



104th Michigan District Convention 2025

Convention Essayist – Rev. Dr. Joel Biermann

President Davis:

I'd like to invite our essayist, Reverend Dr. Joel Bierman, to come forward. I'm grateful for his willingness to address our convention. He and I have agreed that this was an appointment by the Holy Spirit, and so I'm grateful that he is open to the work of the Spirit, and I'm looking forward to listening in with him. I've made it my practice when I'm interviewing candidates coming out of one of the seminaries, I often ask them, not who's your most favorite, but who's one of the professors that's made a big impact on your life? And I have to say, time and time again, Dr. Bierman's name gets mentioned as being helpful and a big impact on the candidates' lives. I want you to know he's got a Michigan pedigree. He went to college at Concordia College Ann Arbor, was pastor here in the Michigan District. Married one of the pastor's daughters where he was, and off he went to St. Louis with her. And maybe you'll bring her back to Michigan someday. So anyways let's welcome Dr. Biermann. Thank you for coming.

Biermann:

Thank you for the kind introduction. It's a joy to be with all of you today. It was the summer of 1975 when I first set foot on this campus. And I'll save you all doing the math that makes me 64, which according to a much younger Paul McCartney is the quintessential age of an old man. So that means that I'm old enough to know some stuff, but I'm not quite yet old enough to be that cute, irrelevant old guy, but it's getting closer. Some people were with my father not long ago and talked about, oh, he's so cute. And I thought, the day will come, but not yet. So while I still have some relevance left, I just want to, I want to try to make the most of it. So I came to campus in the summer of 75. It was for a Lutheran Youth Explo or whatever it was officially called.

It was an extraordinary event. Friday night we had a keynote speaker. Moving. I'd never been to anything like this in my life. And on that night, I stood up and said that I was going to serve God with my life. I made that promise. He did a little altar call kind of thing. And the next day we went out and we made evangelism visits on the streets of Ann Arbor right down the neighborhood. Blew my mind. I did it as an eighth grader. It was pretty crazy. So that was a huge event. Every summer I kept coming back. Eventually it was a non-issue. I simply enrolled. I left here in 83 with a BA and headed off to the seminary. Came back pretty consistently for about two years until my future bride graduated. Then I was pretty much done. I wandered on campus once in a while for something like one convention. I remember sitting back on those bleachers for about two hours and then I left. I didn't get a vote, it didn't really matter. Then that was it. I didn't come back.

So Ann Arbor was my alma mater. Loved it. Very proud of it. Telling stories about my Ann Arbor days. Then the spring of 2024, we had a theological professors conference. And these things are mandatory. So I had to come. Well, this one's going to be on the campus of Concordia Ann Arbor. I thought, wow, three nights in a dorm, first time on campus in almost 35 years. This is going to be great. I was genuinely excited about it. So I got to campus and it was wonderful. I was in Timmy dorm, which was so dumb. I was a Barnabas Ruth guy. And so Timothy, what is that?

But I managed, and when I saw the buzzer pad in the CA it was just like, bam, the nostalgia hit. It's just overwhelming. And what I wasn't prepared for was, in the midst of the meetings and all the stuff you do at those conferences, was the overwhelming angst I experienced. And I did not expect that. And anybody who knows me a

little bit knows I'm not really prone to much emotional angst. But, man, I got clobbered and I was walking around campus and everything you see just boom, memories like crazy and so much regret and so much remorse and mostly thinking about all the people I treated really lousy. Seriously. You know, I just, man, I was such an idiot back then. What a jerk. And I can't believe I did that. And how I did that. And oh, I did that there. Oh man, it was hard.

But the other side of it was, and I realized this as I reflected more later on it, part of the angst I was experiencing. And it got to the point where I just didn't want to even be alone. I remember walking one evening just finding some table with some guys and just said, "Talk to me, please. I'm needing some help here. I'm just kind of going through this little, little price crisis of angst." And they kind of laughed at me and it was fine and I laughed along. But, um, part of it was I was realizing that I was grieving just becoming an old guy. And I was grieving the fact that that stuff was a long time ago. And a lot of those people I would never see again. And even if I saw them, it would never be the same.

Those days were gone and that Church was gone. And that grieved me because the Church then frankly was a blast. It was a blast. When I came to this campus back in the 70s, in the summers, this was right in the thick of this thing called the charismatic movement. And most of you are far too young to know anything about it. But you know, there's still that dumb question on the set that you can't figure out why it is, but trust me, in the day that mattered. All right? But I came in right in the thick of that and for all the things you could discuss about that and the ups and downs, and I've done all that and worked through it all, it was a profoundly positive thing for me. I did not speak in tongues, just to be clear. All right? Not that that would be a problem.

I'm just letting you know where I came down. Okay? So it was a profoundly positive experience for me. And I witnessed during my four years here, kind of the change that time just sort of went away. And I've reflected often about that. And I really have become quite convinced that there's something to this idea of the Spirit kind of moves where He will and things just happen and then things just kind of don't. And that was very much the case then. And it was with grief then that I was reflecting on this and that last spring in 2024, grief over the loss of that Church. Now nostalgia and reminiscing, man, that's easy. And it's easy to get nostalgic about the past and paint things and unrealistic silly colors that were never true. And so I don't want to indulge in much more of this. I've already taxed your patience, I'm sure way beyond what any of you probably care.

