

## NARRATIVES IN DIALOGUE: THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN EVOLUTIONARY HISTORY AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

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Rudolf Bultmann famously highlighted the supposed need to “demythologize” the New Testament in order to discern its enduring relevance in the modern world. Both the biblical text itself and the early theological formulations of the church came together within a cultural context that assumed a “world picture” that we no longer hold in the post-Enlightenment West.<sup>2</sup> These supposedly primitive ancient philosophies and cosmologies were part of the cognitive milieu from which classical Christology and creedal formulations emerged. Today, Christians in the West are separated from these contexts by thousands of years and even thousands of miles. Over the past few centuries, discoveries and advances in philosophy, historiography, and the hard sciences have created a new world picture that is no longer hospitable or amenable to the “mythological world picture of the New Testament”—or so the narrative goes. Many biblical interpreters and Christians rightly view the cultural gap between ourselves and the earliest Christians as an interpretive problem to be overcome.

The fact is that *all* theological reflection—whether modern, pre-modern, or post-modern—takes place from within certain cultural contexts, geographical locations, human communities, and creational ecosystems. The substance metaphysics and Neoplatonism of the late classical period were as much a part of ancient Christians’ historical-cultural context as scientific inquiry and evolutionary biology is in the late modern period. We should also acknowledge that different world pictures (whether Neoplatonist or evolutionary) are not value neutral. They can and should be critiqued. However, critiquing either a scientific or a pre-scientific worldview is not the aim of this paper. Rather, it is my aim to point out that the dominant world picture is often assumed by those inhabiting its historical and geographical territory. Thus, if faithful Christian witness would seek to speak in any context in relevant and compelling ways, it should do so in ways that are in some measure comprehensible to the assumed world picture of the day.

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<sup>2</sup> Rudolph Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology” in Schubert M. Ogden, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 1–43.

It has become commonplace to preface articles on the intersection between science and faith by noting how evolutionary biology has presented new challenges for classical Christian doctrinal formulations.<sup>3</sup> While this is certainly the case, it is important to remember that many of the mysteries of the faith have challenged ancient and modern thinkers alike. For example, the work of N.T. Wright has highlighted the “chronological snobbery”<sup>4</sup> of late modernists’ conviction that the bodily resurrection of Christ is impossible given the findings of modern science. Wright has noted that both in the ancient world and the modern world, people were not believed to rise from the dead with any regularity.<sup>5</sup> The resurrection of Jesus was every bit as scientifically impossible and difficult to believe for those in the non-Jewish ancient world as it would be for many modern Westerners. I would argue that a similar dynamic has taken hold in popular contemporary thought with regard to the incarnation, the trinity, the existence of the soul, and many other Christian doctrines. It is often assumed that the difficulty modern minds have believing, for instance, that the human Jesus of Nazareth was “very God of very God” is a recent development. The fact is that some Christian teaching has always been difficult to believe given the human understanding of the natural world. It is not as if no one had any categorical or conceptual difficulties relating the humanity and divinity of Christ before the emergence of evolutionary biology. The specific reasons for our struggle may be unique to our own late modern context, but the fact that there is a struggle is not.

For the purposes of this paper, I hope to approach evolutionary biology not as a challenge to Christian faith that must be resisted and refuted, but as an important feature of our own world picture in the late-modern West that must be accounted for in our presentation of the gospel. Recent proposals have sought to show how creedal (and biblical) conceptual formulations might be adapted in new contexts.<sup>6</sup> Language of “revising” or “rearticulating” Christian doctrine is common in such proposals. As helpful and necessary as these discussions often are, my goals for this paper are slightly different. I plan to treat evolutionary biology, broadly construed, as a given. This is not because I believe that the biblical data in no way challenges this narrative, nor because I believe the scientific community has attained a final “theory of everything” as a result of Darwin’s insights. Rather, it is because the most helpful touch point for many in the modern West may not be how the Christian faith speaks *against* evolutionary theory, but rather how the gospel of Jesus Christ speaks *into* it. In this paper I hope to demonstrate that the Christian faith is especially well-suited, rather than deficient, for speaking into the historical narrative of evolutionary biology—a narrative that many modern people consider to be beyond reasonable dispute. Stated

<sup>3</sup> Also common are comments bemoaning the idiosyncratically American problem of so-called culture wars and the drawing of battle lines between “liberal” evolutionists and “conservative” young-earth creationists.

