

Orthodox Repentance

by [Pr. Brett Jenkins](#), NALC pastor from Pennsylvania and former board member of Lutheran CORE



If your church is following the three year lectionary, Lent begins on Ash Wednesday with 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10. Officially, the pericope begins, “We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Cor 5:20b–5:21, ESV) In light of the fact that he is addressing established Christians, what Paul is obviously driving at here is the ongoing need for even the most committed Christians to realign their lives with the will of God. “Be reconciled” implies that these already-converted Christian believers are not in a conciliar state with God; in fact, Paul is addressing them for a third time precisely *because* while claiming Christian identity, they are behaving in ways inimical to God.

At a recent gathering of primarily conservative clergy, I got some hostility but engendered much more fantastic conversation when I brought up the danger of Christianity being coopted by conservative politics. In the end, everyone agreed that Christians need to be on God’s agenda first, offering critique as well as necessarily-conditional support to any ideology, political party or strategy. This is what it means to be “the light of the world” and the “salt of the earth.”

A wise mentor once told me that people’s politics are always influencing their theology, but that the great conversation that is the

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Approaching the Throne of Grace With Boldness

by [Pr. Dennis D. Nelson](#), Lutheran CORE Executive Director



Every year Lent is a time when we give thanks to God for His great love and amazing grace. How much we need that love and grace. Every year on the First Sunday in Lent the Gospel reading is the account in one of the synoptics of the temptation of Jesus. This year the reading is from Luke 4. The Gospel writers tell us that Jesus resisted the tempter and how He did so. The author of the letter to the Hebrews expresses so beautifully and powerfully what that can mean to us. “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4: 15).

We have a God who can empathize with us. But more than that, we have a God who paid the penalty for and broke the power of sin and who won the victory over death and the devil. Therefore, we can “approach the throne of grace with boldness” for it is there that we will “receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4: 16) Do you see the throne of God as a throne of grace? Do you know that you can approach it with boldness? Have you found at the throne of God mercy and grace to help in time of need?

What I would like to do is to go through Luke’s account of the temptation as found in Luke 4: 1-13. As we do so, we will see what makes God’s throne a throne of grace and why it is possible for us to approach that throne with boldness.

Luke 4: 1-2 tell us that after His baptism “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.” Matthew

and Mark say it a little bit differently. According to Matthew 4: 1, “Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” Mark 1: 12 says, “The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.” When have you felt that the Spirit led you while you were in the wilderness? When have you felt that the Spirit actually led you into the wilderness? When have you even felt that the Spirit drove you into the wilderness?

Luke 4: 2 continues, “He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.” Note: The devil attacked Jesus at a point of weakness – at a time of great vulnerability. Remember: The devil also knows your points of weakness – your times of greatest vulnerability. And that is exactly where the devil will attack you.

We find the **First Temptation** in Luke 4: 3. “The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.’” Just a few verses before, in Luke 3: 22, at His baptism, the Father had said to Him, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

I can see two possible things going on here. First, Satan could be saying, “If you truly are who you think you are, then you should be able to turn these stones into loaves of bread.” But Jesus knew that if He were to do that in order to have the strength to resist the devil, then He would be drawing on a power that would not also be available to us. A second possibility is that here we see the devil attacking Jesus at His sense of self-identity. He wanted to get Jesus to question whether He truly is the Son of God. In the same way the devil will try to get you to question whether you are a child of God. The devil is jealous of your identity as a child of God, so he will attack you there. The devil will attack your self-identity, your self-image, your self-confidence.

We find the **Second Temptation** in Luke 4: 5-7. “Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, ‘To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.’”