But far more significant I think is the reality that you see. My formation happened during those summers here and during my four years here, I was shaped into the kind of Christian I am today, very much. There are other factors, of course, family things I learned at the Sem, all that stuff. But man, those were formative, profoundly important years. And my vision of the Church has been shaped by it ever since. And every single one of you sitting here, close to a thousand of you, I suppose, if by counting the votes and figuring out how many are sitting around for the fun of it, maybe a little less, 800 of you, you all have your stories. And every single one of you has your idea of the Church. This is what it's supposed to be.

This is what she looks like. This is how she's supposed to operate. This is the ideal. This is the best. And you're ready to fight for it. Because you give a rip—and you should. Because Church matters. I've got my ideas, you've got yours. And we could have some great discussions about what we think the Church is supposed to be. But what I want to do with my time, and I guess I'm told I get an hour or something like that.

Pres. Davis:

"An hour, not something like that."

Biermann:

Okay? An hour. I won't go long. Trust me, David, I never go long. I might cut it short, get your voting done sooner, but I won't go long. So with the time I have, I want to think with you a little bit about what exactly the Church is and what the Church is supposed to be doing.

Less on what it is. We know the Church is the body of Christ, the gathered people of God around God's gifts being delivered. AC 7 and 8, crystal clear. You all know that down pat, but what's the Church supposed to be doing? I think we can have some more discussion about that and a little bit maybe things to reflect on. So to help with this, and those of you who have had me in class, and that's not a small number of you, as I look around—one of the liabilities of teaching for a couple of decades, you've got a lot of former students around, and my apologies to you already if I don't immediately connect a face and a name. But as soon as I do make the connection, I'll remember exactly what kind of student you were. Those things stay with you. I'm kind of not kidding. They kind of do. I don't remember your names, but I remember what kind of guy you were in class and what kind of papers you wrote. Whoosh. Some of you made a bigger impression than others. But anyway, I digress.

So I want to spend some time learning, not just from me and my opinions. My opinions really don't count very much. But the opinions of others maybe give us something to chew on and think about. So I want to spend some time learning and I'm going to give us today three individuals, three teachers I want to present to you to consider for some learning. Two of them are pretty well, one of them is very safe. One of them might be considered marginal. And one of them, I think you will all be shocked that I'm using him.

So a surprise for all of you former students who think you know exactly where I'm going. You don't. All right? So now you have to pay attention just a little bit. But some of this, you've been down this road before. Alright, so let's go here. The first one I want to talk about, the safe one is Herman Sasse. And yeah, pretty safe in our circles. And I've got a little Sasse quote here for you. I've got two of his essays and if you've got my screen ready to go... no? It's not showing. It's not been showing and I was ignoring it. Maybe I didn't get plugged in enough. Oh, let's try again there. There you go. I just had to plug it in more. It was totally user error, which is always the case.

You probably can't read it, but I'll read it for you anyway. This comes from an essay that Sasse wrote in 1936 and he wrote this on apostolic, what does it mean to be apostolic? What does it mean for the Church to have apostolicity? And so this is from his 36 essays on the Church's apostolicity. And it gives us, I think, a really beautiful kind of overview of what the Church should be. So he writes this, I'll try to make it a little bit larger for you just by holding it open here. That the Church today is no other than the Church of yesterday and of the day of Pentecost. That it today has no other doctrine than in the days of Luther and of the formula of Concord. And then no other doctrine than in the days of Bernard of Clairvaux and Thomas Aquinas (there's a couple names for you), that the Church's proclamation in the time of Gregory the Great and the time of Cyprian dare be no other than in the days of the apostles, that there is only one Gospel for all the centuries of history until the last day, just as there is only one Gospel for the people of all nations and all races that the Gospel has given us in the witness of the apostles and nowhere else. And that this witness cannot be supplanted by any other source of revelation. Yes, that the anathema of the true Church would have to strike even an angel from heaven who would proclaim to us another Gospel than that proclaimed by the apostles. Such are the thoughts that are contained in the statement of the Church's apostolicity.

If you're paying attention, that was one sentence. You got to love the Germans. These are the trues of the faith to which we commit ourselves when we confess, with Christians of all confessions, the words of the ancient ecumenical Creed: I believe in the apostolic Church. Wow, that's Sasse at his best. Pretty cool. The Church is the Church of the Apostles. It is one Church, one Gospel message for all people, for all time. That's the end of the story. Pretty compelling. Great stuff. And that's what it means to be apostolic. And this reminds us that we then live today. You hear about we're standing on the shoulders of giants. Well yeah, but it's like giants all the way down. It's not turtles all the way down, it's giants all the way down. And it's all the way back to the Church Fathers, all the way into the Old Testament. We're part of that. And it's a healthy reminder for us sometimes in our little sort of sidebar Lutheran Church body that nobody really pays much attention to. The media forgot to come and cover the election of our new DP. Where are they? We got a press room, but I don't see any cameras anywhere. <laugh> the Pope. Big deal. Come on, the world stops to watch the smoke and this is just dumb. But anyway, nobody cares.

