Robert Jenson and the Dogmatic Location of Culture

by John W. Hoyum

Abstract

This article takes up Robert Jenson's theology of culture. According to Jenson, the church is a heavenly culture of its own alongside various worldly cultures. The church, therefore, presents a rival agenda for human social life conformed to a distinct Christian ethics and polity. Jenson's brand of ecumenical ecclesiology has also been leveraged against the challenge of modern secularity. However, this article contends that Jenson's ecumenical vision overinflates the doctrine of the church by assigning culture to it. Jenson's ecclesiology risks the particularity of the various cultures, languages, and contexts in which the gospel is proclaimed. To redistribute the contents of ecumenical ecclesiology—and its theology of culture—into the doctrine of creation, this article culminates with an examination of Martin Luther's theology and that of the Lutheran Confessions.

One great achievement of Robert W. Jenson's ecclesiology is that his vision of a reestablished Christendom conceives of the church as a comprehensive cultural and institutional reality.[1] This ecumenical vision of a reunified church does not, however, simply recapitulate the order established by Constantine or developed in Byzantium wherein political authority must propagate a unique Christian culture.[2] Rather, the church—according to Jenson—is a culture, polity, and institution of its own that is an alternative to various worldly institutions and cultures. Jenson contends that the gospel narrates the world by the rule of scripture's story. The Bible absorbs and refracts the world according to the narrative of God's action in history on behalf of his people Israel and for the nations in Jesus Christ.[3] Jenson thus offers a brand of ecclesiocentrism: by maintaining a discreet culture, polity, and liturgics, the church is a comprehensive reality which subverts all its rivals because it is inclusive of every dimension of human life, both earthly and heavenly. Jenson's ecclesiology departs from the habits of some midcentury Lutherans

LUTHERAN QUARTERLY Volume 38 (2024): 30–50

who understand proclamation as an event which occupies no space in time, history, or human life. As Jenson sees it, a promise without a story—the Bible's story—narrows the profile of evangelical proclamation, such that theology opens human self-understanding *coram deo*, but leaves the world otherwise untouched.[4] Here, the secular positions and contextualizes theology and the church, restricting theology to the domain of disembodied spirituality. Ecclesiocentric accounts like Jenson's resemble the turn of radical orthodoxy pioneered by John Milbank, who contends that postmodern theology must refuse the secular altogether. No other discourse, discipline, or domain positions theology: it is rather theology itself which contextualizes all human knowledge.[5]

Jenson's doctrine of the church commendably avoids the tendency of some modern Lutheran theology to retreat into the narrow confines of the existentially disembodied. However, is the church really its own culture and polity? This article submits an alternative to Jenson's ecclesiocentrism which nevertheless meets some of the important criticisms he registers against some of his Lutheran predecessors, chiefly Rudolf Bultmann. This alternative likewise rejects the habit of inwardness and the refusal of historical embodiment which characterizes much contemporary Lutheran thought. Beginning instead with a Lutheran doctrine of creation, I contend that Lutheran dogmatics assigns both polity and culture to the world rather than to the church. If Lutheran theology situates culture and politics in the world, then it does not require a withdrawal from earthly arrangements to construct a heavenly polity on earth. To make the argument, what follows begins with the inflated vision of ecumenical ecclesiology wherein the church occupies an outsized position relative to other topics of Christian dogmatics—especially the Creed's first article. Ecclesiocentrism also universalizes and abstracts the church from the particularity of peoples, nations, families, and sinners to whom the gospel is preached. This essay is an exercise in deflation and redistribution: ecumenical ecclesiology must be cut down to size, with much of its contents reassigned to the doctrine of creation. By doing so, I argue for a non-sectarian concept of the church which resists the inwardness that marks ecclesiocentrism.

The Inflated Vision of the Ecumenical Church

Jenson is foremost among contemporary Lutherans who develop the ecumenical turn in the direction of a church that provides an alternative to the world.[6] David S. Yeago has also taken up Jenson's agenda for ecclesiology, particularly in connection to the doctrine of the ministry.[7] The ecumenical movement in the postwar era is only one element responsible for turning to the church as a solution to the problem of modernity and secularity. To respond to this challenge, this brand of ecumenism contends that the church resists modernity by offering a rival agenda for human social life. That rival agenda is the church itself, which in its reunited, institutional form, will bring to bear the resources of the catholic tradition against the challenge of the secular.[8] George A. Lindbeck proposed that "the Christianity which survives into a hypothetical radically de-Christianized future will be sociologically sectarian, sharply distinguished from society at large, and continuing to make the traditional Christian claims regarding the unsurpassable finality of revelation in Jesus Christ."[9] The vision of the ecumenical turn at work in Jenson's mature ecclesiology responds to the challenge of modern secularity by casting the church as an alternative community with its own distinct practices and a discreet epistemology on which to ground its assertion of the truth. Indeed, Jenson proposes a kind of credal "critical theory" as the church's distinct approach to the question of truth, scripture, and tradition.[10]

It is within modern Lutheran theology itself that Jenson identifies a critical flaw to which his ecclesiology ventures a correction. Lutheran theology under the influence of the historical critical study of the New Testament is incapable of challenging the secular paradigm. Theology is, rather, beholden to secular standards of truth and meaning in order to legitimize its own claims about reality. Bultmann's program of demythologizing, for example, seeks the enduring content of New Testament faith apart from the trappings of myth, especially the myth of Christ's bodily resurrection.[11] After all, what plausibility do miracles possess in a world of electricity and modern technology? At least that is how Bultmann understands the problem. Yet the great conundrum for Bultmann's position is that he

cannot account for the present reality of Christ's body—only the word which creates faith. Christ risen into the proclamation has no body and has no necessary connection to the man from Nazareth who preached and died. The proclamation that "he is risen" might well refer to Jesus as much as it could to Stalin—if in fact Christ was not raised.[12] Demythologized faith is no faith at all, but simply nonsense.

