

Issues, Etc.

JOURNAL




Better Than Good Failed Attempts to Improve on the Gospel Part 2

by Todd Wilken

Wittenberg Trail: How I Became a Confessional Lutheran

by Joy Pullmann

Spring—2017



Dear **Issues, Etc. Journal** Reader,

Greetings in the name of Jesus.

For this edition of the *Journal*, I bring you part two of an essay, “Better Than Good: Failed Attempts to Improve on the Gospel,” in which I outline the myths of Gospel reductionism.

In the Wittenberg Trail feature, Joy Pullmann, managing editor of *The Federalist*, tells us about her journey away from the experience of charismatic Christianity, and how she found what she was looking for in confessional Lutheranism.

You’ll also find a list of our generous sponsoring congregations at the end of the *Journal*.

Enjoy this edition of the *Journal*.

Wir sind alle Bettler,

Todd Wilken, host

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Better Than Good

Failed Attempts to Improve on the Gospel

Part 2

by Todd Wilken

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. —2 Tim. 3:16–17

In the last edition of the *Journal*, I wrote about some common myths regarding the Gospel that attempt to improve upon the biblical Gospel:

- The Gospel is “God loves you anyway.”
- The Gospel is any good news.
- The Gospel frees you to do what you want.

In the second half of this essay, we are going to look at some attempts to improve on the biblical Gospel by, in effect, making the Gospel the only thing God has to say.

This approach to the Gospel and to Scripture has been called “Gospel reductionism.” Simply put, Gospel reductionism is a method of interpreting

Scripture that tries to reduce the message of Scripture to the Gospel and only the Gospel. All other teachings are retained, reinterpreted or simply dismissed based upon whether or not they are judged to be in agreement with the Gospel.

Historically, this approach to Scripture has wreaked havoc on the Bible and its teachings. It usually ends up dispensing with many biblical doctrines that are judged too Law-based or oriented. And since all theology is reduced to the Gospel, it inevitably requires the Gospel to do the work of the Law. The next myth is a clear example of this.

Myth: The Gospel produces repentance.

Lutheran theology has a very careful definition of repentance:

Now, repentance consists properly of these two parts: One is contrition, that is, terrors smiting the conscience through the knowledge of sin; the other is faith, which is born of the Gospel, or of absolution, and believes that for Christ's sake, sins are forgiven, comforts the conscience, and delivers it from terrors.¹

Notice that repentance isn't merely contrition, nor merely faith, but both contrition *and* faith. This definition of repentance distinguishes Christian repentance from what the Bible calls "worldly sorrow."² It also emphasizes that repentance is God's work, produced by God alone, through His Word of both Law and Gospel (namely that the Law is how God produces the knowledge of sin and the Gospel is how God produces faith in Christ).

However, if one is reluctant to speak God's Law, one might attempt to recruit the Gospel to do the Law's job. Televangelist Joel Osteen is one such person. Osteen is infamous for his hesitancy to discuss sin. This is his solution for producing repentance without the Law:

Listen, don't dangle people over the fires of hell. Listen, that doesn't draw people to God. They know what kind of life they live. They know how bad

*they've lived. What you've got to do is talk about the goodness of God. Listen, it's the goodness of God that brings people to repentance.*³

Osteen says that it is not God's Law that brings people to repentance but God's "goodness," the Gospel. But Osteen is paraphrasing, taking out of context and misapplying a verse from Paul's letter to the Romans:

*Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.*⁴

According to Paul, God's kindness that leads to repentance does not exclude the preaching of the Law; it includes and requires it. It is, in fact, part of God's "kindness and forbearance and patience" that He continues to warn unbelievers about His wrath and righteous judgment through His Law. In other words, this verse does not teach that God produces repentance by the Gospel, apart from His Law.

But Osteen is hardly alone in this mistake. The aforementioned Luther scholar Gerhard Forde has this rather convoluted way of describing how repentance is best produced:

*If justification by faith alone is death and resurrection, then it is the proclamation of that justification itself that does the deed we are looking for. It is the proclamation itself that puts to death and raises up—at one and the same time. ...One would depend rather upon the unconditional word itself to do the job. It is the very unconditionality, the "nothing to be done," itself that administers the coup de grace, because it kills and makes alone at once. The preacher, that it, leads from strength, announcing the unconditional word, knowing that in the first instance it is not going to be heard as Gospel by the Old Being because it an attack on the ego, the beginning of the end, so that the new can start.*⁵

Forde argues that the preaching of the Law, rather than producing contrition or a knowledge of sin, “usually ends up just prolonging the agony of the Old Adam.”⁶ Instead, he suggests preaching the “unconditional word” of justification by faith alone, which “is not going to be heard as gospel by the old being” but rather as an attack on his ego.

In other words, Forde, like Osteen, is suggesting that instead of preaching the Law to produce contrition and a knowledge of sin, we preach the Gospel.⁷ For Osteen, such preaching is intended to persuade the unrepentant to repent in view of God’s goodness. In Forde, such preaching of the Gospel-for-contrition is designed as an attack on the unbeliever’s self-confidence. It’s difficult to decide which of these versions of the myth, “The Gospel produces repentance,” is worse.