So we are this little, this little sidebar and we all get it. But guys, we are not in isolation. And we are standing on that Church, that Church, that Church of Bernard of Clairvaux, that Church of Aquinas, it's ours. That's who we are. We're not a weird denomination that left the Church 500 years ago to be our own thing. No, don't think that way. We are the faithful Church that has been proclaiming God's truth right down the line. We are the Gospel proclaimers. It's who we are. It's who we are. And that one Gospel has to still be proclaimed because it is the only hope for the world. There's else John 14:6 hasn't changed: "I am the way, the truth and life. No one comes to the father, but by me." Period. Utterly exclusive. That's our message. Hasn't changed, can't back off it. We got to keep doing it.

So that's the Gospel, heart and center of it all. So I haven't really preached Gospel at still law. So if someone said, give us some Gospel right before I came up and I said, that won't happen <laugh> if it happens it is by accident, my mistake. So we have a responsibility to proclaim that truth because that's what God has given us to do. Alright, so that's Sasse from 1936. A reminder for us to be faithfully apostolic. This is an awesome message from Herman Sasse. Fifteen years later he wrote another essay and this one is called Confessionalism in Missouri. And those of you who have had Church and World in the last few years, you've read this one. Anybody remember this one? Alright, a couple few hands went up, Confessionalism in Missouri, this is an outstanding essay he wrote, Sasse wrote it, you're reading now.

Sasse wrote it after he had spent some time visiting in the US, hung out in Missouri, hung out with some Missouri Synod people, and he wrote this essay—a hugely complimentary, glowing picture of the LCMS as this mission group doing the work of the Church. And Sasse paints this picture. Like most of my students think, whoa, where's that Church? My response is kind of, yeah, things change, don't they? And so it's a remarkable picture he paints, but then he has some critique and some criticism, which I'm not going to get into today. That would be like a three-hour discussion all on his own, because he starts asking questions about the role of Scripture and confession and why we're spending more time on paying attention to Scripture and where's our confessional and all kinds of interesting stuff. But we won't do that today.

Today I want you to think about one of the comments he makes in passing and it's such an important comment, but he just kind of makes it along the way, almost a throwaway, but it's so significant. So he writes this (this is on page 207 if you want to check it out yourself sometime). He talks about the great rediscovery of the confession of the Church. And I'm just reading here now, which was the most joyous experience of the German Lutherans in the years between the two world wars was not shared by our American brethren in the faith. So he's saying that in the Missouri Synod, we didn't experience the same court of confessional revival that was going on in the continent between the world wars. For this reason, even whereas in the case in Missouri, the unshakeable authority of the confession—he knows that we're confessional people; we toe the line—he said the unshakable authority of the confession is held in complete earnest, there is nevertheless lacking, lacking in the affirmation of the... (and now you're all bated breath. What's lacking? What are we missing? We've got a confession, right? What are we missing? Let's turn the page and find out)... of the great joy which should accompany genuine confessional loyalty. To confess, [Greek word], *confiteri*, always includes praise to God. Therefore Luther rightly counted "*Te Deum laudamus, Te Dominum confitemur...*" among the Confessions. Joy, my friends, joy. This is such an awesome insight of Sasse. When you are confessional, you are joyful. You are joyful. There is a joy that runs through a right confession. And that's kind of what I think I was living through in my idealistic, heady, naive 70's days. But there was a joy that just ran through stuff. And I'm going to bet that the time is when you can identify when the Church was being the Church, the best and the most real for you and the most significant for you, there was an unbridled joy that accompanied it. There was just a thrill to be part of God's people. A thrill to know God's truth, A joy to confess rightly.

When there's joy lacking, there's a problem. It's a problem. Now this is a hard thing because you see in the Missouri Synod we like things to be empirical. We like to be able to pin things down and point to hard facts, and joy, that's a feeling and that's scary. Because feelings, wow, you know, feelings. And that's that charismatic. Well, there you go, <laugh>. So we get suspicious. But you see, joy is the hallmark of confessional fidelity. And when joy

is lacking, there is a problem. I don't care if you can identify it any more than "something's missing here." These people are crabby. Crabby people are not faithful. I'm serious about this. I know some of you have a disposition that tends towards crabbiness. I will own that one myself. My wife accuses me of being even just a bit of a pessimist, but she's an optimist. And so what are you going to do?

So joy is a hallmark of confessional fidelity every single time. And if you're lacking joy in your life, check your confession, my friend. Check your confession: Is Jesus Lord? And I'm willing to bet He's probably not. Because you probably put something else there. When Jesus is Lord, joy comes. When a confession is right, the confession is always "Jesus is Lord" and everything else that grows out of that. And when that's the central confession, what's there to be sour about? When Jesus is Lord, what's there to complain about? When Jesus is Lord, what's there to be afraid of, people? Come on. Jesus is Lord, where's your joy? So a hallmark. This is Sasse, not Biermann. Sasse. Go fight with Herman.

