us purpose, in our families, communities, and an end goal.
3. A loving community: In a world of individuals, we still crave community. We need to be loved. We can offer that. We can proclaim the love of God, the forgiveness of Jesus Christ, and a peace that passes all understanding in knowing him.

Our world has changed. On the survey you took, I asked if being a patriotic American was important to being a faithful Christian. And a vast majority of you said no. I think that is a sign of our society changing. Being a patriotic American is no longer the same as being faithful Christian. We need to navigate this new path . . . .we do so by faith. not in ourselves, but in Jesus Christ. In the next two weeks, I will offer a way forward to live as faithful Christians in this culture.

The purpose of Christianity is not to defeat communism or some other earthly force. It is to

proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, that by His cross and resurrection he has defeated the powers of sin, death and the devil and gives us eternal life through His Word and Sacraments. Faithful Christians have a purpose, to love the Lord, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

We are in this new era, and it is a rocky road. But with the past as a guide, it is in times like these when faith grows stronger and deeper. Only with immense pressure are diamonds made, and under duress faith grows. In the early church, in the time of the Reformation, or when the immigrants left their countries for this unknown wilderness of America, or even now across the world, in China where many Christians meet underground, they are growing or Africa, where they live day to day, the church is growing. No, the 50s are not coming back. And that's ok. With Jesus we are on the move. When Peter and the disciples were on the boat, that was comfortable. But when he began walking on water to Jesus, that's faith. Living as a faithful Christian means not knowing what the future may hold, but boldly walking forward keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus. The world changes, but Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. We still gather in His house to pray the prayer he taught His disciples 2,000 years ago, the meal he first fed them, the words he first spoke to them. His words are life, truth, and peace. Amen.

**Sermon #3. Love the Lord your God**  
**Texts: Psalm 145, Nehemiah 10, Luke 14:12–24**

This is part 3 of the sermon series – “What does it mean to be a faithful Christian?”

In the survey you completed, 96% of you said your faith has an impact on your daily life. It should. In these next two weeks, we're going to look at how exactly faith intersects with real life.

I am dividing this into two parts, based upon the words of Jesus in Matthew 22. A certain lawyer asked Jesus what is the greatest commandment in the law. And Jesus said to him, ‘You shall love



the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus sums up our purpose, our mission as faithful Christians, with these 2 commands. Love the Lord & Love your neighbor. He is basically summing up the 10 commandments. The first 3 commandments deal with our relationship with God. The final 7 - our relationship with others. This week, we will focus on the first part, our relationship with God—Love the Lord your God.

How do we love the Lord? Well . . . how can we know about the Lord? Through two basic ways, 1. natural knowledge - we encounter God in the beauty of His creation; and 2. specific knowledge - we learn His will through His Word, the Bible.

### Natural Knowledge

There is just something about digging your hands into freshly tilled dirt. Maybe you enjoy working in a garden, or with flowers. There's something therapeutic about it. Living in a farming area, you all know better than most, there is something special about being connected to the earth. The farmer plants the seed, and then the process is in the Lord's hands. That's an act of faith. He sends the sunshine, gives the nutrients of the soil, and sends the rain in its due time. Seeing the corn sprout, grow, tassel, and then harvest.

Or maybe you enjoy watching a beautiful reddish orange sunset, or listening to the birds chirping in the early morning hours, or maybe just sitting outside. There's something spiritual about it. In nature, we commune with our Creator God is in His creation. Let the earth bless the Lord, you mountains and hills, bless the Lord, all the green things that grow on the earth, bless the Lord. (Song of the Three young Men) Romans 1 tells us God's eternal power is clearly seen in the things that have been made.

God formed Adam from the earth, and one day our bodies shall return to the earth. But more than that, God created Adam and Eve in His image, and called them to be the stewards of this creation. That is the Christian truth, we are a part of the earth, but we are uniquely called to steward God's creation.

So then, one of the ways we can show our love for God is to be good stewards, of our bodies, for it is the temple of the Holy Spirit. and of this earth. For God has breathed life into each sparrow and robin, every tree and flower, lion and lamb.

