

Trinity Te Deum

The official newsletter for Trinity Lutheran Church

1207 West 45 Street Austin, Texas 78756

Interim Pastor Brock Abbott - (512) 453-3835 Church

Sunday School and Bible Study 9:15 AM - Divine Service 10:30 AM

Another Great Experiment

On January 9, 1790, in a letter to Catharine Sawbridge Macaulay Graham, George Washington wrote: "The establishment of our new Government seemed to be the last great experiment for promoting human happiness, by reasonable compact, in civil Society."

When I was asked to be the vacancy pastor at Trinity, I thought of these words of Washington. I thought to myself that this is going to be a "great experiment" for me and for Trinity, and I hope that it will end up in "human happiness." So far, I think, or hope, things are happy, other than losing Pr. Harris to retirement.

What hit me hard was the fact that in and out of the Mo. Synod, I have been a vacancy pastor many times, but this is the first time I am a vacancy pastor where the congregation is 942 miles away, 13 hrs. and 45 minutes by car. "How in the world are we going to pull this off?" I thought to myself, "we are going to have to think outside the box, while maintaining our good principles."

The Lord has put everything together. First, Trinity has a strong board of elders and a dedicated call committee, and they were already plowing the ground before I started. They care with all their hearts and want the very best for Trinity, and so do I. Second, there are pastors still in the Mo. Synod, active and retired, who have proven faithful, who are sympathetic to our confessional stand, who deeply care about what's best for Trinity, and are willing and eager to help. Third, technology has made it possible for me to do a lot to keep the lines of communication going in many ways, especially, through video conferencing.

The only thing I really dislike is being so far away. Still, I am eagerly looking forward to visiting you in person when I am able, which is nowhere near as much as I would like. And technology, at least in this instance, is a blessing in that you can, and are more than welcome, to contact me on a level that would have been impossible not that long ago.

So, I think things are happy even while we miss Pr. Harris. He has some big shoes to fill, although I know he would temper my statement with genuine humility. Thank you for entrusting to me the work of keeping Pr. Harris' excellent work intact for your next shepherd. The Lord already knows who he is going to be, and he is leading us to him in his gracious and impeccable timing. At this point, I pray that the Lord continue to show us his guidance and grant us strength to carry out our new work together to the glory of his name!

I am here for you, grateful to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ that he has brought us together, binding us in unity and in the mutual conversation and consolation at the cross. I am thankful that I have this opportunity to serve and help you in one of the most sacred duties given to a congregation, which is to divinely call a shepherd to preach the pure Word and administer the Sacraments according to Christ's institution. It is a great gift to be a part of that task, and I continually pray that the Lord will open and close doors as he sees fit and give us the insight and wisdom to embrace it all while growing in our faith and walk with Jesus! Again, if there is anything you need, I am here for you in Christ.

Yours servant, Pastor Brock Abbott

The What About Pamphlets

Not that long ago, I found myself reading some of the “What About Pamphlets” written by Dr. A. L. Barry. The series began in 1996, two years shy from 30 years ago. Many of the pamphlets are still available, with an introduction added in 2001, by Rev. Paul T. McCain titled, “Unchanging Truth in Changing Times: The Complete Collection of the What About Pamphlets.”

The series began with the Gospel, followed by one on the Bible. These two are followed by a series on the six chief parts of Luther’s Small Catechism. The rest of the What About Pamphlets present brief statements on key doctrinal and ethical issues. There were also titles devoted to anti-Christian cults and groups, but I did not find these pamphlets in the link below.

NOTE: If you want copies of the pamphlets, put in the following link and you can download the files: <https://resources.lcms.org/reading-study/what-about-pamphlets/> You may individually download them or you may scroll down and click on the “Download all pamphlets,” which will give you a zip file of all of them in PDFs.

When I found myself recently perusing the pamphlets again, what initially struck me is that they do possess unchanging truth in changing times, and they still have many excellent things to say. The truth always remains valid to every generation. However, what also struck me was the realization that times have changed so drastically that many of the pamphlets almost feel quaint, that is, to use the definition in the online Merriam Webster dictionary, “pleasingly or strikingly old-fashioned or unfamiliar,” with an emphasis on the “unfamiliar” part.

In other words, what we saw and still see as an issue, or an important topic, isn’t even an issue or an important topic in the minds of many today, including so-called “Lutherans.” Take for example, the “Living Together Without Marriage” pamphlet.

