

Luther the Tech Critic

Technology and the Gospel of Eternal Life

Julian Waldner

*Geese appear high over us,
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,
as in love or sleep, holds
them to their way, clear,
in the ancient faith: what we need
is here. And we pray, not
for new earth or heaven, but to be
quiet in heart, and in eye
clear. What we need is here.¹*

Part I: Luther's Monastic Counterproductivity

For several years now I have been nursing an intuition that the theology of Martin Luther has something to say to our technological society. My intuition surprised me because I had grown accustomed to hearing about how Luther was irrelevant, pie-in-the-sky, implicitly antinomian, and probably at fault for most of what is wrong with the modern world.² And yet, what if the “accidental” progenitor of our technological modernity has a profound diagnosis of its disease and a real sense for its cure?³ What if it is a denial of the gift of eternal life that makes

1. Wendell Berry, “The Wild Geese” in *Collected Poems, 1957-1982* (New York: North Point Press, 1985), 155.

2. See for example Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

3. I've been encouraged to see similar arguments from various quarters including, David Zahl, “The Seculosity of Technology” in *Seculosity: How Career, Parenting, Technology, Food, Politics, and Romance Became Our New Religion—and What to Do about It* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019). David Zahl, “Against Self-Optimization,” *Plough*, July 1, 2025, <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/life/health/against-self-optimization>. Matthew J. Milliner, “Evangelicals and Zen Masters,” *Millinerd*, Sept. 4, 2025, <https://millinerd.substack.com/p/evangelicals-and-zen-masters>. William G. Fredstrom, “Wendell Berry and Martin Luther on Creatureliness in a Technological Age,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 39 no. 1 (Spring 2025) 1-20, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/950806>. Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 103, 110-112, 156, 292. Brian Brock, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability and the Body of Christ* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019), chapter 2.

our relationship with technology so toxic and terrifying? The Reformer insisted that eternal life cannot be manufactured but is given as a free gift. This can only be heard as a scandal to those who trust in the technological paradigm. In some measure this includes all of us, whether we believe with the tech-futurists that technology can literally grant eternal life or whether we buy technology's more prosaic promises to give enduring life through some service or device. At the center of the argument in this article is a paradox: faith in the gift of eternal life, rather than being an otherworldly form of wish-fulfillment, is actually what allows us to embrace our mortal limits and find joy in the gratuity of creation.

Luther's own path to this insight was to come through the harrowing experience of the monastery. Luther, a particularly sensitive soul, found the practices of monastic life to be counterproductive: the more he tried to secure peace, the more distant this goal became.

When I was a monk, I made a great effort to live according to the requirements of the monastic rule. I made a practice of confessing and reciting all my sins, but always with prior contrition; I went to confession frequently, and performed the assigned penances faithfully. Nevertheless, my conscience could never achieve certainty but was always in doubt and said: "You have not done this correctly. You were not contrite enough. You omitted this in your confession ... by following the righteousness of the monastic order, I was never able to reach it."⁴

Luther's autobiographical statement is part of a theological argument that he wants to make in his Galatians commentary about the futility of achieving righteousness through the works of the law or human traditions. Paradoxically, while these monastic traditions and practices were intended to aid the monk in growing in peace and holiness, Luther's experience is that this "vanishes exactly with the effort to *make* it present."⁵ Rather than working as rungs on a ladder to heaven, these practices or "works" end up shriveling Luther's life. As he writes elsewhere, "If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work."⁶ Indeed, Luther finds that these works, traditions, or practices—in short, the Law—do not increase holiness, but rather exacerbate *sin*: "Many have worked hard, inventing various religious orders and disciplines, to find peace... but instead they have plunged more deeply into even greater misery, for such tactics are merely ways of multiplying doubt and despair."⁷ This is the state that Luther will

4. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535 Chapters 5-6*, in *Luther's Works*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 27:13.

5. Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, updated edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 94.

6. Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1950), 45.

7. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535 Chapters 1-4*, in *Luther's Works*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 26:27.

later identify as *incurvatio in se ipsum* (sin as being curved in on oneself). “The human being, who is made by nature to respond by looking outward, ends up entrapped now in the endless downward spiral of a circle, talking to himself ceaselessly... being absorbed in his own existence... the sinner draws his fellow creatures in, so that they have to suffer.”⁸

Skepticism and the Natural Desire for Eternal Life

Luther, in his pursuit of holiness by the Law, is under the grip of what philosopher Stanley Cavell calls “skepticism.” For Cavell, the skeptic is disgusted with the limitations of humanity and seeks some violent transcendence of those limitations. The skeptic feels chaffed by his own skin,⁹ “astonished”¹⁰ and “disgusted”¹¹ by his own limitations and fixated on the wish to escape its confines. The logic of skepticism is a logic of “the best case,” which cannot settle for anything but absolute knowledge, complete certainty, unquestioning devotion, perfect bliss, and total penetration.¹² Luther, in seeking total sinlessness, perfect holiness, and absolute certainty about his spiritual state, has come to despair at his humanity and seek what is not attainable for human beings. This unachievable goal, combined with his disgust at his humanity, leads to the “paradoxical counterproductivity” of “the works of the law.” The more Luther seeks to attain this goal, the more frustrated he becomes.

What is it that Luther is seeking? We have seen from Cavell that the skeptic is frustrated with the unfulfilled desire, limited knowledge, and impurity of the human condition. What the skeptic seeks is an absolute *overcoming* of these limitations: the fulfillment of desire, knowledge, happiness, and goodness. Against the limitations of human existence, there is a desire for the *negation* of those limitations. Positively stated, there is the desire to *transcend* those limitations. What is this but the desire for eternal life? The phrase “eternal life” has a double sense in the Christian tradition: on the one hand, it denotes a life that endures and is not simply snuffed out by death, and on the other, it denotes *abundant* life, fulfilling life. This double sense is suggested by Jesus in the gospel of John: “those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (Jn. 4:14).¹³ Ultimately, “eternal life” is equivalent with God, the source and end of all life. In *The City of God*, Augustine follows the Platonists in describing God as the *summum bonum*, that which “we desire not for the sake of anything else but for its own sake alone, [which] will,

8. Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 183.

9. Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 61.

10. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 128.

11. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 12.

12. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 128.

13. All scripture references are in the NRSV.

when attained leave us nothing further to seek for our happiness.”¹⁴ In seeing God as the “highest good,” the Christian tradition makes a dual claim: on the one hand, there is nothing higher, better, or more desirable than life with God, but on the other hand, there is an innate desire in all human beings for this eternal life that explains much of human action and motivation.¹⁵

The documentary “Transcendent Man” featuring the futurist and technologist Ray Kurzweil opens with a vivid illustration of this. In a voiceover that introduces the documentary, Kurzweil describes a recurring dream that symbolizes his greatest fear:

I have a [recurring] dream. It has to do with exploring this endless succession of rooms that are empty and going from one to the next. Then feeling hopelessly abandoned and lonely and unable to find anyone else. That’s a pretty good description of death. And death is supposed to be a finality but it’s actually a loss of everyone you care about. I do have fantasies sometimes about dying, about what people must feel like when they’re dying, or what I might feel like if I were dying, and it’s such a profoundly sad, lonely feeling that I really can’t bear it. So, I go back to thinking about how I am not going to die.¹⁶

Kurzweil is known for his predictions about the rapid rate of technological innovation leading to what he calls “the Singularity.” The Singularity is the point at which humans and machines could merge, leading to a transhuman future of unlimited possibilities. In his book, *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*, Kurzweil describes a coming Singularity in religious, eschatological terms:

What then is the Singularity? It’s a future period during which the pace of technological change will be so rapid, its impact so deep, that human life will be irreversibly transformed ... this epoch will transform the concepts that we rely on to give meaning to our lives, from our business models to the cycle of human life, including death itself.... To truly understand [the Singularity] inherently changes one’s view of life in general and one’s own particular life. I regard someone who understands the

14. Augustine, *The City of God* (Books 1-10), translated by William Babcock (New York: New City Press, 2012), 8:8, pg. 251.