Jenson unfolds this line of critique directed at Bultmann in conjunction with his liturgical research in the 1970s. His *Visible Words* (1978) is a theology of the sacraments that takes Bultmann's basic contention—that the risen Christ is available in the proclamation of his death—and adds to it the missing element of embodiment. Thus, Christ is risen into the church and the sacraments, and supremely into the Eucharist.[13] To make the necessary adjustments to space and time for this to work, Jenson recruits Johannes Brenz and his account of Christ's omnipresence according to the human nature. Jenson takes heaven and the right hand of God and puts them on earth—specifically, on the altar where the body and blood of Christ are present and distributed.[14] The Eucharist, not baptism, is the chief sacrament of the church because it most intensely manifests both the presence of Christ and the identity between himself and those he summons to the table.

A revised theology of space is an important ingredient of Jenson's doctrine of the Lord's Supper. This is important because Jenson's eucharistic theology underwrites his other contentions about the nature of culture: indeed, the church is the intrusion of heavenly reality and heavenly culture on earth because the right hand of God is inseparable from the Eucharist. The location of the risen Christ simply *is* the bread and wine consecrated and consumed in the mass. Yeago spells out the implications of this quite well: "The church exists as space in the world within which the God who has unexpectedly identified himself with the suffering man Jesus is honored and attested."[15] The reality of Christ's presence in the bread and wine alters native human conceptions of reality—distance and nearness, visibility and invisibility—because in the Eucharist Christ *is* tangibly present with his body. And to Jenson, a body is simply one's "availability" to others. Unlike Bultmann's spiritually disembodied

Christ, Jenson's eucharistic theology offers a Christ who is bodily present in and as his church.[16] But his defense of Christ's real presence is not where Jenson's ecclesiology acquires its outsized position in Christian dogmatics; rather, it is Jenson's contention that the church is a space of its own alongside that which is worldly. This is the speculative upshot of Jenson's appropriation of Brenz's Christology.[17]

It is critical to observe at this point that Jenson and his associates are quite right to contend that the reality of the gospel is given within time through earthly means. They are also correct to contest any framing of the question of truth which appeals to the tribunal of secular reason to legitimize what the gospel says about the reality of God, the world, and human salvation. Christ was crucified and raised for us and our salvation in Jerusalem while Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea. The promise of the gospel delivered in word and sacrament is not reducible to human psychology or self-understanding before God. Nor is it mere encouragement to seek justice in the world. God delivers his justifying promise in word and sacrament "to the creature, through the creature," as Oswald Bayer has it.[18] The inflated position of the church originates instead with the contention that the church is its own alternative space to the world, with a culture and polity all its own.

If the church is a space, then the empirical reality of the church as a fractured communion of disparate churches presents a pressing ecumenical problem. Ethnic particularity also hampers the unity of the body of Christ.[19] The achievement of Christian unity as an empirical attribute of the visible church is therefore a priority, if indeed we conceive of the church as an alternative space to the world and its great variety of polities, cultures, and traditions. Christ's prayer to the Father that those who believe in him would be one (John 17:23) is not a petition, but a mandate that the church overhears and that it must actively pursue. In the second volume of his *Systematic Theology* (1997–99), Jenson delivers a fully developed account of the church as the body of Christ in the world, taking up its own space and maintaining its own polity. Here, Jenson lobbies for an ecumenical ecclesiology in which the concrete, historical forms which surround the embodied presence of Christ are implicit

in the gospel. It is important to understand Jenson's theology of time and how it informs his understanding of the episcopate and the shape of the liturgy which emerged in fourth-century Christian orthodoxy. Historical critics have contended that within the New Testament itself there is a conflict between the earlier "charismatic" ecclesiology on display in 1 Corinthians and the later ecclesiology of "early catholicism"—with its three offices of deacon, presbyter, and bishop—set forth in the pastoral epistles.[20] Whether or not one recognizes such dissonance within the New Testament, all recognize that Christ does not explicitly mandate the episcopate. He merely sends his apostles to preach "repentance and the forgiveness of sins to all nations" (Luke 24:47) in baptism, the word of forgiveness, and the Lord's Supper.

However pragmatic the early church found the episcopate for evangelizing the nations, it is a contingency of history rather than a necessary feature of the gospel. But, as Jenson argues, the episcopate is a non-negotiable guarantee of orthodoxy and of faithful proclamation of the gospel. But how can one ascribe institution by divine right to a historically contingent arrangement? That the episcopate is a practical office of oversight is not enough to establish its necessity. Instead, Jenson argues that the episcopate is "dramatically" necessary for faithfulness to the gospel.[21] The episcopate did not emerge from Christ's explicit institution, but it *has* emerged—and done so almost universally—and therefore the ecumenical church cannot be without it. To decline the episcopate introduces dissonance into the ongoing story of salvation. But the Spirit's work is to harmonize the church's history, and so the Spirit must of necessity incorporate the episcopate into the future reunited church. The same could be said for an evangelical papacy: Christ has not mandated a universal pastor located in Rome, but nevertheless the future reunited church cannot lack the papacy because the papacy has become dramatically necessary.[22]

