



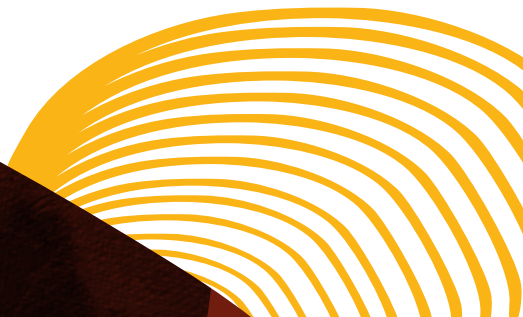
IN ALL THINGS
2022 THEMATIC DEVELOPMENT

—
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**in all
things**

2022 LCMS YOUTH GATHERING



PART 1: LIVING IN STORY

The Importance of Story

Everyone loves a story. From the little girl who climbs onto the lap of her grandfather to hear about his life on the farm to the middle school boy who picks up for the fourth time his favorite Harry Potter book, stories do more than entertain or amuse. They have a magnetic power. They draw people in and bring people together. Stories keep team members in the locker room long after the game has ended, campers around the fire long after the fireflies have settled down, and alumni at the reunion long after the program has ended.

Stories also help us make sense of our lives. If I asked you to tell me about yourself, you would choose a select number of details about your life and arrange them in a specific order. In doing so, you would tell a story, which would help me understand who you are, where you have been, and where you are going. Such story-telling doesn't take concerted effort. We do it naturally. Without thinking about it, we locate our individual experiences into a larger narrative to give our lives meaning. This is as necessary as it is natural. It prevents us from experiencing life as an incoherent collection of random and detached episodes. Philosopher Stephen Crites, who has written about the narrative quality of our experience, puts it like this: "Stories, and the symbolic worlds they project, are not like monuments that men behold, but like dwelling-places. People live in them."¹

In recent decades, narrative has been applied to many fields of study. Universities offer courses on narrative and geography, narrative law, narrative and public policy, narrative leadership, narrative physics, narrative engineering, and narrative architecture. You can even earn a masters of science in narrative medicine.² Theologians have also highlighted the significance of narrative for matters of religion and faith. William Willimon, an influential American preacher and theologian, suggests that the most basic difference between people of different belief systems is that they adhere to different stories. He explains:

"A Christian and a Buddhist differ, not because one is sincere and the other is not, nor because one is necessarily a 'better person' than the other. We differ because we have listened to different stories, lived our lives by different words. While there may be certain similarities among people of different religions, they will be different because their sacred writings are different, because they have attended to different accounts of the way the world is put together."³

In other words, people of different faith traditions (or no faith tradition) believe, teach, and confess more than isolated ideas. They conceive of the world and themselves according to a specific story of how all things fit together. Christians, for example, do not merely affirm the two natures of Christ, the authority of the Bible, or justification by grace through faith. They do believe these things, and these beliefs are important. But they only make sense within a larger story that encompasses all things. This Christian story begins with (and even before) creation, and it continues into the new creation and the life of the world to come. In the Christian story, nothing—in heaven or on earth, visible or invisible, in time or eternity—is left out. It includes *all things*.

The Challenge of Competing Stories

Among the most basic challenges facing the contemporary church is the existence of *other* all-encompassing stories. There is competition, you might say, for understanding how all things fit together. This hasn't always been the case. For many centuries, Christians (in the West, at least) could take for granted the major contours of the Christian story. We called this society Christendom. It was probably never fully Christian, but life in

1 Stephen D. Crites. "The Narrative Quality of Experience." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39 (1971): 295.

2 See David R. Schmitt, "Telling God's Story," *Concordia Journal* (2014) 40:2, pg. 103.

3 William H. Willimon, *Shaped by the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 12–13.

Christendom was shaped significantly by the Christian story. It was believed throughout Christendom, for example, that God exists and created all things; that the Scriptures are the authoritative Word of God; and that all people need to be saved for a coming day of judgment. Intense debates about the specifics occupied the church's energy and attention. (Recall early church debates about the relationship between the Father and the Son, Enlightenment debates about how to interpret the Scriptures rightly, and Reformation debates about the role of the individual human in salvation.) But notice what was happening in these debates. Everyone assumed the same story. The Christian account of how all things fit together provided the context for making sense of everything else, including which doctrines were even worth debating.