<sup>4</sup> A term coined by C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London: Harcourt, 1955), 207–08.

<sup>5</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 83.

<sup>6</sup> David Yeago, “The New Testament and the Nicene dogma: a contribution to the recovery of theological exegesis,” *Sewanee Theological Review*, 45.4 (2002) 371–384.

another way, I will seek to demonstrate that Christianity and evolutionary history are promising dialogue partners regarding some of the most basic questions of human identity and cosmological significance. The gospel of Jesus Christ speaks into the natural world made known to us by modern science, not in a contrarian or antagonistic way, but rather in a way that offers redemption and healing a world that many would argue has been ravaged by evolutionary history. I will proceed by surveying three topics related to the origins and evolution of life: the solidarity of creaturely existence, the unique role of humankind in the cosmos, and the redemption of suffering and death.

### THE WORD BECAME FLESH

One of the most basic features of evolutionary history is the claim that human beings share a common ancestry with other animals. What implications does this radical continuity have for Christian doctrine? For instance, how does the insight that “flesh” is evolved change our view of the Word become flesh?<sup>7</sup> One way that biblical Christianity supplements and clarifies the narrative of evolutionary history is by affirming the goodness of *all* creation, not merely the exceptionalism of human beings as the most advanced and well-adapted animals on the planet.

In a recent proposal known as “deep incarnation,” Niels Henrik Gregersen seeks to expand the theological concept of incarnation to include all of material creation, not just human beings.<sup>8</sup> Adherents of Gregersen’s proposal note how at the climax of the prologue to John’s gospel, the author declares that the Word became, not “human,” but rather, “flesh.”<sup>9</sup> The term “flesh” bears significance for the Word’s entry into creaturely, embodied existence as a whole, not just His taking on of human nature. Similarly, Gregersen argues that the Christ hymn of Philippians 2:6-11 emphasizes the humility of Christ’s descent, taking on the form of a “servant” rather than the form of a “human.”<sup>10</sup> In this shifted emphasis on enfleshment rather than the assuming of a human nature, we see the love of God poured out not merely humankind but on creation as a whole in solidarity with its materiality. God the Son has not merely crossed the threshold between his divine essence and our human nature; in crossing this threshold he has crossed what is arguably the greatest and most fundamental of ontological

<sup>7</sup> Celia Deane-Drummond, “Christ and Evolution: A Drama of Wisdom?” *Zygon* 47.3 (Sept 2012), 525.

<sup>8</sup> Gregersen first coined the term in 2001 in response to a particular question on theodicy brought to light by evolutionary history. Niels Henrik Gregersen, “The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World,” *Dialog* 40.3 (Fall 2001), 192–207.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Jesus and the Cosmos: Soundings in Deep Christology” in *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology*, ed. Niels Henrik Gregersen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 135.

<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that there are no references to his human nature per se in Philippians 2; there are clear references in both v. 8 and v. 9. However, the overall illocutionary emphasis of the passage is on Christ’s self-emptying humility and subsequent exaltation rather than his taking on of a human nature.

distinctions, the separation between his incorporeal existence and the materiality of the created order.

