

TELLING TIME or Whose Millennium Is It Anyway?

Robert Bertram

[Address at the 25th Anniversary of Christ Seminary Seminex, at Atonement Lutheran Church, June 25, 1999.]

Twenty-five years ago we learned a new phrase from the **Formula of Concord**, “a time for confessing.” (SD X,10) What kind of time is that? What does it teach us about time in general, all time?

1. The Stifled Second Wow

Next year at this time students will be graduating in the Year 2000. Some of you surely will be serving as their commencement speakers or baccalaureate preachers. I can see it now. You will begin your address by greeting them. You will intone, “So you are the Class of 2000.” The moment you say only that much, some precocious child in a back pew, some little sister, will be startled by what you’ve just said. She will lean over and whisper to her father, “Class of 2000 – are there that many graduating tonight”? Her father will shake his head reassuringly, No. “Then why 2000,” the little girl persists. “2000 what?” The father thinks for a moment and then whispers back, “2000 years, 2000 years old.” “Wow,” the child exclaims, “Who is 2000 years old?” The father realizes what he has gotten himself into, and he whispers back, “Better ask your mother.”

If you should turn out to be the mother in question, What would you answer the child? Who is it who is 2000 years old, give or take a few years? Who from among all those who have gone before is so important that you would date your whole life, your whole world, from the time he or she lived? The child’s question comes

down to this, Whose bi-millennium is it anyway? How would you answer? If you're a seminary graduate you'd probably tell the child more than she wants to know. You'd say that an ancient monk by the name of Dionysius Exiguus once figured out how many years it was since Jesus had been born and that, ever since, people have been counting, "This is year so-and-so A.D., Anno Domini," which means "In the year of the Lord." With that learned answer the little girl's eyes would of course glaze over and she would promptly lose interest.

I suspect that what the mother, not having gone to seminary, will answer will be more to the point. Quite simply she will say, "That's how old Jesus Christ is."

With that answer the child is just about to let out another, a second Wow, just about but not quite. Suddenly she hesitates. She suppresses the Wow. Her expression turns to a frown. Why? More on that in a moment. First, let us interject, if the child had gone through with the next Wow, she would have had good reason, don't you think? After all, two thousand years is a long time. For anyone to live that long – anyone like us, and Jesus is like us – is a pretty ripe old age. Granted, the mother could say what she did, that Jesus Christ is still living after 2000 years, only on faith. For she was not saying that Jesus would have been this old had he lived. No, she says he is still very much alive and counting. She is not saying only that two millennia ago Jesus lived and died. That's true, he did, and that is decisive. But that much anyone could have said, even the little girl's father. Any non-believer could have said that. The mother, however, is a believer. She takes it as a given that this same Jesus who died was in turn raised from the dead and therefore, ever since, keeps adding years to his life. Isn't that enough for another Wow?

Then why did the girl stifle her Wow? What gave her pause? Why

the sudden frown? Listen. She nuzzles up to her mom's ear and, with just a touch of embarrassment asks, "But isn't Jesus just as old as God? Isn't Jesus God, too? Why did he start so late?" Notice, at first the child had been impressed that anyone could be so old, that is, before she realized they were talking about Jesus Christ. But then, once she heard it was he, she was disappointed that he wasn't any older than that. For shouldn't he be, being divine? Granted, for a human being two millennia would be a long time. But for a God, that's an embarrassment. A God who was born only 2000 years ago? Why then first? For a God, that is a pretty late bloomer and, to all appearances, not much of a God at all. What took the wind out of the little girl's sails is the question with which Christians have long been taunted, Where was your Savior (ha, ha) before he was born? And we have to admit: before he was born, he wasn't. Not this Savior. That's enough to choke off a Wow.

Of course Christians, too, know that any proper God, any God who is "from everlasting to everlasting," has no beginning – not only not an end but also not a beginning. I repeat, God has no beginning. But that was not your question, was it? Your question was about Jesus Christ. Does he have a beginning? Well, I can tell you this: he has no ending.

The Christian gospel has that problem safely covered. Jesus Christ doesn't end. He rises again, and he goes on living longer and longer, year after year, "world without end." Some folks mistakenly think that "A.D." means "After Christ." No, there is no "After Christ." He is still very much in circulation. Even as human he is still alive and present. He is, as G. K. Chesterton called him, "the everlasting man." See, that takes care of Christ's "to everlasting." On that point the little girl could say Wow. And remember, she did. That was her first Wow.

