

# The Church of the Undead

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“Civilizations die from suicide, not by murder,” wrote the historian Arnold Toynbee. Sometimes civilizations die, but the human institutions remain in place and the undead corpse of the civilization staggers on. Prior to WWI the sun never sank on the British Empire. After WWI the British Empire had collapsed. The United Kingdom still lives on and still puts on imperial airs, but is little more than a second-rate regional power.

The Church can sometimes be like that. Of course the Church Triumphant, being the Bride of Christ, is eternal. But the earthly manifestations of the Church Triumphant are born, live, and often die. These church bodies are like the undead---they have the outward appearance of being alive, but actually died a long time ago. When we look around at these church bodies, we are tempted to blame outside forces for their demise. But church bodies are more likely to self-destruct than to be murdered by outside forces.

When Arnold Toynbee said “civilizations die from suicide,” he was saying they die by their own hand. Both civilizations and church bodies are naturally self-destructive. They both have bad ideas, they both make bad choices, and they both do bad things. The natural human response is to seek out the very thing that ends up destroying us. The Apostle Peter warned his readers to be sober, to be vigilant, and to resist the devil by remaining steadfast in the faith (I Peter 5:8-9). But our sinful human nature keeps trying to come down from the cross, and sometimes we help it without realizing it. By helping the old man of sin to come down from the cross, we have committed spiritual suicide.

The great Italian journalist, Oriana Fallaci, is full of gloomy predictions of the impending death of Europe, of its great death march towards the precipice. In an interview with the Wall Street Journal she said, “The moment you give up your principles and values...the moment you laugh at those principles and those values, you are dead! Your culture is dead! Your civilization is dead!” A startling statement, to be sure, but also an important diagnostic tool. Using this tool, we can identify the beginnings of a civilization’s collapse---that moment when something else takes the place of a civilization’s cultural values, and when those values become a matter of derision.

We can use this same approach in the Lutheran church as a diagnostic tool. What is it that defines us as Lutherans? Some call themselves Lutheran because they were born into a Lutheran family, or because they were baptized Lutheran, or because they are members of a Lutheran church. Some call themselves Lutheran because they maintain the historic Lutheran church practice. But the truth is that we are all Lutheran by confession. We all say the same things about the faith. We all confess to the same teachings of scripture.

We all know the scriptures to be the Word of God because they contain the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We all worship the God who has revealed himself to us through the Gospel,

and we all know the scriptures are normed by that Gospel. In like manner we all know the Lutheran Confessions are normed by the Scriptures, and we all know that our private interpretations of scripture are normed by the Confessions. Everything flows from the same source---the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Once we know who we are as Lutherans, we can be watchful for the beginnings of our own death march towards the precipice. What will likely happen is that something will take the place of the Confessions. Something else will serve to define us---something that points us away from the Gospel. Perhaps we will derive our Lutheran identity from our family and friends (Granddad was Lutheran, Daddy was Lutheran, therefore I'm a Lutheran.) Perhaps we will identify with a particular church body, or have a sentimental attachment to a particular church building (like someone who sticks with a corrupt church because it is their family's church.) Perhaps we will identify ourselves as Lutheran through our adherence to specific Lutheran church practices and traditions, rather than being grounded in the Lutheran Confessions.

The death march toward the precipice is well along among those who discount and disregard the confessions. I've heard some refer to the Lutheran Confessions as the "doctrines of men," using the pejorative formulation the Apostle Paul spoke against the Gnostics (Col 2:22). When someone has gone so far as to connect the Confessions of the Lutheran Church with the Gnostic heretical writings, their death march is nearing its end and they are standing at the edge of the precipice: indeed, they may indeed have already jumped off. But maybe we don't have to look that far afield. Maybe we can simply ask why we ourselves are Lutheran. If the Lutheran Confessions don't immediately spring to mind, then it is time to begin backing away from the precipice before we become part of the church of the undead.