Things have changed. Today we live *after* Christendom. Which is another way of saying there is no longer a single overarching story that provides a shared context for the church, much less for society. Instead, we live in a culture where people, in close proximity, live by vastly distant stories. Google's calendar is a case in point. Notice the festivals that appear under the label "US Holidays." In addition to Easter and Christmas, my phone also tells me the dates for Ramadan and Eid al Adha (Islam), and Diwali and Holi (Hinduism). I can't say for sure, but I'm willing to bet these holidays didn't appear in my grandma's kitchen calendar back in 1950. In comparison to Christianity, these other religions do not simply teach false doctrines. They do, of course. But more fundamentally, they conceive of *all things* in a way that is incompatible with the Christian story. Likewise with some prevailing philosophical systems, such as idealism⁴, materialism⁵, and scientism.⁶ They don't simply disagree with Christianity on a few fringe ideas. They completely contradict the Christian account of all things. They tell different stories about who we are, where we come from, and where we are going.⁷

Complicating matters is the fact that, in addition to obviously opposing stories such as the ones just mentioned, there are also versions (or, more accurately, distortions) of the Christian story that often pass for Christianity. In many cases, these versions are too far from the biblical story to be considered Christian—even though they identify as such, and even though they affirm selected biblical passages and ideas. Jehovah Witnesses and Mormons are officially organized examples. Less formal is the so-called "prosperity gospel," and there are others.⁸ The Christian façade of these stories makes it necessary for Christians to do more than affirm individual biblical truths (such as creation *ex nihilo*, plenary biblical inspiration, or justification through faith). Even such foundational Christian beliefs can be coopted to serve a different story.

A well-known and widespread distortion of the Christian story has been described by sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton. They call it "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" (MTD).⁹ This story of God and the world is characterized by a set five beliefs:

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- 4 Idealism is the philosophy which asserts that reality is indistinguishable from human understanding and/or perception.
 - 5 Materialism is a form of philosophy that holds that matter is the fundamental substance in nature, and that all things, including mental states and consciousness, are only results of material interactions.
 - 6 Scientism is the promotion of science as the best or only objective means by which society should determine normative values.
 - 7 For a fuller consideration of Christianity in relation to other religions and philosophies, see Joel P. Okamoto, "The Word of the Cross and the Story of Everything" in *Concordia Journal* 45.3 (Summer 2019), pg. 51-66.
 - 8 Theologian John W. Wright, for example, describes two compelling conceptions of Christianity among Christians that have distorted the biblical message. He calls the first "Sin-Salvation-Service," which conceives of Christianity as an individual's experience of sin and grace, which results in a life of service in preparation for dying and going to heaven. Left out of this story are such things as the church, the sacraments, and the return of Jesus. He calls the second the "Puritan Federal Covenant." This conception identifies America as the new Israel. It is God's chosen nation, which is proven by its material success and "blessings" from God. Missing from this story is the cross, the identity of Jesus (and the church) as the new Israel, and the reign of God over all things. See his *Telling God's Story: Narrative Preaching for Christian Formation*, (InterVarsity Press, 2007), especially chapter 2.
 - 9 Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

1. A God exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life (except when needed to resolve a problem).
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

According to MTD, the God of the universe is, above all, nice. The story begins when God created the world. Since then, he has been overseeing a general moral order characterized by fairness and kindness for all. He is not particularly involved in our lives, especially in areas we don't want him involved. But, like a good therapist, he is always there when we need him. God's ultimate purpose is to assist us in our pursuit of happiness, success, and freedom. The story ends when each of us (since we are the main character in this story) dies and goes to heaven. Why do we think we will go to heaven? Because, well, most of us are relatively good people and God is, above all, nice. The MTD story fits nicely with such American ideals as rugged individualism, manifest destiny, and a capitalist economy.

The problem with MTD is that, while it employs *some* biblical ideas, it does not follow the Christian story of all things. It is a narrative distortion. You might even call it a hijacking. It gives the impression that it is biblical by selecting isolated passages, reading them in light of some more basic cultural ideals, and piecing them together under the banner of "God bless America." It reminds me of my neighbor in Minnesota. A lapsed Catholic, he attended the non-denominational church in town once or twice a year with his family. He even visited our congregation once. Most Sunday mornings, however, he was working in the yard, hunting in the stand, fishing on the lake, or lounging in bed. Around the bonfire in my backyard one night, he asked me (as the neighborhood Bible expert) to remind him which Bible verse says God helps those who help themselves. He was surprised to hear it wasn't there. According to MTD (and my neighbor), God is the servant to the individual's self-made and self-centered narrative. Kenda Creasy Dean calls the church that has adopted this story "the Church of Benign Whatever-ism," or "Christian-ish."¹⁰

The Biblical Story of All Things

We should not underestimate the impact distortions of the Christian story have had on the youth (and adults) who will attend the 2022 LCMS Youth Gathering. While most Gathering attendees are baptized and confirmed, the air they breathe (which is the same air we breathe!) is constantly telling and reinforcing a variety of competing stories. The specific story depends on their local context, media consumption, and family background. What has been said about all Christians applies to the participants at the Gathering: "We are formed not only by baptism but by a host of other masters."¹¹

IN ALL THINGS is a reminder that the Christian story encompasses **all things**. Nothing, and no one, is left out. Further, this story rules out all other overarching stories. Christians believe there is only *one* story of all things, and this is it! This is an audacious claim, especially in today's pluralistic context. Which is why it requires some vindication. (We'll get to that in Part 2 of this study.) At this point, we should simply recognize that the Christian story makes two fundamental claims: (1) this story includes us all, and (2) this story includes all of each of us.