But the creation is groaning (Romans 8), groaning under the weight of sin and decay. We have not always cared for creation as we ought. Too often, we see it as just a resource to be used up. I saw an article that asked some kids eating lunch where the ingredients from their hamburgers come from. Some of them looked puzzled, and answered, 'well . . . the store.' Little thought is taken of the cow, the grains of wheat, the water, the vegetables, the harvesting that goes into that cheap \$2 fast food burger. We just expect it to be there, then throw away the wrapper.

Loving the Lord begins with our stewardship of His creation. Using our talents to bring forth the bounty of the earth. A few examples:

- conserving water, caring for the earth
- Being careful consumers, not wasteful
- taking good care of our bodies
- planting a garden or flowers to bring forth the beauty of God's earth

#### Specific Knowledge

Yes, like the moisture in the atmosphere, God's presence is everywhere.

Water is everywhere. But if you need a drink . . . where do you go. You go to the living

water, in ancient times a well or freshwater stream. In today's world, if you need a drink, you go to a faucet or bottle of water. In the same way, God is omnipresent in this world. He is everywhere. People say I can talk to God anywhere. And you can—through prayer. But also need to listen to God, receive His gifts. And to get a drink of God's life giving water, we come to His house.

Here is where God promises to be, to deliver His forgiveness in means of grace. We experience God in the means of grace—The word, in the sacraments of baptism, confession, and communion . . . that is where God delivers His blessings to you.

We can be with God in nature. But to know His forgiveness, to know His will through Jesus Christ, we come here for that specific knowledge. To praise him, and give him thanks. Loving God begins by being where He is. One of the survey questions asked How often should a faithful Christian attend church. 71% said every week. 5% said once or twice a month. 23% replied you do not need to attend church to be faithful. Now that doesn't mean attending church saves you. But it's pretty hard to follow someone when you reject their gifts. Here we receive God's gifts of life salvation through His word and sacraments.

In the Gospel reading, a man was giving a banquet. He invited His friends but they had excuses why they could not come. I just bought a field, or I just got married. We too make excuses to God why we do not have time for him. We are too busy, too many urgent pressing matters. Like busy Martha slaving away in the kitchen . . . she asked Jesus to tell Mary to help with the work. But Jesus rebuked Martha. Mary is listening to Jesus. Is there anything more important in the world for us to be doing for this one hour? Let us not call ourselves Christians but live as Christians, in His house, in our lives, in our love, our forgiveness, bearing with one another.

Many people today think of faith as just a personal relationship . . . me and Jesus. But that's not really Biblical. God's kingdom is pictured not as a personal relationship, but a marriage banquet. Who does the Bible say is the groom? Jesus. And who is the bride of Christ? The church, the body of Christ.

In the body of Christ, we grow in faith, in trust, in love. Here we learn what God's truth is. Here we console and lift up and encourage one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. We need to encourage and strengthen one another on our walk of faith. Look around you, everyone is dealing with something. Someone in mourning, someone is ill, someone lonely. Someone here this morning needs your support, your love. That's why Christians have Historically met on Sunday morning, to begin the week in love toward God, then go out the rest of the week in service to others.

Let me offer a few concrete ideas as to how we can love the Lord, follow him in faith.

- Go to church—being where God has promised to be in the Word and sacrament. There is no better place to start the week.
- Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest, memorize the Bible verses, for times of struggle.
- Confess your sins and receive Absolution
- Receive Holy Communion
- Talking to God in prayer, and taking time for quiet meditation
- Engage in the mutual consolation of brothers and sisters in Christ
- Give financially to the mission of the Church, both at home and abroad
- Invest your time and talents in the life of the church
- Stand up for the truth of God's Word.

There are many more! I would love to hear some other ideas you may have, how we can love the Lord. Challenge yourself as to how you can love the Lord, grow closer to him in faith. Being faithful is not a burden, but a joy!