15. The book of Genesis argues this implicitly by placing the narrative of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9) after humanity’s expulsion from the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:1-23). Humanity’s attempt to build a tower that reaches to the heavens is their rebellious response to the expulsion, and an attempt to regain eternity on their own terms. God’s response to this human attempt at totality is the establishment of different cultures and languages. God’s establishment of good limits places human beings back into the context in which they can flourish.

16. *Transcendent Man*, directed by Robert Barry Ptolemy (Ptolemaic Productions and Therapy Studios, 2009), MP4.

Singularity and who has reflected on its implications for his or her own life as a “singularitarian.”¹⁷

The two features we saw at play in Luther’s monastic counterproductivity are on display in Kurzweil’s comments: first, there is a disgust at humanity. Kurzweil cannot reconcile himself to the fact that human beings die; he cannot even think about death. Second, there is an attempt to violently transcend these limitations, in Kurzweil’s case, through the pursuit of technological immortality in the “Singularity.” Most strikingly, we can see how a negative fear of death and a positive desire for eternal life are the motives of Kurzweil’s futurology and technological innovation. Kurzweil’s quest for technological immortality is transparently a modern version of Luther’s monastic quest for self-justification. Quite literally, Kurzweil is seeking to attain through humanity’s own technological “works” the eternal life that the Christian tradition insists can only be obtained as a free, unmerited gift from God. But Kurzweil’s eternity must be a distorted earthly one: an endless succession of increments rather than the eternal present of Christian hope.

While Kurzweil’s transhumanist vision is on the cutting edge, he is not out of step with the leading technologists of our age, including Elon Musk and Peter Thiel. Indeed, it is possible to argue that Kurzweil is articulating the submerged myth of the modern technological and scientific quest: the search for the philosopher’s stone. This magical quest for an alchemical material capable giving eternal life as well as turning base metals into gold (thus unleashing the latent capacities of the natural world) was a project in which serious early modern philosophers such as Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton were engaged. The search for the philosopher’s stone represents the quest to penetrate to the bottom of things in order to bring nature fully under human dominion. As Kurzweil puts it, the quest for the Singularity is “predicated on the idea that we have the ability to understand our own intelligence—to access our own source code, if you will—and then revise and expand it.”¹⁸

According to Scripture, we live in a world created good yet invaded by the alien power of Death (1 Cor. 15:26-27). Technology can be understood as a “remedy” for the conditions of the fall and the ill-suitedness of human bodies to the world we live in.¹⁹ “And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and his wife,

17. Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (London: Duckworth Overlook, 2008), 7. Kurzweil’s language here echoes Paul’s in 1 Corinthians 15:51-53: “Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in a twinkling of an eye.... For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.”

18. Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near*, 4.

19. David Cayley, *Ivan Illich: An Intellectual Journey* (State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021), 195.

and clothed them” (Gen. 3:21).²⁰ We become sick and require medicine, our bodies cannot stand the climate and require clothing and shelter, and we go hungry and require means of harvesting and preserving food. It is not illegitimate that we have devised technologies to help ameliorate these conditions. Moreover, Kurzweil’s desire to escape the clutches of Death is correct. Death is an alien force that must be defeated; humans are made for eternity. However, Kurzweil and his ilk go wrong when they claim to be able to achieve what only Christ can do: defeat the power of Death and grant eternal life.