2. The Problem Is the B.C.

But I'm evading your question. You weren't asking whether Jesus Christ has an ending. You know he doesn't. What you were asking, little girl, is whether he has a beginning. You know well enough that he is "to everlasting." The question is, Is he "from everlasting?" I might as well admit it: that is a problem. That is the problem, isn't it, that brought the girl up short in the first place. For Jesus Christ does have a beginning, a rather recent one at that. As Jesus Christ he does. There was a time when Jesus Christ was not – a time B.C., "Before Christ." There is no problem with the years A.D., the years since our Lord. The more of those, the better. However, if there is an A.D., there had to be a B.C., before he ever came into being. But then that means he had to start at some Year One, like us – square one. That is definitely ungodlike and, when you think of it, humiliating.

It is true, indispensably true, that before he ever was Jesus Christ, he had already been the divine Word from all eternity. But then why didn't he leave it at that? Instead, scandal of scandals, doesn't he go off one day into this far country, into our world, and suddenly become one of us as well – which the day before, he had not been? How prodigal of him. What does that do to his reputation as God, that after all this time, after so much history had flowed over the dam, now first he decides to start this way, quite different from anything he had ever been? A God who is just starting out? An entry-level God? That is an oxymoron. That makes him not like God but like this little girl. And that makes her uneasy.

Worse yet, not only does this incarnate God get a late start, but just think what a headstart that gave to all those who had gone before him. All those people, those nations, those generations – all of them his mere creatures – now had the jump

on him. His problem, we're saying, is not just that he began at a certain time and not before. His bigger problem is all those predecessors who did come before, whom he now has to follow.

Yes, he was late getting here. But what is worse, so many others had gotten here first, ahead of him, putting him at a distinct disadvantage. It is bad enough that the incarnate God has a birthdate but because he does, there was all that B.C. that he had missed out on. Like what? Well, for starters he missed out on the death of his friend Lazarus, as sister Martha scolded him, If you'd been here sooner my brother wouldn't have died. (Jn. 11: 21) But that was merely a delay of a few days, which Jesus was able to minimize. However, it was a lot harder trying to explain why he had not been around when Moses was, or Abraham, let alone Adam and Eve. Predecessors do have advantage. Anciency outranks recency. Our little girl in the back pew understands that. It's because she's so young that she is in the back pew with her parents, and her older brother gets to be up on stage graduating. Yet for God to be so upstaged, because he too was born later, makes him like her, a back-bencher. And that makes her uneasy.

Still worse, all that pre-history that had predated Jesus, all that BC, not only was something he had missed out on but also was something he now had to run to catch up with. How much he had to learn, and always at second hand, from those who already had been there and done that. Not only did he get a late start and the others a headstart, but his was not a fresh start. No baby's is. We all had to begin not just where the world once began but where it already was by the time we arrived. If God was going to begin as a baby with a birthdate, as he now did, think how inexperienced that suddenly made him and how dependent upon others to teach him: to walk, to chew, to talk (and then in only one or two languages at best.) Maybe he even had to learn theology from John the Baptist. What a dilemma that posed for

the evangelist of The Fourth Gospel, who had to admit that, OK, so Jesus did follow the Baptist and maybe even studied under him. But then the evangelist had to explain somehow that, in spite of all this Christ-come-lately, he nevertheless had been "in the beginning" of everything.

Even so, the evangelist did not dare deny that this Jesus Christ, though he was very God of very God, was still very much a descendant and not only of God but of other humans, and not only in what he had to learn from them but in what he had inherited from them, and inherited not only historically but even genetically. The genealogies with which the other evangelists begin their gospels are not fluff. Jesus Christ, for all his originality as humanity's Creator, is just as truly one of its dependents, a chip off of our old block, an apple that has fallen not far from the tree. And in that shocking sense he is not an original but an offspring, a derivative. The Son of God not only entered history, he became a product of history. That puts him right in the back-seat with our little girl. Like her, he too had to have parents and he too had to ask them the same elementary questions she has to. That dependent he was upon his forebears B.C. And that makes the little girl uneasy.

