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Good Order and Decolonizing: Blessings and Challenges¹

Kayko Driedger Hesslein²

Good Order is Good

Context is important for understanding just about everything, and the context for understanding these words is this: social polarization, civil unrest, divisions between the rich and the poor, periodic outbreaks of a plague that destabilized food networks and the economy, an empire attempting to expand its border through a combination of power and religion, and meteorological signs that point to unprecedented change. In other words, Germany, in the 16th century.

Yes, the context of Luther and the Reformers and their calls to ensure that the church is a place of good order is one that is unfortunately familiar to us. Germany in the 16th century was experiencing religious polarization and extremism—Andreas Karlstadt and his followers were busy smashing icons and altars while the Roman Catholic church was excommunicating Martin Luther. The serfs, who were tied to land owned by the lords, were increasingly rebelling against the feudal system and increasingly being violently suppressed. A second wave of the bubonic plague was beginning to sweep through Europe, prompting Luther to write his pastoral letter, *On Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague* (1527).³ The Ottoman Empire was rapidly and successfully taking over countries like Hungary and parts of Venice, controlling the Mediterranean and allying with France. Halley's comet was visible in Europe throughout 1531 and 1532, lending credence to Luther's belief that the world was in truly apocalyptic times.⁴ Then, as now, society and the church was in a time of instability.

It should not be a surprise, then, that for several decades through the first half of the 16th century, the Reformers emphasized the importance of peace and orderliness, crystallized in Article XV Concerning Church Rites (AC), "keep those [things] that ... serve to maintain peace and good order in the church." And again in the Apology, observe those things which "contribute to tranquillity and good order in the church" for "the holy Fathers ... instituted them for the sake of good order in the church and for the sake of tranquillity" ... "for this good order is most appropriate."⁵

¹ Keynote Address at the BC Synod Study Conference for Rostered Ministers. This keynote address was presented from May 7 to 11, 2023. It was written on Treaty 7 land and was presented on the traditional and unceded territory of the Katzie and Kwantlen First Nations.

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³ Martin Luther, "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague, 1527," trans. Anna Marie Johnson, in *The Annotated Luther Volume 4*, ed. Mary Jane Haemig (Fortress, 2016), 385–410. *The Annotated Luther* volumes are hereafter referred to as *TAL*.

⁴ Timothy Wengert, *The Augsburg Confession*, Lutheran Quarterly Books (Fortress, 2020), 155. For the visibility of Halley's comet, see Donald K. Yeomans, "Great Comets in History," Jet Propulsion Laboratory: California Institute of Technology, April 2007, https://ssd.jpl.nasa.gov/sb/great_comets.html (Accessed April 18, 2024).

⁵ *The Augsburg Confession*, hereafter cited AC, XV, 1. *The Apology to the Augsburg Confession*, hereafter cited as AAC, XV, 1, 13, 22, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Fortress, 2000).

This language, then, of good order in the church has been in use throughout the history of the Lutheran church, and has been used to argue for or against various issues in the church, including who should be allowed to preach, who should preside, who should be ordained, how we should understand the various orders of ministry (interesting that we call offices orders), how worship should happen, when and where worship should happen, and who should be allowed to vote on church issues.

Much of what we today consider to be orderliness in church life resonates, of course, with what Luther also understood to be good order: Something resembling peace, where everybody is of one heart and mind on what is happening. Good order also includes predictability, where everyone feels secure in knowing what is going to happen next and who is going to do it. One of the reasons that Luther was insistent that the church issue a public and recognizable call to "bishops, pastors, or preachers," (his categories at the time), was the concern he expressed in *On the Councils and the Churches*, written in 1539: "What would happen if everyone wanted to speak or administer [the Sacraments], and no one wanted to give way to the other?"⁶ (We should be so lucky as to have people clamouring in our congregations to get up in the pulpit and preach.) Not that there were fistfights breaking out in the churches, but with the chaos of the time, Luther was concerned about the disruption of services. He appealed to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, "All things should be done decently and in good order," (1 Cor 14:40) and was concerned that "no one should ignore such order without cause, out of mere pride or just to create disorder, but one should join in observing such order for the sake of the multitude."⁷

However, I am suggesting that it wasn't only Luther's experiences with civil and ecclesial disruption that reinforced his desire for order. While he could not have remained untouched by the violence of the 1525 Peasants' War, when hundreds of thousands of serfs rose up against the nobility and were then slaughtered, Luther also had a strong Augustinian anthropology that distrusted the natural goodness of human leadership. Humans, born in sin, are not inclined to godliness unless empowered by the Holy Spirit. James Estes, a Luther scholar, explains that according to Luther, "if it were possible to have a society composed entirely of perfect Christians, government would not be necessary." But, since that was not possible, "God has established secular government to restrain evildoers."⁸ Luther did not believe that humans could govern themselves, either in society or in the church, and so God instituted an ordered world, through the feudal system of lords and serfs in the secular kingdom, and through the offices of ministry in the church kingdom. These institutions were divinely created and empowered, for the purposes of restricting evil human inclinations.⁹ Good order in the church, then, was founded on what Wengert called, "an ecclesiastical first use of the law."¹⁰

⁶ Martin Luther, "On the Councils and the Churches, 1539," trans. Paul W. Robinson, in *TAL Volume 3*, ed. Paul W. Robinson (Fortress, 2016), 28.