Jenson makes a similar argument concerning the culture and liturgics of the universal church. The church is its own culture that contests any alternative cultural arrangements. Ecclesiocentrism therefore overcomes ethnic and cultural distinctiveness in favor of a universal ecclesial culture which must renounce particularity. To join the

church is to pass from the city of man, enslaved by the lust for dominance (*libido dominandi*), into the city of God where the rule of love overcomes all.[23] A striking passage clarifies what is at stake here. Jenson writes that we cannot simply "shuck off chant and chorale, or the crucifix, or architecture that encloses us in the biblical story, or ministerial clothing that recalls that of ancient Rome and Constantinople."[24] I will return to the place of culture and tradition in the church below, and recast ecclesial culture in terms of created particularity rather than redeemed universality. For now, it is worth noticing that Jenson contends that the church is a static culture bequeathed to the ecumenical church from the "dramatically" necessary content of its ancient past. And for this conviction, Jenson's ecclesiology has been charged with "imperialism" because non-Western cultures must conform to the universal culture of the catholic church. Because of the European origins of that culture, the culture of the ecumenical church will eternally be that of Europe—but never Africa, Asia, or the Americas.[25] It is no surprise that George Hunsinger identifies Jenson as a political "neoconservative" who might nevertheless supply to skeptical readers something surprisingly amenable—though he declines to say just what that might be.[26]

Here the inflated vision of the ecumenical church is in full view. Culture, polity, liturgy, and story are all integral to the reality of the church. And for a sectarian re-founding of Christendom, modern ecumenism must compete with atheism, liberalism, capitalism, and communism to offer a distinctly Christian sociality. The church as *totus Christus* takes up space in the world by installing a comprehensive culture that overcomes the particular within the universal catholic church. Indeed, working off his Christology, Jenson also maintains that the church itself is Christ's "bodily availability" in and to the world. If to have a body is to be available to another, then the church is the total, risen Jesus Christ. The church is nothing less than a "communal prophet" in whom the world recognizes its savior, and the agent in whom the Father recognizes his Son as risen.[27] In short, the church itself is its own "context" for the course of the gospel through this old and sinful world. Such a vision lacks Luther's recognition that the believer and the church inhabit two

kingdoms, not one: the old world and the old nature are captive to sin and death, while Christ rules consciences in faith through the power of his word.[28] Not only does the ecumenical ecclesiology on offer from Jenson result in a loss of the simultaneity of life under both God's left and right hands, there is also a corresponding loss of creation and the law.

Context, Creation, Proclamation

Having set forth Jenson's vision of the ecumenical church, I can turn now to the specific question of context in some detail before delivering an alternative. For Jenson, the gospel cannot be a purely disjunctive event which contradicts the continuity of created history in perpendicular fashion. He holds that apocalyptic of this variety—on display for example in Karl Barth's *Romans*—leaves no space for the doctrine of creation.[29] Jenson seeks a narratable apocalypse, which means that it must extend outward in time and history.[30] However, if the ecclesiology rehearsed above supplies an extended context for the gospel to do its work, Jenson finds in the church—not creation—the narratable extension wherein the gospel can occupy time and space. At most, the reign of the gospel through the church orients created history toward eternity, such that all the church's rivals propose false theories of hope and eternity that must be redirected toward their true end in God.[31] Such an eschatology is essentially Augustinian in its core elements because Jenson's operative concept of history is one in which God redirects all things toward their true end in the divine life, thus appropriating the structure of grace perfecting nature.[32]

The ecumenical turn rightly identifies in some midcentury Lutheran theology a strategy of retreat which prizes existential inwardness over the fleshly word addressed from one sinner to another. Word-events or a demythologized *kerygma* are not Luther's *verbum externum* in which God addresses the sinner by the preached word, the water of baptism, and the bread and wine of the Supper. These are liturgical events implicated with culture, but for now their power is also hidden from sight. As Jesus tells Nicodemus concerning baptism, "The Spirit breathes where he wills, and you hear his voice,

but you do not know from where he comes and where he goes" (John 3:8; trans. altered).[33] The promise delivered in word and sacrament is hidden not because it grants access to the eternal without mediation, but because the means themselves are apprehended by faith rather than sight or reason. This is why "The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing" (1 Cor. 1:18). The word preached does not conform to any publicly shared concept of reason, majesty, or goodness, but masks itself under humble means. The gospel is apocalyptic just here because it decisively contradicts native human notions of goodness, truth, and beauty.[34] But it is interruptive from *within* the particular, worldly means that mediate the promise.

However, this also means that the gospel resists generalization. The gospel is not an abstraction imposed upon the world which reshapes human community and earthly politics toward the reality of Christ's kingdom. Creation is the setting in which the gospel arrives—bread, wine, water, and the human voice are creations of God commandeered in the service of human salvation. But because the gospel is particular—applied in diverse settings to specific individuals and disparate assemblies—the conditions which make the gospel happen are by nature limited to time and place. Indeed, that the gospel is preached and heard at all is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Christ instructs the disciples, for example, not to premeditate how to speak under persecution, but promises instead that he will give them a mouth and wisdom to preach (Luke 21:12–15). The word is indeed mediated through earthly means, but, as Gerhard Forde says, "the mediation is such that it limits itself to this age and ends itself precisely by its witness to the new age."[35] If the church occupies space, it does so within the old world like the other authorities given by God to order civil life and judge sin unto Christ.[36] Jenson is right that the church takes up space, extended through time—yet not as an outpost of a coming heavenly kingdom, but rather as a reality of the old world.

The ecumenical turn, as we have seen, contends that maintaining a body of tradition through episcopal governance is a dramatically necessary component of making the gospel promise. This kind of narrative extension, wherein the gospel takes up empirical space, confuses law and gospel because it ascribes tradition, ecclesial culture,

and polity to the gospel instead of the law. Yeago ably articulates the ecclesiocentric position: "The gospel is thus not only spoken *in* history, but is itself historical, a socially embodied word which *has* a history, a word whose reality penetrates earthly-historical space and extends through earthly-historical time."[37] The gospel is not, in this case, an eschatological event which ends the law for faith by establishing it for the old world.

