JONATHAN FISK comes of age in Without Flesh. His theses evidence a mature Reformational theology, galvanized by years of brooding over our technosocial, consumeristic culture and also by his extensive experience in pastoral ministry. His reflections coalesce in a passionate new work that’s hypercharged to motivate his readers to do something about a flaccid, passive, largely capitulated-to-culture Christianity that has rendered the message of Jesus indistinguishable from godless Humanitarianism’s ethic of neighborly niceness. But, Fisk says, that’s not the Gospel; it never was. Such a pathetic, this-world-is-all-there-is, message shrinks before American Liberalism as if Jesus were dead and His Gospel were weak. At the heart of Evangelical Christianity’s surrender to today’s dictum that “human morality is good enough” is a loss of confidence in the truth of God’s Word and, significantly, the power of God’s Word proclaimed and sacramented. Think, then, of Without Flesh as a clarion call to the Church to be the Church, to Christians to be fearless in their possession of Jesus’ message of truth and hope. Christ is not dead. He is very much alive and very much in charge. It’s time to live and speak in light of that reality, just as St. Paul in pagan Imperial Rome, just as Martin Luther in political Roman Catholicism. It’s time to push back against the zeitgeist with the Spirit of Christ. Blending the reckless allegiance to Christ by the Church Fathers with the boldness of Luther and Hermann Sasse’s prescience, Jonathan Fisk urges “old-fashioned faithful grit” because Christianity cannot die, because Jesus is not dead, because Christ is in fact the world’s rightful King.

John J. Bombaro, PhD, King’s College, University of London
Director of Theological Education for Eurasia, Rīga Luther Academy, Latvia

TO A CHURCH cowering in the corner, Pastor Fisk’s Without Flesh bursts into the room with a dazzling light. It rallies us. It emboldens us. “Don’t be afraid! ‘This is My body! This is My blood!’ These words of Jesus still stand true!” The Church finds her life in hearing these words and eating this flesh. This book gives boldness and courage by fixing our ears and our lips on the Word made flesh for us.

Bryan Wolfmueller, author of A Martyr’s Faith in a Faithless World
pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church and Jesus Deaf Lutheran Church, Austin, Texas
WHY HAD SO MANY in Corinth become weak and ill? For the same reason faith dies in those who cling to a faddish, false, and crossless “Christianity” today. Rev. Jonathan Fisk’s *Without Flesh* is a surgical exploration of the cancer afflicting much of nominal Christianity today: doubt in, disuse of, and lack of trust in the words of Christ that established the Lord’s Supper and in the life-giving forgiveness and medicine of immortality He gives according to His promise. Poignant and pithy, bluntly honest and boldly faithful, *Without Flesh* will point readers to the Word made flesh, Christ Himself, who creates, nurtures, and resurrects faith unto life everlasting.

Rev. Paul Cain, editor of *Lutheran Book Review*

senior pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church, Sheridan, Wyoming

AMID PROTESTANT and Gnostic denials of the absolute validity of the divine Word and the miracle of Jesus’ Holy Supper, Pastor Fisk cautions us to examine the easily misused call to “change or die.” He marshals the Rock of Horeb (1 Corinthians 10), the three who bear witness (water, blood, and Spirit), Jesus’ great “I am” statements, and more, trumpeting the call to “change back” to the present and enduring coming in the flesh that Jesus does in the Sacrament.

Rev. Dr. Kenneth Wieting, retired LCMS pastor

author of *The Blessings of Weekly Communion* and

*Lutheranism 101: The Lord’s Supper*
Why the Church Is Dying Even Though Jesus Is Still Alive
OUT

WHY

THE CHURCH

IS DYING

EVEN THOUGH

JESUS IS

STILL ALIVE

JONATHAN FISK
Dedication

For good reason.
And, as always, for you.
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THANK GOD for Hermann Sasse, and thank God also for Rev. Matthew Harrison for the work he and others have undertaken to translate and make available Dr. Sasse for those of us who cannot read German. I am eternally indebted.

Unless otherwise noted, all Sasse quotations are taken from the essay “Church and Lord’s Supper,” published originally in 1938, now available in the compendium The Lonely Way, vol. 1, pp. 369ff.