The Essence of Modern Technology

Kurzweil’s vision brings the modern technological paradigm—as diagnosed by philosophers of technology such as Jacques Ellul and Martin Heidegger—into sharp relief. For Ellul, contemporary society is dominated by what he calls *technique*, the pursuit of efficiency, or the quest for the “one best way” in every domain. According to Ellul, we live in a *technological society* because it is the logic of *technique* that finally governs our society in all its aspects. Heidegger, in his 1954 essay “The Question concerning Technology,” sees us as caught up in a *technological way of seeing* in which creation becomes a “standing reserve” waiting to be ordered. Kurzweil’s example, it seems to me, shows that something even more fundamental is at play: at the heart of the modern disordered relationship to technology is humanity’s longing for immortality and the attempt to secure this by our own means. In theological terms, our technological society is founded on the refusal to gratefully receive eternal life as a free, unmerited gift. It is this refusal of grace that makes our technological society hellbent on ensuring that life, health, learning, and growth continue with the certainty of eternity.

Augustine already diagnosed this condition in his magisterial work *The City of God* with his contrast between the goods of the heavenly city and the goods of the earthly city. The heavenly city has its good in eternity, “secure in supreme and eternal peace.” The earthly city by contrast “has its good here on earth.”²¹ The earthly city’s exclusive love of these earthly goods leads to anxiety, conflict, and rivalry. Kurzweil feels the anxiety of death and puts all his hope in securing an earthly escape. For Augustine, this can only lead to misery: “But, if the higher goods are neglected . . . and if lower goods are desired so much that people believe them

20. The following thoughts are undeveloped and for that reason relegated to a footnote.

The ‘garments of skin’ that God gives to protect Adam and Eve from the harsh climate are typologically associated with the ‘covering’ that Christ provides. There is a suggestion here about technology as a providential remedy that is in some sense superseded by the gospel. However, given that humans still live in a world marked by Death, garments of skin are still necessary. At the same time, as the tower of Babel story shows, technology risks becoming an alternative to reliance on God and His provision.

21. Augustine, *The City of God* (Books 11-22), translated by William Babcock (New York: New City Press, 2013), 15:4, pg. 142.

to be the only goods or love them more than [higher goods], then misery will necessarily follow.”²² The quest for “earthly eternity” (the anxious technological quest to ensure that life goes on as long as possible, profitability increases exponentially, and agricultural yields increase year by year) can only end in disappointment and disgust at our humanity because this world cannot bear the weight of eternity.

The sociologist Hartmut Rosa explores this very disappointment in his 2020 book *The Uncontrollability of the World*. Rosa notes that the central feature of modern society is the drive to progress. This, Rosa points out, is not a *positive* motive but a *negative* one, motivated by the fear of loss: “To argue that modernity is driven by an increasing demand—*higher, faster, further*—is to misunderstand its structural reality. This game of escalation is perpetuated not by a lust for more, but by the fear of having *less and less*.”²³ Rosa explains that this is because modern society can only stabilize itself by “constant economic growth, technological acceleration, and cultural innovation in order to maintain its institutional status quo.”²⁴ This is precisely the dynamic that Augustine observes in *The City of God*: the peace of the earthly city is the peace of having subdued all its enemies—“if it triumphs and there is no one left to resist it, there will be peace.”²⁵ Rosa goes on to argue that this fearful drive for progress becomes a drive to make the world ever more knowable, accessible, manageable, and useful, on the promise that this increase of control will make our lives better.²⁶ However, Rosa notes, “this cultural promise of making the world controllable, not only does not ‘work’ but in fact becomes distorted into exact opposite.”²⁷ The quest for greater controllability puts human beings into artificial environments that many find alienating and uncontrollable—that is, unknowable, inaccessible, unmanageable, and difficult to use. At the same time, modern life is characterized by catastrophic outbreaks of uncontrollability: financial crashes, terrorism, pandemics, ecological crises, and more. Paradoxically, the attempt to bring more of the world under control ends up generating new forms of uncontrollability.