⁷ "On the Councils and Churches," 438.

⁸ James M. Estes, Introduction to "On Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should be Obeyed, 1523," trans. James M. Estes, in *TAL Volume 5*, ed. Hans J. Hillebrand (Fortress, 2017), 83.

⁹ Luther's belief in the God-appointed establishment of nobility was inspired by Augustine's *City of God* and the social idea that "human institutions and values have an ontological validity because they are rooted in the mind of God." Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformation* (Blackwell, 1996), 51.

¹⁰ Wengert, *Augsburg Confession, 2020*, 135–136 and f.n. 4.

Certainly, in the church we benefit from good order. During worship, our *ordo* allows participants to feel secure knowing what will happen next in the service. If there is a disruption in the service, we know who to look to for returning us to order. Outside of worship, good order is expanded to include constitutions, bylaws, and policies, which are designed to protect people from harm and to provide procedures that prevent abuse. (The absence of properly designed policies, their lack of application, and the subsequent harm may prove this point.) Our candidacy procedures ensure that rostered ministers have been properly educated for their work so that ministries can put their full trust in their leaders, knowing they will not be theologically (or legally) led astray.

I know that I myself have benefited from the good order of the church in the way we call and then identify our pastors. Wearing the clergy collar when we are performing ministerial duties, or an alb and stole when we are preaching, is something we do for the sake of good order, so that in hospitals, for example, nurses know that the person wearing the collar is the one who is supposed to be at the bedside, or on Sunday morning, congregants can easily identify who amongst the people is the one who should be up there giving the sermon. I remember seventeen years ago, when I was eight months pregnant and visiting a congregation member in the hospital, I went to the front desk to get parking access, and the attendant raised their head only high enough to see my belly, and said, "Parking is only for clergy," and when I said, yes, that's me, they looked high enough to actually see my collar. Only then did they give me my parking pass. When I was a pastor in my mid-20s, the alb and stole marked me as the person who was authorized to preach; it allowed me to preside with good order rather than having to constantly argue with people that yes, the 25-year-old half-Japanese 5'1" girl, because that's what they called me, was meant to be standing up there in the pulpit. Good order, proper procedure, and acknowledged authority can protect against abuse, against prejudice, against chaos that excludes or even injures the vulnerable.

When it comes to groups of people, we crave order. Willie James Jennings, an African American theologian, notes that when people gather together, that gathering is "inherently powerful," which can be used in both creative and destructive ways.¹¹ This power risks becoming unleashed in destructive ways (as we see historically in examples of mob violence), and so Jennings draws our attention to our history, one that predates Christianity, and argues that these groups and gatherings are both ordered and ordering: "Ancient powers ... always gathered people together, seeking to bring order to their worlds."¹²

We see this craving for order in the first words of Genesis, "In the beginning, the world was a formless void," which in Hebrew says, *tohu abohu*, more accurately translated as higgledy-piggledy or a jumbled up mess. What does God do? God orders it. First into day and night, and then into waters and sky, and then into land and plants and animals. And then God asks the created human to order the animals by giving them names. In the Christian tradition, we interpret this ordering as God's divine desire to bring order out of chaos, with chaos becoming undesirable and order becoming desirable and godly.

Is Good Order Good?

There is a power in numbers, as Jennings said earlier. There is something "inherently powerful" in groups. But what he said before that is also important—"There is nothing

¹¹ Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Eerdmans, 2020), 135.

¹² Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 135.

inherently good about gathering people together, but there is something inherently powerful."¹³ Jennings would resonate with Luther's concern that when it comes to groups, we need to be cautious. But where Luther and the Reformers were reacting to a loss of stability that was jeopardizing the feudal system, Jennings is responding to a similar history—one of slavery—but from a different perspective.

The connections between the two rest on understanding the relationship between good order and control, particularly when it comes to ordering and controlling people. Luther believed that the feudal system was instituted by God.¹⁴ The feudal system was made up of three classes of people: 1) nobility, who owned the land, 2) clergy, and 3) peasants or serfs, who worked the land and were legally attached to it. Serfs, despite being the ones who made the land produce, were not allowed to leave the land to which they were attached in order to live or work elsewhere, and any children born were subsequently considered serfs on that land. Although they were not owned by the nobility, they were functionally owned by whomever owned the land.¹⁵ They were property, which is why Luther includes them in his explanation of the Tenth Commandment, "You are not to covet your neighbour's wife, male or female servant, or cattle, or anything else that is his." All of these things were considered property. And this entire arrangement was, in Luther's eyes, divinely established to restrain the human propensity to evil.