The interplay between deep incarnation and evolution is substantial. As Gregersen and his interlocutors have pointed out, the biological continuity shared by all living things on planet earth implies a fundamental physical continuity with all that is, living and inanimate.<sup>11</sup> Rocks and rabbits, nebulae and nuclei, walruses and waterfalls—and Jesus’ human body—all things material originate from the same fountain of stardust that burst forth in the big bang. Several scientific disciplines including evolutionary biology, astrophysics and chemistry have drawn to our attention the relative sameness and kinship of all created things and all life. These are what Robin Collins calls “ancestral connections” to non-human creatures.<sup>12</sup> Jordan Wessling and Joshua Rasmussen go further by suggesting that we may carry some part of these ancestors with us as part of our human identity.<sup>13</sup>

The narrative of evolutionary history affirms not only interspecies connections between different animals, but also even more fundamental connections within the material networks of creation. There is a radical and beautiful interconnectedness to the fabric of the cosmos, not just in terms of the genealogical connections between living things, but also between all material reality on a molecular level. In amazing coherence<sup>14</sup> with the findings of modern chemistry, astrophysics, and biology, the Bible repeatedly refers to humankind as “dust” (Gen 2:7, Gen 3:19, Ps 103:14). Our interdependence as homo sapiens is not just with human networks but with the entire creaturely order.<sup>15</sup> And it is precisely this creaturely material order that the Logos assumed when he became flesh. Deep incarnation extends the creation affirming power of incarnational theology naturally to all creatures and all of the cosmos. By entering into kinship with humanity, God the Son has become kin to the complex and beautiful network of life and matter.

As promising as Gregersen’s proposal has proven for dialogue with modern science and evolutionary biology, it may also raise theological concerns when viewed through the lens of traditional Christian theological confessions. One of these doctrinal challenges involves the distinction

<sup>11</sup> Robert John Russell, “Jesus: The Way of All Flesh and the Proleptic Feather of Time” in *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology*, ed. Niels Henrik Gregersen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 332.

<sup>12</sup> “Divine Action and Evolution.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, ed. Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 250.

<sup>13</sup> Jordan Wessling and Joshua Rasmussen, “A Radomness-based Theodicy for Evolutionary Evils,” *Zygon* (2017), 993.

<sup>14</sup> I do not here mean to adopt a concordist view of the biblical text’s relationship to scientific theory. Rather, I mean simply to note an elegant continuity in this instance. This is not meant to read as a statement on how the biblical text functions as a whole as it relates to modern scientific theory. For discussion on concordist views of the relationship between science and the biblical text, see Deborah B. Haarsma and Loren D. Haarsma, *Origins: Christian Perspectives on Creation, Evolution, and Intelligent Design*, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 2011), 93 ff.

<sup>15</sup> Niels Henrik Gregersen, “Deep Incarnation: From Deep History to Post-Axial Religion,” *HTS Theological Studies* 72.4 (2016), 3.

between immanence and incarnation. Gregerson's provocative question, "Is God incarnate in all that is?" ostensibly threatens the preeminence and exclusivity of God's presence in Christ. Whatever we may say about the solidarity expressed by God with all of the creative order in the incarnation, it seems that there is a manifest, unique presence in this one creature, this one person, Jesus. If we say that God is incarnate in all things, it remains unclear what, if anything, is exceptional about his presence in Jesus. In the person of Jesus, God is not merely present *in* and *with* a creaturely entity. Rather, he is present as Jesus.<sup>16</sup> Despite Gregerson's insistence to the contrary, the concern remains that "a promiscuous use of the concept of incarnation carries with it a dangerous whiff of pantheism."<sup>17</sup>

Where evolutionary biology affirms the solidarity of humanity with non-human creation, the Christian doctrine of the incarnation adds even greater significance to this interconnection of creatures; the Creator God has seen fit to enter into His creaturely network of relationships by becoming a human being. The implications of this are significant for creations broadly and for Christians in particular. As the Apostle Paul suggests in Rom 8:19-23, the salvific benefits of the incarnation are not just enjoyed by human beings. Indeed, God's gift of salvation in the Christ event is not a saving of human beings from creation but a saving of the creation itself.<sup>18</sup> The incarnation has not merely served to affirm the immense worth of the human person, but also to echo God's original declaration over his creation "that it was good" (Gen 1:31). The incarnation is a statement not just of God's intent to redeem humankind, but his intent to redeem the whole cosmos. And this holistic salvation will seem quite fitting to the biologist who has devoted her life to studying and reveling the kinship of all living things.