¹⁰ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Oxford University Press, 2010). See especially chapters 1-2.

¹¹ William Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized*. Eerdmans, 1992. 75.

Claim #1: This story includes us all.

The Christian story of all things is universal and inclusive. That is, it calls for belief and acceptance from all people, not only Christians. This is the foundation and motivation for the church's evangelistic mission. This should be clear to anyone who reads Genesis 12, John 1, or Matthew 28 (much less the rest of the Bible). Take Jonah, for example. Despite his attempts to get out of the story by getting out of town, God made it clear that he was part of something bigger than himself. And much to Jonah's chagrin, so were the Ninevites! The inclusive nature of the story was explicit in Jesus' ministry. Samaritans, tax collectors, prostitutes, Romans soldiers—he included all of them under his gracious reign. What began with individuals in his ministry extended to everyone in his resurrection. He explicitly told the disciples that repentance and forgiveness of sins would be preached to all nations, and at Pentecost this mission began in full. Inclusivity, which is a supposed virtue today, is central to the Christian narrative. Indeed, it would be good and right to call the story of Christ and his relationship to all things a story of radical inclusion.

There is resistance to the universal scope of the church's mission, however. The resistance comes from both inside and outside the church, and it is strong. Consider the popular slogan, "You do you." The idea is simple. Each person is his or her own authority. I know what is best for myself, and I am responsible for creating a meaningful existence on my own terms. This includes crafting my own personal story. Neil Patrick Harris' autobiography is an example. It is called *Choose Your Own Autobiography* (2014), and it's written in the style of a choose-your-own-adventure book. The back cover says it has "put the U back in aUtobiography." *NY Times* best-selling author Sarah Knight is even more explicit. Her recent book is called *You Do You: How to Be Who You Are and Use What You've Got to Get What You Want* (2017). For Knight, and for the 7.5 million-plus people who watch her TED talks, conformity to an external story is out. Self-acceptance and uniqueness are in. Rather than fit into someone else's account of all things, each individual should create his or her own narrative. The stranger, the better. Knight explains, "I do declare that we, as a society, should celebrate weirdness in all its forms—and that the right to be weird should be inalienable—just like the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."¹²

In this celebration of weirdness, the greatest sin is to suggest, much less insist on, adherence to a single overarching narrative. (Never mind that the pressure to be authentically unique has essentially become its own rigidly imposed narrative!) Faith, it is said, may be an important part of *your* story. But keep it to yourself. In this context, Christians are increasingly uncomfortable thinking (much less saying) that their view is *the* right way for all people of all times and places. It is more common for Christians to conceive of their faith as a matter of personal preference. You are familiar with this kind of thinking: "Christianity is good for me. Perhaps also for my family. But I don't wear it on my sleeve. And I certainly wouldn't impose it on others." The impact of this mindset in the church can be seen in the lack of urgency in the church's missionary task. Rather than being driven by evangelistic zeal toward the inclusion of all people, the church is often characterized by a disturbing sense of apathy toward unbelievers.¹³

Claim #2: This story includes all of each of us.

While the first claim addresses the Christian's relationship with others, the second addresses the Christian's life as it is lived out each day. That is, the first has to do with evangelism and mission;

¹² Published by Little, Brown and Company, 2017 (loc 2130 ebook). Her previous best-selling books include *The Life-Changing Magic of Not Giving a F*ck*. (More than 7.5 million people have watched her TED Talk with the same name.)

¹³ For a convicting examination of apathy among believers, see a brief article by Jonathan Rauch in the *Atlantic* called "Let It Be" (May 2003). He coins the term "apatheism" to describe HOW believers live out (or neglect to live out) their faith in public. It can be found here: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2003/05/let-it-be/302726/>

the second has to do with stewardship and vocation. This claim insists that living according to the Christian story is living a life that is *fully* Christian.

Which reminds me of the baptism of the Gauls. Mark Allan Powell begins his book about stewardship with this (probably fictitious) story:

“Have you heard the story about the baptism of the Gauls? It may not be historically factual, but this is not a history book so we won’t worry too much about that. The Gauls were a warlike people who in ancient times inhabited what is now France and Belgium. They spoke a Celtic language and were Druidic by religion. By the time of the Christian era they had been conquered by the Roman Empire and were supposedly under its control. The extent of this control varied, however, for the Gauls never did take too well to being conquered and there were numerous Gallic uprisings.