Based on the survey, many of you grasp what I am talking about. There was a section which asked: How important are the following items to being a faithful Christian? Rank items 1- not important to be faithful up to 5 - very important to be faithful.

The #1 highest ranked item in your answers was receiving communion. You believe it is a super sign of our faith. What is most important to be a faithful Christian. Receiving communion got highest marks, right behind were being baptized and confessing your sins. Great, the 3 means of grace, I would agree, are very important acts of faithfulness. Then came - telling someone about Jesus. And reading the Bible was a 4.3 out of 5. As you did your survey almost all the church related acts were rated very high . . . except one. Memorizing Bible verses came in at 3.3 on a 1–5 scale. I was a bit surprised to see that so low. Perhaps some of you have a few flashbacks to confirmation questioning! But I would say that memorizing Bible verses can be a benefit, to have say John 3:16 or Psalm 23 in your permanent memory.

One thing I notice, is that when we grow in faith and love for the Lord, it has an effect on our relationships with others. One of the things we've noticed in our culture recently is more hostility in politics and even in general society. A big factor in that is that many people have turned away from God, turned away from church, and community, and we become more isolated. We need to repent . . . listen to God. Jesus said if you truly love me, you will obey my commands. So put His words into your daily practice.

For instance, When we pray in the Lord's prayer forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us . . . well, when we forgive the person who has wronged us, we are obeying the command of Jesus. We are living out our faith. Forgiveness is a sign of faith, that we believe God really is in control. We are also trusting Jesus as our Lord and Judge. And that in the end, vengeance is the Lords. Justice will be served . . . by him.

When we follow the command Do not steal, we are putting our faith and trust in action. We are trusting that God will provide for our needs, we do not need to harm our neighbors.

When we give our money to church or charity, it is an act of faith, of trust. That God will provide for me, but also that the money we give will be used for its purpose in God's kingdom. That we are investing in those in need. I was reading a few recent studies, they show that people who go to church are more generous with their money and more generous volunteering their time. Churchgoing does have an effect on the way people live.

Loving God begins in His church, and then it flows out to the rest of life. Love the Lord your God . . . love your neighbor as yourself. As we aspire to love as God has loved us, we live out our faith.

One last sign of loving the Lord is giving thanks in all circumstances.

We follow God not only when things are good, but also when the road of life gets bumpy. I am reminded of the story of Job, who lost His family, His livestock, His house burned down, and His body covered with boils. He was tested, if we're honest, beyond the breaking point. But what did Job say. 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, naked I shall return. The Lord gives, the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord!' Following him in uncertain times, even times of persecution, is a sign of great faith!

I want to tell you a story about a woman named Julie. Her amazing faith. Julie grew up in Pakistan. She was a Christian, and faced persecution. One day she was harassed, a man demanded she convert to Islam. When she refused, he returned a bit later and threw acid on her face. He and another man also poured acid down her throat, blinding her in one eye, and burning 90% of her esophagus just because of her faith. She went through 34 surgeries. Her attending physician even tried converting her to Islam. When she refused, he tried to poison her. She survived that. Going to church was an anxious endeavor, never knowing if something would happen on the way.

With some help, she moved to America, she is now a speaker in the Houston area. Julie is a living testimony of God's love and courageous faithfulness.

Most of us in America cannot even fathom that. Most people think just going to church or putting a few bucks in the offering plate is a sacrifice. We live comfortably. We rationalize our sinful actions, knowing that God will forgive us.

But today, I challenge you to deepen your faith in the Lord. Deepen your love for God. Care for His creation. Be generous. Receive His gifts in His house. Get on your knees tonight and pray. Inwardly digest the word of God, put His word in your memory.

Thank the Lord. in all circumstances. Proverbs 28:20 – “A faithful man will abound in blessings, but whoever hastens to get rich will not go unpunished.” May God strengthen you this week to boldly live out your faith, your love for God and for your neighbor. Amen

**Sermon #4. Love your neighbor as yourself**  
**Text: Matthew 25:31–46**

This morning is the final part of our sermon series, “What does it mean to be a faithful Christian?” The theme is Jesus' words, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ That quote is sometimes known as the golden rule.