This is also why, in Luther's *Letter to the Christian Nobility* in 1520, his *Sincere Admonition to All Christians to Guard Against Insurrection and Rebellion* in 1521, his *Admonition to Peace: A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia* in 1525, and his article *Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants* the same year, he reiterates over and over again that a disruption of the feudal system through insurrection or rebellion was sinful, and why he argues that the nobility were placed in their position by God and should therefore use all means to stop the serfs.¹⁶

But here is where Luther's privilege is showing. Luther was not a serf. He did not come from a family of serfs. He counselled in his *Admonition to Peace* that serfs who felt unjustly treated should not fight against injustice but rather flee, as he did, when facing injustice from the Pope.¹⁷ But this was not an option for the serfs. They did not have freedom of movement as the clergy did; it was illegal for them to leave their land without the lord's permission.¹⁸ The argument for good order, for peace, for the suppression of chaos was made by someone who benefited from a system that was ordered in such a way as to control and exploit those at the bottom.

¹³ Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 135.

¹⁴ Luther asserts that Charles V, elected emperor in 1519, is a gift from God in "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate," LW 44:125. He also argues the existing system is in place by divine will in the section addressing the peasants in "Admonition to Peace: A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia, 1525," trans. Ashley Null, in *TAL Volume 5*, 309–24.

¹⁵ William Chester Jordan notes that, due to the toll of famine and plague on labourers, "the demographic crisis on some estates was so severe, however, that poaching workers from other estates seemed a reasonable strategy." William Chester Jordan, *Europe in the High Middle Ages* (Penguin, 2001), 299. One may ask if this was another reason Luther included them in his explanation of the Tenth Commandment.

¹⁶ See Ashley Null's commentary on "Admonition to Peace," 281–333.

¹⁷ "Admonition to Peace," 323–24.

¹⁸ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, online edition, x.v. "Serfdom," <https://www.britannica.com/topic/serfdom>.

It takes someone who sees things from the bottom to point out that good order is synonymous with control, and that control is not always "good." Jennings, who is an African-American man born in the United States, is therefore able to point out that when those in power use that power to bring about good order, it is for the purposes of controlling *people*, and that throughout history, that control has rarely been good for the oppressed, no matter what the oppressor says. Even today, he notes that "we already live in the midst of a process of gathering, a global gathering that does not cultivate life but pulls us toward a bondage and death found in a *managed diversity*."¹⁹ Ordering people is managing them, and managing them is controlling them.

Randy S. Woodley, a Keetowah Cherokee theologian, helps us to see this in his book, *Indigenous Theology and the Western Worldview: A Decolonized Approach to Christian Doctrine*. He observes that "the Western worldview ... is extrinsically categorical, hierarchical."²⁰ We categorize the world for the purpose of fitting it into orderly structures of power or hierarchies. In the church, we have categories for particular vocations in the church—bishop, pastor, deacon, lay person. And then we put strict boundaries around the categories, and give each one particular functions, and then we put them in a hierarchy. And I know that we Lutherans like to believe that we are less hierarchical than some of the other denominations, but even our Lutheran polity, which grants power to the congregations, still has a hierarchy. It might be the reverse of bishop-led denominations, but it's still a hierarchy in that power flows primarily in one direction through one channel. And through that, the church is kept in good order. The church is controlled.

But Woodley, who understands how the church has used categories to order and control people, reminds us that "people who are controlled by the system want to change it; people who are in control of the system want to improve it."²¹ Improving the system, finding better processes, tweaking current structures, these are things that those in control want. Luther, I'm sorry to say, wanted to improve the system of the church but not change it—he said himself that he did not want to start a new denomination, he only wanted to improve the Catholic church.²²

And this is where we begin to talk about decolonization and about whether good order is really that good. Colonization is the process whereby the ruling elite take control of lands, resources, and people to support efforts to take control of more lands, resources, and people. It is an ever-expanding endeavour built on processes of control, which are built on processes of categorizing and ordering, for the good of those in power. Luther was certainly not in the business of colonizing in the ways we traditionally understand it, but he did lend his support to the processes and good order by which the ruling elite continued to control the land, resources, and people.

But why? Or rather, how could he? How is it possible that the same person who stood on the side of the religiously oppressed, who wrote an explanation to the Ten

¹⁹ Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 134. Emphasis mine.

²⁰ Randy Woodley, *Indigenous Theology and the Western Worldview: A Decolonized Approach to Christian Doctrine* (Baker, 2022), 99.

²¹ Woodley, *Indigenous Theology*, 115.

²² Martin Luther, "A Sincere Admonition to All Christians to Guard Against Insurrection and Rebellion, 1522," LW 45:70.

Commandments that expanded on our ethical obligations to our neighbours, who believed that we are each servants to all, could also stand against the oppressed serfs?