A number of Christian missionaries ventured in Gallic territory and, over time, many of the Gauls became Christians. As the story goes, when a converted warrior was baptized in a river or stream, he would hold one arm high in the air as the missionary dunked him under the water. This seemed a peculiar custom and the missionaries soon learned the reason for it. When the next battle or skirmish broke out, the warlike Gaul could proclaim, ‘This arm is not baptized’, grab up his club or sword or ax, and ride off to destroy his enemy in a most un-Christian manner.

As I’ve indicated, this story is probably not historically authentic. . . I just find the image so compelling: the picture of someone—anyone—trying to keep one part of their body, one aspect of their identity, free from the influence of baptism.”¹⁴

The Christian story of all things is radically inclusive on a personal level, too. It includes *all things* in your life and mine. Nothing was left out when we were baptized. It shapes our relationships, our jobs, our hobbies, our spending habits, our eating habits, our exercise habits, our dating habits, our sports schedules, our politics, our interactions at school, our interactions online, our interactions on vacation, our thinking about ourselves, our thinking about others, and our thinking about the purpose of life. In baptism, **all things** in our lives are brought under the gracious rule and reign of Jesus Christ. The story includes *all* of each of us.

The repercussions of this claim are far reaching. They also present a challenge for Christians (like most of us) who are accustomed to compartmentalizing our relationship with God. We tend to treat our faith like one more class in the school day. We understand that it occupies an important place. Call it “first hour.” But what we do during first hour has little to do with the other classes in our schedule, and even less with our extra-curricular activities. As a result, our lives are fragmented. We think, speak, and act one way at church. When the setting changes, so do we.

But if baptism is really what Paul says it is—if it is *Christian*—it is not merely one part of our lives. It does not merely shape what happens before we eat meals, where we go on Sunday mornings, how we greet people at Christmas, and what happens when we die. Baptism transforms every aspect of every day of every one of our lives.

¹⁴ Mark Allan Powell, *Giving to God: The Bible’s Good News about Living a Generous Life*. (Eerdmans, 2006), xi-xii.

*A Few Words of Terminological Caution

As we consider the importance of dealing with narrative in the 2022 LCMS Youth Gathering, several words of caution are in order:

1. We should notice that the word “narrative” has become increasingly popular in our cultural conversation. Social influencers speak regularly about “changing the narrative,” “twisting the narrative,” and “pushing a narrative.” This often coincides with the idea that there is no single, overarching story of all things, but rather only a collection of personal and contextual narratives vying for position. We do not want to give the impression (much less suggest) that the Christian narrative is merely one narrative among many equally valid possibilities. To repeat, Christians believe that there is only one true story of all things, and this is it!

On the other hand, we recognize and affirm that everyone has their own experience within the Christian narrative. In our pluralistic context, these experiences are increasingly varied. That is, everyone has their own story within *the Story*.¹⁵ We must not minimize this great variety of experiences of the participants at the Gathering. Much to the contrary, we should highlight this variety. Each of us has unique experiences and perspectives that are necessary for the church to be the church. Paul’s image of the church as a body with many parts in 1 Corinthians 12 comes to mind.

Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* offers a useful image of what this looks like. The hobbits, both collectively and as individuals, have unique stories. They share a similar hometown and background, but they have different roles to play. Before, during, and after their mission to save Middle Earth, they maintain their distinctive perspectives and roles. Likewise, the elf, the dwarf, and the men come from different places and bring different skills to the task. (Dwarves, for instance, are not suited for long distances. They are much better at sprinting.) Each of them maintains their individuality and makes their own specific contributions. But they all participate in the same story. This emphasis on unity and diversity should similarly characterize *IN ALL THINGS*.

2. We are sensitive to the fact that talking *about* narrative is not the same as *proclaiming* the Christian narrative. While we need to call out false narratives and distortions of the Christian narrative, we do not intend for this to be known as the “narrative” Gathering. We don’t want participants returning home from the Gathering with the term “narrative” on their minds. Instead, we want to proclaim the Christian story of all things so fully and extensively that participants go home envisioning all aspects of their lives according to this story.
3. We recognize that some people have concerns about using the word “story” to talk about the Christian faith. Such concerns seem to come from difficulty separating “story” from “fiction.” We want to be sensitive to this concern and avoid causing undue offense. But we also feel strongly that the narrative dimension of the Christian faith needs to be elevated. We think these concerns can be alleviated if we are explicit about the historical accuracy of the Christian story. Similar to when the evening news speaks about the “lead story,” we will communicate that the Christian story is an accurate depiction of reality. It is not fiction!