Except where otherwise indicated, Bible quotations are taken from the English Standard Version. Cited verses are noted, but the entire verse is not always quoted. At times, the quotation only includes a portion of a verse or sentence, but in all cases I end the quotation with a period for the sake of clarity.
IN 1939, the Nazis were marching through the streets on their way to “liberate” France. Since 1935, people of Hebraic descent had been ghettoed, but the true Holocaust was not yet begun. Even so, the Christian chance to respond was already far past. The 1934 Barmen Declaration, signed by many Christian pastors as a rejection of the Nazi control of the churches, had done nothing to slow infiltration of Nazi ideology and power in both congregations and culture. Now the pulpits were preached in by double agents. Now the Gospel was outlawed as an offense to Arian morality. Now Dr. Hermann Sasse, ever the stalwart and brave confessor, first among his colleagues to speak out against the Fascist propagandas when they originally appeared, decided to write an open letter to the world about the grave situation they faced.

His topic of choice? The Lord’s Supper.

With Christianity in shambles, with the buildings entirely lost to the activities of an alien and hostile power, with the bad people in control and the good people too terrified to speak, Sasse, with pristine, cosmic insight, like the prophets of old, ignored the frills and distractions of immediacy and took an ax to the root.

To understand why is, in part, the purpose of this book. For while it may seem on the surface that we live in times a million ideas removed from the depths of Nazi Germany, appearances can be deceiving. Humanity has not changed. Our doubtfulness has not changed. Our tendency toward hysteria has not changed.

But Sasse’s reasoning will have to work its own magic. To see with his precision, you will need to make room for his arguments. To perceive where present and past combine, you will need to sit for a while with the eternal. This begins not at the Lord’s Supper itself but at its root. At the Church’s root. At Christianity’s root. With Jesus Christ Himself.
What is wrong with our church?
What is wrong with each one of us and our faith if such disintegration of our church was possible?

Hermann Sasse

Quid incertitudine imserius? [What is more wretched than uncertainty?]

Martin Luther

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Anonymous
Don’t Change

**UPHEAVAL** is all around us. A messy dark age of misinformation, distraction, and willfulness dominates us. Civilization trembles, besieged by gusts and surges. Impregnable institutions are collapsing while, by wit, will, and luck, power brokers ride the waves at a mad pace. In the midst of all this, for anything still trying to call itself a “church,” it is a terrifying time to be in business, much less to actively sail against the tide.

But is any of it truly new? Or do we merely believe it to be so? To be sure, compared with memories of those greener pastures of only a few decades ago, pews are emptier, congregation budgets are dwindled, and church doors are closing. There’s no question about that. It all looks authentically bleak.

Yet what we must consider is what precisely the bleakness **means**.

Have the times really changed? Is the Church actually dying? Are we truly in danger of being subsumed beneath a new, ominous culture of evil? Or is the only real difference a matter of our perspective? Is the only real change the fact that we have convinced ourselves that times have changed?

Change is often spoken of as if it is its own kind of religion. Some fear it and avoid it at all costs. Others trust it implicitly, regardless of the results. Whichever side of the coin you are on, both parties are too quick to grant “change” near godlike powers. If Christianity is a **holy spirituality** founded to outlast even the end of the world, aren’t we overreacting a bit? Twitter gets invented, and boom! The almighty dominion of the Lord of lords is suddenly in question?

What?

It’s kind of like watching sailors on a boat far from shore. They notice signs of a storm approaching. But rather than batten down the hatches, they decide that now would be a good time to renovate the whole boat from the hull up. “Anchors? Who needs anchors? Hey you! Get over here and slice up that sail. It’s a bit medieval, don’t you think?”

“And ropes? Ropes are sexist. Toss those overboard, quick, before someone sees them. Hop to it, ye scurvy dogs! We need to get moving now! We need to change what we’re doing . . . or die!”

But does the approaching storm warrant this? Will any change help, or would some changes be useful while others only make the situation worse? Are these questions even being asked?
In American Christianity, this “change or die” refrain has become its own form of creed. Within little more than a generation or two, it has accompanied the erosion of Christianity’s presence in society. In a brief time, nearly two millennia of conviction that historic Christianity is the last bastion of humanity’s hope have been replaced. Instead, there sits the new assumption that we are about to face such a perfect storm of change that unless the Church finds a way to join its maddening pace, Christianity is fully and rightly doomed.