Worst of all, notice, this incarnate God has to do this. He has no choice. He has to accept the past which preceded him and, like all the rest of us he has to let that past set the agenda for who he now is and what he now does. That's the way it is with our kind of time. Once we're born into it, much of what we do from then on – maybe most of what we do – has been decided for us before we get here. Just by living out our lives we are keeping all sorts of prior commitments, but commitments which we had little to do with making. We are complying with a past which antedated us. Yet don't we have some choice in the matter? Some, yes. Our biggest choice, I suppose, is to reaffirm the choices which have already been made for us, and then to make the most

of them: for example, that we were born in the twentieth century, white or black or brown, female or male, gifted in this way or that. But even the new choices we make along the way do in turn control our future. The wedding vows we once made, the once fateful decision to stand with Semtex, the calls we once accepted or declined – all past tense – are the ties that most bind us today. We are governed by what happened beforehand. Look at your pocket Appointment Book. What is that but page after page of IOUs, all incurred previously. Here you've inked in next Tuesday, "7:00 pm, Meet with Caleb's teacher." Not only is there a person to be met but a debt to be met, a debt you incurred beforehand. It must be paid.

So it is with Jesus Christ. He too incurred a beforehand, a B.C., which even before he arrived had already mortgaged his future but which he had to pay. As God, he doesn't have to do anything, I suppose, not even become incarnate. But once he made that choice, he was obligated to "fulfill" dozens of previous promises. Scripture read like his appointment book, and he had to keep moving to meet those appointments on time. He sounds like you and me, with our "have to's," our "must do's." "The Son of Man must (dei) undergo great suffering, and [must] be rejected by the elders . . . , and [must] be killed, and after three days [must] rise again." (Mk. 8:31) So let's get going, he says to his disciples, it's time to head for Jerusalem, because of previous commitments B.C.

What makes our past so binding is just that, it is past. It is done and cannot be undone. You promised Caleb and your spouse that together you would go to his parent-teacher interview. True, that is still a few days off. It hasn't happened yet. That is what we mean by future: what hasn't happened yet. So, conceivably, you could still bow out – as you did last year. (Caleb has not forgotten that.) But what has happened – and that's what we mean by past – is that you did in fact promise.

That you cannot undo. Although that was a month ago, or because it was, there is no way that you can now make the promise unhappen. You cannot unring the bell. The die is cast, because it's past. There is no way to recall it, not by you, not by anyone. Not even by God? Milton may have been right,

But past who can recall, or done undo?
Not God Omnipotent. Nor Fate. (PL 9.926)

Whether or not God can undo the past, truth is, God does not. Time, too, is the Creator's doing, including its irrevocable past, and not even the New Creation pretends the Old Creation never occurred or is not owed its full due.

However, that is exactly the problem with Christ's "B.C." When the Son of God became a human creature, he became a creature also of time. He had to do what his prehistory made him do. Else, like a parent who breaks a promise to a child, he welsches on a debt. And The Past is a very fastidious book-keeper, moreso by far than Caleb, with an infallible memory for deadlines – and deadbeats. For "The Past" read "the Law."

3. The Past Mortgages the Future

This is the way the Law works, chronologically speaking. In any given day most of us have more to do than we have time to do it in. We may wish, as we say, "there were more hours in the day." But there aren't. So instead we borrow additional time from the future. A month ago, probably through no fault of yours, you were unable to attend Caleb's parent-teacher interview. So you took out a loan against the future. You borrowed next Tuesday evening. You even wrote it down. Caleb and his teacher and your spouse all notarized the loan. But when next Tuesday arrives and the loan comes due, it is no longer a free evening to be spent at your discretion. In a real sense that evening has already

been spent a month ago. You will say, This evening I “have” to go to my son’s parent-teacher interview. You’re right, you have to, because of what you “have” already done. You promised (past tense.) Our past commitments already own most of our tomorrows. We say of prisoners or of the dying that they are living on “borrowed time.” But who isn’t? For all of us, the future is already time owed, debited time. It has been booked solid. It has all been borrowed long since to hold off creditors yesterday.