### CROWNED WITH GLORY AND HONOR

We have seen that the intersection of the biblical doctrine of the incarnation and the narrative of evolutionary history can serve to affirm the goodness, dignity, and kinship of all creation, not just human beings. However, our kinship with creation is only one feature of the Christian teaching on human identity. We should also be quick to acknowledge that Christians have consistently affirmed some form of human exceptionalism above and beyond the rest of the created order and the animal kingdom. The specific dignity of human beings has been articulated throughout church history as the doctrine of the *Imago Dei*, the teaching that God has uniquely bestowed upon human beings the privilege of being created in His image. In today's cultural moment, this exceptionalism clarifies the vision of humanity that one might surmise from the evolutionary data, particularly

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Bauckham, "The Incarnation and the Cosmic Christ" in *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology*, ed. Niels Henrik Gregersen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 28.

<sup>17</sup> John Polkinghorne, "Reservations" in *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology*, ed. Niels Henrik Gregersen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 357.

<sup>18</sup> Dirk Evers, "Incarnation and Faith," in *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology*, ed. Niels Henrik Gregersen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 313.

regarding human vocation in the world. According to the biblical account, the creation of humankind is not merely the next step in an evolutionary process. Rather, it is the culmination and climax of God's creative work. This is the final act of the drama toward which all creation—all evolutionary history—has been moving, the arrival of a creature created in God's image, a mediator between the God and all that is not God. This realization can indeed awaken us to awe, the sense that we play an important and pivotal role in an emerging drama of creative activity.<sup>19</sup>

The significance of humankind is not a one-off theme in the biblical text. The *Imago Dei* is first mentioned in the creation account (Gen 1:26–28) and is also mentioned again in a warning against murder (Gen 9:6). The psalmist marvels at the exalted status God has bestowed upon human beings, declaring, “You [YHWH] have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor. You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet” (Ps 8:5–6, NIV). In a passage already referenced above, the Apostle Paul also notes the key role of humanity in the redemption of the cosmos, “For creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed” (Rom 8:19, NIV).

An important feature of these passages and others regarding human identity is that they prescribe both a present and future *significance* to human identity. They do not merely describe the elevated status of humanity as a bare fact. Both the biblical and evolutionary accounts agree that humankind holds a unique and exceptional place in the history of life on this earth. Disagreements persist within the scientific community regarding what exactly has led to the global dominance of *homo sapiens* as a species. Human exceptionalism is often associated with our large brains, our capacity for abstract thought, our ability to use spoken language, our proficiency in making and using tools, our ability to quickly recognize and interpret patterns of behavior and symbols.<sup>20</sup> A Christian may well find this debate fascinating, but not in any way surprising. Whatever the historical or biological explanation for human exceptionalism may be, the theological explanation has been clear throughout Christian history. God intended and prescribed that human beings would be the exalted species on planet earth. We have been given a unique dignity of ontology as well as a unique dignity of vocation. The biblical account and theological framework of Christian belief here enter into meaningful and relevant dialogue with the evolutionary narrative, both by adding important and relevant purpose to human identity and human exceptionalism, as well as adding more to the telos of our existences than mere survival and perpetuation of our species.

### SELECTION AND SUFFERING

What, Gregersen asks, do the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus have to say in response to the long and bloody evolutionary history

<sup>19</sup> Wessling and Rasmussen, “A Randomness-Based Theodicy,” 989.

<sup>20</sup> For an accessible treatment on the evolutionary and historical advantage of *homo sapiens* as a species see Yuval Noah Harari *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), especially “Part I: The Cognitive Revolution,” 1–63.



of death that led to the emergence of *homo sapiens*?<sup>21</sup> For people of faith (Christian or otherwise) who affirm the existence of a good and benevolent Creator God, certain questions of theodicy are brought to light by evolutionary history. For Christians, one question is: if the Christ event is God's solution to suffering and death in His creation, why does this solution come so late in the history of the planet? Why would God wait so long to address the problem of death? As Gregersen frames the question: does the incarnation "offer any relevant perspective to problems of suffering and decay during these first 4 billion years of biological life?"<sup>22</sup> Is God's redemption in Christ limited—even scandalously limited—to this late-emerging genus of hominid, while utterly indifferent to the scores of billions of non-human creatures that lived and died before the first human appeared?

