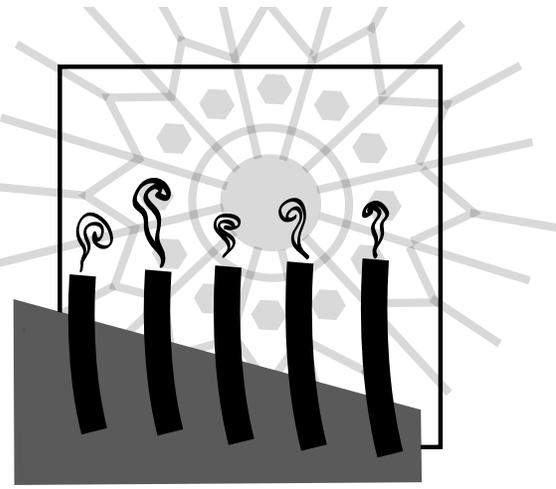


THE HOLY CHRISTIAN MEMORY

Jonathan T. Crawford



The power of the memory is prodigious, my God. It is a vast, immeasurable sanctuary. Who can plumb its depths? And yet it is a faculty of my soul. Although it is part of my nature, I cannot understand all that I am.

—St. Augustine¹

The ability to store and retrieve information is a mysterious and wonderful capacity with which human beings have been blessed. Augustine devotes several pages of his *Confessions* to pondering the mysteries of memory. Neuroscientists are only beginning to understand its inner workings.

And yet, at the same time: our memories fail us. The memory is fallen, just like all of our other mental faculties. Though it is a wondrous thing when memory performs its function according to God's design, quite often the fallen memory forgets what we would rather remember and remembers what we would rather forget. Augustine seems to be amused by the fact that the memory can remember forgetfulness! Who of us hasn't searched our home for something misplaced? We walk into the same room over and over, checking and rechecking under the same couch cushions. On the web, we forget our username and password combinations. At church parents, teachers, and pastors are frustrated that pre-teens can memorize the entire soundtrack of *Frozen* but can't remember the explanation of the Second Commandment. (What was that again? *We should fear and love God...*)

We also tend to remember things we would rather forget, retaining useless or painful information. We can remember our childhood phone numbers and zip codes but have a hard time remembering anniversary dates, birthdays, and appointments. Many of us have had the unpleasant accident of seeing something we wished we hadn't. For some

reason those images seem to bury themselves deep in the catacombs of our memories. But again, these are only "venial sins" when it comes to memory.

For the fallen memory can cause much greater harm. In the category of forgetting what we ought to remember, we are constantly forgetting who we are. Our baptismal identity is notoriously difficult for the memory to retain. St. James describes this problem in his strawy epistle:

Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do. (1:23–25)

We forget our baptismal identity because we fail to live the way God sees us, that is, through Christ's perfect atonement.

Moreover, the vast sanctuaries of our memories can become hoarding houses for the devil's trash. Our sins can haunt us. I'm not trying to be heavy-handed with the Lutheran piety here, but we really can be driven

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to despair by the memories and regrets of our sins! Even knowing they are forgiven and that God no longer remembers them (Isaiah 43:25), our memories hang on and Satan uses them to accuse us. We have images burned into our memories that deeply hurt us. War veterans are visited by relentless images of the carnage they witnessed. Now, more than ever, many men and women have memories full of pornographic images—images that dull and damage their capacity for intimacy with real people. One of my fellow pastors witnessed his mother die of a heart attack right before his eyes at a young age. These memories are hard to

shake, symptoms as they are of life in a fallen world.

And even the church collectively is damaged by fallen memory. In local congregations and in the catholic church at large, we tend to forget certain directives that should govern our life together. Our Lord's principles for resolving conflicts between believers, laid out in Matthew 18, are just one example. On the other hand, we are very good at remembering the grudges and anger of the past. Lutherans of my parents' generation are still deeply

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scarred by the events of the 1974 fracturing of the Missouri Synod, which tore apart not only church bodies but also parishes and families.

Is there any cure for the often devastating effects of the fallen human memory? As with so many other aspects of redemption, we now see only through a glass darkly. Although Scripture does not speak specifically to the idea of the redeemed memory, we know that being in Christ makes us a new creation (II Corinthians 5:17). The whole person is in view here: body, and soul, and all things. There is no qualification to the scope of redemption. This means that all of our faculties will be redeemed, including the memory. The new person in each of us is daily emerging and aris-

ing to live before God in righteousness and purity.² In this life we are only beginning to see what it looks like for the image of God to be restored in us. In the eschaton, we will fully experience the outcome of Christ "making all things new" (Revelation 21:5).