The truth is that the devil has no more right to lay claim to all the kingdoms of the world than I would have the right to try to sell you the Brooklyn Bridge. The devil could claim that right only as a usurper – a thief. The devil was also tempting Jesus to choose

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The Implications of Current Religious Trends

by Pr. Don Brandt, [Congregations in Transition](#) and [Congregational Lay-Led Initiative \(CLI\)](#)



To use a somewhat dated expression, it's "hot off the press." I am referring to the latest Pew Research Center "Religious Landscape Study." This is Pew's third large-scale "Religious Landscape Study," involving, in this 2023-2024 survey, 36,908 United States adults. The first of these "Landscape surveys" was 2007, and the second in 2014. As a result, we now have, between these three surveys, a thorough and comprehensive picture of U.S. religious trends over the last 17 years.

To keep this in perspective, Pew has become the preeminent source for this kind of information. Not even the Gallup organization can compete when it comes to findings and data related to religious life in the United States. Gallup surveys contact only 1,000 adults. And unlike Gallup, Pew Research's survey of just under 37,000 respondents focuses entirely on in-depth questions related to religious affiliation, practices and beliefs.

So—now that I have your attention—here is a summary of the results of this latest Religious Landscape Study.

First, the good news. Unlike the 2007 and 2014 surveys, this survey indicated that the rate of *decline* in Americans identifying as Christians is leveling off. The quote, in the introduction of this Pew report is, "After many years of steady decline, the share of Americans who identify as Christians shows signs of leveling off—at least temporarily—at slightly above six-in-ten..."

Now the not-so-good news. This "leveling off" needs to be considered in the context of long-term **decline** when it comes to...

1. The percentage of Americans who self-identify as Christians;

2. The number of Americans who report they attend church worship services at least once a month (now at only 33% of respondents); and...

3. The fact that the generation most likely to identify as Christian and worship regularly is aging (and dying) Boomers; while younger generations are far *less* likely to identify as Christians and far *more* likely to identify as "atheist, agnostic" or as "nothing at all."

And one more finding from Pew: When it comes to overall trends since 2007: "There are far fewer Christians and more 'nones' among men and women; people in every racial and ethnic category, college graduates and those with less education; and residents of all major regions of the country."

Oh, and one more quote regarding these downward trends: "The changes are much more pronounced among ideological liberals than (they are among) conservatives."

For complete results from this survey you only need to go to the Pew website.

I realize there might be few (if any) surprises in these survey results and trends. However, I would like to share some practical strategies for your congregation to consider as it strives to be faithful, effective and relevant in our increasingly secular society. The suggestions below are based on my work—over decades—working in a coaching role with pastors and lay leaders of over 500 Lutheran congregations.

1. Never forget that when it comes to a congregation's number of active members, **size matters**. Implications? Smaller churches cannot do everything well when it comes to their ministry efforts. Accordingly, they should focus on doing one or two of their ministries *really well*. Some examples: Quality worship (including congregational singing), small discussion-oriented groups (most often Bible studies and/or book studies), and local community service efforts your people can volunteer for.

2. A ministry focus on reaching nesting-stage families is incredibly important. But it usually "takes families to attract families". So if you no longer have any families with children worshipping you might want to focus on one or more of the above strategies.

3. In smaller congregations—especially those worshipping fewer than between 50 and 75 at a given service—be sure to more-often-than-not select congregational hymns and songs that are both popular and familiar. Otherwise you will have difficulty

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inner life of the church over time corrects—and when necessary, excises—the errors that people of any given time and place incorporate. Because of the fractured nature of the Church’s communion and witness, amplified by social media, there is a real danger of these much-needed course corrections being significantly delayed or not even engaged in.

The solution to this is to heed Paul’s words to “be reconciled to God,” which is of course, what the season of Lent is all about. The difference between the orthodox Christian construal of these words and the progressive Christian one is that for the orthodox Christian, the Bible provides the *content* of what being reconciled to God looks like—a detailed road map for discerning where one’s life is out of sync with the life of the triune God. Conversely, for the progressive Christian, the Bible provides abstract theological *principles*, but the content comes from elsewhere, sources deemed more relevant because they are more contemporary, scientific, progressive, or whatever.