Given the emphases of deep incarnation discussed above, we can see that Christ has not merely entered into human experience but enters into nature red in tooth and in claw. On this account, one may argue that Jesus is not merely taking upon Himself the suffering of humankind from sin and death; He also takes on the suffering of non-human creation, of the multitudes of creatures who have been trampled underfoot by the competition for survival in evolutionary history. Jesus participates in this struggle as a "loser in the evolutionary arms race."<sup>23</sup> He does not procreate, and He is killed at a young age for the benefit of other creatures, just as many of the "losers" of evolutionary history were. By no means does this observation easily resolve all the questions of theodicy associated with gratuitous non-human suffering, just as Christ's suffering does not automatically resolve all tension in current experiences of human suffering. However, connection between Jesus' death and that of non-human creatures is worth noting nonetheless. For instance, given what we have noted above regarding our kinship with non-human creatures, our connection with our animal ancestors could potentially solve some of the problems here. Using appropriately nuanced language, Wessling and Rasmussen suggest that there may be some true way to speak of a correlation of identity between us and our non-human ancestors, which *could* in turn mean that our redemption is in some way a redemption of all the lives that have preceded ours.<sup>24</sup>

We should also note that the role of death and suffering in evolutionary history is potentially troubling not only for Christians. Non-believers may well ask themselves, "if I am here today because all of my ancestors (human and otherwise) were able to survive and reproduce (often at the expense, suffering, and death of the other, weaker and less well-adapted creatures around them), how then ought I live?" Evolutionary mechanisms favor

<sup>21</sup> Gregersen, "The Cross of Christ," 192.

<sup>22</sup> N.H. Gregersen, "Deep Incarnation: From Deep History to Post-Axial Religion," *HTS Theological Studies* 72.4 (2016), 2.

<sup>23</sup> Gregerson, "The Cross of Christ," 203.

<sup>24</sup> Wessling and Rasmussen, "A Randomness-Based Theodicy," 993–94. A potential objection to this is that this would not ostensibly include creatures that fall outside of the direct genealogical chain leading to *homo sapiens*, as is the case with the vast majority of species alive today.

competition and survival at any cost. Still, with the emergence of human beings it seems that for the first time evolution has produced a life-form that can question and evaluate the “oughtness” of the process that brought that very life-form into existence. Indeed, even the presence of these questions of “oughtness” in the human psyche should give us pause in adopting a purely naturalistic understanding of origins. Homo sapiens ask themselves not merely “How can I survive?” but also “How should I live?” While I do acknowledge the possibility that human moral questionings are themselves an evolutionary adaption that favors the survival and perpetuation of our species, we should ask ourselves why the mechanistic explanation for our existence is so unsatisfactory for human beings. Even as we give intellectual assent to naturalistic origins, we often still assume that the world has a teleological order in our everyday decision-making. Why not continue the trajectory of evolutionary progress where the strong survive and weak do not? All this is to say that many people—even most people—who accept the evolutionary picture of the emergence of life do not accept the values of natural selection as a totalizing narrative that should determine how he or she acts in the world.

In this regard, the Christian theological narrative speaks into the cognitive dissonance that may arise for some studying evolutionary history. The gospel of Jesus Christ provides a compelling worldview alternative to a totalized evolutionary naturalism. Indeed, the death and resurrection of Christ serves as precursor to the coming of the Kingdom of God, a New Creation that is not characterized by suffering, death, and competition with others, but rather love and service of others. Bethany Sollereder writes, “now that humanity is called into the role of being the image and likeness of God, a new law prevails. Love must now predominate over our evolutionary instincts.”<sup>25</sup> The creational tension on this side of the resurrection is unavoidable, but we need not let the unease that we feel make us despair of the final consummation and telos of the cosmos. The difficulty we have comprehending the purpose or justification for these sufferings does not itself imply that they are incomprehensible or will not be comprehensible by us in the future. Wessling and Rasmussen suggest that the current and dramatic state of creation may be similar to that of a developing work of art with rising tension and even dissonance. Presumably, the final work will help us see the beauty of the creative narrative as a whole.<sup>26</sup> This is the premise that there is some future, unseen aesthetic good to the suffering in the universe. This seems to be at least a possible biblical option given that it appears similar to the logic that Paul uses when he writes, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom 8:18). This is not to say the death and resurrection of Christ automatically cancel any and all of our concerns of theodicy. Far from it. Paul in this passage is speaking specifically of the