At the same time, we are not out to *prove* that Christ is in all things, or that the Christian story is the most *reasonable* explanation of all things. The good news is not that the Christian story is historically accurate, but that God, in Christ, is gracious and merciful to us. Rather than trying to argue for the truth of Christian story, we will proclaim it. To do so, the promise of God in

¹⁵ Capital letters may work well in print, but not in programing. We’ll need to find a way to speak of individual’s stories and The Story in a way that maintains this tension.

Christ, which can only be received by faith, must dominate the messaging and programming of the entire Gathering.

PART 2: THE CHRISTIAN STORY ACCORDING TO COLOSSIANS

The Story of Christ and All Things

There are many ways we could summarize the Christian story. No single Bible passage says, “This is the biblical story of all things.” There are, however, passages in the Scriptures that offer broad narrative summaries. Psalm 136, for example, is a song of praise to God for all he has done and will do. Nehemiah 9 is another example. It retells the story from creation up until to the return from exile. In the New Testament, Jesus summarizes the bigger story in his preaching in Matthew 11, his parables in Matthew 13 and 21-22, and his message for the disciples in Luke 24. Mary proclaims the story in her *Magnificat* in Luke 1, and the apostles retell the story in their preaching in the book of Acts (see chapters 2, 3, 4, 10, 13, and 17). Each of these, to varying degrees and with varying amounts of detail, summarize the Christian story of all things.

We also find summaries of the Christian story in a number of the church’s hymns and prayers. “Of the Father’s Love Begotten,” “How Great Thou Art,” and “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty” all tell the larger Christian story in broad strokes. So does the *Te Deum*. It gathers together prophets, apostles, martyrs, the church, and all creation to sing praise to the eternal Father and his Son together with the Spirit. It concludes by proclaiming that the Son will return as judge and king. “Thy Strong Word,” the hymn by Martin Franzmann, also goes big with the narrative. It proclaims Christ as the light who cleaved the darkness at creation. He continues to order the seasons. This light spoke to those living in darkness and breathed his own life-giving Spirit into them. He bespeaks us righteous, shapes our lives to confess and our mouths to proclaim his holy name. He fills our songs, together with mortals and angels, now and forever, with alleluias without end. (Contrast these hymns and their retelling of the Christian story of all things with the familiar hymn, “I Love to Tell the Story.” Ironically, this hymn talks a lot *about* the Christian story, but doesn’t actually tell it.)¹⁶

Among the most familiar versions of the Christian story are the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. These summaries of the Christian faith do more than identify important doctrinal beliefs. They describe reality according to a story. They begin with creation, continue by highlighting the redeeming work of Christ in his death and resurrection, and end with the return of Christ and the life of the world to come. Within this story they affirm specific beliefs. But even more so, they provide the narrative context for Christian thinking about how all things fit together. Their narrative quality is one of the reasons they have stood the test of time and remain significant and helpful still today.

It’s worth noting, however, that neither the Apostles’ nor the Nicene Creed includes every detail in the biblical story. That would be impossible, of course. But still, these creeds leave out some pretty important details. They do not explicitly mention, for example, the call of Abraham, the Exodus and wandering in the desert, the Davidic kingdom, the exile and return, the baptism and ministry of Jesus, the Lord’s Supper, Pentecost, or the mission of the church. The omission of such details does not negate their value or usefulness. But these omissions *do* remind us that the creeds were written in a specific time and for a specific purpose. (In the case of the Nicene Creed, for example, one primary purpose was to guard against Trinitarian heresies.) But even with these gaps, the creeds provide an overarching narrative context within which these important details could easily be included. (For example, calling Jesus “Christ” entails the messianic prophecies from the Old

¹⁶ Another liturgical example of telling the story can be seen in the Litany. While the Litany focuses less on the narrative movement of the biblical story, it is explicit in its inclusion of Jesus’ entire life. It is also remarkably comprehensive in addressing all things for which we pray here and now.

Testament, and the Nicene Creed’s description of the church as “apostolic” entails Pentecost and the mission of the church.)

Colossians: Telling the Story of All Things

Creeds, hymns, and prayers are all ways in which the church across the centuries has told the Christian story. They were all composed in specific times and places to emphasize specific details that needed attention. Which makes me wonder. If we were to tell the Christian story *today*, in a pluralistic culture, in a “you do you” culture, among Christians who are tempted to exempt certain aspects of their lives from their baptismal identify and life, what might it sound like? What would we highlight? How would we tell the story?