In addition to having a low anthropology, or perhaps because of it, Luther had a conception of God as both omnipotent and interventionist, who either blesses a nation with good government or allows government to go unchecked as punishment for a disobedient populace.²³ In other words, Luther's God is a controlling God. In 1525, Luther told the peasants to wait for God to act to correct injustice because he believed that God would, through divinely appointed leaders.²⁴

But if Luther believed that God's relationship with creation was one of control over it, then it follows that the institutions that God established—nobility, church, even family—would mimic God. Specifically, he followed Augustine's *City of God* (written after the sack of Rome by the Visigoths, another time of societal upset) in proposing that individuals occupying positions of power in the earthly kingdom, in the church, and in the family, were to be obeyed as one would obey the Lord.²⁵ This is why he cites Romans 13 in the Household Chart in the Small Catechism: "Let everyone be subject to the governing authority. For wherever the governing authority is, it is ordered by God. But whoever resists the governing authority, resists God's order, and whoever resists will incur judgement."²⁶ God controls creation, and God's human agents control creation on behalf of God. To disrupt that control, to disrupt that order, is not simply a matter of disobedience to one's Lord but a disobedience of *the* Lord and a defiance of the God-who-is-control.

The appeal of an omnipotent, interventionist God is easy to see when one is living in a time of social upheaval and a future in peril, where one's fellow human beings cannot be trusted because they are inherently inclined towards evil. Woodley notes that "the opposite of vulnerability is control," and feeling that one is left alone to face the coming apocalypse is an incredibly vulnerable position.²⁷ It makes sense that one would turn to an all-powerful God who promises to control everyone and everything.

The question for the church thus becomes: who are we trying to control when we appeal to "good order"? In situations in the church where we value orderliness and appeal to constitutions, policies, and bylaws, who is it in these scenarios that is being controlled? For example, in hybrid teaching, I ask people to raise their hands to speak in-person, and to use the chat function if they are on zoom. This is to instill a process of good order *because* I am attempting to control the discussion. These are ways that a presenter or a teacher controls the room which is desirable for optimal and equitable learning. In the church, we hold to procedures, policies, and practices for church membership, for deciding who is allowed to vote and who sits on decision-making committees, for determining who is allowed to preside over Communion, and for other significant decisions. But the church must also ask these questions: in these situations, who are we seeking to control?

A telling example of this was a congregation, now closed, that conducted a survey in the early 80s on congregants' feelings about worship. Several strongly worded comments stated that the children in service were too disruptive and disorderly, and that they needed

²³ "A Sincere Admonition," 66.

²⁴ "Admonition to Peace," 312.

²⁵ Lindberg, *The European Reformation*, 51.

²⁶ Martin Luther, "The Small Catechism, 1529," trans. Timothy J. Wengert, in *TAL* 4, 239.

²⁷ Woodley, *Indigenous Theology*, 104.

to be controlled better. The church thus developed the practice of having Sunday School at the same time as worship, thereby giving control over the children to the Sunday School teachers, who oversaw the children in a separate space. While this may have been temporarily "good" for the worship service, those children did not return to church as adults, and the congregation closed forty years later.

The desire for control masked as "good order" also manifests in the ways congregations manage or control not just children but also other disorderly bodies in church, particularly those who live with disabilities, either physical or cognitive. Orderly worship in church requires orderly bodies, orderly minds, and orderly voices so that the desired worship atmosphere is created. To ensure good order, churches are constructed to control bodies so that we are all still. For example, seating takes up most of the worship space, with little space available for those who can't keep their bodies still. Space, and the bodies that occupy those spaces, are ordered and controlled. (If you have ever gone the wrong way returning to your seat after Communion, you will have experienced the controlled spaces in the aisles of a church.) Ushers are given the sometimes uncomfortable task of directing or controlling people so that they go where they are supposed to and do not disrupt or disorder the service. Worship time, likewise, is controlled by an order of service that does not allow digressions, impromptu contributions, or spontaneous dialogue. We describe these things with the phrase "good order," as in an ordering of space and time that is good for those gathering to worship the service, but we might also describe them as "controlling," which is how they may feel to people whose bodies or minds aren't controlled or ordered the way we think is good—people who can't sit still in a pew, who can't keep their voices under control, who can't keep their minds from wandering, people who disrupt the service when they are there.²⁸

Good Without Order?

There are both pros and cons to good order, both desirable and undesirable reasons for wanting to control people, a tension, a good old Lutheran both/and, saint and sinner. The Reformation was, for Lutherans, a wonderful throwing off of the control of the Catholic Church, but we can't forget the hundred thousand serfs who died trying to do the same to the nobility, and we can't forget that in the disruption of the Reformation thousands more were murdered in the religious chaos that ensued. Particularly, 5000 Anabaptists were murdered by Roman Catholics and Reformers because they refused infant baptism. That the Reformers murdered the Anabaptists by drowning them was, I think, likely not a coincidence. So, we must be mindful when we leap to agitating for the disruption of good order. Nevertheless, is it possible to achieve good without order?

Randy Woodley surveyed a number of elders from different Indigenous groups in North America and discovered some similarities in how they organized themselves as communities that he calls "the harmony way."²⁹ Each group had their own word for what they called it, but Woodley was able to find a shared set of values across North America, and in fact with Indigenous peoples around the world, and it's these values that I want to consider

²⁸ I first shared these observations at the "Beyond Saints and Superheroes: How Can Canadian Churches Support Parents Raising Children with Disabilities?" panel at the Canadian Theological Society Annual Conference in 2022. See also MacGregor, Laura, and Allen Jorgenson, *Beyond Saints and Superheroes: Supporting Parents Raising Children With Disabilities, A Practical Guide for Faith Communities*, Mad and Crip Theology Press, 2023.