Strikingly parallel observations were made by Ivan Illich who noticed what he called “paradoxical counterproductivity” across a range of modern institutions. Beyond a certain threshold of professionalization and efficiency, institutions begin to undermine the purpose for which they were established: schools make people dumber, hospitals make people sick, therapists make people mentally unbalanced, transportation makes movement slower, and in our own day communication technology makes people less connected. Illich is concerned with how these institutions foster dependence, leading people to believe that “salvation” can only be found

22. Augustine, *The City of God* (Books 11-22), 15:4, pg. 143.

23. Hartmut Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 9-10.

24. Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World*, 9.

25. Augustine, *The City of God* (Books 11-22), 15:4, pg. 142.

26. Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World*, 10-11 and chapter 2.

27. Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World*, 19.

through the mediation of experts. Illich observes this in the process by which verbs such as education, health, or life that are part of ordinary life become *nouns*, packaged as scarce goods that are the purview of experts. Thus, we come to see education as something that can only be administered by trained teachers, health as something that can only be provided by a healthcare system, and counseling as something that can only occur in a therapist's office from a professional with the proper credentials. In effect, modern institutions and technologies have a *religious* structure: by means of a priestly class of experts, in the sanctuary of institutions, packaged goods of education, health, and other promises of enduring life are distributed to a dependent and ignorant public. The disturbing effect of this is the devaluing and discrediting of the abundant ways ordinary humans provide home remedies, teach each other, and offer consolation. This leads to the shrinking of community as the communal capacity for mutual aid is hollowed out. Furthermore, it leads to a shrinking of the soul as the individual loses agency and the capacity to reach out to his neighbor.

At the heart of the modern technological paradigm is the promise that these devices, services, or institutions can deliver us from the drudgery of mortality and grant us eternal and enduring life. This is essentially a religious claim. Meta promises to make us all more connected. The automobile promises to give us freedom. AI promises to make our lives better in an unspecifiable way. Yet, there is no more important truth about technology than that it cannot give what it promises. There is no shortcut to being human: there is no device, training, or institution that can release us from the frustrations of creaturely life and bring us the freedom, happiness, connection, knowledge, or peace we long for. In short, technology is an inadequate religion. It is incapable of delivering the abundant, eternal life it promises.

Part II: Gospel

Content to be Creatures

We saw above how Luther's monastic faith ran aground in his attempt to transcend his humanity by his own effort. The more Luther attempted to achieve righteousness, peace, and faith, the more distant these became. I attempted to show how similar structures of "paradoxical counterproductivity" characterize our technological society.

Luther's breakthrough was his discovery of the gospel. Through his reading of Paul's letter to the Romans, Luther came to see that the gospel about Jesus Christ is a message which if believed, gives the believer the reality that is signified: "the word of the Gospel ... [is the] outward means by which God gives us Christ and all that is his, including his righteousness, holiness, blessing, salvation, and everlasting life."²⁸ In short, the gospel enables us by faith to participate in

28. Philip Cary, *The Meaning of Protestant Theology: Luther, Augustine, and the Gospel that Gives Us Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), Chapter 7, epub.

the eternal divine life. Eternal life then is not achieved by striving towards a distant goal but instead by simply accepting that eternal life has already been given. Luther's *humanity*—his limitations, moral failures, and inadequacies—is no longer an impediment to his search for righteousness. Instead, it is Luther's *acceptance* and coming-to-terms-with his humanity that is the precondition of his reception of grace as a free, unmerited gift:

*Because I am in sin, a captive of death and the devil, because I feel that I am weak in faith, cold in love, wayward, impatient, envious, with sin clinging to me before and behind; therefore I come hither where I find and hear Christ's words that I shall receive the gift of forgiveness of sins.*²⁹