All right, so he continues though: "Are we mistaken if we miss this joy with our brethren in the Missouri Synod when they speak of the Confession? Are we mistaken in believing that their understanding of the doctrine is wholly orthodox but only in the sense of correct doctrine, while real orthodoxy includes a joyous praise to God? In the case of the old Missouri of Walter is still plainly noticeable that here even as in the classical time of Orthodoxy dogma and liturgy belong together—how greatly St. Louis formerly influenced liturgy in America! If it were still so today would not then Orthodox Lutheranism in particular have something of importance to say to the liturgical movement in America? Christian America, more than many Lutherans sense, waits today for a word from Lutheranism. Members of the Protestant churches in the United States sense the fact that the surrender of the confession of the fathers which has taken place in all these churches during the past century, constitutes an irreparable loss of something that is essential for Church and for Christianity. The so-called new orthodoxy (*neo orthodoxy*) of Reinhold Niebuhr and of the American adherents of Barth is only a weak substitute for what has been lost. But Lutheranism keeps silence. It appears about to follow the Reformed churches on the way to unconfessionalism and with this step to lose its mission to all of Christendom, even as European Lutheranism missed every opportunity, every great opportunity during its history."

So then he wafts off into some concerns about what are we doing for the sake of the wider Church? And see what I, the reason I read that longer outtake is because Sasse never lost sight of the fact that Lutheranism is some sort of sacred splinter off by itself. There is never ever in Sasse of this idea that somehow we take our liturgical, doctrinal, confessional ball and go home. We engage. We engage the wider Church because we're part of that Church. So remember that. So in our zeal to be faithful and careful, we have to be careful not to become cut off. All right, one last thing from Sasse and then we'll leave Sasse behind here. And this is a little further on in the same essay. And he makes a rather interesting observation on page 219 here where he writes:

"One thing the Church also today has, which preserves her—only one thing, only one person—him who has reserved for himself the task of being the Savior of his body. One of the most comforting truths which the New Testament teaches us with respect to the Church is this, that the prayer for the preservation of the Church is not our prayer alone. The greatest of all prayers which are preserved for us in the holy scripture, perhaps the greatest prayer which ever was spoken on earth, is the prayer of the eternal High Priest for his church on earth in John 17. We know from Scripture that it is not on earth only that prayers are spoken. There's praying also in heaven. The mystery of prayer reaches into the Holy Trinity itself as the prayer of Jesus shows.

This is our comfort, dear brethren, wherever we may be performing our office in the church in this difficult and sorrowful time" [He's writing this in 51, okay? A sorrowful time after the war is over], "as it was the comfort of our fathers during the 'evening of the world,' as they regarded their time. This comfort gives us the strength to work while it is day. The most necessary task we have to perform in the English-speaking world is this, that we learn again to read Luther and the Confessions as men began to learn to do in Europe after the First World War. Here lies your greatest theological task, brethren, in the Missouri Synod."

We've done better with that. I'm not sure we've done better with the joy part. And I'm not sure if we've always done well with the Jesus as our hope and our comfort. And that's kind of the point he's making here. Back to the beginning of that quote where he writes this one thing the Church has, which preserves her only one thing. And that is Christ himself.

The Church's preservation is Jesus' business. And I say this with a little care because I know we have a responsibility to be faithful in our generation. But I think there is way too much tendency in our circles to think that everything in the future depends on us. We've got to preserve, we've got to protect, we've got to hang on, we've got to look out for the wolves. We got to look out for any laxity and we are on continual vigilance as if the entire future of the Church hangs on us. That's wrong. It's just wrong. Christ is our preserver. Christ is the one who will care for us. He has made the promise, guys, nothing will defeat the Church. Let's bank on that. All right, I'm done with Sasse. Now I want to go for a little sidebar here because what Sasse is telling us is that we need to be, he would argue, we need to be confessional and we need to be faithful.

So what does it mean for us to be confessional? That's what I want to think about a little bit here. This word gets a lot of press. People have a lot of ideas. Some people don't like the word because they think it's been taken over. I still like the word because it simply means that I say back to God what He has said to me learned that from Nagel a long time ago. I don't think I'll let go of that one. So when we confess, we're just saying back what has been said to us. God gives us His truth. I say it back to Him. But I would submit that there are four ways that we are working to be confessional in the contemporary world. Or we might say here with confessional also goes with this is to be doctrinally faithful. And as I made the argument, that also means joyful. But more on that in a second.

But I think I see kind of different techniques or ways of operating that I see present among people who are trying to figure out how to be confessional. So the first one I want to suggest to you, the first way of being confessional or being doctrinal is what I will call the route of polite dinner manners. Dinner manners. So this is the Thanksgiving gathering. The whole family is there, and everybody dreads it because Aunt Sally's going to be there and she's some kind of left-wing nut. And you've got Bobby and his girlfriend and they're vegan and they're weird. And so they're all going to be gathered around the Thanksgiving table, and everybody is holding their breath, holding their breath. You know, when's the ethical discussion coming up? When's the political discussion coming up? Don't say the word Trump. Don't do it. And so everybody is on pins and needles holding their breath. And so what do you do? Well, you just back off and you get this stern warning from the moderator in the family, whether it's the wife or the husband, usually it's the wife who says, keep your mouth shut about this. And so you get the rule laid down. And so the polite dinner manners kick in.