²⁹ Woodley, *Indigenous Theology*, 91.

as we try to explore different ways of holding onto the "good" of good order without necessarily enforcing the control part of the order.

According to Woodley, "the most primary value" in the harmony way is the community, which is built through "relationship building."³⁰ This, of course, does not sound new to us. All community is built through relationship. But what Woodley wants to draw our attention to is that healthy relationship is built not through control but through reciprocal vulnerability. Vulnerability, rephrasing Woodley's quote from earlier, is the opposite of control. The colonial community, if I can call it that, relies on control to shape and manage relationships, particularly the control of hierarchy and power. It is built on an understanding that vulnerability is weakness, and that those in power cannot be vulnerable to those they are meant to control, otherwise their weakness will be used against them and they will lose their position of power, lose control, and all will be lost. But a decolonial worldview relies on vulnerability and reciprocity—a distinct lack of control—to create equality and community.

Before exploring this further, it is important to note that Indigenous communities, like Luther and Augustine, draw their ideas of what community should look like from their idea of God. We model our power on the power of God. Luther and Augustine's God is all powerful and wielded that power on earth, and so the community leaders became kings and lords who were all powerful. But that is not the way Indigenous people understand God. As Woodley writes,

I believe the Creator to be the most vulnerable being who exists. If God is love, and love means being vulnerable, then God must represent the essence of vulnerability. The incarnation of Jesus expressed Great Mystery's vulnerability. ... The crucifixion demonstrated God's vulnerability. Jesus radically expresses the most vulnerable Creator by coming from a shalom Trinity, sharing Creator's mission of love with us, and leaving the responsibility in our hands to co-act with God through love.³¹

While this is not so dissimilar from God's kenosis in Christ and his death on the cross, or to those who are more familiar with the process theology, as long as Western Christianity continues to hold on to even a thread of God's omnipotent intervention we will never fully immerse ourselves in a vulnerable God. For Indigenous peoples, however, much more strongly than for us, God is vulnerable, not controlling, and so communities are set up to be vulnerable, not controlling.

So why might Indigenous communities be so comfortable with a vulnerable God, especially when they have experienced the social upheaval of attempted genocide and colonization? My suspicion is that one of the reasons is that they have a much more generous anthropology than Luther and his spiritual descendants do. For Indigenous peoples, "humans are mostly good with some bad."³² George "Tink" Tinker, an Osage theologian with a Lutheran background, argues that sin does not exist in the Indigenous worldview the way the spiritual descendants of Augustine understand it.³³ Not having heard of Augustine before

³⁰ Woodley, *Indigenous Theology*, 105.

³¹ Woodley, *Indigenous Theology*, 104.

³² Woodley, *Indigenous Theology*, 92.

³³ George E. "Tink" Tinker, "Decolonizing the Language of Lutheran Theology: Confessions, Mission, Indians, and the Globalization of Hybridity," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 50:2 (Summer 2011), 200.

contact, North American Indigenous peoples believe that people are born good. They are born into community, in harmony with creation and one another, and in balance with the world. Of course, nobody stays that way forever, as we see from the reality of the world, and from time to time they fall out of balance and go off in the wrong direction.³⁴ And in doing that, they cause harm to those around them. That tendency to exploit the vulnerability of the community in a way that is harmful—what we call sin—is just part of living in community, and it is reparable. The individual can be brought back into community and restored to balance. There is no original sin, there is no truly bad or evil person. Which means that, when it comes to interacting with those around us, our neighbours are trustworthy. Strangers are trustworthy. The masses are trustworthy.

Which engenders a very different reaction to times of upset. In the face of social chaos, whereas the Augustinian/Western Christian worldview encourages suspicion, particularly of the person who doesn't know Christ, the Indigenous worldview encourages compassion and understanding. People are not evil, yearning for the opportunity to destroy. They have simply (although of course it's not really "simply") fallen out of balance with the community and gone the wrong way. Sometimes this is their own fault, but sometimes falling out of balance has to do with the community itself, or with forces pushing at the community. Either way, the attitude towards the offenders is one of continuing to be in relationship with them and continuing to see them as part of the community and seeing them as mostly good, who have accidentally done some bad. (It may be noted that Luther resonates with Indigenous understandings in his explanation of the Eighth Commandment in the Small Catechism when he says, "We are to come to our neighbours' defence, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light."³⁵ It is unfortunate that he wasn't able to follow his own teachings when it came to his interpretation of the serfs during their rebellion.)

And so, if humans are mostly good, then there is no concern about God being vulnerable to us. God does not need to control humans but is able to live in a free relationship with us, allowing us to be who we are, and being in a free and uncontrolling relationship with us.

