INTRODUCTION

For a moment, imagine that we live in the 1950s. According to Gallup, in that decade, 98 percent of Americans claimed belief in God. Between 1950 and 1960, membership in congregations grew from 57 percent to 63 percent, while 90 percent of all Americans identified with some form of Christianity.[1] It was a decade that witnessed the rapid growth of churches in the burgeoning suburbs of North America.

At the same time, the United States and its allies were drawn into a conflict with the Soviet Union and its allies, a global struggle that prompted political leaders in the United States to portray the nation as robustly Christian: In 1953, the National Prayer Breakfast was established in Washington, DC, bringing political and religious leaders together; in that same year, President Dwight D. Eisenhower prayed at his inauguration—a first in presidential inaugurations; in 1954, the phrase "under God" was added to the Pledge of Allegiance; and in 1956, President Eisenhower signed a declaration making "In God We Trust" the national motto, soon to be printed on all forms of money. It would seem that one's patriotic duty was to participate in a religious community—despite the constitutional separation of church and state.

And yet, dramatic change was in the air. Many young "baby boomers"—born between 1946 and 1964—questioned what they considered cultural strictures and rebelled against "traditional" education, government, and religion, calling into question the assumptions held by previous generations concerning family life, sexual relations, spiritual practice, and the role of government. The civil rights movement, the free love movement, opposition to the war in Vietnam, and the women's equality movement began to reshape the social fabric of America in unprecedented ways.

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1. "How Many Americans Believe in God?," Gallup, June 24, 2022, https://news.gallup.com/poll/268205/americans-believe-god.aspx.

For some Christian leaders, the close alliance between church and state during the 1950s seemed *too* close, leaving them to wonder why the moral voice of the church had been silent in the presence of crimes committed by state and federal agents: the harassment, torture, and murder of civil rights activists; the corruption that attended the resignation of an American president; the overthrow or murder of democratically elected leaders in other nations, actions covertly directed by US agents.

At the same time, the dominance of historic Christian communions was called into question as other religious and social movements offered alternatives to mainline Protestantism and Catholicism: the Pentecostal movement, New Age spiritualities, the Religious Right, countless self-help coaches, and Eastern religions—to name but a few. What were once established Christian traditions became "options" in the spiritual marketplace where various groups contended for adherents. While one could rely on a measure of denominational loyalty in the 1950s, the growth of consumer culture influenced religion as well: "Shopping" for a church community or spirituality became common and remains so to this day.

This shift in the tectonic plates of mainline Christianity raised and continues to raise the question, "What does it mean to be a Christian?" What guides Christian faith and life in a culture that not only witnesses many religious options but also seems less inclined toward religion? A recent survey by the Gallup organization indicates that the percentage of people who believe in God has dropped from 98 percent in the 1950s to 81 percent in the 2020s. Among Americans under age thirty, it is down to an unprecedented 68 percent.[2] Mainline Protestant communions are shrinking, as is the number of college-educated Roman Catholics. While those who lived in the 1950s received many messages that it was good to be a Christian participating in a church of one's choice, few, if any, cultural messages present the same message today.

As I write these words in 2026, I am mindful of the challenges that face the nation, among them an epidemic of loneliness and isolation that began even *prior* to the COVID-19 pandemic. Assistance to those caught

2. Jeffry Jones, "Belief in God in U.S. Dips to 81%, a New Low," Gallup, June 17, 2022, https://news.gallup.com/poll/393737/belief-god-dips-new-low.aspx.

in poverty has been slashed—but let us keep in mind that the United States, one of the wealthiest nations in the world, has failed on a regular basis since its founding in the late eighteenth century to provide adequate food and drink for all its citizens. The demonization of immigrants—with its long history in American life—has emerged again. The rule of law seems to be imperiled. The quest for gender equality and racial justice remains a struggle. Protection of the environment—which dates to 1970—is being repealed. And what of the rise of Christian nationalism, with its virulent demand that a fundamentalist form of Christianity hold political and social power in the nation? In this context, what does it mean to be a Christian?

In 1978, Lutherans in the United States published *Lutheran Book of Worship*. In 1979, Episcopalians published a newly revised Book of Common Prayer. In both books, and in the subsequent publication of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* in 2006, something entirely new was present: a set of renunciations and promises embedded in the baptismal liturgy. It is these rejections and affirmations that are the subject of this book—baptismal vows which I believe offer a robust response to the question of what it means to be a Christian in an increasingly secularized and fractured society.

Chapter 1 focuses on the baptism of Jesus as the event through which he entered public life and called women and men to join him. Here we discuss how his followers were formed as cooperators with Jesus in his public mission, and the significant role of common life in their shared labor for the reign of God.

Chapter 2 introduces the practice of baptismal formation among early Christians, who lived in a culture that was at times skeptical of their shared faith and life and at times violently opposed to them. Why did early Christian leaders insist on a process of preparation for baptism? Did they discern a significant difference between the values and practices of the dominant culture and those that shaped Christian life? This chapter then presents the drastic change in the practice of holy baptism when the Christian movement became the established religion of the state.

Chapter 3 introduces the remarkable change in Christian faith and life prompted by reform during the sixteenth century, with Martin Luther and Thomas Cranmer. The Reformers guided Christians to engage the world in

which they lived, rather than living primarily in the hope of gaining eternal life. This chapter brings us to the present day and the rise of secularization that began with the Enlightenment, a scientific and philosophical movement that has had a profound influence on contemporary American culture.

Chapter 4 describes the early Christian practice of baptism, which became the inspiration for the revision of contemporary baptismal rites: being washed in water and the word, marked or anointed as Christ's own, communed in his body and blood, and sent to witness and serve in daily life—the generous practice of Christian initiation. Here we consider the Christian community as a sacramental assembly, and the strength such a community offers in a culture of loneliness.

Chapter 5 invites readers to reflect on the responsibilities that flow from the gift of holy baptism, through the experience of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor and martyr who resisted the apathy of a Christianity held captive by its secular culture. We consider the baptismal vows to proclaim the good news, serve others as Christ did, respect the dignity of every person, work for justice and peace, and care for God's first gift of grace: the creation.

Chapter 6 claims that the baptismal renunciations and promises serve as a guide or rule of life for the baptized—as they are viewed in monastic life, in the Reformers' catechisms, and in Bonhoeffer's commentary on communal Christian life. We consider several practices through which Christian faith and life can be nurtured in the household, the "domestic church"—practices that serve as an alternative to the hyper-individualism, noise, and frantic activity of contemporary life.

Chapter 7 offers a series of reflections that present different perspectives on the practice of holy baptism with its renunciations and promises, including quotations from the scriptures, from hymns and liturgical canticles, and from activists, artists, bishops, environmentalists, poets, pastors, preachers, priests, theologians, and writers—each shedding light on this foundational Christian practice.

The title of this study—*Unclaimed Treasure*—suggests that the baptismal renunciations and promises are, indeed, a treasure that asks for greater attention in the churches. When individuals or families are preparing

for baptism, we spend time reflecting on the liturgy of holy baptism and what its various elements mean. But I wonder whether even greater attention is needed among the already baptized: It is one thing to renew the baptismal covenant four times each year in worship;[3] it is something quite different to spend time with the renunciations and promises of the baptismal covenant, inwardly digesting them, letting them shape one's sense of what it means to live as a Christian in the world today. Be welcome, then, to these reflections on stepping into the river of life.

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March 25, 2026
Feast of the Annunciation

3. The Baptism of Our Lord; The Easter Vigil; Pentecost; and All Saints. See "Affirmation of Baptism," in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 234, and "Holy Baptism," in the Book of Common Prayer, 312.