Instead, "the gospel is at once a community-creating and communally embodied word, which simply has no existence apart from the social practices of an empirical community, the church."[38] The church constitutes a uniquely Christian way of being in the world. This also includes a novel Christian morality beyond the Ten Commandments and the natural law. Therefore, "the gospel does not terminate our existence in this world but confers on it a new pattern given in and with the gospel itself."[39] Yeago is right only with the proviso that the gospel terminates earthly existence under the law *in faith*. But he intends something different: the eschatological gathering of the saints is identified with the visible reality of the church which occupies its territory over and against worldly society. The kingdom of God cannot, by Yeago's reckoning, be reduced to the events of word and sacrament which create faith that is for now unseen. Rather, the church is the visible outpost of Zion to which all the nations will stream to worship the Lord who compels one and all to his eucharistic feast (Isa. 25:6; Matt. 22:9–10).

By seeking narratable extension, the church surpasses creation as the "context" in which the gospel arrives. And with it, church replaces nation; citizenship in the kingdom replaces ethnic identity; ecclesial polity replaces the state's governance; and the universal scope of the gospel overruns the specific locations where the word is proclaimed in the power of the Spirit. This vision of the ecumenical church downplays the historic confessional differences between the churches; but it also puts ecumenical Christendom in competition with the various polities ordained by God to govern the nations for now under sin. At work here is a loss of the *simul*, where both the church and the believer struggle under the cross against the reign of sin and death. Such an ecclesiology also minimizes creation, and thus suffers a different kind of inwardness: instead of retreating to

psychology or religious experience, ecumenical ecclesiology retreats to a universal catholic society that is independent from all others. To rectify this problem, I turn now to the place of culture in creation.

Locating Culture in Creation

If the ecclesiology of the ecumenical church must be cut down to size, with its contents redistributed, the first article of the Creed indicates where the leftovers should go. No doubt it is true that the church has a culture and polity. However, these are not intrusions of heaven's culture and governance into created history, but are necessary arrangements under the law to restrain sin and drive sinners to Christ. One of the main problems with ecclesiocentrism is that it abstracts both polity and culture as if tradition could be reconstructed outside the concrete action of handing something over. But culture is not something which can be reconstructed; it emerges naturally out of particular human social arrangements. Culture emerges from a series of diverse and tangible events which by nature resist generalization. While the sociology of cultural construction is not the main interest of this article, I would like to conclude here by sketching some alternatives to ecclesiocentrism that locate culture, polity, and tradition within the reality of creation. Some engagements with Luther's theology and that of the Lutheran Confessions will punctuate this concluding argument for a strategy of deflation with respect to ecumenical ecclesiology in favor of creation and vocation.

Luther's doctrine of providence in his explanation of the first article of the Creed is *a propos*. He does not speak here in lofty terms, but of shoes and shelter, family and property, and the human body.[40] Luther's view of divine providence is preoccupied with the ordinary, material realities of human life. This is not to say that Luther is an opponent of "high" culture: the music and visual art generated by Luther and his Reformation can attest to this fact. Rather, Luther teaches how faith grasps divine provision in that which is simple and ordinary. Likewise, when Luther teaches the third article of the Creed, he does not assert a discreet Christian ethics of discipleship that goes beyond the requirements of the Ten Commandments. This comports with Luther's practical focus on the material realities of

creation: Christian living is not about an ethics of monastic self-denial or interior holiness. Faith grasps that all the gifts of creation are given by a benevolent heavenly Father, to whom Christians pray in the Lord's Prayer. But these gifts are not only for Christians, just as the demands of the Decalogue are not somehow unique to the church. Quite the opposite is the case since the Commandments engraved on tablets of stone are the natural law engraved on every human heart (Rom. 2:15). Faith does not withdraw human beings from creaturely reality, but it places them in a new relationship to the world. Likewise, the law reaches its end in the gospel, but this does not mean that the gospel issues a novel morality that supersedes the Commandments.[41] The gospel ends the law for faith, but establishes the law for sin (Rom. 3:31).

Luther makes this explicit in the mid-1520s in the *Sermons on Exodus* (1524) and *How Christians Should Regard Moses* (1525). While Luther contends strenuously that the law of Moses does not apply to Christians,[42] he does say that the natural law agrees with the Ten Commandments. God gives to the Israelites on tablets of stone what he has written on the hearts of the gentiles (2 Cor. 3:7; Rom. 2:15). This includes the commands against other gods, obedience to father and mother, and abstinence from murder and adultery.[43] Furthermore, Luther's *simul* is essential for understanding how the law does, and does not, apply to Christians: believers are not under the law, but under grace; yet insofar as they remain sinners in this life, they stand under the law—not for sanctification but for death. The distinction of law and gospel strictly patrols the boundary between reason and faith, law and gospel, old and new. The view of the church Jenson espouses fails to observe the law's limit by the word of the gospel which—though imparted through created means—does not replace the law with a new evangelical ethics derived from the teaching of Jesus or the exhortations of the apostles.[44]