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<sup>25</sup> Bethany Sollereder, “From Survival to Love: Evolution and the Problem of Suffering,” *The Christian Century*, 131.19 (2014), 22.

<sup>26</sup> Wessling and Rasmussen, “A Randomness-Based Theodicy,” 990–91. They also note that this approach seems to work best when viewed as a system that allows for suffering, not as justification for an individual instance of suffering.



future aesthetic good that *Christians in particular* will experience in the new creation. It may well be the case that the logical extension to the suffering of non-believers or non-human creatures is not implied by Paul's logic. We should not be surprised that a fully satisfactory explanation eludes us in our current perspective. However, I believe we may still suggest the possibility that the resurrection of Christ may well be archetypal for a divine pattern of the life that comes from death in God's creation, a renewal of life that is inaugurated by and mediated only through Christ.

### CONCLUSION

I have sought in this paper to highlight three ways that the Christian faith is especially well positioned to speak into—not against—a culture whose “world picture” increasingly views evolutionary biology and common ancestry as a given. The Christian story tells of a good creation. Our faith teaches not only of the exalted state of humankind, but also their unique role in the world we inhabit. Christians also confess a Christ who has expressed solidarity with His creation in the incarnation, a God who has spoken an answer to the problem of suffering and death in the resurrection of Jesus. The goals of this paper have been modest and intentionally exploratory rather than exhaustive. I do not suppose I have solved or even delved especially deeply into the topic discussed above. I do, however, hope that I have noted the thematic resonance between some of the questions being explored in evolutionary history and in the story of the Christian faith.

While the methodology for theology and modern science are very different, their stated goals for understanding and explain a coherent view of the world are remarkably similar.<sup>27</sup> This serves as an important point of contact between believers in Christ and believers in science alike. Far from being opposed to one another, the impulses that drive both forms of study are quite congruent. We desire to understand the world in which we live, the story in which we find ourselves as individuals and as a species. These basic lines of human inquiry include such questions as, “How do I relate to the world around me?” “What is the place and role of human beings in this universe?” “Why is the cosmos plagued with death and suffering?” This is not to say that the two meta-narratives of Christianity and evolutionary history fit seamlessly together. Christianity does not solve every moral and intellectual dilemma created by an evolutionary system. Nor does embracing evolution as compatible with the Christian narrative remove all tension between the historical faith and the modern scientific consensus. Again, this paper has sought modestly to create avenues of discussion for pastors and believers who wonder at both sets of questions.

Admittedly, there is immense disparity within and among believing communities with regard to their attitudes toward evolutionary biology. Some churches are made up of a majority of people who hold a young-earth view, other churches consist of a majority of evolutionary creationists. I myself am part of a faith community where congregant beliefs are mixed.

<sup>27</sup> For more on this point, see Owen Gingerich, *God's Planet* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2014) 104.

I hope this paper will serve in some way as a call for pastors to care for congregants who do affirm an evolutionary picture of the emergence of life. It is important that ministers be pastorally sensitive and able to address the unique contours of theodicy within an evolutionary worldview. Additionally, many congregations have people in STEM field in their pews, the majority of whom lack the theological training that pastors have. In order to embody faithful gospel witness within our cultural context, it is important that pastors be able to keep these people in mind and the unique difficulties they will face (not to mention non-believers) when the doctrines of our faith are presented to them in the proclamation of Jesus Christ. This, I believe, is what it means to do faithful theology *within* our cultural moment.