See, even the Law can be quite generous in advancing us more time from the future, but only by putting us, its debtors, more and more in arrears to the past. The problem isn’t just that “time is too short.” Even if it were endless, as for us Christians it is, it would always be borrowed time, waiting not to be spent but to be paid back – back to this or that commitment in the past. We deceive ourselves when we think the problem is with the future, as if there were not enough of that. The usual complaint is, We are running out of time. If only we had another week. If only we could extend the future. That is The Chronic Fallacy, an illusion, at least for Christians. We have all the time in the world and then some: “world without end.” Thanks to Jesus’ resurrection, we do. But that by itself isn’t good enough. What is the good of merely adding more tomorrows if those, too, are already earmarked for payments past due. What we need is not only more future but one which is debt-free, not in hock to the past. No matter how many more tomorrows we have coming to us, they have already been signed over to a creditor who says, tapping the table, “Sorry, those tomorrows, remember, are what I have coming to me.” Who is “me”? Euphemistically we call it The Law. But remember Whose Law it is.

So when the Word became flesh roughly 2000 years ago, he started running on our time. But, we protest with the psalmist, our

times are in God's hands. (Ps. 31:15) True. And if that were all, that might be sheer comfort. (It might.) But did God leave well enough alone? No. For what is also true is that, ever since the coming of Christ, our time now is God's time. That is deeply unnerving. For that means that, vice versa, God's times are now also in our hands. And what an intimidating handful he is! Those enormous debts we have on our hands, all those tomorrows we already mortgaged yesterday, are now inherited by Jesus Christ as well. As he takes us debtors on as his past, his B.C. – his Bad Credit! – his future becomes encumbered and impoverished along with ours. Now we have him, too, on our hands. That is doubly daunting. So long as it was just the lot of us, before he assumed us as his B.C., we could plan the future almost glibly. What's one more Tuesday evening promised away! But now that he too bears the consequences of our plans, our responsibility is staggering.

For instance, the Son of God lets his very birthplace be scheduled for him by one of us, Caesar Augustus, in Caesar's appointment book no doubt. If poor Caesar had known, would he still have scheduled the decree that all the world should be taxed? A few years later Pontius Pilate did have some premonition of whose time he held in his hands, and quiveringly he tried washing his hands of the whole affair, in vain. Then there was Judas, to whom Christ said, "Friend, do what you are here to do." "Then they came and laid hands on Jesus." (Mt. 26:50) Yes, "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." (He. 10:31) But is it any less fearful having God fall into our hands?

We said that God is now running on our time. But it isn't even "our" time. It is our enemy's. The fact is, "our" time runs us. We speak glibly of "managing our time." Surely we can't mean that literally. Who, I ask you, is managing whom? You know as well as I, this time of "ours" can be a tyrant. Time may not be,

as Leonard Bernstein claimed, "THE enemy." But it definitely can be inimical, right up there with the other principalities and powers (as I glance nervously at my watch.) By the same token, God the incarnate one is not so much running on our time as he is letting himself be run by the time that runs us. So once again, our worst problem is not that we are running out of time or even that we're not running on time but rather that time is running us – us and Jesus Christ, as one of us. If the question is, Whose time is it, our first pious impulse may be to say, It is "our" past which he took on as his B.C. But even that is not the extent of it. Even he, the Lord, has to concede to his enemy, "This is your hour, and the power of darkness." (Lk. 22:53) Sometimes that causes us to tremble.

No wonder the little girl in the back pew held back her second Wow. The fact that someone like us has been living for 2,000 years, that she did find Wow-worthy – until she learned that that someone is Jesus Christ. Then suddenly a mere two millennia seemed, well, disgraceful, if Christ truly is the Son of God. Suddenly he seemed too much like one of us. The child suppressed any further wow, as who wouldn't. That started us thinking: by coming when he did, Christ inherited a past, our past, as his B.C.; that past laid its heavy hand on his whole ensuing future, demanding its obligations be paid; by our being his B.C., as woefully we are, our unpaid past causes his downfall – time being what it is "under the Law." The appropriate response, as the youngster seemed to sense, is not Wow but Woe. I can understand why her father evaded her question, also why folks who don't share our faith object to having to date their calendars from the time of Christ. I would, too, and so would you, were it not that we've learned otherwise – as some of us did most pointedly twenty-five years ago, in a "time for confessing."