When I was younger, I recall thinking that faith began and ended on Sunday morning. There was church—then there was the rest of life. Or that if you wanted to be a really good Christian, you needed to be like Mother Theresa or someone exceptional. But that just isn't true. To love your neighbor as yourself, that begins in your vocation, your everyday life. We all can be faithful Christians! In everything that we do, it is a sign of our faith and love.

Take pride in our calling as children of God. Cherish this gift of life the opportunities and responsibilities he gives us. In Matthew 25, Jesus tells us how we can love our neighbors as

ourselves. “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.’”

We serve in our everyday actions. Sometimes, our lives may seem kind of hum drum, not so exciting, not always meaningful. But your everyday life is charged with meaning! Martin Luther wrote about this subject. He said that we are like masks of God when we serve and are served. When we donate a winter coat to children in need, Jesus is working through you. When you care for a sick family member, behind the mask of that person is Jesus. He said whatever you did for the least of these you did unto me.

In our daily vocations, God is working through you . . . we are honoring God by loving our neighbor. So what does that look like. The maid who milks her cows is doing the will of God just as much as the monk who prays—not because she may sing a Christian hymn as she works, but because she is doing a useful deed. The Christian shoemaker does His Christian duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship.

When you serve in your vocation, you are loving your neighbor. Milking cows, making shoes, harvesting corn, flipping burgers at a restaurant, these are all examples of various useful vocations. Through our vocations, God uses us.

In this way, we love our neighbor, we live as faithful Christians. Whether at work, in town,



or especially in our families. Especially in the family, sometimes love takes the form of discipline or constructive criticism. A parent disciplines children out of love. A child that is allowed to eat sugary snacks and play games all day, that. The same is true in life, encouragement to sin is not love, and sometimes the truth needs to be spoken, in love of course.

There are more ways we can love our neighbor, of course. We could go above and beyond. Maybe that means visiting the sick in the hospital, or donating a coat or toy to a child in need, or help sandbag when the flood waters swell beyond their banks. There are so many opportunities in life to serve, use the unique gifts God gives you to show our love for our neighbor! This all may seem a bit overwhelming. Of course, you cannot do it all. No one is a perfect parent. No one is a perfect Christian. But we can do our little part.

I want to tell you a story about starfish on the beach. Once upon a time, there was an old man who used to go to the ocean to do His writing. He had a habit of walking on the beach every morning before he began His work. Early one morning, he was walking along the shore after a big storm had passed and found the vast beach littered with starfish as far as the eye could see, stretching in both directions.

Off in the distance, the old man noticed a small boy approaching. As the boy walked, he paused every so often and as he grew closer, the man could see that he was occasionally bending down to pick up an object and throw it into the sea. The boy came closer still and the man called out, "Good morning! May I ask what it is that you are doing?"

The young boy paused, looked up, and replied "Throwing starfish into the ocean. The tide has washed them up onto the beach and they cannot return to the sea by themselves," the youth replied. "When the sun gets high, they will die, unless I throw them back into the water."

The old man replied, “But there must be tens of thousands of starfish on this beach. I am afraid you will not really be able to make much of a difference.”

The boy bent down, picked up yet another starfish and threw it as far as he could into the ocean. Then he turned, smiled and said, “It made a difference to that one!” You cannot possibly cure all the ills and injustices in the world. But you can do your little part, in your little corner of God’s creation.

Love your neighbor as yourself. The golden rule. All human beings should follow it. But what makes Christianity unique is this . . . the golden rule doesn't save us, we do it because we are saved. Ephesians 2:8–10 says, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, so that no one may boast.” Our salvation is a gift of God. But then verse 10, “We are God’s workmanship, created to do good works which God has prepared in advance for us to do.” God is preparing those works for you this week. Maybe it is in your vocation, or a good work caring for kids, or visiting a sick friend. Because we are saved, we can go out in love.

