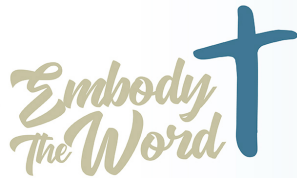


# Reflections on the ELCA's 2022 Churchwide Assembly



2022 ELCA  
CHURCHWIDE ASSEMBLY  
August 8-12, 2022  
Columbus, Ohio

## 2022 ELCA Churchwide Assembly

### Co-missioners,

Our writer this week is Chris Repp. That's Chris as in the Rev. Dr., pastor of Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois; also a long-serving member of the Crossings board, convener of our biweekly [Book Club](#) ([drop him a note](#) if you'd like to join), and one of the writers who produce our weekly text studies.

Chris spent a week this past August in Columbus, Ohio, as a voting member of a churchwide assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). When he got home his local bishop asked him to write up some thoughts about this. Three weeks ago, Chris invited us to share those thoughts with all of you too. Here they are.

Two other quick notes this week:

First, our friend and colleague Steve Kuhl has dealing with some grave medical issues occasioned by a Covid infection. Please keep him in your prayers.

Second, Matt Becker of Valparaiso University sent word recently that his translation of Edmund Schlink's *Ecumenical Dogmatics* is slated for publication next month. You can [pre-order at Amazon](#). More on this in a forthcoming post.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossings Community

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## **Reflections on the ELCA's 2022 Churchwide Assembly**

by Chris Repp

The assembly took place in the same venue that hosted the ELCA's Constituting Convention in 1987, 35 years ago. I was in seminary in those days, in my third year, and was recruited by our worship professor, who was in charge of the various worship services for the convention, to be a participant. My role during the opening worship service was to carry a five-gallon jug of water in procession for presiding bishop Will Herzfeld of the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC), the church body I belonged to, the smallest of the three that were joining to form the ELCA. The presiding bishops of the American Lutheran Church (ALC) and the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) also had seminarians carrying jugs of water for them, and at the remembrance of baptism they simultaneously poured the water from our jugs into a single large font.



Opening Worship at the ELCA Constituting Convention, April 30, 1987. Photo accessed from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/elcaarchives/6147972235/in/photostream/> on October 3, 2022. (Bishop Herzfeld is at the font, just to the right of the processional cross, with his back to the camera. I am behind him, to the right, also with my back to the camera.)

That experience gave me some perspective as I returned to Columbus, Ohio, for this year's assembly. What did I notice? First, in 1987 one of the exciting possibilities before the assembly was electing a woman as our first presiding bishop. Pastor Barbara Lundblad emerged as one of the final four candidates for that call at a time when no woman had yet held the position of bishop or its equivalent in the predecessor church bodies. By contrast, at the assembly this year we needed

to elect a vice president after the untimely death of Mr. Bill Horne last summer. Early in the voting there was a possibility that all of the four officers of the ELCA would be women. So, in thirty-five years we have gone from being intrigued by the *possibility* of a woman leading our national church body to broad acceptance that women can be elected or called to any position of leadership in our church that a man can be elected or called to.

The second thing I noticed was the racial and ethnic diversity of the voting members. To be sure, we are still an overwhelmingly white church body. But we are electing people of color as our voting members in percentages well above their representation in the church as a whole. We were trying already in 1987 to broaden our diversity, and 35 years later we are still trying. That is encouraging to me.

The third thing I noticed was how many young people there were among our voting members who are passionate about moving our church faithfully into the future of a changing world. Again, I'm going to guess that their representation was far above the percentages of active participants their age in our congregations. But here again, I find it encouraging first that we have such people in our church and second that we are entrusting them to help lead us.

I know that articles like this are meant to end on a positive note, but I need to include one last observation that I also posted on Facebook on the last day of the assembly in response to a friend asking what my takeaways were. After writing a

single-sentence condensation of the previous two paragraphs, I then wrote this: “We [as a church] have trouble imagining and articulating the gospel in ways that don’t collapse back into law, which is a perennial problem, and less encouraging.”