4. Time For the Second Wow

I'm betting that the little girl did not give up on the second Wow altogether. She was probably just mulling it over. It is called wonder. We never did reveal how her mother answered her last question. Remember, the child had asked why Jesus Christ, being just as old as God, being God, would still have a birthday like one of us. I'm not sure her mother answered the Why head-on. But I do have it on good authority that what the mother does reply, simply, is this: "Aren't you glad he did?" That is, what if Christ had not had a birthday like one of us? But: "Aren't you glad he did?" That was enough to set the child to mulling or, if you will, wondering. Aristotle said, All philosophy begins in wonder. Whitehead said, And that is how all philosophy ends, in wonder. Lutherans sing, "To this vale of tears he comes, . . . Is not this a wonder?" (TLH 97)

In her wondering, the little girl has lots of company. She is compassed about by a great cloud of wonderers. They are the confessors who have taken the stigma of the Word made flesh, the everlasting God with a birthdate, and they have parlayed that stigma into the diametric opposite: a point of pride, a doxological Wow. For instance, take Dorothy Sayers, that doughty old Anglo-Catholic, pre-feminism feminist. She said, and she meant it as a compliment, "The Christian God is the only God with a date in history." That makes Dorothy Sayers a Wow-sayer. (Do you believe puns are divinely predestined?) And Martin Luther, who had a penchant for saying things plainly, how did he put it? He said "the humanity of Christ has not, like the deity, existed from eternity, but according to our calendar Jesus the Son of Mary is 1543 years old this year." (FC/SD 8:85) Think what the little girls in the sixteenth century must have said, "Only 1543 years old?" For Luther, too, the scandal of the time-bound, debt-bound Son of God had become instead the very wonder

of the Good News. Luther did not minimize that this condescension on God's part was humiliating. For God it definitely is, but for us too. Indeed, it is mortifying. Yet just think how God's humiliation simultaneously exalts us. Daring to trust that, Luther swallowed hard and joined the Wow-sayers.

Incidentally, the two quotations cited here, one from Dorothy Sayers and the other from Martin Luther, give you all the texts you need for your first theological get-together back home with the Episcopalians in your community, once ELCA finalizes "full communion" with them. Here in Saint Louis we have not waited for that. In anticipation of full communion, we have already been having "full conversation" – we call it "LutEpisc" – annually for the past three years. Next time, at LutEpisc IV, we could talk about our common faith in "the only God with a date in history." But as Max Beerbohm would say, I digress.

What is it that drives the new Wow-sayers? Answer: it is Christ's bringing about a New Time, actually a whole new kind of time. It isn't just that he adopts our Old Time, under the Law, as our co-debtor. By itself, what's the good of that, unless all you look for in a "God-with-us" theology is a kind of misery-loves-company? That is a misreading of "Immanuel," if all Christ does is assure us he is here feeling our pain. That still leaves the bills unpaid and our future as indebted to the past as it ever was, except that now we may have a new celebrity sharing our insolvency, and maybe an endless resurrection in which to prolong it. Really, that is just the same old B.C.-kind of time, only more of it, and now in more respectable company. But the God of Scripture whom we confess does not settle for such old potatoes, being much more pragmatic, more results-oriented, more innovative than that. True, by becoming incarnate, a creature of time, this God does start running on our Old Time and is run by it – all the way into the grave. But by the time he is finished,

he has put an end to that kind of time altogether, along with all its pauperizing works and ways. And he has replaced it not only with a new heaven and a new earth but also with a New Aeon – call it a New Time – complete with a new future and a new past. What’s more, that is not only his time but ours, too. And already we have been running on it, he and we together, for some 2000 years now.

We said that Christ put an end to the old kind of time, the kind where the past mortgages the future. On his cross he did that, when he paid with his life, paid off all the mortifying IOUs of B.C. “It is finished,” the Old Time is. All the perennial sighs of “A mother’s work is never finished” and of fathers’ “I’m never caught up” came to an end in Christ’s consummatum est. There finally we do get caught up. Of course, that Old Time would have come to an end anyway, sooner or later, with or without Christ. For everyone it will, also for you and me. Whether or not we ever catch up, the past will eventually catch up with us. In due time all the obligations of B.C. will finally come due. Then there will be no more extending our payment period into the future. Time’s up. But if that is going to happen anyway – The Final Judgment, The Last Analysis, the end of time as we know it – what was the point in Jesus’ putting an end to the Old Time when he did, already 2000 years ago? Couldn’t he wait? If this dreadful Endtime is still to come, regardless, why rush it?