Furthermore, if humans are mostly good and not born sinful as Augustine argues, then chaos or disorderliness is not something to be feared and suppressed. Rather, Woodley explains that "fear [becomes] a catalyst for virtue."³⁶ You see, if we believe that humans are naturally bad, then chaos or disorderliness, the absence of wielded power, becomes the opportunity for people to give into their wicked impulses and to commit sin on small and grand scales. If humans are predisposed to sin, they must be restrained by the agents of God's power, who themselves, being human, are probably prone to corruption, also. And so in this scenario we become afraid of chaos and afraid of being afraid. Chaos triggers fear, which triggers sinful behaviour, which triggers sin, and so on.

But in the harmony way, humans are good, and chaos and dissension do not provide opportunities for further disruption of the community balance but are instead calls to restore

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6385.2011.00603.x>. See also "Sin and Ethics" in *A Native American Theology*, ed. Clara Sue Kidwell, Homer Noley, and George E. "Tink" Tinker (Maryknoll, 2001), 100–12.

³⁴ See also George E. "Tink" Tinker, *American Indian Liberation: A Theology of Sovereignty* (Orbis, 2008), 17–20, and Lisa A. Dellinger, "Sin—Ambiguity and Complexity and the Sin of Not Conforming" in *Coming Full Circle: Constructing Native Christian Theology*, ed. Steven Charleston and Elaine A. Robinson (Fortress, 2015), 119–32.

³⁵ "Small Catechism," *TAL* 4, 221.

³⁶ Woodley, *Indigenous Theology*, 93.

balance by restoring relationships of vulnerability. And so, fear becomes a catalyst—for entering into vulnerability with another, for risking equality, for embracing differences, for building community. I mentioned differences, and in the harmony way, "dissension is respected."³⁷ Community engagement includes encouraging a "diversity of opinions, which means providing safe space for difference of thought without threat."

I witnessed this in 2022, when I participated in the Reconciliation walk hosted by the Ktunaxa (or Kootenay) Nation in Cranbrook. The walk started at St. Eugene Residential school, with some initial remarks by one of the Chiefs and a residential school survivor, and then concluded at the top of a nearby hill with an open invitation for anyone to speak. One of the speakers was the adult child of a residential school survivor, and she did not call for reconciliation. She spoke about pain and hurt and how she rejected efforts at reconciliation and how she would never forgive what had happened. She talked about the hypocrisy of the entire effort, about how she hated Orange Shirt Day and its slogan, Every Child Matters, because every child did not matter. She talked about how she still drank to dull the pain of growing up in a family that had been traumatized by residential school. What she said was the truth, but it was most emphatically not about reconciliation and was diametrically at odds with the speeches that had gone before, where residential school survivors had talked about how good and important and significant this day was. And as I stood there in the crowd of Indigenous and non-Indigenous faces, I grew increasingly uncomfortable. And yet the organizers let her talk. There was no attempt to get her to finish up, no attempt to cut her off or move her away, no attempt to apologize to the rest of us for her words. Her words were directly opposed to the words of the earlier survivors, who welcomed and encouraged reconciliation. Her words let the onlookers know that the Nation was *not* of one mind, that there was what we would call "dissension in the ranks," but the Chief thanked her for her words, and his thanks was genuine. As someone who has been raised to believe that you don't contradict authority in public, that you never let outsiders see disagreement, that a unified front is the strongest in front of strangers, that disagreement is weakness, this was new for me.

Yet this experience fits with what Woodley says about the importance of community that includes everyone equally, and that believes that vulnerability is what builds community and that difference of thought is not threatening. Woodley says that "facing risky questions together, even if sometimes expressed as unruliness," is how change happens.³⁸ Disagreement, especially when one is in the minority, is to be in a position of vulnerability. Being a community in disagreement can be (if often in the western world) interpreted as being weak. But in the Indigenous worldview, it is a sign of strength and it is good.

This idea of vulnerability as the opposite of control and "good order" as a mechanism of control calls us to explore whether there is a connection between situations where we crave good order in the church and situations where we feel we have lost control and are vulnerable. Are we afraid of what will happen if we feel vulnerable? Do we mistrust what we might do if we feel vulnerable? Are we afraid of how others might react to our vulnerability?

(It is important to detour here to think about the understanding we might need to bring when we put someone from a marginalized community in a position of power. One of the things I have noticed is that sometimes when someone who has historically been

³⁷ Woodley, *Indigenous Theology*, 93.

³⁸ Woodley, *Indigenous Theology*, 105.

marginalized because of their gender or their race is given power in their community, they become overly powerful. We could talk about how it's because the patterns of power replicate, much like abusive behaviour travels through generations, but I think it might also be that being in a position of power as a marginalized person is extremely vulnerable. If a mistake is made, it can be used as proof that that person shouldn't be there in the first place. Any weakness can be used as a reason to remove that person from power, as evidence they "don't have what it takes to lead." And so, to prevent that from happening, the person becomes overly orderly, overly controlling, creating a vulnerability-proof bubble to prevent their own weakness from being used against them. And so I would suggest that when we give power to marginalized people, that we make it explicitly clear that mistakes are supported and that weaknesses from that person are treated as no more significant than they would from someone who is less societally vulnerable. We should be creating structures that support them in their vulnerability and serve to decrease it.)