The outcome of these two approaches is what yields at least some of the divisions observable in contemporary Christianity, where people united by confessional traditions like Lutheran, Methodist, Catholic, etc. have radically different ideas of what makes for faithful Christian living. While both agree for the need to reconcile ourselves to God, one group sees God as telling us what would constitute alignment with God, the other believes that God is “just” or “forgiving” or “love,” but asserts that what those words mean is not what Christians have traditionally thought they mean, based on the witness of Scripture.

What this means in practice is that the progressive Christian lacks any tool whereby to critique their own politically-influenced positions, for they have no data by which to evaluate them. As long as the principles they have gleaned from Scripture seem to be met by the ideologies and morays acceptable within their own narrow cultural conditioning, they are living as God intends and no reconciliation is necessary. Conversely, for the orthodox Christian, while perceiving one’s own biases is always notoriously hard, the Scriptures provide actual canons against which to measure cultural assumptions and political prescriptions... and the exhortation to do so.

Paul goes on, “Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.” It is important that we not consign the

persistent warnings of the New Testament about spiritual disqualification to the dustbin based on our theological *principles*, no matter how venerable or new. We *can* receive the grace of God in vain, and only the lifetime of persistent Christian repentance (realignment) that Luther called for in the first article of the *95 Theses* can stave off that terrifying reality.

So, since we cannot hope to be perfected in theology, holiness, or piety, let us be perfected in repentance, and let the Scriptures dictate to us what that should look like... furthermore, let us start today. “For [God] says, ‘In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.’ Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.” (2 Cor 6:1–2, ESV)

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maintaining your current attendance over the long term.

Finally, there are two primary ministry strategies that are the most meaningful and effective for congregations of *any* size. The first relates to outreach and the second to in-reach and disciple-making.

A. Worship This is not only about preaching and worship music (see above), but also *Sunday-morning hospitality*. The bottomline here is this rule of thumb: The more meaningful your worship life—including congregational singing, preaching and hospitality—the more likely your members will invite friends, *and* the more likely first-time visitors will return for a second visit.



B. The second suggestion is disciple-making and small groups. They go together. The best venue for “making disciples” is small groups. Here’s a challenge for your congregation: Rather than be satisfied with the number of groups already meeting within your congregation, how about “new groups for new people”? For example, how about trying to launch at least one *new* group each year?

If you would like free printed resources related to either worship ministry or small groups, email me at pastordonbrandt@gmail.com Unless I happen to be on a trip I will email these resources to you within a few days of you contacting me.

Pastor Don Brandt

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the easy, less painful way, and to avoid the way of the cross. When has the devil tempted you to choose the easy, less painful way? What was the result? Would the easy, less painful way have worked?

We find the **Third Temptation** in Luke 4: 9-11. “Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,” and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.””

Again, the devil attacks Jesus by trying to get Him to question His identity as the Son of God. Here we see that the devil knows the Bible (in this case, Psalm 91: 11-12), though he will misquote and misuse the Bible. If the devil knows the Bible (and he has had many more centuries than any of us have had to learn the Bible), then we had better get to know the Bible too, so that we will not be led astray.

Luke concludes his account with these words. “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.” (Luke 4: 13) The devil is like the Terminator, who said, “I’ll be back.”

Again, I can see two things going on here. First, the devil had finished every test. The devil has thrown everything he has against Jesus and none of it knocked Him over. Jesus experienced the full onslaught of evil and none of it worked against Him. The devil does not need to throw everything he has against us, for we fall early in the process. Jesus experienced the full severity of temptation in a way that we do not know because the devil does not need to use it all against us.

Second, we can ask the question, When was that “opportune time”? I believe in the Garden of Gethsemane, where again the devil tried to tempt Jesus to go the easier, less painful way and avoid the way of the cross.