5. A Switch In Time

Aha, notice the switch. Suddenly we are asking, Why did Christ come so early? Here, all along, we had been asking the opposite, Why did he come so late? Until now our question has been, Why did the incarnate God, by waiting so long to be born, let all that B.C. pile up and drag him down? Now we are asking instead,

If Old Time is going to end anyway, all too soon, why did Christ have to come and end it even sooner – ahead of time? Why? Answer: to give us an option. The old option, until Christ the only option, is to wait for The Endtime and take our chances. The new option is not to wait but rather to face The Endtime prematurely and hope to preempt it. One option is to go on living our lives as we have, falling farther and farther behind in our obligations, in hopes that when The Endtime comes we may just have enough credit left to impress The Creditor. The other option is not to go it alone but instead to go through The Endtime with Christ, when he did, ahead of time. One option is to temporize and wish for the best. The other option is to anticipate, risking everything, even blasphemy, going for broke, with only Jesus and his promises to go on. Neither option is without enormous risk. On the one hand, if you try to “save your life you will lose it.” But the other option, Jesus’ way, while it promises to “save your life,” requires first of all that you lose it. Neither option is a no-lose situation. And let’s face it, rationally calculated, Jesus could turn out in The End to be wrong. Either way, you die. But now at least you have options as to how to die: permanently or, as we dare to confess, transitionally.

Old Time, as we have said over and over, operates by having the past mortgage the future. There was a reason for overworking that metaphor, “mortgage,” a christological reason. Etymologically the word means death-pledge. In times past a poor debtor may have secured a loan by promising to repay it once she had come into her inheritance, that is, once the present owner of the estate – say, her older brother – died and left her his bequest. Her “pledge” (gage) to pay was posited on his “dying” (mors.) It sounds a bit morbid at first, her waiting for him to die, but not if it was he, the brother, who urged her to count on his death and to make her plans in that hope. Isn’t it so

with our older Brother, Christ? He made a point of instituting "a new covenant in his blood," to liquidate our vast indebtedness to the old covenant, where past mortgaged future?

Where the analogy breaks down is that, in our mortgage with Jesus, we the heirs come into his bequest by our dying with him. As our fellow-confessor Bonhoeffer put it, "When Christ calls us, he bids us come and die." (CoD) There is no denying that that is a breathtaking invitation. In one of Seminex' advent hymn-sings at Christ Church Cathedral a few years ago, there was this line in the sermon, "If you like bungee-jumping you'll love Advent" – advent as in adventure. But beyond the risk is the come-on to take the risk, the lure of the promise: here in dying with Christ is where Old Time comes to its end way ahead of schedule. And what else but that have we been doing in our baptisms and every day since?

How to find words to describe this wonder of the New Time, Jesus' ending of Old Time ahead of time, prior to its own appointed end? The wonder, being so new, defies old language. The best analogies for that wonder, I find, are from the tough slang we hear on the streets and at the edges of polite society. Thus we might say, in the lingo of the boxer, that Jesus beat Endtime to the punch or, like a gun-slinger, he beat Endtime to the draw or, like a wrestler, he got the jump on it, or, like outlaws in a Western, he headed Endtime off at the pass, or, like a reporter, he scooped it. The point in these analogies is not the machismo they exude. That part is directly belied by Jesus as the Isaianic Suffering Servant, whose preeminent virtue is not bravado, not even bravery, but humility.

However, what these earthy analogies do convey is the element of foiling an adversary with a preemptive strike. And remember in this case who the adversary is: Old Time under the Law. Do you mean the very Law of God? Yes. But doesn't that put God's Son in

an adversarial relation with God's, the same God's, own old order? Evidently so. What chutzpah! But why would Jesus risk that? Why? For now the mother's answer to the little girl is enough: But aren't you glad he did? Still, that would require the audacity either of a fool or of a child. Exactly. And as Paul said of Jesus' believers, we too are both of those things: children and fools, for following Jesus. But aren't you glad?