So what does this mean for the Church? This means we've got our doctrine. We're sure about it. Best doctrine in the world. Best confession in the world. I hear this all the time when I'm out in the Church. "Uh, professor man, we love our doctrine here. Now our practice, we do some things a little on the side, but don't worry about that. It's okay. We love our doctrine." That's garbage, guys. Because your practice is your doctrine. And so you can't do sloppy stuff and still have good doctrine, it doesn't work. But the polite dinner manners has this idea that somehow we can just kind of pack that away, tuck it away out of sight, because we don't want to cause any embarrassment. We don't want to cause a harangue. So we'll just kind of shut up about it and back off. That's polite dinner manners. That's not being confessionally faithful, that's sloppy. It's not giving a witness. So that's the first one. I see a fair amount of that in the Church. Some people are more predisposed than others, but I see it.

The second one, and this one is exceedingly common in our circles, is what I will call in the contemporary parlance "shelter in place." In the old days I called it "circle the wagons," but nobody watches cowboys and Indian movies anymore. Yeah, some of you still know what I'm talking about. So circle the wagons, shelter in place. Look out, there are enemies. Look out, there are dangers. Look out, someone's going to get you. So what we've got to do is hunker down, bar the circle the wagons. Stay safe. Don't let anybody in. Be careful, be careful, be careful, be careful. And so we don't engage, and we're terrified and we operate into fear. And so shelter in place, very common. See it all over the place. And you see this attitude of "we don't want to lose what we've got. We don't

want to risk something.” And so we’ll just shelter in place. We’ll circle the wagons, and you know what I’m talking about.

Third approach is not widely practiced, but when it is, boy, you cannot miss it because it makes a lot of noise. And that’s when we take confession and we take doctrine and we weaponize it and we turn it into a beautiful weapon to attack other people who aren’t doing it right, who aren’t doing it enough, who aren’t doing it faithfully. Don’t do it the way I would do it. And so we can turn our doctrinal prowess and our confessional commitments into a club to clobber others who don’t quite measure up. And this is not the way of confessional integrity, guys. Yeah, sometimes people deserve a good whacking, I won’t argue with you, but it’s whose job is it to do this? And it’s rarely yours. So we need to be much more careful. I think about how we operate with this idea of the club mentality or weaponizing doctrine. Doctrine is not meant to be a tool to kill and clobber and bring down to size. It’s meant to be God’s truth that is celebrated with joy.

So there’s a fourth way and yeah, I saved the fourth one for this is the last one. So probably it is the right one. And indeed it is. And this is the one I would like to call simply to listen and speak and then learn and teach. And so you have here an attitude of receptivity, an attitude of openness, an attitude of willingness to learn, to gain, to take the time to listen and pay attention. Can you still be confessionally strong and have great integrity confessionally? Absolutely. You have to be a jerk. Ah, no, absolutely not. And to be a jerk is always a problem here. Alright, so this really kind of translates into that we need to function with a good huge, healthy dose of humility again and again and again and again. You don’t have it all figured out. Your vision of the Church doesn’t necessarily have to be the only one. And maybe it’s not even the right one. Humility, listen and learn and then speak and then teach. And you teach God’s truth, and you do it in a winsome way and with confidence and without fear.

All right, this has all been the easy stuff, the stuff you’re all used to and familiar with. And that was Sasse and he’s pretty safe. So let’s go to another Lutheran who’s just a little less safe. And we’ll take a look at Bonhoeffer. Um, students know that I have become an enormous fan of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s theology. Not just his example, not just his stance against Hitler. Yay. He’s a great martyr. No, I like his theology for his theology’s sake. And I encourage you to take a look at Bonhoeffer and read him carefully and learn from him. He has insights for us today, which are remarkable. One of my favorite essays of Bonhoeffer’s is in the middle of his book called *Ethics*. *Ethics* was written by Bonhoeffer one chapter or essay at a time and then smuggled out of the prison in Tegel where he was being held by the Gestapo. And so he never had the chance to organize it into a complete text or to edit it in any way. So we just have these essays which we’re not quite sure where they, how, what order, or even what actually even belongs in his *Ethics*. But this one unquestionably does. It’s one of his best. It’s an outstanding essay and it’s called *Christ, Reality, and Good*. So *Christ, Reality, and Good* [is the] name of the essay. If you can find it, it’s worth reading. So in the middle of that essay, he makes this argument. He’s talking about thinking in terms of two spheres. And he’s very concerned because he’s been watching the Deutsch Christian, that’s the German Christians. And if you don’t remember your 20th century German history, the Deutsche Christian, where the faithful Christians who are following Luther, who decided they could also follow Adolf Hitler and follow Luther and let’s go. He’s our guy, duly elected, democratically elected. He’s the leader God has given us. Off we go. That’s the Dets Christian. Bonhoeffer didn’t agree and he wasn’t the only one. Sasse didn’t agree, Martin Niemuller didn’t agree, and the list can go on. So Bonhoeffer wrote this essay from prison about the danger of two spheres and making this neat bifurcation. Got my God stuff, got my world stuff cool. Just go obey Hitler and keep on loving Jesus. It’s all good. Don’t worry about it. That’s two kingdoms, about as messed up as you can get it. And I care a lot about getting the two kingdoms, the two realms, right, but that’s not today’s topic either. But that matters a great deal. Now Bonhoeffer is talking about that danger and he starts talking about it in the sphere or the realm, the arena of the Church. And he writes this:

“It is essential to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ that it occupies space within the world. [So there needs to be a place for the Church and the world. And we know that.] But, of course, it would be entirely wrong to interpret this space in a purely empirical sense. [It’s not just a building or a literal gathering of people necessarily.] If God in Jesus Christ claims space in the world, even though it’d be only a stable ‘because there was no room in

the inn' (Luke 2:7), then in this narrow space He comprises together the whole reality of the world at once and reveals the ultimate basis of this reality."