I hope that this sermon series has been beneficial to you. I hope you are encouraged and inspired to go out and love the Lord and love your neighbor as yourself. In this way, we live as faithful Christians following a Lord who is faithful to His promises to bring us forgiveness, life, and salvation. Amen.

## APPENDIX FOUR

### SERMON SERIES FEEDBACK SURVEY

#### SERMON SERIES FEEDBACK - Distributed June 25, 2017

Thanks for listening to the Sermon Series: 'What it means to be a faithful Christian.'

*-Saved by Grace to Live by Faith*

*-History of Faithfulness in America*

*-Love the Lord your God*

*-Love your Neighbor as Yourself*

This is feedback for the purposes of my Doctor of Ministry Major Applied Project

1. Did the sermon series aid in your understanding of faithfulness?

Yes31No0Unsure 0

2. Is there anything that stood out during the sermons or any other comments?

- How important it is to be faithful to God - to hear and act on His word - to love God and man.
- Encouraging to realize that even though we cannot fix everything . . . it is comforting to know that even simple acts of kindness please God and make a difference.
- Well done! Disappointed that so many do not see that going to church every Sunday isn't important.
- Important to attend church.
- Love your special messages.
- Reaffirmed what I know.
- How time has changed society in going to church.

## APPENDIX FIVE

### FAITHFULNESS SEVEN POINT SUMMARY

#### *What does it mean to be a faithful Christian?*

Jesus calls us to be salt and light. When we follow Jesus by faith, we are different from the world, and that's a good thing!

- 1 Be active in your church.** This is where God promises to give you His love, forgiveness and hope through His Word and Sacraments of Baptism, Communion, and Confession. Learn God's Word of truth. Help the church with your time, talents, and treasures. As God serves us through Word and Sacrament, care for your brothers and sisters in Christ.
- 2 Take time to pray and meditate regularly.** In prayer, we talk to God and find quiet time from the busy world. In His life, Jesus often made time to be alone in prayer. We should model Christ's behavior. We can glorify Him, thank Him for our daily bread, present our requests to Him, and pour out our heart to Him. Opportunities for prayer abound: in the morning, at mealtime, with family, before bed, in times of blessing and need.
- 3 Care for your family.** Your family is your primary vocation. In familial relationships, we model love, forgiveness, faithfulness, care, and service. Spouses, be faithful to one another. Parents, train up your children in the Lord. Children, honor your parents.
- 4 Be good stewards.** A steward is a manager of someone else's property. Hence, we are stewards of God's creation, stewards of our bodies, our finances, our talents, etc. How we care for what God has entrusted to us is a sign of our faithfulness.
- 5 Love, do not judge, those who are different from you.** Jesus said, 'Before you remove the speck from your brother's eye, take out the beam from your own eye.' (Matthew 7:5) All people are sinners and fall short of the glory of God. (Rom 3:23) All people are in need of the love and forgiveness which is found by being baptized into Jesus. Christians do not condone sin, but rather are called to 'speak the truth in love.' (Eph. 4:15)
- 6 Live your vocations with 'Jesus-vision.'** In Matthew 25, Jesus said, 'Whatever you did to the least of these, you did unto me.' Monday-Saturday daily living is connected to our Sunday faith via the vocations to which we are called. God has infused our hum-drum, daily life with meaning and purpose. 'Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.' (1 Cor. 15:58)

- 7 **Forgive.** Forgiveness is one of the hallmarks of the Christian faith. Anger, bitterness, and vindictiveness are soul-devouring cancers. As Jesus has forgiven us our sins, we are called to the difficult task of forgiving those who have wronged us. Contrary to the popular saying ‘forgive and forget,’ forgetting is not a requisite for forgiveness. It is not advisable or even possible to forget past atrocities. However, it is a mark of a mature Christian to forgive and move on. Forgiveness is a primary way in which we can imitate the love of Christ in our lives.

*Let love and faithfulness never leave you. Tie them around your neck; carve their initials on your heart. Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways, acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight. - Proverbs 3:3, 5–6*

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