6. Time For Confessing, A Telling Time

In the Christian tradition there has long been a belief about confessors, those believers who have witnessed to the gospel in times of persecution, maybe not all that bravely but (let us hope) humbly, certainly humbled, possibly even humiliated. The belief is, those confessors were not just being mortified in this way or that but rather, already at that time, were being put through The Endtime, The Final Judgment. Way ahead of time, they were, here on earth while they were still alive. They were heading off The Endtime at the pass, long before it comes to pass for everyone else. Accordingly, the confession they once made – whether before Pilate or the Diet of Augsburg or before the New Orleans convention or an LC-MS church council – already counts as the testimony they would ordinarily not have given until The Last Judgment, when everyone else will be held to account. Confessors and martyrs, by contrast, have already been through that accounting and, in The Endtime, will simply be asked whether they still stand by their earlier witness. They get no other chance. They have already had that. It is this previous public confession of Christ, once upon a time, to which they will be held by the ultimate Creditor. Woe to them if then they disclaim it or apologize for it or ask to revise it. But Wow for them, the Creditor will say, if they stick by it.

It was in this belief about confessors that Luther preached a funeral sermon in 1532. The deceased was his own duke, Elector John of Saxony, who just two years before had been one of the little band of confessors (all of them laypeople!) who had stood before a hostile emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, probably hat in hand, bowing and scraping, to present their modest Confessio Augustana as they had been ordered to do, only to have it repudiated on the spot as false teaching. Luther's duke had not permitted him to go along to Augsburg because a contract had been put out on his life. But what Luther marvelled about in this prince who went in his stead was not nearly his courage so much as his humility. ("He was obliged to swallow all kinds of bitter broth and venom which the devil had poured out for him.") It was that earlier mortification, not his recent physical demise, which was the elector's "real death," namely, the one he had suffered "two years ago in Augsburg . . . not only for himself but for us all." Nevertheless, "there our beloved elector openly confessed Christ's death and resurrection before the whole

world and he stuck to it, staking his land and people, indeed his own body and life, upon it." This was the same elector whom Luther publicly had criticized for looting the monasteries. But on The Last Day, what is that sin compared with what the elector did at Augsburg? "For here the words of Christ stood sure: 'Every one who acknowledges me before human beings, I also will acknowledge before my Father.'" (LW 51: 237-240)

So Elector John scooped The Endtime way back in The Year of Our Lord 1530. Half a century later his co-confessors joined him: "In the presence of God and of all Christendom among both our contemporaries and our posterity [that's us] we wish to have testified that the present [confession] . . . is our teaching, belief, and confession in which by God's grace we shall appear with intrepid hearts before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ

and for which we shall give an account." (FC/SD 12:40) "With intrepid hearts" they went through The Endtime, the time of final accounting, way ahead of time and dared to get the jump on the very Law of God, in humble trust that it was God who personally had put them up to it. In that "time for confessing," long ago, they died. Such confessing is terminal. But so did Old Time die with them, then already. They, by contrast, will not stay dead, anymore than Christ does. We dare not minimize the awesomeness of such confessing. For it is, shall we say, a "rushing to Judgment," one's own Judgment, rather than waiting for that Judgment to summon us. No Christian wishes to precipitate that time of trial frivolously. That is why we pray, "Save us from the time of trial," just as our Lord prayed in the garden that he be spared the trial of Good Friday. But as Hattie, one of my favorite characters in a nursing home said of Christ, "Look at him now: he's up and around and doing quite well."

The title of this essay, "Telling Time," was meant as a pun. The phrase can be understood in more than one way. I can say of our three-year old granddaughter, "Ursula is learning to tell time." In that case it is she, the subject, who is doing the telling and it is "time," the object, which is being told. But the reverse can also be true. We say, "Time will tell." In this second sense it is time that does the telling and we are the ones who get told. There was a time, twenty-five years ago, when you and I did the telling. It was "a time for confessing" – to the whole world. It was, for us, a mortifying "show and tell time." We, whether we sought it or not, had to be the tellers. However, and this is the question, was that confessio of ours, twenty-five years ago, good enough, final enough to admit us when we "with intrepid hearts before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ . . . shall give an account?" Time will tell. We don't yet know for sure. That future Endtime, for which we like

everyone else must wait, will eventually tell whether our onetime confession in 1974 was God's own. By then, of course, it will be too late for us to change.