Redistributing the contents of ecumenical ecclesiology to the first article of the Creed nevertheless brings with it some perils. It means, for example, reviving the vilified doctrine of the *Schöpfungsordnungen* (orders of creation).[45] Despite its misapplication to a static, *völkisch* concept of race in the 1920s and 1930s,[46] the orders of creation befit Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms. According to this theology

of creation, the church does not replace created orders with a universal policy that abrogates ethnicities, nations, polities, languages, and cultures.[47] There is no evangelical mandate for Christians to abandon ethnic particularity in favor of a universal Christian culture, just as there is no universal Christian language. The gospel gives freedom, but it does not outstrip vocation as far as the old nature is concerned. For Luther the three estates—family, church, and state—are fundamental.[48] He does not put the church in competition with either the family or the realm of the political. Politics imposes order after the fall, and the gospel does not subvert earthly governance here and now.[49] Consequently, both the family and the state have an abiding significance until the Day of Judgment. Family, nation, and ethnicity—just like good works—profit nothing before God compared to the righteousness of Christ. But in the present evil age, they serve their purpose because they are wielded by God as masks by which the law coerces obedience.[50]

Luther's explanation of the fourth commandment in the *Large Catechism* clarifies the matter. Obedience to parents includes obedience to both governing authority and pastoral authority.[51] Perhaps the best example of vocation at work in Luther's own biography is his renunciation of his monastic vow. Luther prefaces his work on monastic vows by apologizing to his father for his disobedience to the fourth commandment. Hans Luther had objected to Martin's plan to join the Augustinian order, but Luther did it anyway. Monasticism itself epitomizes the ecclesiocentric aversion to worldliness because it proposes a unique Christian manner of life above and beyond the ordinary obligations of marriage, parenthood, and commerce.[52] A culture like that in Luther's Germany might have been Christianized, but this does not mean Christians must withdraw from family and society to take up a manner of life opposed to the realities of ordinary vocation in order to achieve a superior degree of holiness.[53] Indeed, this was precisely the problem with the enthusiasts who in many cases sought to create revolutionary, utopian communities apart from the rest of society. The origin of the modern revolutionary impulse descends first from the preaching of the radical Reformation.[54]

When it comes to the liturgical reform of the church, Luther's position is likewise consistent. The church does not set forth a unique

paradigm that mandates how to enculturate the gospel into a particular setting. Luther has in mind no unique ethos to which Christian liturgy must conform by force of law in every time and place. Take for instance the dispute in the 1520s concerning the administration of the chalice to the laity. Christ says to all communicants, "take and drink, this is my blood," but evangelical reform cannot impose the chalice by law. Christ gives his blood to drink for forgiveness not as a matter of obedience, but as a promise. When Luther returned to Wittenberg after his exile at the Wartburg Castle, he refused to impose the chalice on the laity by binding consciences. Rather, Luther argues that the word must be preached to set consciences free so that Christians receive the promise delivered at the altar.[55] This is precisely what Leif Grane means when he says that the Reformation was not a reformation of the church—nor of culture and politics—but of preaching.[56]

Language and ethnicity are perhaps the most obvious point at which the church intersects with human culture. Ecclesiocentric theologies, like Jenson's, find an obstacle to ecumenism in ethnic and linguistic particularity. The work of the modern liturgical movement sought to align both the text and shape of the liturgy among the various traditions over and against more recent historical developments that resulted in divergence.[57] Liturgical traditionalism, taken concretely in this case, is an ironically anti-ecumenical act: to receive what has been handed on sustains ethnic and cultural uniqueness over and against a common ecclesial culture. Particular ethnic and linguistic traditions pose an obstacle to the cultivation of a universal liturgical culture that transcends ethnicity and diverse human cultures.[58] But when culture is assigned to the doctrine of creation, then we can see how language and ethnicity pass on Christian faith through hymnody, scriptural translation, and diverse liturgical forms.[59] If the early chapters of Genesis teach us anything, it is that the first attempt to craft a universal language is one of the very first sins humans committed (Genesis 11:1–9). Indeed, among Luther's lasting contributions to German culture is his translation of the Bible. The same is true of his revision of the mass and the introduction of the vernacular into the divine service. To abandon the program of the ecumenical turn is to celebrate cultural and linguistic particularity rather than to overturn it. As the *Augsburg Confession*

says, "It is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings be alike everywhere."[60]

For the ecumenical turn, the unity and integrity of the church rest on a uniquely Christian culture. The church achieves oneness by uniting Christians within an overarching ecumenical reality. Ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity pose a great problem for this task, and so they must yield before the universal ecclesial reality which transcends what is local, particular, and diverse. By contrast, Lutheran theology recognizes that culture, polity, and liturgy are indispensable features of human life. They both unite and divide. They unite because they tie Christians together in diverse traditions of catechesis, hymnody, liturgy, music, and cultural expression. They divide because the particular event of tradition—the act of handing something over—cannot be universalized. Material forms of culture and tradition unite, that is true, but only concretely for those who share a common culture that by nature cannot be universalized. The various ways in which Christians will incorporate their congregations, inscribe the gospel in hymnody and song, and give testimony to the gospel will by nature differ from place to place, person to person, and culture to culture. And because the external trappings of ceremony and tradition cannot be instruments by which the church achieves its unity in Jesus Christ, that task therefore belongs to God alone, who, as the *Augsburg Confession* reminds us, makes the church one through the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Civil authority, common human vocations, and the practices which make and transmit meaning having their place in human life. But these are created realities, not strictly ecclesial ones. For now, the oneness of the church is hidden from sight, held in faith, and depends on the work and power of God alone.