Colossians provides some helpful guidance. Indeed, we have decided that the 2022 LCMS Youth Gathering will tell the Christian story using Paul’s letter to the Christians in Colossae. We have chosen this letter because it proclaims, as clearly and as densely as anywhere else in the Scriptures, Christ’s relationship to **all things**. (In four relatively short chapters, Paul uses the Greek word for “all” 39 times.) Christ is the source of **all** life and the goal of **all** creation. He is the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer of **all** things. He is the firstborn of **all** creation and the firstborn in the resurrection of **all** the dead. **All** the fullness of God dwells in him, and he rules over **all** authorities. In him are **all** the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. More than that, he forgives **all** our sins, reconciling **all** believers to himself for **all** eternity. He extends his work into **all** the world as we walk in him in **all** manner of living. To do this, he fills us with **all** spiritual wisdom and understanding, and strengthens us with **all** power and patience and endurance. In short, “**Christ is all, and in all**” (Col. 3:11).

The entire letter of Colossians proclaims the supremacy of Christ fully and clearly. But we have chosen Colossians 1:15-20 as the Gathering theme verses to provide even more focus. In these six verses, which most commentators think was originally sung as a hymn (somewhat like Philippians 2:5-11), Paul accomplishes two significant things. First, he unambiguously announces the supremacy of Christ as Lord and God. Second, he does this by outlining the major movements of the Christian story in a way that encompasses all things. Read through these verses slowly and pay attention to both the supremacy of Christ and the narrative movement.

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Notice the story told in these verses. The story begins with Jesus, who is before all things. All creation came into existence through him, and all is held together by him. In his incarnation all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. Through his cross he reconciled all things to himself, and he is the first (of many) to rise from the dead. As the risen Lord, he is the head of all things, including the church. He reigns over all things, and all things exist for him and his praise. Theologian N. T. Wright says these six verses “are generally, and rightly, reckoned among the most important Christological passages in the New Testament.”¹⁷

Colossians: Background

The city of Colossae was probably the least significant among all the churches to which Paul wrote New Testament letters. Several centuries before the birth of Christ, Colossae had been an important crossroads of two major highways. This brought many diverse ideas and philosophies to town. The city was known for

¹⁷ N.T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon* (Eerdmans, 1986), 64.

its textile industry and the high quality dark red wool it produced (known as “Colossian wool”). But as trade routes shifted, Colossae was left behind and business went elsewhere. The diverse philosophies, however, seem to have stuck around.

Paul himself probably never had any direct contact with the city of Colossae. He was not the founder of the church there (1:7) and he never met many of the members of the church face to face (2:1). He depended on Epaphras to hear about what was happening (1:8) and Tychichus to deliver his message to them (4:7-8).

Scholars don’t know exactly what prompted Paul to write this letter. Like all biblical epistles, we hear only one end of Paul’s interaction with them. But commentators agree that a primary purpose in writing this letter was to guard Christians living in Colossae against the dangers of false teaching. The precise nature of the false teaching is not clear. Paul speaks of hollow and deceptive philosophy (2:8), dependence on human traditions (2:8, 16, 21-22) and elemental spiritual forces of the world (2:8), worship of angels, asceticism, visions, and pride (2:18, 23). He goes on to warn against living according to worldly standards and behaviors (3:5, 8-9), but rather to live faithfully and distinctly as God’s chosen people (3:12-13) by loving one another (3:14). A thorough and comprehensive examination of the false teaching in Colossians has described it as “syncretistic folk belief.”¹⁸ That is, the culture in Colossae encouraged people to bring together a variety of teachings and ideas—some good and right, and others false and destructive. A little of this, and a little of that, and the end result was a variety of personally constructed spiritualities. The Christians in Colossae were tempted to bring into their faith in Jesus a syncretistic blur of Jewish and pagan beliefs. Sounds a little like the First Century’s version of “you do you,” right?

Colossians: The Big Idea and Its Spokes

While the precise nature of the false teaching in Colossae was uncertain, Paul’s response was crystal clear. It could be summarized with one word: Christ. He is the fullness of the deity. He is over all and in all and through all. He is the beginning and the end and everything in between. Christ is the single “big idea” in Paul’s letter to the Colossians, and he will be the single big idea at the 2022 Youth Gathering.