I don't want to abandon Luther, however. A decolonized, Indigenized approach would have us also attribute good intent to his words and see his dissenting opinion as valuable to the community. Luther does care about the community and about the vulnerable, even if he has a different understanding of how to protect them. In the first of his 1522 *Invocavit* sermons, his concern with Karlstadt's followers smashing altars is that the disorder and destruction is an "offence to your neighbour," by which he means not an offence to their sensibilities, but a stumbling block to their faith.³⁹ Even as he advocates for good order in *On the Councils and Churches*, he adds an indispensable caveat, "there must be freedom if time, person, or other reasons demand a change."⁴⁰ Luther himself seems to display a discomfort with complete control even as much as he advocates for its usage, and that's because while he occupied a position of privilege in society as a professor, within the church in those early days he did not. He knew the experience of being vulnerable to the church and to church power, and so in this case, he talks about freedom as a way to prevent good order from turning into complete control.

This has implications for thinking through the relationship between good order and institutions. Particularly, how can institutions survive without some kind of hierarchicalized order? We have seen in this past generation both the rise in individual autonomy, which some argue is a rebellion against authority, and the instability of the institution. So will a truly reciprocal community lead to the further destabilization of institutions? Well, yes. But I would say that in many cases, what institutions are good at is no longer what is needed. Institutions are good at managing and controlling large and complex groups of people. Institutions are known for their bureaucracies, and bureaucracies are hierarchicalized forms of administratively controlling vast numbers of people. But, at least in this institution we call the church, we are no longer talking about vast numbers of people. So it is entirely possible for the church, and for congregations in particular, to think in terms not of institutions but of communities. We don't have vast numbers of people to manage, but we do have communities of people to develop relationships with. And communities can be built on reciprocal vulnerability.

³⁹ Martin Luther, "Eight Sermons at Wittenberg—The First Sermon, March 9, 1522," *LW* 51:73.

⁴⁰ *On the Councils*, 439.

Decolonizing Good Order

So, in typical Lutheran fashion, we are left with a both/and situation and the challenge of how to discern what is good order. On the one hand, good order prevents destructive chaos that can result in violence and, worse, disrupt the faith of our neighbours. Church procedures and processes can prevent abuses that can harm the vulnerable among us. On the other hand, good order is a mechanism of control, and control can result in systemic violence that still abuses the vulnerable among us, but calls those abuses good for the community and, in the end, instils in the community the idea that control, which is enforced by power, is godly and to be desired. The risk of good order is that it creates a community where the kind of honest and authentic relationship that comes from being vulnerable with one another is dangerous and undesirable. Between these two outcomes—the blessings of good order and the challenges of it—we walk.

Wengert suggests that the Reformers determined the requirements of "good order" of Article XV by its "effect in the assembly of believers."⁴¹ The assembly of believers is the people gathered to worship in that particular space at that particular time and so it is worth noting that good order is not measured by its effect on the church at large, nor by its effect on the leaders, but within the community gathering to worship. We see Luther reiterating this when he talks about the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. In *On the Councils and the Churches*, he writes, "the word of God is not the preacher's... but belongs to the disciples who hear and believe it."⁴² And in discussing what he means by "right administration" of the sacraments, he writes, "the sacrament belongs to the one who receives it."⁴³ This use of belonging is interesting, because belonging is connected with ownership, and ownership is connected with decisions that involve control. The proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments does not belong to the preacher or the presider. They are not the owners of it, and they are not the controllers of it. The *recipients* of the Word and the sacraments, the ones who are affected by it, are put in that role instead.⁴⁴

Luther argues this, though, because he believes that love and service to the weak neighbour is determinative. You see, when we place Luther's emphasis on good order in the framework of *The Freedom of a Christian*, and his understanding that yes, we are perfectly free lords of all, and also perfectly dutiful servants to all, we begin to see how we might discern the good in good order.⁴⁵ Good order becomes, then, what works best to create a community of mutual servants, where we together seek what is good, not for ourselves, but for the weakest among us.

Now, here's the important part. We don't discern that in isolation. We discern that by being vulnerable to and with the weakest among us; by following the model of community that Indigenous communities lay before us; by having open conversation that solicits the perspectives of everyone, that makes space safe for dissent, that finds fruitfulness rather

⁴¹ Wengert, *Augsburg Confession*, 2020, 135.

⁴² "On the Councils and the Churches," 422.

⁴³ "On the Councils and the Churches," 425.

⁴⁴ Being mindful, of course, that the Holy Spirit is ultimately the one who controls the effect, as seen in Luther's explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed in the Small Catechism.

⁴⁵ Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, 1520, trans. Timothy J. Wengert, in *TAL Volume 1*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Fortress, 2015): 467–538.

than fear in disagreement. We ask ourselves, to whom is God vulnerable, and to whom are we called to be vulnerable?