What is the Gospel (from Canva)

What I meant by this is that both in presentations and sermons I heard again and again that the gospel is about things we *have* to do: addressing structural and historical racism, for instance, or combatting poverty and injustice, or being inclusive of all people, and so on. I want to be as clear as I can be that all of those are things I want to see the church doing, but not as a new legalism. Martin Luther warned his followers not to make Jesus into a new Moses, as if all Jesus did was bring us newer and better laws to replace the old ones. The gospel is the promise of reconciliation with God and our fellow human beings that Jesus accomplishes for us through his death and resurrection, forgiving our past sins, and freeing us from the power of sin, death, and evil.

When the church is clear about this as the gospel and when it centers its life around the church-defining task of proclaiming it, then we find not that we *have* to do all those good things above that we too easily confuse with the gospel, but that we *get* to do them, we *want* to do them, we *can't help but* do them. The real gospel is the power of God, the vehicle through which the Holy Spirit transforms our lives by creating faith in us that trusts God's promises and aligns our wills with God's. My hope for the ELCA is that we would start acting as if we believed these key insights of the Lutheran movement that I've just attempted to summarize, and that we would resist the ever-present temptation to take matters into our own hands. It has to be "God's work, our hearts" first, and only then "our hands."

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**Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use**  
A publication of the Crossings Community

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## **A Review of David Zahl's Low Anthropology**

The Unlikely Key to a Gracious View of Others  
(and Yourself)

# *LOW ANTHROPOLOGY*



**DAVID ZAHL**

Low Anthropology, by David Zahl

**Co-missioners,**

Are you looking for ways to talk about the Gospel with people who can't imagine needing it? If so, we send you notice of a book you'll want to buy. It was published only last month.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossings Community

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**A Review of David Zahl's *Low Anthropology***

by Bruce K. Modahl

*Bibliographic Details—*

Zahl, David

[\*Low Anthropology: The Unlikely Key to a Gracious View of Others \(and Yourself\)\*](#)

Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2022

203 pp.

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Someone comes to you in a state of distress. They have questions about their life and faith. They wonder if there is any meaning or purpose for them. At the end of the conversation, you scan your shelves, hoping some book will present itself as one to help them address their questions. The books you find on those shelves are from a previous generation. They will not do for today.



In a Facebook post, David Zahl cites the above experience as motivation for writing this book. Zahl serves on the staff of Christ Episcopal Church in Charlottesville, Virginia, which provides campus ministry to University of Virginia students. He is also the founder and director of [Mockingbird Ministries](#) and the author of the critically acclaimed book [Seculosity](#). Zahl has been a keynote speaker at two Crossings conferences.



David Zahl

In the introduction, Zahl expands on his reason for writing. First, in his ten years of working with students from the University of Virginia, he has seen an increase in the number of students who are anxious and unhappy with their lives. From 2007 to 2019, the number of students with prescriptions for antidepressants or anti-anxiety medication has doubled.

Second, in twenty years of preaching at different churches around the country he has found that the sermons people remember are the ones which assume that the listener is suffering.

Third, he cites the deep division and acrimony in our country. Each side assumes their point of view is infallible.

Finally, he finds that religion in general and Christianity in particular do not make sense to many people today. Words like sin and salvation are scarcely intelligible.

He closes this section writing, “[M]y concern moves beyond ecclesial or confessional loyalties. Because no matter our religious background or beliefs, we are all well acquainted with the fallout of tireless perfectionism. It is killing us.”

But why “low anthropology”—as something we should embrace? What Zahl means by the term is what we mean when we confess in church before God and everyone around us that “we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves.” That is low anthropology. The problem is we leave church and, by our words and actions, show that we think we are very much capable of freeing ourselves. Like everyone else, we can’t bear being wrong. We are caught up in the same tireless drive to be right(eous). That is high anthropology. But it is not the truth about us. Expecting perfection of ourselves or those around us causes misery all around.