The question really is this, and a quite personal question it is: Was our "time for confessing" a quarter of a century ago the telling time in still another, a third sense of "telling," as when we speak of "the telling blow"? Was that the time which made all the difference, the big moment, the chance of a lifetime given us by God? Was that the time, as we said then, when we had to stand up and be counted, and be counted not just by others but by God? In the words of this week's gospel, was that the time which we were given so to confess Christ before others as to be confessed by him before the Father? If it was – as with fear and trembling I believe, teach and confess it was – then that was also a time when The Endtime, The Last Analysis, came way ahead of time. That year The Final Future came very early. And we have been living with it ever since, in The New Time.

7. Backing Into the Future

Does this mean that the defining moment to which we look back is our own "time for confessing" in 1974, as if that were the time past when our new future began? Hardly. Indeed, the only thing which makes any "time for confessing" memorable at all is precisely that in that moment when confessors are on trial before God and the world they point, for their defense, away from themselves to the only sufficing Defense they have, Jesus Christ. Anything short of that is simply not a confession of Christ. If during these anniversary days we are pointing back a mere twenty-five years ago we do so only because then, in that recent past, we had to confess how indefensible we all were (our accusers included) and instead had to pass the buck to a far

more remote past, two millennia ago, to the only Defendant anyone (our accusers included) ever has had. It was that past, Christ's cross and resurrection and Pentecostal gift, not our re-telling of it, which this week's second lesson says was "once for all." It was that past which, when we did retell it, our accusers thought was beside the point, an evasion of the issue. It was that past which was the defining historical moment which scooped The Endtime. But because it is that past which is definitive for all time to come, that is likewise what made our saying it over (which is what confessing means) definitive for our own futures as well – and maybe, please God, for some small part of the church's future. In any case, the Message makes the messengers, not vice versa.

But isn't there something wrong here? For to hear us talk you would gather (and you would be right) that our future is still being shaped by the past. But isn't that the mark of Old Time, to which Christ allegedly put an end? Shouldn't Christians rather be looking ahead to the future, not back to the past? Doesn't Jesus himself command us, once we have put our hand to the plow, never to look back? (Lk. 9:62) Doesn't Hebrews urge us to run "the race that is set before us," not behind us? (12:1) Isn't it exactly this forward look which the biblical tradition gave to the American frontier? Isn't it this biblical futurism that makes us Americans all millenarians, whether religious or secular? Didn't Lincoln speak for our whole culture when he said, "Let the past as nothing be"? Then why should Christians be so un-American, so antiquarian, so counter-cultural as to take their basic cue from 2000 years ago, even if that is the past of Jesus' death and rising?

But oh, what a past that is! That is no longer the past which, under the Law, burdens the future with unmet obligations. That is the alternative past, the new past, when Christ uncoupled the future from all old debts and instead launched a future which is

debt-free, a future not of “got-to” but of “get-to.” When Emerson says, “Be not the slave of your own past,” I can re-interpret his advice much more radically than he ever intended: Yes, not the slave of my own past, but of Christ’s. For he came not to destroy the past or to demean it but to liberate and “save” it. He came to save time along with everything else he had created. Once upon a time he did.

But what about the biblical metaphors of running the race or plowing? Obviously you cannot do that looking backward. Yet those pictures do not exhaust the options. For example, picture a person rowing a boat. He too plows ahead but faces to the rear. The future, out ahead, is the open sea, stormy and shrouded in fog. He rows right into it but with his back to it. How can he see where he’s going? By fixing his gaze on that landmark from which he came. His destination is visible only in his point of departure.

It’s all he’s got to go by. It is the cross of Christ, the one and only past which holds his future. The farther out he rows the darker the sea up ahead: “ventures of which we cannot see the ending, paths as yet untrodden, perils unknown.” So the louder he calls back to shore, “Lift high the cross.” He gets his bearing by lining up that cross, as his base point, with a nearer marker, his baptism, and that in turn with still other markers, his times for confessing. The oarsman is not only the individual Christian. He is the church, a whole boatful, cheering each other on with shouts of Wow, probably led by the cheerleader, the coxswain, the little girl on the back bench.

RWB

Saint Louis

1999 Anno Domini

25th Anniversary of Seminex

469th Anniversary of the Augsburg Confession

[TELLINGTIME \(PDF\)](#)