Even in the present, we can begin to see Christ's redeeming work on our memories. One concrete place we can see the memory being conformed to the image of God's Son is at the eucharistic table. Our Lord clearly intended for this meal to be repeated—and to be remembered! Two of the four New Testament accounts of the institution of the Supper record the words, "In remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19, I Corinthians 11:25). Lutherans tend to overlook this portion of the words of institution. Because of historical controversies in the Church, we have laid the greater emphasis on the words, "This is my body." Let it be plainly said: paying due attention to the words "in remembrance" in no way implies or requires a denial of the bodily presence of Christ in the sacrament. By giving his disciples a meal that was to be repeated and remembered, Jesus was remaking Christian memory for his holy purposes. As a Lutheran pastor and professor who has studied neuroscience suggests:

[The disciples'] memories of the Last Supper, and of succeeding celebrations of the Eucharist, helped them make sense later of the life they had given to him. Life then had meaning for them. It helps us in the same way when we visualize sitting at that same table with the disciples and then look at the crucifixion and resurrection with knowledgeable hindsight. We seal the experience of Christ in our memory and consolidate it there.³

Detractors of traditional worship often criticize its potential for staleness. Why so much repetition? Certainly repeating things for the sake of repeating them can become meaningless rote activity, but it is especially

when the eucharist is celebrated in the context of the historic liturgy that our memories are reshaped and filled with the word of God. This is also a strength of using the lectionary. Through the lectionary and the regular rhythm of the church year, we tell and retell our narrative as God's people year after year. This kind of repetition serves to solidify in us a memory of that which is holy, and good, and beautiful. Those of us who have been shaped by the liturgy are probably not even aware of how deeply it is embedded in our memories. With little variation, Lutherans usually know what comes next: "The Lord be with you..." "This is the Word of the Lord..." "Lift up your hearts..." The familiar petitions, responses, and tunes have become part and parcel of the church's collective memory.

When it comes to delivering messages, the Holy Spirit is not an innovator. One of His gracious functions is to serve our memories, teaching us all things and *bringing to remembrance* all that Jesus said (John 14:26). Through the work of the Spirit in word and sacrament, in repeated ritual and song, the Christian memory is already being renewed. But there is also a "not yet" part to this story. In this life, it seems we are unable to completely wipe our memories of all the traumas, sins, and nauseating garbage that fills them now. Life this side of the last day is messy, and our memories are no exception.

What will our memories be like in the eschaton? We can't say for certain, but it's fun to imagine. In his Genesis lectures, Luther offers some playful musings on what life might have been like for Adam before the fall. He suggests, for example, "that before Adam's sin his eyes were so sharp and clear that they surpassed those of the lynx and eagle. He was stronger than the lions and the bears, whose strength is very great; and he handled them the way we handle puppies."⁴ What will happen to those parts of our memories that cause us anguish? Will God completely erase them? Or will bad memories remain

intact but in some sort of redeemed form? Will such remembering become redemptive and somehow add to our enjoyment of eternal life? Perhaps it is pertinent here to remember that even in his resurrected state our Lord still bore the marks of his crucifixion in his hands and side.

Scripture offers at least one clue. In John 16 Jesus speaks to his disciples about his return and uses an analogy that touches on the idea of a memory redeemed.

A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me... Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be

sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, *she no longer remembers* the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. (16:16, 20–21)

Jesus suggests here that the suffering we experience in this life will be forgotten in the same way a mother “forgets” the pain of childbearing. It isn’t that she has no recollection of what it was like, but in comparison to the joy at hand the memory of pain is defanged so that it is no longer troublesome.

Exactly what a redeemed memory will be like we cannot possibly know. Yet one thing is clear: on that day, we will remember exactly what God would have us remember. *LF*

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Notes

1. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), 216.
2. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Small Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1986), 25.
3. Allen Nauss, *Implications of Brain Research for the Church: What it Means for Theology and Ministry* (Minneapolis: Kirk House, 2012), 100.
4. *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, 82 vols., eds. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.), 1:62.

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