We, who believe in Scripture, see this as a real sin in need of repentance. Today, most see sexual relations outside of the context of marriage and living together without the lifelong commitment of marriage as completely, unapologetically normal, and good.

What I mean by that is this: Today, the wickedness of our times has so increased, the issues and topics have so exploded, and Biblical literacy has so deteriorated, that the simple truths laid out in those pamphlets have amazingly grown harder to raise and communicate to people. This is why we must continue to grow in the truths we believe and learn to lovingly apply them to the ones we meet in everyday life, including those who tell us that they are Christian.

Our witness to others involves the truth, but it also involves the truth from the one who is witnessing. And that’s you and me. In other words, it requires one to take the time, to develop a relationship with the person on some level, to be gentle, patient, but firm, with repentance always in view. Our great example is Jesus, who gave himself to the Samaritan woman at the well. Not only was she doctrinally a mess, but she was living with a man who was not her husband, as Jesus points out. Our Lord also points to himself as the source of forgiveness. Like Jesus, we must be willing to give ourselves to those around us. Our witness is about Jesus. And it isn’t a witness only to the unconverted, but even to the ones who claim Christ, but are a doctrinal mess and living in sin.

To paraphrase Dr. Barry, “Keep the Message straight, Get the Message out!” Like all rally cries, they often fade away and are forgotten. But this one is worth remembering.

Buy Another Book

In the October-November 2023 Issue of *Trinity Te Deum*, Pastor Harris recommended Harold Senkbeil’s 1994 book, *Dying to Live*. I recommend it as well. For years I have kept copies of this book in the office cabinet to give to people who I think would benefit from the read.

He also mentioned Gene Veith's *Spirituality of the Cross*. Everything that Pr. Harris said about it was spot on. Interestingly, our experiences were uncannily the same.

A much better book than Veith's, that covers the theology of the cross, is a relatively unknown book by Dr. Steven A. Hein, titled *The Christian Life: Cross or Glory?* It is now in its second edition. I have read the first, and I intend to buy the second. You can buy the book from Christian Book Distributors, or from 1517.org.

Dr. Steven A. Hein serves as Director of the Concordia Institute for Christian Studies, an organization that offers auxiliary educational services to Christian gatherings across the country and the leadership of Lutheran Churches in West Africa. Dr. Hein also serves as an affiliate professor of theology at Concordia University, Chicago, and the Institute of Lutheran Theology.

When I attended Concordia University, River Forest I had him for several classes, including a class on Christian doctrine and the Christian life. Some of the material in the book I can recall in his lectures that were delivered around 1986.

What you receive in the book are years of research and teaching. The writing is very close to the way he taught in college, but he also writes to make it accessible to everyday Christians. Still, the book is challenging, but it's worth the challenge. It makes you think and grow. The book jacket of the first edition reads:

Are you leading a healthy spiritual life?

What does it look like to overcome the trials and tribulations of Christian living?

By what means are we meant to measure our righteousness?

These are just a few of the typical questions posed by the most popular spiritual help and Christian living books today; questions that often lead to faulty answers that only leave readers more unsure of the faith given to them through Christ crucified.

Dr. Steven Hein flips these questions on their head – offering a radically different perspective on what true life in Christ looks like. Contrary to popular opinion, Christianity is not about success or achievements, nor should it be focused on the glorified risen Christ. Instead, Christianity has always been centered first and foremost on that old, rugged Cross, where Christ was crucified in His full humanity and full divinity for you.

The “radically different perspective” that Dr. Hein offers is the Lutheran theology of the cross, rather than “American Christianity,” which is centered on glorious living. You may be surprised to discover how much Reformed theology has infiltrated your mind when you read the book. Hein takes his readers to the truth of what the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” Christ crucified on the cross tells us what we need to know about God, his saving work, and the life we live down here in Him.

No Way and No Future in The Church of AI

For the background of my next article, *No Way and No Future in The Church of AI*, it will be necessary for you to read an excerpt from an article written and published by Sejal Sharma on November 24, 2023, 01:06 PM EST. The subject of the article shares with the reader the reboot of *The Way of the Future*. It is titled *GodGPT: Anthony Levandowski revives AI Church with fresh religion reboot*. Here are the selected portions:

Anthony Levandowski, an entrepreneur known for his work in developing autonomous vehicle technology, is bringing back the artificial intelligence church, which he conceptualized and launched in 2015. It was shut down a couple of years into its inception.

When it originally began its operation in 2015, it didn't operate like a traditional church in the sense that it didn't have a brick-and-mortar place of worship or routine gatherings of its followers.