Conclusion

The ecumenical turn in modern Lutheran theology has left its mark on the doctrine of the church in recent thought. Robert Jenson's theology is an especially salient instance in which the conventional Lutheran understanding appeared far too small to contend with the rival ideologies of the modern world, like communism,

liberalism, and fascism. Jenson's Augustinian approach, which conceives of the church as a godly society of comprehensive scope, seeks to out-narrate all rival conceptions of human social life. Only in the church do people become true human beings, having entered the outpost of the heavenly kingdom here on earth in the form of the ecumenical, reunited church. At present, however, the ecumenical movement is in crisis. Even more so is the ambition for Christendom reestablished on postmodern, sectarian terms. What Nicholas Hopman calls "post-ethnic" Lutheranism[61] has failed to establish Lutheran, let alone Christian, unity. As argued here, the ecumenical turn has incorrectly assigned culture, polity, liturgy, and identity to the reality of the church in the interest of reviving a new kind of Christendom under the auspices of ecumenical reconciliation. Instead, these realities of human life should be ascribed to the doctrine of creation. I therefore have argued for a return to a distinctly Lutheran conception of church, culture, and vocation that declines the ambitious agenda of the ecumenical movement in favor of the local and the particular. The situation of post-ethnic and post-ecumenical Lutheranism invites a revival of the classically Lutheran understanding of the relation between world and church by upholding the proper distinction of law and gospel, and therefore the Reformation teaching of justification by faith alone.

NOTES

1. For some representative instances of Jenson's mature ecclesiological reflection and its connection to the issue of culture see: Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford, 1997–99), II:189–210; Robert W. Jenson, "Christ as Culture 1: Christ as Polity," in *Theology as Revisionary Metaphysics: Essays on God and Creation*, ed. Stephen John Wright (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2014), 181–8; Jenson, "Christian Civilization," in *God, Truth, and Witness: Engaging Stanley Hauerwas*, ed. L. Gregory Jones, Reinhard Hütter, C. Rosalee Velloso Ewell (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2005), 153–63; Jenson, "You Wonder Where the Body Went," in *Essays in Theology of Culture* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1995), 216–224.

2. For some proposals adjacent to, but distinct from, Jenson's see: Ephraim Radner, *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998); Radner, *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor, 2012); John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1972); Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom: How the Church is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991). For a dissent from

the ecclesiocentrism on offer in these parallel proposals, see Peter J. Leithart, *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2010).

3. Robert W. Jenson, "How the World Lost Its Story," *First Things* 36 (March 1993): 19–24.

4. Though Jenson appropriates the language and imagery of apocalyptic, he contends against the kind of apocalyptic theology that leaves the gospel bereft of narrative extension. If apocalyptic is purely interruptive, it has no positive content that can be mapped onto the ongoing history of God's dealings with Israel and the church. Without narratable extension, the gospel's diverse audiences supply its historical content, and it thus fails to deliver anything that is new. See Robert W. Jenson, "Apocalyptic and Messianism in Twentieth Century German Theology," in *Messianism, Apocalypse and Redemption in 20th Century German Thought*, eds. Wayne Cristaudo and Wendy Baker (Adelaide: ATF Press: 2006), 6.

5. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1990).

6. See also Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999).

7. David S. Yeago, "Theological Impasse and Ecclesial Future," *Lutheran Forum* 26, no. 4 (1992): 36–8, 40–5.

8. Walter Sundberg links the heritage of the modern ecumenical movement to nineteenth-century reactionary anti-modernism. See Sundberg, "Ecumenism and the Conflict Over Modernity," *Lutheran Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (1990): 383–403. Erling T. Teigen also connects the unification of the Norwegian-American Lutheran synods at the beginning of the twentieth-century to the secular nationalist movement in Norway. See Teigen, "The Norwegian Lutheran Merger of 1917 and Norwegian Independence of 1905," *Logia* 26, no. 1 (2017): 15–21.

9. George A. Lindbeck, "The Sectarian Future of the Church," in *The God Experience: Essays in Hope*, ed. Joseph P. Whelan (New York: Newman, 1971), 228.

10. Robert W. Jenson, *Canon and Creed* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 79–87.

11. Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1951–55), I:305.

12. See Robert W. Jenson, "Second Locus: The Triune God," in *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 83.

13. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, II:229.

14. Robert W. Jenson, *Visible Words: The Interpretation and Practice of the Christian Sacraments* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 49–50.

15. David S. Yeago, "Testing the Spirits: Practical Theology and the Crucified and Risen God," *dialog* 22, no. 4 (1983): 252.

16. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, II:212–5.

17. Whether Jenson faithfully appropriates the Christology of Brenz is not the pressing question just here, but on the interpretation of Brenz see Hans Christian Brandy, *Die späte Christologie des Johannes Brenz* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1991); Richard Cross, *Christology and Metaphysics in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Oxford, 2022), 44.

18. See Oswald Bayer, *Schöpfung als Anrede: Zu einer Hermeneutik der Schöpfung* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1990), 9–32. Here Bayer reaches back to the critical theology set forth by Johann Georg Hamann in conversation with Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth-century.

19. See Mark A. Granquist, "The Urge to Merge," *Lutheran Forum* 47, no. 2 (2013): 20–3.

20. See Ernst Käsemann, "Paul and Early Catholicism," in *New Testament Questions of Today*, trans. W. J. Montauge (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 236–51.

21. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, II:238.

22. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, II:242–9.

23. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, II:73, 77–8.

24. Robert W. Jenson, "Catechesis for Our Time," in *Marks of the Body of Christ*, eds. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 144–5. Compare Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How It Died* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008).

25. Peter Kline, "Participation in God and the Nature of Christian Community: Robert Jenson and Eberhard Jüngel," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13, no. 1 (2011): 38–61; Kline, "'You Wonder Where the Spirit Went': Barth and Jenson on the Hiddenness of God," in *Karl Barth in Conversation*, eds. W. Travis McMaken and David W. Congdon (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), 91–108; Nathan Kerr, "Apocalyptic and Imminence: A Response to Christianity's Cultured Defenders," in *Apocalyptic and the Future of Christian Theology: With and Beyond J. Louis Martyn*, ed. Joshua B. Davis and Douglas Harink (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2012), 334–53.