In Luke’s account of the agony in the garden after Jesus prayed, “Father if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done,” it says that “an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength.” (Luke 22: 42-43). Mark’s much more succinct account says, “He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan . . . and the angels waited on him.” (Mark 1: 13)

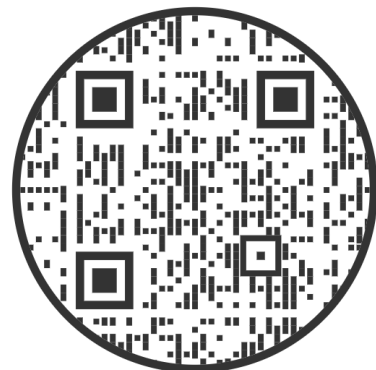
When have you experienced the ministry of angels after a particularly difficult time in your life, including a time of severe temptation? When have

you offered encouraging and strengthening ministry to someone else after a particularly difficult time in that person’s life, including a time of severe temptation?

My prayer for you during this Lenten season is that you will experience the throne of God as a throne of grace, that you will know that you can approach that throne with boldness, and that coming into God’s presence you will receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.



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Video Ministries: Captain Comet and the Intergalactic Patrol

by [Pr. Dennis D. Nelson](#), Lutheran CORE Executive Director



Many thanks to Alan Williams for his video review of his book, “Captain Comet and the Intergalactic Patrol.” A link to Alan’s review can be found [HERE](#). A link to our YouTube channel, which contains fifty-six reviews of books and videos on topics of interest and importance, can be found [HERE](#).

Alan writes, “As a retired Lutheran pastor for 54 years of ministry (NALC and LCMC), I wrote three books that are science fiction, outer space and Christian, in hopes to touch the minds of high school and college aged people to come to know God and our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The spaceship Star Treader, with a crew of fourteen, has a five-year, galaxy-policing mission, which is completed with many challenges along the way and tragically the loss of some lives. The crew hail from five different planets and take their religious faith seriously as they call on God to help them deal with impossible difficulties such as space pirates, intelligent nuclear spiders, AI viruses, fighting trans-dimensional beings, and rescuing energy beings who are friends. They run into political shenanigans that almost cost them their lives. They find friends in unexpected places. Alan writes, “The combination of adventure, faith, and camaraderie . . . is an exciting glimpse into the world of the future.”

Published by Christian Faith Publishing, Alan L. Williams’s new book is a thrilling space odyssey that will captivate readers of all ages. With its

imaginative world building and dynamic characters, it offers a compelling exploration of courage, friendship, and the enduring power of faith. Consumers can purchase this book at traditional brick & mortar bookstores, or online at Amazon.com, Apple iTunes store, or Barnes and Noble.

The author webpage is alanleewilliams.com.

“I wrote ... in hopes to touch the minds of high school and college aged people to come to know God and our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Coming Events

- **Cross Country Mission: Burnsville, NC II**—April 7-12, 2025. For more information, click [here](#).
- **City Mission: Baltimore & Beyond 2025**—May 13-17, 2025. For more information, click [here](#).
- **BYLD: Building Youth As Leaders Who Are Disciples of Christ**—Geneva College, Beaver, PA. July 7-12, 2025. Click [here](#).
- **The NEXUS Institute 2025**—Grand View University, Des Moines, IA. July 24-26, 2025 with mentor training July 21-23.
- **2025 ELCA Churchwide Assembly**—Phoenix, AZ. July 28 - Aug 2, 2025. Click [here](#).
- **NALC Lutheran Week 2025**—Pittsburgh, PA. August 3-8, 2025. Click [here](#).
- **LCMC 25th Annual Gathering & Convention**—Lakeville, MN. October 5-8, 2025. Click [here](#).
- **Nicaea Pro Ecclesia: The Status and Potential of Our Nicene Heritage in Christian Catechesis and Ecumenical Dialogue**—Beeson Divinity School, Samford University, Birmingham, AL. January 12-14, 2026. Click [here](#).

More events: <http://lutherancore.website/events/future/>

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