Would that the myth stopped with Forde, but it doesn’t. One of Forde’s disciples Tullian Tchvidjian also describes the effect of grace, or the Gospel, in terms usually associated with the effects of the Law:

*Grace turns our world upside down. It disrespects our values, pops the bubble of our self-righteousness, suspends reciprocity, and introduces chaos. It throws our to-do lists out the window.*⁸

*The truth, whether we admit it or not, is that grace scares us to death. It scares us primarily because it wrestles control and manageability out of our hands –introducing chaos and freedom.*⁹

Nowhere does Scripture say that grace does anything other than bring comfort and assurance to the troubled conscience. The Word of God that “turns our world upside down...disrespects our values...pops the bubble of our self-righteousness” is God’s Word of Law. This way of speaking about grace is now common, even among our fellow Lutherans: a grace that scares, ruins, disrupts, destroys and even kills. This confuses the effects of the Gospel with those of the Law and represents a profound confusion of the two.¹⁰

Myth: The Gospel is the only thing that really matters.

When Gospel reductionism first appeared in Lutheran circles in the 20th century, it did not at first suggest a conflict between Scripture and the Gospel. It began by adopting a subtle confusion that would later result in the utter devastation of Lutheran theology among those who adopted it. It was the confusion of the formal and material principles of theology.

This is one of theology's most basic distinctions—not as famous as the distinction between Law and Gospel but equally important in its own way. The formal principle of theology describes the authoritative source of all theology: Holy Scripture. The material principle of theology describes the central message of all theology: the Gospel. A simple trick for remembering the two is the formal principle is that which “informs” theology, and the material principle is that which “matters most” in theology.

When Gospel reductionism first appeared in Lutheran circles, it adopted a confusion of the formal and material principles of theology. In particular, it asserted that the Gospel ought to be the formal principle, the authoritative source of theology. It proposed that the Gospel should replace Scripture as the source and norm of all theological truth. This was an attempt to make the Gospel the only thing that matters.

At first, this might sound like a good thing. After all, doesn't Lutheran theology center on the Gospel? Yes, it does. Aren't all doctrines related to the Gospel? Yes, they are. But the Gospel isn't and can't be the source and norm of all theology. Why? Because while the Gospel teaches the most important revealed truth, the Gospel doesn't teach all revealed truth. Far from it. In other words, God has revealed many other things other than the Gospel, the primary example being the Law. If the Gospel is made the source and norm of all theology, then either the

Gospel must teach the Law or the Law must be dismissed as contrary to Gospel. It should come as no surprise that Gospel reductionism arrived at both of these conclusions.

This also might seem like an arcane or technical point, but it's difficult to underestimate the damage this simple confusion has done in American Christianity. The theological offspring of the first Lutheran Gospel reductionists is the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Why does the ELCA today permit the ordination of women and homosexuals, support for abortion, affirmation of the LGBTQ+ agenda and the denial of virtually every doctrine of Scripture? They do it in the name of the Gospel. They do it because the Gospel, not Scripture, was made their final authority. The ELCA is a case study in how Gospel reductionism has successfully pitted the Gospel against Scripture.

Am I saying that the Gospel, the Good News of forgiveness of sins because of Jesus' death and resurrection, produced all these errors? Quite the contrary. Gospel reductionism forces the Gospel to do something it was never intended to do. The Gospel was never intended to be the source and final authority for theology; Scripture was. The Gospel simply couldn't do what the Gospel reductionists wanted it to do.

In the 1960s and 70s, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) fought its “battle for the Bible,” which was in large part an attempt to correct this confusion of the formal and material principles in its own ranks. In a 1972 document, the LCMS concluded,

Lutheran theology does not appeal to the Gospel in such a way as to relativize the rest of the Scriptures. Gospel is not norm in the Scriptures in such a way as to make only the Gospel the norm of theology. This is a "Gospel reductionism" that Lutherans condemn as a repudiation of the authority of the Scriptures.

and

God has joined Gospel and Scripture together in an inseparable unity. Lutheran theology which is loyal to the Confessions understands the relation between Scripture and Gospel as follows: Scripture is to Gospel as source is to summary; or, Gospel is to Scripture as summary is to source. God had given us the Gospel in the Scriptures. What God has joined together, Lutheran theology does not put asunder. Much less does confessional Lutheran theology pit Gospel against Scripture, or Scripture against Gospel.¹¹

In the end, gospel reductionism proved to be an enemy of both Scripture and the biblical Gospel. Scripture was abandoned as the final authority for theology. The “gospel” of gospel reductionism ended up being reduced to nothing more than a permissive moral code of niceness, affirmation and celebration of anything and everything. Then and today, the Gospel is the ultimate casualty of gospel reductionism. In an attempt to make the Gospel the only thing that matters, gospel reductionism first abandons Scripture and then second—and inevitably—it abandons the Gospel.

Myth: The Gospel trumps the text.

This myth is closely related to the previous myth, but it has to do how particular passages of Scripture are explained, or more often than not, explained away by Gospel reductionism.