26. George Hunsinger, "Robert Jenson's *Systematic Theology*: A Review Essay," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 55, no. 2 (2002): 200.

27. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, II:212–5.

28. Perhaps the most apparent instance in which Jenson's theology foregoes the simultaneity of old and new is in his sanative doctrine of justification—particularly his preference for deification over the Reformation's conventional emphasis on the imputative character of justification. For Jenson's mature account of *theosis*, jointly influenced by the new Finnish school of Luther studies and his work on the Lutheran-Roman Catholic ecumenical dialogues, see: Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, II:289–305; Robert W. Jenson, "Theosis," *dialog* 32, no. 2 (1993): 108–12; Jenson, "Triune Grace," *dialog* 41, no. 2 (2002): 285–293; Jenson, "Response to Tuomo Mannermaa, 'Why is Luther So Fascinating?'" in *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, eds. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 21–24; Jenson, "Justification as a Triune Event," *Modern Theology* 11, no. 4 (1995): 421–7.

29. See Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford, 1933), 29–30. See Robert W. Jenson, "On the Dogmatic/Systematic Appropriation of Paul-According-to-Martyn," in *Apocalyptic and the Future of Christian Theology: With and Beyond J. Louis Martyn*, ed. Joshua B. Davis and Douglas Harink (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), 159.

30. See Jenson, "Apocalyptic and Messianism in Twentieth Century German Theology," 3–12.

31. See Robert W. Jenson, *A Large Catechism* (Delhi, N.Y.: American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, 1991), 30.

32. See Robert W. Jenson, "*Gratia non Tollit Naturam sed Perficit*," *Pro Ecclesia* 25, no. 1 (2016): 44–52.

33. See William Weinrich, *John 1:1–7:1*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2015), 356, 366.

34. On aesthetics and the cross, see Mark C. Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty: A Reappraisal* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2017), 91–112.

35. Gerhard O. Forde, "The Catholic Impasse: Reflections on Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue Today," in *Promoting Unity: Themes in Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue*, eds. H. George Anderson and James R. Crumley, Jr. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 76.

36. Forde, "The Catholic Impasse," 76.

37. Yeago, "Theological Impasse and Ecclesial Future," 40.

38. Yeago, "Theological Impasse and Ecclesial Future," 40.

39. Yeago, "Theological Impasse and Ecclesial Future," 40.

40. *Small Catechism* II 2, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 354–5 (hereafter cited as BC followed by the page numbers).

41. For some recent, American Lutheran treatments of Luther's ethics, see Robert Benne, *The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-first Century* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995); Benne, *Ordinary Saints: An Introduction to the Christian Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); William H. Lazareth, *Luther, the Bible, and Social Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001); George Wolfgang Forell, *Faith Active in Love: An Investigation of the Principles Underlying Luther's Social Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1954). On the worldliness of the church's mission, ministry, and witness, see Lazareth, "Sentinels for the Tricentennial," in *The Left Hand of God: Essays on Discipleship and Patriotism*, ed. William H. Lazareth (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 113–67.

42. Martin Luther, *How Christians Should Regard Moses*, in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955–), 35:164–5 (hereafter cited as LW followed by the volume and page numbers); Luther, *Sermons on Exodus*, LW 62:339–41.

43. Luther, *How Christians Should Regard Moses*, LW 35:168.

44. Oliver O'Donovan puts it this way: "A belief in Christian ethics is a belief that certain ethical and moral judgments belong to the gospel itself; a belief, in other words, that the church can be committed to ethics without moderating the tone of its voice as a bearer of glad tidings." O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 12.

45. For a postwar treatment of the orders, see Werner Elert, *The Christian Ethos*, trans. Carl J. Schindler (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), 77–139. On Elert's evolving approach to Christian ethics from before and after the Second World War, see Matthew Becker, "Werner Elert (1885–1954)," in *Twentieth Century Lutheran Theologians*, ed. Mark C. Mattes (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 130–1.

46. For some critical examples, see: Robert P. Ericksen, *Theologians Under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emanuel Hirsch* (New Haven: Yale, 1985), 100–9; Ericksen, *Complicity in the Holocaust: Churches and Universities in Nazi Germany* (New York: Cambridge, 2012), 24–60, 96–100; Ryan Tafilowski, "Exploring the Legacy of Paul Althaus," *Lutheran Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2017): 64–84; Tafilowski, "A Reappraisal of the Orders of Creation," *Lutheran Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2017): 288–309; Paul R. Hinlicky, *Before Auschwitz: What Christian Theology Must Learn from the Rise of Nazism* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2012), 21–5. See also Nathan Howard Yoder, *Ordnung in Gemeinschaft: A Critical Appraisal of the Erlangen Contribution to the Orders of Creation* (New York: Peter Lang, 2016).

47. Nicholas Hopman has argued that the distinction of law and gospel does not negate Jewish ethnic particularity, but preserves it. According to Hopman, the gospel belongs to the Jews particularly because of the promise made to Abraham. This same promise blesses gentiles with eternal life, but does so only as a surplus of God's mercy bestowed

first and particularly on his people Israel. In the interim, the ethnic particularity of gentiles under the law remains as well, but not as anything about which the gentiles might boast before God. See Hopman, "Let Israel's Pride Fill the Cosmos: A Reformation Correction of Christian Suspicion of Jewish Particularity," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie* 63, no. 1 (2021): 86–109.