So how much space does Jesus need in the world? The space of an infant in a manger. That's how much space he needs. Bonhoeffer is going to exploit this image.

"And so, too, the Church of Jesus Christ is the place, in other words, the space in the world, at which the reign of Jesus Christ over the whole world is evidenced and proclaimed. [So now he's making the connection as Jesus goes, so goes His Church because the Church is His body. How much space does the Church need in the world? How much space do we need in the world? How much space did Jesus need? How much do we need? All right, let's go on further here. Bonhoeffer' got some things to tell us.]

"This space of the Church, then, is not something which exists on its own account. It is from the outset something which reaches out far beyond itself, for indeed it is not the space of some kind of cultural association such as it would have to fight for its own survival in the world, but it is the place where testimony is given to the foundation of all reality in Jesus Christ."

The place where testimony is given to the foundation of all reality in Jesus Christ, even the world! We can never have a dismissive attitude toward the world around us. Be careful. I know John and Paul will both warn us about the world as a fallen place where Satan runs wild. But who made that world out there and who came to redeem that world out there? And who's going to remake that world out there? It is Christ's world, guys. We can never be at odds with the world. We exist for the world. Christ came for the world. So Bonhoeffer stresses this all through the essay.

He goes on, "The Church is the place where testimony and serious thought are given to God's reconciliation of the world with Himself in Christ, to His having so loved the world that he gave His son for its sake. The space of the Church is not there in order to try to deprive the world of a piece of its territory, but precisely in order to prove to the world that is still the world [in other words, God's creation, the object of God's activity] the world which is loved by God and reconciled with Him."

Alright, here's the kicker of this whole thing. Now it gets good: "The Church has neither the wish nor the obligation to extend her space to cover the space of the world. She asks for no more space than she needs for the purpose of serving the world by bearing witness to Jesus Christ and to the reconciliation of the world with God through Him. The only way in which the Church can defend its own territory is by fighting not for it, but for the salvation of the world. Otherwise, the Church becomes a 'religious society' which fights in its own interest and thereby ceases at once to be the Church of God and of the world."

Now he goes on and the rest of it is outstanding as well. But that's enough right there. Think about what he just said. The Church is not fighting with the world for space. And when the Church goes out and demands her rights, we have stopped being the Church because we just look like the rest of the world now. We're not looking like Christ's people anymore. We're no longer pointing to the reality of Christ. We're no longer witnessing his truth. We just look like every other pathetic lobbying group, running wild, demanding their fair share of the pie, demanding their rights. This is Bonhoeffer's insight. It's astounding. And the implications of it are dramatic. If we would actually take this seriously, it's crazy stuff. And I love it.

About 28 hours ago, a little less, just down the road in Wayne, Michigan, crazy guy armed to the teeth, decided he was going to go kill a bunch of people in a church. And before he could even get in, while he was unloading his trunk, people saw him and some guy ran him down with a truck and got shot at, survived. And then the security guards, the security staff of the Church at Cross Point Church in Wayne came out and took him out, killed him, shot him dead. They defended their space. Everybody's safe.

At almost exactly the same time, almost exactly the same time, halfway around the world, gathered in a Church in Damascus, Syria, a church fittingly named the Church of the Prophet Elias, which of course is Elijah the patron saint of this convention. <laugh> On that Sunday night in Damascus and the Church of the prophet Elias,

worshippers had gathered at this Greek Orthodox Church to sing the mass, to go through the liturgy, the divine liturgy. And a crazy came in and shot them and blew himself up and killed 22 people and injured 60 some others. How much space does the Church need? Just enough space to make 22 more martyrs.

So I ask you, which Church at that exact same moment provided a profound witness to the Church of the people of Christ who gathered to receive what God gives and who look different than the world? We need to be careful who's setting our agenda. We need to be careful how we prioritize. Well, if we make life the most important thing, we have already missed the boat, guys. I tell my students and they're always shocked, but I'll tell you today, life is not the most important thing. Faithfulness to Christ absolutely is. There are things far worse than death. And unfaithfulness tops the list.

So just remember what it means to follow Christ. What did it mean for Bonhoeffer to follow Christ? How much space did he need? How much space did he demand? How much space do we need? How much space do we demand? What are we here to do? All right, while you chew on that, I have one more guy for you today. He's different and I've never used him before and so that's why he's really different. The guy I want to talk about today is, um, one I just started reading a little bit and it, he's a little scary, frankly. That's David Bentley Hart. And if you're not familiar with him, he's kind of a, well, his orthodoxy is questionable. Well, no, it's not. He's pretty much over the top. He's one of these guys who denies the vicarious atonement and he is pretty much a full-blown universalist. No, he's not pretty much. He is a full-blown universalist. So Hart has got some problems, but Hart wrote a book that was published in 2022 called *Tradition and Apocalypse*.