One of Luther's flaws is that, when it came to good order, he believed that the ones with power were the best ones to determine what good order looked like. In the conflict between the lords and the serfs, he sided with the lords. And theologically, we can understand that he did that because of his belief that this reflected God's will and plan. But it resulted in the deaths of 100,000 serfs, which would have meant plunging all of their families into even worse destitution. And his logic, that people in authority know what's best for everyone because they are appointed by God, has led through the centuries to our own history, and putting Indigenous children in residential schools, taking them from their families through the Sixties Scoop, and today through child services. In congregations, it has led to decisions that exclude people from the Sacraments, and at the extreme it has left congregations without the "right" people to preside over Communion, all in the name of good order.

The Indigenous harmony way corrects that flaw by teaching us that those in power can't assume what is best for the most vulnerable. The most vulnerable must be asked, and consulted, and if we want to really change the system rather than just improve it, they must have equal power in decision-making. And this brings us to the last point about the harmony way that I want to raise, and that is consensus. In many Indigenous communities, decisions are traditionally made by consensus, not by vote. I remember when my oldest child was in Grade Five or Six and they were learning about different models of governance, particularly about the Iroquois consensus model. They had to make a class decision using that model to order pizza for class lunch. (And what I particularly remember is that my child's biggest frustration was how loooooong it took for the class to make a decision, in part I suspect because the children, not being raised in consensus decision-making, had to negotiate between what they wanted for lunch and what they believed their classmates would want for lunch, not knowing their classmates' food needs particularly well.)

Consensus is a viable alternative to hierarchicalized decision-making, and it works when we have good relationships—and we have good relationships when we have taken the time and energy to be vulnerable with one another, to hold and honour one another's vulnerabilities, and to allow for differences in experience and opinion to be held together. But I do want to caution that we, and I mean the Western-enculturated church, may not be in a place yet where we are ready to use consensus-based models on high-stakes issues that must be resolved quickly. To do that, to come to a consensus on something big, and quickly, requires deep relationships and a deep knowing of everyone, especially the vulnerable, in our community. It takes a long time to develop that vulnerability, particularly when we have been raised to believe that admitting or showing vulnerability is weakness. And if we rush into a consensus, it is likely that we will find that power dynamics exert more influence than true relationships, and that vulnerable people will go along to protect themselves from their vulnerability being exploited. And that is not, then, a true consensus.

Conclusion

This evening at worship, there will be a few moments of good disorder, and I hope we can enter into those moments with a trust that the Spirit is leading us. The first will be during the sermon. I was trained in seminary to preach from a pulpit, to proclaim the Word to receptive listeners who sit quietly and receive what I have to say. Very orderly. I did, actually,

have an opportunity when I was a student to preach for an African-American Lutheran congregation, where they punctuated my sermon with "Amen!" and "Preach!" and, while a bit unsettling, it was amazing. But other than that, nobody has ever interrupted me—I speak and the congregation is quiet. But as I have been working on these issues of good order and control, I have come to realize that this way of preaching is modeled on a kind of control. The preacher controls the proclamation of the Gospel by excluding any other proclamations or interpretations. It assumes that the preacher is the only one with the right interpretation, or the one with the best interpretation. It allows the preacher to colonize the faith of the listeners. So, this evening I am going to try something different. I am not going to proclaim the Word—you are. I will hold and facilitate that space so that together, the good news of the Gospel emerges from the community.⁴⁶

Pentecost is coming. Pentecost was the reverse of Babel, and to me it is that biblical example that offers us a glimpse into the hope of disorderliness. In Babel, the people were of one mind and one language and presumably one opinion, and they used that oneness to build a tower to the heavens as a means of control. Some scholars believe that this is a story referring to the expansion of the Babylonian empire.⁴⁷ But the hope in the story is that God confused them by giving them multiple voices and multiple languages and they dispersed. We often interpret that multiplicity as a punishment, and perhaps it was to the Babylonians, but to the people who were crushed by the Babylonian empire it was a blessing. And in Pentecost we see that blessing multiply when the Holy Spirit descends on the faithful Jews and unites them, not with one voice, but with one heart in multiple voices. Whenever I imagine that scene, I imagine it as a cacophony, with wild gestures, utter chaos. But again, a chaos that was a blessing, a good disorder.

Pentecost is coming, or perhaps we might say that the church is coming to Pentecost. We are coming to a time, more likely we are already in that time, when what has been good order is no longer good. When we have to find a new way of discerning what is good order, of shaping order so that it is a blessing to all, and especially the weakest. But we know that the Holy Spirit is with us, and that Christ speaks through the most vulnerable, and so we can embrace this time of chaos with hope, not fear.

⁴⁶ The process was this: I read the Gospel, then I invited worshippers to each contribute one sentence of the grace they heard within the Scripture that they wanted to offer to those gathered. I wrote these down, quickly rearranged them, and then read the sentences back to them as a sermon.

⁴⁷ Theodore Hiebert, "The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures," in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126:1 (Spring 2007), 29–58. <https://doi.org/10.2307/27638419>. See f.n.2.