This exactly reverses the situation we saw in Kurzweil and the modern technological paradigm. In that case, the hatred of the limitations of humanity leads to a violent attempt to transcend them. Luther's acceptance of the present eternal life allows him to arrest his striving to transcend his humanity and instead find contentment in his creaturehood. Luther will call his way the *vita passiva* (the way of passivity). Progress is not the way; instead, by some great mystery, "what we need is here." In *The Presence of the Kingdom*, Jacques Ellul describes the Christian difference *vis-à-vis* the modern vision of progress:

The whole object of ethics is not to attain an end (and we know very well that for a genuine Christian ethic there is no such thing as striving for holiness) but to manifest the gift that has been given us, the gift of grace and of peace, of love and the Holy Spirit, that is, the very end pursued by God and miraculously present within us.³⁰

Luther's gospel—that eternal life is to be celebrated rather than manufactured—makes visible the abundance of the present. "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed, nor will they say, 'Look here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you" (Lk. 17:21). What is needed for the good life is already present. We should not heed the promises of our many false technological messiahs who announce the kingdom is coming with the latest device or method.

Living by Faith³¹

This does not mean that what the gospel unveils is obvious and can be read off the surface of things. It requires energy to keep one's eyelids open. Luther spoke of how believers are *simul justus et peccator*, that is, simultaneously sinner and saint.

29. Emphasis mine. Martin Luther, "The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ—Against the Fanatics," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 3rd edition, edited by Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russel, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 233.

30. Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom* (New York: Seabury Press, 1967), 82.

31. Thanks to Paul R. Hinlicky for suggesting I add this section.

Our eyes have been opened to the vision of the kingdom while being liable to close again in slumber. We are participants in the divine life but also through our biological bodies bound to a world still subject to death. When Jesus, God veiled in flesh, came announcing the kingdom of God, his hearers were called to answer with faith. Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom was already present, here and amongst them (Luke 17:21), and at the same time that it was arriving, on the way, and yet to come (Luke 19:11). The call to have faith—to entrust oneself to God—then as now, requires a kind of crucifixion of the flesh and of the eyes. For Jesus' first hearers, faith was required to believe in this intriguing man before them as the divine presence drawn near: "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? (Matt. 13:55-56). In the same way, faith is required to believe that we have been given what we need to live a life beyond the world's options of violence, greed, and despair. Perhaps the more painful crucifixion is the death of our desire to have salvation by our own hands. This means that the prestige we think we have earned, those things that justify our existence or set us apart from others, our desire to be the ground of our own existence—is relativized, and we must acknowledge our moment-by-moment dependence on God.

Thus, we see the appeal of the false gospel of Silicon Valley. It does not ask for faith but gives mechanical certainty. Kurzweil makes his case for the coming Singularity with charts and statistics: given the current trajectory of technological development we can be assured of this future. The men in lab coats inspire confidence and their marvelous machines leave us awestruck. This gospel does not demand that we live for a hope that lies beyond this world in the promise of God; instead, it simply asks us to put our confidence in humanity's great technological achievements, so sure and impressive. Yet, the gospel of Jesus Christ announces that this is an impressive façade, an illusory hope that is ultimately a form of slavery to the fear of death. Instead, it calls us to put our faith in the One who can destroy the power of death and "free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death" (Heb 2:15).

Gratuity

To live by the gospel is to "walk by faith and not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). This means trusting in the provision of God and hoping that we have been given what we need in the present (not the future) to live abundantly and be at home in this world:

Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them. And can any of you add a single hour to your span of life. And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow, they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the

grass of the field which is alive today and tomorrow thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore, do not worry, saying “what will we eat?” or “what will we drink?” or “what will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed, your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well (Matt. 6:25-33).