So *Tradition and Apocalypse*, which was a profound book because he's arguing in this book that to be faithful to our tradition is not just a matter of hanging on to what we've got. It's not just a matter of preserving something or keeping it or holding onto it, but it's really receiving what we've been given as part of a living tradition. And so Hart has got me thinking a lot about these things and I'm not even close to endorsing everything. Hart does not even close. He's got all kinds of problems. But on this score, he has got me thinking: What is it actually that we have received? And if we think about what we have received from the people who have gone before us as some sort of a sacred heritage that we have to preserve at all cost and not let anything happen to it, we're already kind of missing the boat, guys. Because our living tradition keeps on moving somewhere. It's going forward. See, we are inherently an eschatological people. That's what Isaiah's getting at here in Chapter 65: "Behold I create new heavens and a new earth. And the former things will not be remembered or come to mind." New heavens, new earth. This is, we're going forward, people, into a future. We cannot be always hanging on to an old past. Repristinationism is always wrong. It is a sin because you're looking back and trying to recreate something that is gone. We're not living back there. We're living now. And even today is gone, gone, gone, gone. There's always another. Here we go. And where are we going? To the promise that Christ has given; a reality that will be fulfilled. Jaroslav Pelikan said it famously that traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. So tradition is an awesome gift, and I love it. And I love my Confessions. I love my heritage, I love all that I have received through God's Church. And I love preserving all of those gifts. Love the liturgy. Love worshiping God. When we had our Explos here, the highlight of the whole thing was our Sunday morning worship and it was straight out of the hymnal, full blast liturgy. I'd never experienced anything like it. It was so cool. People hugging each other after they took Communion. Well, that sounds kind of touchy-feely. Yeah, it was kind of this weird blend of everything going on. And it was awesome. What a gift. So I love all this, but we have to be so careful, guys, that we don't venerate it and we don't create it into a new God, a new Lord.

We are pressing forward. We're pressing forward to where God calls us to be. So what does this mean? Well, it means just a couple things here. The Church will always be weird and out of step with the culture. We don't look like anyone else, and we shouldn't. We are not one more special interest group. We're not the Lions Club, we're not the YMCA, we're not like anything else. And when we start lobbying the world, like we're just like everybody else, we denigrate the Church and we treat her like she's just like everything else. Let's not do that anymore. Let's treat the Church like the Church so that we're out of step of the culture.

It is not part of our witness to the world to make it easy for people to connect to the Church. And there's the mistake on the other side. Don't start lopping off parts to make it a little more accessible. We do not lower the bar so that the threshold is not so high. You die to yourself when you come to Christ. That's always asked a lot. And you know this, those of you who have done evangelism, you have the person who shows up in your Church think, oh, this is going to be a big ask. Yes, it is. It's always the same. Die. Die to yourself. We see what Christ gives. Don't ever cut it back. Guys. Don't ever cut slack. Don't ever rewrite the rules. Don't ever cut back on the Confession. Die to Christ receive what Christ gives. We do not cater to people's tastes. When we start shaping worship and we start shaping the Church according to majority vote or what people like, we're already in bad shape because we don't cater to their taste. Instead, we shape people into God's people. And at the same time, we do not obsess over the wrong things. And we don't equate the Church with a style of worship, with preferred garb, or with some ethnic heritage we think superior. That's wrong. So we've got to watch two errors on either side. One is the sloppy agape as it's been said, where we just love everybody and try to make it easy and cut back on the confession. The other is to circle the wagons, hunker down, weaponize doctrine, and fight off any possible threat so we can preserve what we've got. And we forget that we don't have to preserve what we've got. That's the job of Christ.

So what are we supposed to be doing as the Church? I want to wrap some things up here now because I'm getting close to time and most of you're looking like you heard way too much already. So let's pull this together. What then should be the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's identity? What should be our brand? And brand and identity are basically the same thing. Identity we stick on individuals and brand we put on corporate entities. So what is brand LCMS? Well, the whole notion of identity or brand is really kind of silly. Kind of a little goofy because the very idea of somehow preserving my identity is thoroughly modern. It's a modernist way of operating as if it's your job to create who you are, as if it's your job to decide who you want to be and then to cultivate that and keep it going.

That's not how it works. We just receive. We just receive what comes. And what comes is a hand that baptizes you and no one asked you. It just happened. For most of you, I know most of you infant baptized, I doubt that anybody checked first: "You sure you want to get baptized? It's going to be a pain. You know what you're getting into." And I sometimes think about this when we're baptizing babies, and I think about it even more when we confirm eighth graders. What are we doing to these kids? We're making them promise to suffer all even death rather than forsake their Lord. Wow. Yikes. Really? You want to do that to your kids? Wow, man. You see, I'm throwing them to the martyrs. That's what I'm doing. You will be a martyr rather than forsake your faith. Go for it, dude. Wow. You receive that. See, you don't decide. That's the thing. I think I want that. It happens to you. God just comes and He claims you. He says you're mine, you're His. And he says here, gifts. Take them, receive them. Delight in what I deliver to you and you receive and you know who you are: God's child, forgiven, redeemed, heading for eternity in a new heavens and new earth. That's who I am, man. It's all good. It's in the bag. I know who I am. I don't have to worry about it.