To say that Christ is the big idea for the Gathering is not very helpful for a theological study document, however. The right answer at many children’s messages may be “Jeee-sus,” but there is more we can and should say about Christ as we plan *IN ALL THINGS*. Colossians is helpful here, too. Paul proclaims Christ by highlighting a number of significant truths about Jesus’ relationship to all things. You might imagine a wagon wheel. Christ, the fullness of God, is the center. He is the hub. From him, like the spokes of a wheel that radiate outward, several Christ-centered themes emerge.¹⁹ In this way, Colossians is a useful letter for the Youth Gathering. We will focus on 1:15-20, but like the rest of the letter, we will address significant themes and ideas that radiate from Christ. We suggest that these five themes be the main theological talking points that the Gathering and its language centers upon. These Colossian themes are:

- 1. Christ is the Creator of all things and becomes a creature Himself, entering into His own creation.**
- 2. Christ reconciles all things to himself through his death and resurrection.**
- 3. Christ (risen, ascended, complete, sovereign) reigns over all authorities inside and outside of the church.**
- 4. Christ transforms the lives of all his people into his image.**
- 5. Christ promises to return to restore all things and make his reign explicit for all to see.**

¹⁸ Clinton Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface Between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae*. (Mohr and Siebeck, 1995).

¹⁹ For the wheel/spokes metaphor, see Douglas Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Eerdmans, 2008), 63.

As these major themes demonstrate, Colossians is an ambitious letter. So is the 2022 LCMS Youth Gathering. We are claiming that Christ reigns in and through and over all things. We are also claiming that the Christian story is the only story that accurately describes all things. Especially in a pluralistic context, these claims need to be justified. We should have a clear reason why we, much less anyone else, should believe this story.

This leads us to one thing, and one thing alone: the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. As one commentator summarizes the Christian story: “The entire narrative boasts of one central substance: Jesus of Nazareth is Lord of all. That boast flowed from one and only one source: the resurrection of Jesus.”²⁰ To say that the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead vindicates the Christian story is to follow the logic of Paul’s resurrection discourse in 1 Corinthians 15:

“If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain . . . If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins . . . But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep . . . For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power” (1 Cor. 15:14, 17, 20, 22-24).

The importance of the resurrection cannot be overstated. It is the foundation of the Christian faith. A brief rehearsal of the Christian story shows why:

The Christian story begins with God creating all things. He makes it all good. But then evil enters his creation and corrupts all things. Not surprising, God is not pleased. He curses what he made, but also promises redemption and restoration of all things (especially his human creatures). He begins this gracious work through Abraham and his children. The story continues with this family and their struggle to trust God’s promises and obey God’s commands. To encourage, rebuke, and call this family back to himself, God sends prophets to speak on his behalf. But they do not listen, and their rejection means defeat and exile. God does not forget his promises, however, and so he sends his Son to deliver his people from their sin and establish God’s reign over all things. They do not listen to the Son, however, and they kill him. Had he stayed dead, his claims would have been proved false. But he doesn’t stay dead. **He rises on the third day.** In doing so, he vindicates his work and his words—all the things he had said and would say. He proceeds to send his disciples to continue his work by teaching and restoring, witnessing and inviting others into the family. Finally, he ascends into the clouds with a promise to return on the last day and restore all things. On that day, everything will be really, really good.²¹

Notice the importance of the resurrection in this telling of the Christian story. It is the hinge on which the entire story turns. The resurrection of Jesus...

...transformed the lives of the disciples from a band of fearful scaredy cats to a company of fearless martyrs.

...fulfilled the promise of Jesus in John 2:22 to raise the destroyed temple, thus justifying every claim he made throughout his life and ministry.

²⁰ Scot McKnight, *The Letter to the Colossians*. (Eerdmans, 2018), 1.

²¹ This is a slightly revised version of the Christian story from an article I wrote called, “The Preacher as Worldmaker: Reflections on the Nature and Purpose of Christian Preaching” in *Concordia Journal* (Winter 2020), 71-82.

...provided the impetus for Jesus to extend his mission to all nations, including the Gentiles as fellow members of the chosen people of God.

...vindicates our proclamation of the Gospel and our insistence that the Christian story is the only true story that includes all things.

In short, we believe the Christian story because Jesus rose from the dead. Period.

Our Place IN ALL THINGS

You may have noticed that, up to this point, we haven't said much about *our place* in this story. We have focused on Christ. That's appropriate, for Christ is the focus in Paul's letter to the Colossians. But there is also a place in this story *for us*. God has graciously included us. Indeed, this is where the resurrection becomes personally important to you and me. The resurrected Christ sent his disciples to proclaim his name to all nations, beginning with Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and extending to the ends of the earth. Through the missionary faithfulness of his church across the ages, we have been grafted into the story as members of God's family and participants in his story. Christ has reconciled us to the Father, and he is transforming our lives for service in his kingdom.

The means by which we have entered this story is God's Word. From the beginning of the story to the end, God interacts with his creation by speaking. Most of the time he speaks to his people by speaking *through* his people. It happened in the OT through prophets, in the NT through Jesus, and then his apostles, and it happens in the church through pastors, DCE's, teachers, youth leaders, volunteers, parents, friends, and all baptized Christians. Through such people as our parents, pastors, and fellow Christians, God has addresses us personally and directly. He makes known to us himself and his will. Through his Word he informs us, but that's not all. His Word, which is living and active, has had an effect on us. That is, through his Word, he not only SAYS things. He also DOES things. He comforts us and challenges us. He humbles us and he empowers us. He brings us down and he lifts us up. He does this by speaking commands and promises, instructions and encouragement, or (to use a familiar distinction) law and gospel.