The point of this is not that ordinary provision is off limits, that somehow thinking prudently about clothing, shelter, or food is wrongheaded. Jesus affirms that humans do need these things. Instead, the point is that there is enough. The world is filled with the provision of God: sunshine, rain, fruit trees, grass, people to love, “wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart” (Ps. 104:15). Luther articulates this same wonder at the provision of God in his *Small Catechism*:

I believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and mental faculties. In addition, God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children, fields, livestock, and all property—along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life. God protects me against all danger and shields and preserves me from all evil. And this is done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any worthiness of mine at all!³²

The point is to awaken us to the fundamental gratuity of things, that wonder that God moment-by-moment sustains me and all the world in existence. It is the wonder that things should be as they are, the wonder that we live in such a world as this, with such people in it to love. These gifts far surpass any merit on our part to deserve them. As Kris Kristofferson sings: “Why me Lord? / What have I ever done / To deserve even one / of the pleasures I’ve known?”³³ It is precisely this gratuity, this sheer givenness and contingency of things, that contains the possibility of its negation and shadow side. The question asked in gratitude, “why should I live in such a world as this?” can become Kurzweil’s question: “Why should things be as they are?” Why should the genetic allotment of birth be left to chance? Why should we be constrained by our biological bodies? Why should human lives be limited to a span of a handful of decades? Here we see again the hatred of humanity in its contingency and mortality and the desire for an earthly eternity to ensure that the preservation of life is not gratuitous but lies secure in our own hands, locked down and certain from all the ravages of time.

32. I have modified this translation by adding some phrases from Oswald Bayer’s translation in *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 95. Original from Martin Luther, “The Small Catechism” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 3rd edition, edited by Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russell, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 327.

33. Kris Kristofferson, “Why Me.” Track 10 on *Jesus was a Capricorn*, Monument Recording, 1972.

What We Need Is Here

The conceit is not only that eternal life can be controlled but also that it can come as a result of human ingenuity, with “things that can be observed” (Lk. 17:21). This same conceit lies behind some reactions to modernity that hold that the possibility for a good and meaningful life has vanished with the breakdown of past social or cultural structures. Just as Kurzweil locates “eternal life” in a particular time and social arrangement, namely the technologically advanced future, in the same way some critics of modernity locate “eternal life” in a particular time and social arrangement, namely pre-modern communities. For both, the good life is only possible “if only things were different.” For example, the reactionary might argue that life in the city is inherently meaningless, isolating, and suffocating. Because for the reactionary the good life is located in a particular place and time, say a peasant community in the Middle Ages, it cannot be possible in a modern city. However, from the vantage of the abundance of the gospel, life in the city is full of surprising possibilities: urban gardens, backyard chickens, plants growing on skyscraper windowsills, hospitable houses with revolving doors, backyard trees, campfires, and networks of friendship.

Consider the following lists of imperatives from the New Testament. These exhibit a life lived from the abundance of the gospel and they can be lived out just as faithfully under the shadow of the Roman empire as within the matrix of our technocracy:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor... Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you... Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all (Rom 12:9-18).

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them... Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have... (Heb. 13:1-5).

The reactionary, like the futurist, misses that the good life—eternal life—is not dependent on material conditions but is more “spiritual,” mysteriously present anywhere. The good things that are promised by the technologist and the reactionary are never theirs to give: joy, connection, community, freedom, and peace are not confined or controlled by any social or technological system because they transcend material conditions. They can be found anywhere, in any set of circumstances. What is required is a retraining of our attention from where “things are different,” back to where we are to see the possibilities of humanity, togetherness, happiness,

conviviality, and joy where it can be hard to see them. The places we inhabit—often mindlessly and thoughtlessly—lie dormant with these possibilities: might there be interest in a book club in your neighborhood? Could a new friendship be sparked with a delivery of fresh-baked cookies? Is there room to grow a garden?