Zahl suggests that words like sin and salvation are scarcely intelligible, so our captivity to sin is not the place to begin the conversation. Zahl does not avoid talking about sin. However, he is more inclined to begin with the symptoms of sin. He has a gift for translating insider language into words that appeal to those who are biblically unschooled and put off by theological language.

For example, Zahl quotes Giles Fraser, “[Jesus] wants us to feel that we cannot do what morality demands... and he does so because he’s pointing to something beyond morality.” Zahl goes on to write, “Jesus confronts us with our limits, not to discourage us

but to engineer a situation in which the phrase 'what is impossible with man is possible with God' might find traction. Faith in God begins where faith in oneself ends."

Zahl has just explained how God employs the law to accuse us. God uses the law not to drive us to despair, but to drive us to faith in God. What I miss hearing from Zahl at this juncture is any word about Jesus' death and resurrection as the good news which meets us at the opposite end of the law's accusation.

Zahl begins his book with a section titled "The Shape of Low Anthropology." The shape of low anthropology follows the contours that acknowledge our limitations. Zahl says that accepting our limitations frees us to have compassion on ourselves and others. We see how much we all need each other. Modesty really is the best policy for our relationships with others and for our own emotional health.

Zahl uses the term doubleness. Paul explained the doubleness that affects all of us by saying he wanted to do what is good. But the evil he did not want to do is what he ended up doing. The shape of low anthropology includes the acknowledgement that human beings are self-centered. Zahl calls self-centeredness *control freaks anonymous*.

The center section of the book focuses on the mechanics of low anthropology, how we avoid it and its fruits when we embrace it. The final section of the book focuses on how low anthropology plays out in our lives: in relationships, politics, and religion.



Homeless Jesus Statue, photo by Jerome Burce

The last chapter of the book is entitled "Low Anthropology in Religion." I suggest reading this chapter first. In this reader's opinion, it provides the scaffolding for all the rest. The foundation is provided by the statement Zahl quotes from his father, an Episcopal priest: "The lower your anthropology, the higher your Christology will be."

Zahl builds from this statement. He says a low anthropology holds God to his promises rather than usurp the reins. A religion of low anthropology does not, in Zahl's words, "recalibrate the law of God or propagate rumors about the human ability to fulfill it. Instead, it allows God's voice to speak at full volume." In so doing God intends to force us to look away from ourselves and look to God for deliverance.

Zahl is right to begin with God's promises before unfolding God's use of the law. I would like to hear from Zahl what those promises are. To be sure, I can find them throughout the book. I long to hear a summary of those promises at this point.

The question remains: Is this just another self-help book? Zahl says it is not. Nadia Bolz-Weber, in her testament on the book jacket, says it is not. Low anthropology and self-help contradict each other. However, the book has some of the markings of self-help volumes. They all expose some problem or other in our thinking and behavior. They all offer solutions in ten steps, twelve keys, or twenty-four best practices. Zahl does not do the latter. However, I can envision someone divining rubrics for us to adopt in order to achieve happiness in a life of low anthropology.

Over the years, I have attended enough traveling medicine shows of the I'm-ok-you're-ok, road-less-traveled variety to know I come away burdened with pages of notes detailing what I need to get busy doing and feeling worse about my life and abilities than before I entered the arena.

There is one sentence in the book that decides the matter for me. Zahl writes, "[A] religion of low anthropology tends to resonate with those who find themselves defeated by life rather than with folks on the upward swing."

Self-help books are written by those on the upward swing. Zahl writes from the place the rest of us find ourselves. We are people in desperate need of God grace. God's grace is what I heard from Zahl from beginning to end in this book. This is why I highly recommend the book. Zahl delivers God's mercy as balm for our wounded souls.

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