The distinction of law and gospel helps us read the Scriptures rightly and understand the mission we've been given appropriately. It also helps us think about the *impact* of God's Word in our lives. That is, we distinguish law and gospel not only to ensure that what we say is accurate. We also make the distinction to help us live faithfully as the people of God. Consider, for example, the impact of the supremacy of Christ in *your* life. When you think about the all-encompassing scope of Christ's reign over *all things*, what goes through your heart and mind? (You might want to go back and reread Colossians and notice its impact on you personally.)

Are you comforted?

Are you convicted?

Do you think about the changes that need to take place in your life?

Do you find encouragement and guidance to live faithfully?

Does it lead you to sing songs of praise?

Does it lead you to pray prayers of repentance?

While God does all of these things at various times, there is no formula for how God will work through his Word at any given moment. Where and when he pleases, God does these kinds of things according to his perfect will. We must keep in mind that, despite our best efforts and planning, we don't always know which of these things God is going to do in the hearts and minds of those who hear. The message that Christ is reigning over all things can comfort the youth who is afraid, and it can convict the youth who is trying to hide something.

Our job at the Gathering is not to decide in advance the precise impact of our proclamation. But we should be aware of the types of things God has promised to do through his Word and program with that in mind.

To help us do so, we could divide much of what Paul says to the Colossians into these two categories:

1. Good News Promise (Gospel)

God speaks promises to create faith, encourage hearts, and strengthen the lives those who hear and believe. Throughout this letter Paul proclaims the promises of God clearly and repeatedly. Consider these explicit examples:

1:13-14 – “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of our sins.”

2:11-13 – “In him you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him by baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

2:13 – “And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands.”

3:3-4 – “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”

Notice that the promises in these verses employ a variety of images and metaphors. Paul speaks of darkness and light, transfer into the kingdom of Christ, redemption, forgiveness, death and life, baptismal unity with Christ, canceling the debt of sin, and the promise of eternal glory at the return of Christ. The variety of promises in Colossians offers the Gathering a variety of ways to proclaim the fullness and depth of the Gospel.²²

Notice also that God is the one doing these good things for us. HE has delivered us. HE has transferred us. In HIM we have redemption and forgiveness. HE who raised Jesus also raises us. HE made us alive. HE canceled the debt of sin. HE will make us appear with Christ in glory. The gracious work of God in Christ is always a result of his gracious working *for us*.

2. Challenge and Commands (Law)

One commentator describes Paul’s account of Christian living in Colossians in this way: “Few texts in the New Testament make the case so clearly that Christian living must be rooted in Christ.”²³ Christ is all, and in all. He is the head of all things, and that includes our new life in him. Paul prays that the Colossian Christians would “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord” (1:10), and that applies to all Christians of all times. But what does this look like? Consider the ways Paul describes the Christian life:

1:9-11 – He prays that they would “be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,” that they would be “bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God,” and that their lives would be characterized by “all endurance and patience with joy.”

²² For a helpful description of the variety of ways in which the Scriptures proclaim the Gospel, see Jacob A. O. Preus, *Just Words: Understanding the Fullness of the Gospel*. CPH, 2000.

²³ McKnight, 69.

2:6-7 – He encourages them to “walk in him” by following what they have been taught and live lives “abounding in thanksgiving.”

3:1-2 – “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.”

3:5-10 – “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry . . . But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.”

3:12-16 – “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”

3:18-4:1 – Paul gives vocationally specific instructions to members of the household.

4:5-6 – “Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”

As we reflect on the ways in which Paul talks about the Christian life, two distinctions appear. First, Paul talks regularly about the difference between the resurrected life, which has its mind set on things above, and the earthly life, which is governed by things below. Second, he describes the difference between the “old” life and the “new” life in Christ.

Above and below, old and new—these opposites remind us that the resurrection of Jesus changes *all things* in our lives. As baptized and resurrected children of God, we do not live as the rest of the world lives. We “walk” differently. Perhaps the simplest and most succinct description of the Christian life is found in Colossians 3:17, “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” This is a tall order. If we take it seriously, it will expose the ways in which we fall short. That’s the law as a mirror. But it will also lead us to a new manner of life. The law is also a guide. We need to be aware that these challenges and commands function in both ways. This is also why we, as Gathering planners and servants of the youth in our church, should “continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving (4:2).