And then the Church, we don't have to worry about it either. We don't have to try to preserve brand identity or preserve our flying cross logo and make sure nobody else co-ops it. I always chuckle when I drive through Bethalto, Ill. because there's a huge church that used, well, not huge, but it's got a enormous, huge blue flying cross. I'm talking about the three, you know, the LCMS flying cross, you know what I mean? Right? You all know Logo Missouri? Of course. Yeah. The curve thing.

So it's this huge flying cross plastered on the end of an A-frame building, which has been sold to some non-denom Church <laugh> and it's still there. And they love that logo. It's awesome. I think it's great. Somebody is stealing our branding. Don't tell corporate LCMS. They'll slap 'em up with a lawsuit because that's how we deal with stuff. <laugh>. That wouldn't be the world though, would it? Alright, read that however you want. <laugh> Modernity is obsessed with identity. Modernity is obsessed with brand. We do not need to obsess over such things. We don't need to obsess over preserving and protecting and hanging on. We're heading for a future of a restoration of all creation. And it will happen.

Institutions come and go and I shed some tears, literally, walking around this campus a year or so ago, not so much because Ann Arbor was going to disappear. It's a drag, I get it. But institutions come and go. Synods come and go. Will the LCMS last until Christ returns? I have no idea. Do I care? A little. Really? Just a little. Because will the Church endure, endure? Absolutely. Will confessionalism endure—a confession that confesses Christ rightly? I know it will. Where it happens. I'm not too concerned about it. It'll happen and I'm going to make sure it happens because I'll keep doing it. And my kids will and my grandkids and anybody I can convince to believe God's truth with me in my classrooms, in my congregation. And that's your call, guys. We need to worry less about trying to be in control of everything. Christians need to learn to relinquish control.

We need to quit trying to run God's world. We need to quit trying to run God's Church. Let Christ run His Church. So our agenda should not be trying to advance an identity or advance a brand. Our agenda that should consume us, that should obsess us is to be witnesses for the reality of Christ. Like those Syrians gathered in Damascus we're witnesses, whether they knew it or not, hadn't planned to be martyrs that night, but now they are. We are witnesses for Christ. When I started thinking about this essay, I realized I have no idea how to do an essay at a convention. I've only been, this is my fourth convention in my life. I'm talking Synod, District, fourth convention. Seriously. I never go. because I never vote. I was an assistant pastor then I was a congregation serving a congregation that wasn't a rostered congregation. It's another whole story. Some of you know it. And then I was at the seminary. Well, I spent some time on CRM working for a degree. And then I'm at the seminary. And seminary profs don't matter. We all know that they never get to vote on anything. So that's been my life. And so I've got better things to do than come to a convention and so do you. But here you are. <laugh>

They see conventions matter because elections matter. Because elections put people in power and people in power write call lists and take names off of call lists and put congregations in and out of the Synod. And people in power take names on and off of pre-approval lists. And those things matter a lot. And they shape individual lives, they shape congregations, they shape whole synods, and they shape our witness. These things matter. So we take this stuff kind of seriously and we do our work. But what matters far more is when you head out of here. So back when I was getting ready to start with this, I'd wrap things up when I was thinking about this essay, convention essay. I thought, what do I want to send you guys home with? Because when I used to come to events, I always thought, I hope I go home with something. And when I went home with nothing, I felt like what a drag that was. And so I want to give you something.

So here's what I want to give you. When you go home, back to your place, go with joy. Know who you are, who God says you are. Know where you're going. Don't live with an eye always looking at the past. Get both eyes squarely forward. Stand on what you've been given, but think about where you're going and think about who you're going to bring with you. Witness Christ, my friends, witness Christ. That's what you are to do. Not your job to preserve and protect. That's God's job. Your job is to witness the reality of Christ to the world around you. Don't ever get tired of it. Don't ever let the joy come out of that.

And you witnessed by the way you love your wife, the way you play with your kids, the way you interact with your grandkids, the way that you love your parishioners, the way you pray for them, the way you visit them, the way you talk to the guy at the hardware store about life. And then kick in a little spiritual reality to remind them some things matter more than your lag bolts you're buying. You witness the reality of Christ and you do it with confidence, not fearful. Fear destroys the Church. Repristinationism, dead traditionalism is driven by fear, but it's also driven by pride and piety. Like it all matters what I do. When the future hangs on you, you've got it messed up. The future hangs on Christ. So you go and you witness. The Church's task, your task, is to witness God's reality to God's world. Period. That's what we're here to do. That's it. Witness God's reality to God's world. We're not here to preserve the Church. We're not here to protect her or her people or her heritage. God takes care of us. We need to take care of our witness. And so we are witnesses. Go home and stand up for Christ. Go home and speak for Christ. I learned those things at an Explo about 45 years ago. No, more like 55. Go home and be Christ's witness. Go home and be what God has called you to be: His voice, His presence in His world. Thank you for your attention.