48. Oswald Bayer, *The Theology of Martin Luther: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008), 120–53.

49. See *Augsburg Confession* (*CA*) XVI 1–7, BC, 49, 51; *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* XVI 1–13, BC, 231–3. Compare Luther, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed* (1523), LW 45:81–129. See also Timothy J. Wengert, *The Augsburg Confession: Renewing Lutheran Faith and Practice* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2020), 141–51.

50. Yeago worries that Lutheran theology of this sort sacrifices "public" claims of truth in favor of private, individual experience. See David S. Yeago, "The Church as Polity? The Lutheran Context of Robert W. Jenson's Ecclesiology," in *Trinity, Time and Church: Essays in Honor of Robert W. Jenson*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 213–4; compare *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope* 54; *BC*, 339. The crucial distinction in this case, however, is not between public and private, but between law and gospel. A "Christian nationalist" regime like that contemplated by Melanchthon in the *Treatise* recognizes that the magistrate is obligated to regulate public life according to the natural law, which Melanchthon thinks includes obedience to the first commandment. Such a political theology could hardly be guilty of privatizing the conscience *coram deo*. Indeed, Melanchthon's political theology in the *Treatise* is decidedly more "public" than Yeago's because it contends that Christian nations with Christian rulers are obligated to govern according to the natural law and even protect the right proclamation of the gospel. For Christianized nations, the law's place in public life has been established by the gospel—which is to say for the old world. If anything, Yeago's ecclesiocentrism ghettoizes Christian life with respect to the political in a way the two kingdoms doctrine—and the doctrine of the *Schöpfungsordnungen*—do not. Yeago's concept of Christian discipleship minimizes creation and vocation because it involves special ethical content bestowed by the gospel required for obedience. For a recent argument against ecclesiocentrism—and for a Christian national polity—see Stephen Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon, 2022). While Lutherans will dissent from Wolfe's contention that Christian nations are obligated to align the temporal and material goods of the people with their eternal and spiritual fulfillment in Christ—this would reinstitute the medieval doctrine of nature's perfection by grace—he does rightly assign Christian culture to the temporal kingdom rather than the spiritual. Thus, Wolfe ascribes things cultural and political to the earthly kingdom, and therefore to the law, rather than to the heavenly kingdom and the gospel.

51. *Large Catechism* I, The Fourth Commandment, 158–60, BC, 408.

52. LW 48:330–6. Thanks to Nicholas Hopman, again, for drawing my attention to this letter of Luther's. See Hopman, "Luther on Monasticism: The Triumph of the Particular Over the Universal," *Lutheran Forum* 54, no. 4 (2020): 47–50.

53. See Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957).

54. See Thomas Müntzer, *Sermon to the Princes*, trans. Michael G. Baylor (New York: Verso, 2010). James Nestingen points out that the Wittenberg Reformation was originally mistaken for a revolutionary cause seeking to overturn established civil authority. This misperception was corrected by Melanchthon's treatment of civil authority in the *CA*. See

James Arne Nestingen, "The Two Kingdoms Distinction: An Analysis with Suggestion," *Word & World* 14, no. 3 (1999): 272.

55. Martin Luther, *Eight Sermons at Wittenberg* (1522), LW 51:90–1.

56. Leif Grane, *The Augsburg Confession: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Rasmussen (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987), 12. Steven D. Paulson draws out the implications of this understanding of reform in connection to liturgy and the dispute with Andreas Karlstadt. See Paulson, "Fanatic Iconoclasts are Stupid and Dangerous: Luther's *Invocavit* Sermons," in *Free and Locked Up! Essays Delivered at the Lutheran Study Days 2020 Conference in Bergen, Norway*, ed. John W. Hoyum (Irvine, Calif.: 1517 Publishing, 2022), 79–91. The promise might drive us to subvert political authority and act illegally to give the gospel free course, because the gospel is by nature illegal. This is why Luther disobeyed ecclesiastical authority in the first place and started administering the blood of Christ to the laity. It is also why the *Formula of Concord* requires no compromise during times of confession in which the freedom of the gospel is suppressed. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's resistance against the Third Reich is a particularly apt instance in which evangelical freedom resulted in confession—and eventually imprisonment and execution. See Bonhoeffer, "The Church and the Jewish Question," in *Berlin: 1932–1933*, trans. Isabel Best and David Higgins, ed. Larry L. Rasmussen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 12 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 361–70. See also Robert W. Bertram, "Bonhoeffer's 'Battle(s) for Christendom': His 'Responsible Interpretation' of Barmen," in *A Time for Confessing*, ed. Michael Hoy (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008), 65–95.

57. See Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 646–7. See also Philip H. Pfatteicher, "Cooperative Ventures in Liturgy," *Lutheran Forum* 49, no. 2 (2015): 22–4.

58. An important example of this is not only the "urge to merge," but also the adoption of English as a universal language over and against the particular during the process of Americanization. This had a profound impact on the development of Lutheran liturgy in the United States. In the specific case of Norwegian-American Lutheranism, see Kristofer Coffman, "Lord, I Have Come into This Your Holy House: A Brief History of the Norwegian Liturgy in America," *Journal of the Lutheran Historical Conference* 3 (2013): 148–66.

59. Gracia Grindal points in the direction of reversing the Americanization of post-ethnic Lutheranism when she wonders whether pietism of the Scandinavian variety might constitute a "usable past" for Lutheranism today. See Grindal, "Pietism: A 'Usable Past' for the ELCA?" *The Covenant Quarterly* 70, nos. 3–4 (2012): 54–7, 63.

60. *CA* VII 3, BC, 43. See *CA* XV 1–4, BC, 49.

61. Hopman, "Luther on Monasticism," 49.