Restful Repetitions

We are oriented, then, away from forces beyond our control and into the realm of the present where we have agency: “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today” (Matt. 6:34). Today has enough. What we need is here. This same thought is reflected in that tangible line of the Lord’s prayer: “give us this day our daily bread.” The bread that is chewed and digested for human nourishment and survival physically instantiates God’s care and ongoing giving of life. For Luther, the repetition of eating becomes an image of how we grow in the Christian life. This occurs not through striving into the future but by returning again and again in hunger and need to take hold of Christ in the gospel: “One thing and one thing alone leads to Christian life, righteousness, and freedom. This is the holy word of God, the gospel of Christ, as Jesus himself... says in Matthew 4:4: ‘One does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”³⁴ Luther scholar Philip Cary summarizes Luther’s position here: “We make progress precisely by returning over and over again to [the] beginning, which is to say by taking hold of Christ once again by faith alone, so that our hearts are increasingly formed in his image.”³⁵ The image here is of a well in the center of a community to which the townspeople must continually return to be refreshed or a table set with food around which we must gather three times daily for our nourishment.

What Luther is offering us here is an alternative to the picture of “progress” that has thoroughly colonized our modern imaginations. Our attention is pointed back to the mundane acts that make life livable and worthwhile. Within God’s daily economy of provision—the sun that rises, the rain that falls, the plants that grow—there are humanity’s “restful repetitions” that allow human life to flourish: planting and tending crops, cooking and preserving food, raising and teaching the young, repairing and building homes, helping neighbors, having conversations, singing, and prayer. These restful repetitions, so often scorned and taken for granted, are like the repetitive heartbeat which sustains the life of any community. Our contemporary fixation with progress has the spiritually corrosive effect of making us feel that what is worthwhile is to be found elsewhere, in the future, rather than here and now where there is *vital* work to be done. Against the grand aspirations

34. Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 3rd edition, edited by Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russell, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 405.

35. Cary, *The Meaning of Protestant Theology*, chapter 7.

of modern utopianism or progress narratives, Ephraim Radner argues that the Christian vocation is to tend to what he calls our “mortal goods”:

...our Christian calling is to limit our politics to the boundaries of our actual created lives and to the goods that stake out these limits: our births, our parents, our siblings, our families, our growing, our brief persistence in life, our raising of children, our relations, our decline, our deaths. These mark the goods of our lives along with the acts that sustain these goods, like toil and joy, suffering, prayer, and giving thanks. Christian politics is aimed at no more and no less than the tending of these “mortal goods.”³⁶

The gospel that Luther discovered opens the possibility of doing good, not for the sake of earning eternal life, but for the genuine good of the neighbor: “Let us be clear that no one needs to do these things to attain righteousness and salvation. Therefore, we should be guided in all our works by this one thought alone—that we may serve and benefit others ... having nothing before our eyes except the need and advantage of our neighbor.”³⁷ There is a suggestion here about what an orientation towards our tools that has been nourished by the gospel might look like. Such an orientation would be able to overcome the fearful drive for eternity that characterizes modern technology. Instead, it would seek in its use and development of tools to build up the neighbor and the common life we share. This would be a use of technology that is in the service of tending the “mortal goods” to which we have been entrusted rather than as a means of escape from them. Technology would serve a “remedial” purpose, making the conditions of mortal existence livable rather than as a spurious means of salvation. This would be a use of tools that returns them to their rightful, limited, instrumental place where they serve human ends rather than the other way around. Finally, this would be an approach that smashes idols and divests tools of their mystique of being instruments of salvation, capable of granting eternal, abundant life. This, finally, is not within the power of technology to give or withhold. Abundant life can only be given by the one who is Life itself. It is given freely by the one who lived, died, and was raised so that “that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn. 10:10).

Julian Waldner is a member of the Decker Hutterite Community. Julian recently graduated with a B.A. from Canadian Mennonite University with majors in English and Philosophy. Upon completion of his after-degree in Education, Julian intends to serve his community as a high school teacher.

36. Ephraim Radner, *Mortal Goods: Reimagining the Christian Moral Duty* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024), 8.

37. Luther, “Freedom of a Christian,” 418.

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