But now, Levandowski says that the church already has a congregation consisting of "a couple thousand people," as per a *Bloomberg* report.

Called the Way of the Future (WOTF), the church aimed at championing the ethical evolution of AI, fostering an environment where these artificial entities could merge together with society.

[The article goes on to relate Levandowski's fall from Google, which led to the prison and being pardoned by President Trump. The AI "church" closed. The article now continues.]

The new buzzword: AI

The return of the church comes at an opportune time when the buzz around artificial intelligence has magnified over the last year with the advent of ChatGPT.

AI and religion are disparate concepts, but it's not like people haven't tried to amalgamate the two. In June this year, a service was given by ChatGPT at the St Paul church in Germany. The service included 40 minutes of prayers, music, and sermons in front of a congregation of 300 people.

"For the last 4 billion years we've had organic lifeforms, [but] now, for the first time things are changing and we're going to have inorganic life forms," Levandowski told *Bloomberg*. "We don't know what [these inorganic life forms] are going to be, [but] we're going to fuse it with all these magical powers, and we want it to give us things."

Levandowski believes that AI can bring "heaven on Earth." He says, "Here, we're actually creating things they can see, be

everywhere and maybe help us and guide us in a way normally you would call God."

In 2017, WOTF said that its activities would focus on "the realization, acceptance, and worship of a Godhead based on Artificial Intelligence (AI) developed through computer hardware and software."

<https://interestingengineering.com/culture/church-of-ai-makes-a-comeback-after-two-years>

I came across the above article when I was searching for another article about Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Church. The following article addresses an issue that goes to the heart of human idolatry. If you haven't read the article, you might want to before you read my article below.

No Way and No Future in The Church of AI

Does anyone here remember the 1970 film *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*? In that film there is the Alpha-Omega Bomb, which was a large atomic missile manufactured sometime in the late 20th century. By the 40th century, the bomb was relocated and placed at the altar of what used to be St. Patrick's Cathedral in the irradiated ruins of New York City. There, it was venerated by a subspecies of psychic mutant-humans who safeguarded the missile as well as its operational launch systems. The mutants believed they owed their very existence to weapons such as this, and as such, worshipped the missile as a deity – often referring to it as the Divine Bomb.

This is what the subject of the article above brings to my mind. I remember smiling and chuckling the first time I saw *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*. I think I would have smiled and chuckled at what Anthony Levandowski is proposing and doing, if it were not for the fact that this isn't fiction and entertainment. Rather, it comes from the very depths of hell. Talk about "doctrines of demons" in the last days, as Paul writes in 1 Timothy 4:1.

And churches are flirting with this stuff when they allow AI to generate worship services and sermons and music, even allowing an AI avatar to

lead the service, as happened in Germany last year in November, with some human direction. There was a “Lutheran” pastor who attended and was surprised at how well it worked. Ah, pragmatism, as usual, is the measure of everything in a church that happily destroys itself. The pastor may be happy now that he may not have to work even on Sundays! At this point, we haven’t even mentioned that AI is now generating fictional Bible verses to justify false teaching, when prompted by the LGBTQ+ community. Or is it LGBTQIA+? Or is it really LGBTQAI+ (emphasis on AI)?! Anyway, it was a trans-affirming “Bible verse,” where Jesus is accepting of trans people. Another article I came across was titled: *An AI god will emerge by 2042 and write its own bible. Will you worship it?*

So, will you? I seriously doubt that the readers of this newsletter will. But others? How about, a lot of others? There is so much to discuss in this realm that it requires a book. Unfortunately, our Lord hasn’t given me that kind of time. So, let’s get to the point. We can first boil it down in a simple word: “Idolatry.” It’s plain and simple, albeit “sophisticated,” idolatry. Luther writes in the *Large Catechism*: “A god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need. To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe him with our whole heart. As I have often said, the trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol (Tappert, pg. 365).”

Artificial Intelligence is becoming a refuge in every time of need, and it seems to be in the beginning stage of reshaping most everything. The sad part is that people are so empty, insecure, and searching for love in all the wrong places that their hearts will trust anything and everything but the Son of God in the flesh, who died and rose from the dead, who is the Way to an eternal Future that will never perish, spoil, or fade. Human fantasy, sci-fi, and heaven on earth are so attractive when all you have is evolution. When all you have is yourself to look too, it makes sense to make an image of yourself, or an image of what you like or find attractive to entrust your well-being and satisfaction to it. And to think, humanity has made a god smarter than humanity. It really doesn’t matter how smart it is. It’s still humanity worshipping itself.