Down to a skeleton crew, with no rudder or mast to be seen, and the few remaining officers frantically drilling holes in the hull while cackling, “The answer! At last! The answer!” one has to wonder how long until they set to work bailing water into the boat. The shoals loom deadly close. Leviathan waits in the depths with open maw.

Yes. It looks damned bleak. And I’m not cursing. There is something terribly diabolical at work.

But allow me to suggest that even such impending doom is not nearly so bad as it might seem, especially when you’ve got Christianity on your side. And all the lukewarm spiritual attention, all the shrinking congregations, all the collapsing moralities and apostatizing children are not unique.

Allow me to insist that our times are nothing new.

For the vast bulk of history, times like our own have been the tragic consistency. There is only one new wind that is blowing among us, and that is the wind of believing that we’re so very different from everything that came before.

Empires collapsing? What of it?

The love of many is growing cold? You are surprised by this?

People who grew up in church aren’t going anymore? Welcome to Sadland. Welcome to Normalsville.

The churches of our age have forgotten that they are not here to build a kingdom in the present but to herald the impending better one? Been there, done that too. Tickets to the Reformation, anyone?

The only truly new idea of our age is the suggestion that our age is new.
And even this isn’t really that new of an idea. But it does remain the one idea that everyone believes, the granted “truth” that none of us are willing to question.

I don’t care. I think the idea that times have changed is a stupid idea.

Take a deep breath and dwell on that. Let it be the faintest hint of a possibility. Pause and consider that maybe the only real problem we face is believing we face something new.

Maybe relevance, technology, and strategy are human realities that make precisely zero spiritual impact in Jesus’ Church.

Maybe reactionary fearmongering and growth-minded fad peddling might not be the solution. Maybe they’re the problem.

Certainly only a fool would board a ship whose crew throws all the food overboard at the first sign of a storm.

Only the same kind of fool would join a religion filled with adherents willing to jettison their most cherished beliefs at the first sign of people not believing them.

Only a narcissist would join a movement more concerned with getting him to join them than with moving him in their direction.

Only mania explains self-proclaimed followers of Jesus believing that they can convert people to His Spirit by hiding Jesus, by minimizing both His words and His most public works from all polite conversations.

Are today’s Christians really so arrogant as to believe that the way to save Christianity is to cease clinging to it? Are today’s Christians truly so blind as to willfully forget that the only real purpose of Christianity is to preach the radical message of trust in the body of a single man, and Him dead, hanging nailed to a cross? Do today’s Christians actually think that our churches will long survive by willfully forgetting that the one thing universally guaranteed by Him to never pass away is His Word?

Jesus sends Christians into the world with the insistence that they are sheep among wolves. He did not give us a product to market or an ideology to debate. He gave a truth to be believed. He also told us that the world would hate that truth. Whether we are in the midst of the most bountiful new-Pentecost harvest the world has ever seen, or in the midst of a drought
so bone-deep and out of season that even the tares are asking where the water might be, what is needed is not the doubt-riddled lunacy that we must “change or die.” What is needed is the old-fashioned faithful grit that believes that no matter what we see, Christianity will never die.

Because Christianity cannot die.

Because Jesus is not dead.

Take courage.

Have some moxie.

Grab a glass of tenacity with me.

Stop and listen.

Stop and remember.

Patience, grasshopper.

Zeal without knowledge is fire without light.

There is a gut-deep, mind-transfiguring, change-invincible faith given in Jesus Christ “so that you may believe” (John 20:31) that no matter how bad it looks, the Church of Jesus Christ is not going anywhere.

Except forever.

Because Jesus is alive.

Jesus is not only a man of our past but the Lord of our present and our future. He submitted to death, not to get bound by it but in order to rip out its sting by the root. He rose again, not to abandon us but to bind Himself to us eternally. He ascended to the Father, not to leave us as orphans but to compel the first twelve men He left behind to “more than [conquer]” (Romans 8:37) the world.
Not by any means necessary.
Not as man saw fit.
But with an extreme, specific vision.
With an invested, marvelous, particular mission.
Authorized to wield a single, scandalous, peculiar, highly unbelievable, certifiably impossible, yet everlastingly eternal promise.
Not a guess.
Not a gimmick.
Not a gamble.
A plan.
“Do this,” He said.