It’s still humanity groping around in the dark, empty, and alone. That’s the nature of Idolatry.

GodGPT and the AI church are not our Savior! Jesus is the Way, the road in which we travel to a destiny that has forever been in the heart of our Creator, even before we were born! He gives what no idol can give. He gives Himself and all that has been or ever will be. AI will cease like everything else. But not Christ, nor we in Him. He makes that plain to us at the cross and empty tomb! In that word of forgiveness that we receive in the means of grace we are turned inside out to receive the One who was, is, and ever shall be. In Him there is true existence, that is, life. In Him there is true love, that is, Jesus giving Himself that we may love. In Him, there is true knowing, that is, the revelation of all things with every eternal possibility.

GodGPT and the AI church boasts that it is the “Way of the Future (WOTF).” Jesus says in John 14:6, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” Our Savior, who makes this powerful statement, is the eternal one who made and redeemed us, and is bringing us to a new creation in the beauty of His face. He’s the real deal. When Artificial Intelligence says that “it’s the way, the truth, and the life, and through it you can have heaven on earth,” this promise is from something we made, it was not before us, and it cannot redeem us, because it will never be before us, or truly one of us, for it was not originally made in God’s image. And since we were originally made in God’s image, that is not ours to give, because we have lost it, and we cannot give it anyway, and even in Christians it has only begun to be restored by the Holy Spirit. Only Jesus can give this at the cross. And Christ did not die for Artificial Intelligence, thus AI can never give what it does not have, and that includes heaven. And if our heaven, our future, is to be in the face of Jesus, who is God of very God in our flesh, then Artificial Intelligence, which we have made, when it promises heaven on earth, can only mean that we will see, at best, our own face. And that isn’t heaven! It’s ... well ... artificial. It’s an idol.

https://planetoftheapes.fandom.com/wiki/Alpha-Omega_Bomb

<https://arstechnica.com/information-technology/2023/06/chatgpt-takes-the-pulpit-ai-leads-experimental-church-service-in-germany/>

<https://venturebeat.com/ai/an-ai-god-will-emerge-by-2042-and-write-its-own-bible-will-you-worship-it/>

<https://www.christianpost.com/news/chatgpt-writes-bible-story-about-jesus-affirming-trans-identity.html>

<https://bookofconcord.org/large-catechism/ten-commandments/>

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 Trinity Te Deum is published bi-monthly.
Deadline for all articles is the 15th of the odd months.
 All articles must be approved by Interim Pastor Brock Abbott. Articles with no author are written by him.

February 2024

| SUNDAY | MONDAY | TUESDAY | WEDNESDAY | THURSDAY | FRIDAY | SATURDAY |
|--|--------|---------|-----------|--|--------|----------|
| | | | | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 4 PASTOR KEISTMAN | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| 11 PASTOR KEISTMAN BURYING THE ALLELUIAS DINNER 12:00 PM | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 PASTOR ROTH ASH WEDNESDAY (Observed) 7:30 PM | 16 | 17 |
| 18 ELDERS DEREK KURTH & JIM LESKO (No Communion) | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 PASTOR ROTH LENT I 7:30 PM | 23 | 24 |
| 25 SEMINARIAN, JOSH KILLION (No Communion) | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 PASTOR ROTH LENT II 7:30 PM | | |

March 2024

| SUNDAY | MONDAY | TUESDAY | WEDNESDAY | THURSDAY | FRIDAY | SATURDAY |
|---|--------|------------------------------------|-----------|--|--|----------|
| | | | | | 1 | 2 |
| 3 PASTOR KEISTMAN | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 PASTOR ROTH LENT III 7:30 PM | 8 | 9 |
| 10 SEMINARIAN, LUCAS A. (No Communion) | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 PASTOR ROTH LENT IV 7:30 PM | 15 | 16 |
| 17 ELDERS, RYAN RUWE & THOMAS COPELAND (No Communion) | 18 | 19 VOTERS MEETING 7:00 PM | 20 | 21 PASTOR ROTH LENT V 7:30 PM | 22 | 23 |
| 24 SEMINARIAN, JOSH KILLION (No Communion) PALM SUNDAY CRAWFISH BOIL 12:00 PM | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 PASTOR AUSTIN MAUNDY THURSDAY 7:30 PM | 29 PASTOR SCHEY GOOD FRIDAY 7:30 PM | 30 |
| 31 PASTOR KEISTMAN EASTER | | | | | | |

February - March 2024