If the Gospel is all that matters and is the norm of all theology, it stands to reason that any passage of Scripture must interpreted according to the Gospel.

Again, at first this might sound like a good thing. Doesn’t all Scripture point to Jesus and His saving work? Yes, directly or indirectly. But that is a very different thing than interpreting any given text of Scripture according to the Gospel. That is a

very different thing than using the Gospel to trump the text of Scripture. Two examples will suffice.

First, consider an understandable but mistaken reading of the Ten Commandments. Grammatically, the Ten Commandments are not imperatives but future indicatives, not stated as commands but simple statements in their grammatical form. Based on this observation, some have concluded that the Ten Commandments aren't really commandments at all; they are Gospel promises, future statements of how God's people will live. "You will have no other gods before me. You will not misuse the name of the Lord your God," etc. It is said that this is how we should understand the Ten Commandments according to the Gospel.¹²

This reading, while giving lip service to the grammar of the text, completely ignores the context of the texts wherein we find the Ten Commandments. This context shows that these indicative statements are given as commands requiring obedience and forbidding disobedience. The Gospel, as important as it is for understanding the Ten Commandments, cannot be used as an excuse to ignore, overturn or explain away their text and context.

Second, ponder a more blatant reinterpretation of the qualifications for holding the pastoral office. The apostle Paul provides a rather lengthy list of qualifications aspiring pastors must meet:

*The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.*¹³

Here, Paul's language is unambiguous: "an overseer must be...He must...He must not...he must." Paul seems to be under the impression that there are necessary qualifications for the pastoral office. Despite this, a novel idea is floating around, even among Lutheran pastors, that the apostle Paul is not actually setting a standard by which a man's fitness for the pastoral office is evaluated. Instead, Paul is merely reminding all of us that no one is really fit for the office and reminding pastors that none of them are fit either.¹⁴ In other words, Paul is only accusing pastors and aspiring pastors of being disqualified. If anyone is a pastor, it is only because his disqualifications have been forgiven by God. Therefore, to deny a man entrance (or restoration) to the pastoral office based on his failure to meet Paul's list of qualifications is to deny him God's forgiveness.

What about Paul's unambiguous words, "an overseer must be...He must...He must not...he must..."? They are explained away as nothing but the Law's accusations, just a more detailed version of "all have sinned," to be answered by the Gospel. This assumes that since the primary purpose of the Scriptures is to proclaim Law and Gospel, the only legitimate question to address to a biblical text is: "How can the text be used to confront the sinner with God's judgment and mercy?"¹⁵ This has the effect of robbing Scripture of any instructive power or value.

What would this reading of Paul's qualifications mean in actual practice? If a pastor commits adultery with a parishioner, the Church would have no basis for disqualifying him unless it were willing to disqualify every pastor. There would be no reason to prevent him from returning to the pulpit and no imaginable circumstance that could lead to permanent removal from the office.¹⁶ It would also mean that the Church has grievously erred and denied forgiveness to countless men denied entrance into, or removed from, the pastoral office. You can begin to see what happens when the Gospel is used to trump the text.

Of course, this reading of the text is a classic example of confusing our standing *coram Deo* (before God) with *coram hominibus* (before men). Paul is not describing how a man is determined to be fit before God. He is describing how a man is determined to be fit before men. In this case, Paul's list of qualifications make perfect sense, as does the Church's historic practice of applying them to pastors and would-be pastors. The Gospel declares a man forgiven all his sins before God. The Gospel cannot be used to explain away the texts that list clear qualifications for the pastoral office.

Another way the Gospel is used to trump the text is in Christian preaching. Paul writes,

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the Word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.¹⁷

The ultimate, indispensable task of Christian preaching is to confront the sinner with God's judgment and mercy. But is this the only task of Christian preaching? According to the Apostle, no. Paul does include reproof and rebuke, but he also includes exhortation, correction, training in righteousness, equipping for good works, and teaching. Again, God's judgment and mercy to the sinner is the ultimate, indispensable message. But what then happens to preaching when the only legitimate question permitted of a biblical text is "How can the text be used to confront the sinner with God's judgment and mercy?" It ceases to be textual. The Gospel is used to trump the text. Every text of Scripture is viewed as having three elements: Law that only accuses, Gospel, and the other stuff. The actual content of that "other stuff" isn't particularly important. Whatever it may be, its only possible purpose is to show the hearers their sin. If not, it can safely be ignored. Whatever a

text may say apart the Gospel is shoehorned into the message, “this is how you have sinned,” or it is disregarded.

I know this. For decades, this is exactly how I approached a text to be preached, regardless of the text. The one and only question I asked was, “How can this text be used to confront the sinner with God's judgment and mercy?” Does this mean that I was misinterpreting the text? No. In many cases, I wasn't interpreting the text at all. I was picking out the Gospel bits and leaving the rest uninterpreted and unpreached. I was applying a predetermined filter to the text —a filter that permitted only one message to emerge. That message itself was faithful to the text in terms of judgment and mercy, but it wasn't faithful to the text regarding anything else the text had to say to the hearers.

I found that, in the end, the particular texts weren't very important. Any text would do. The text became just an obligatory starting point, not the actual content of my preaching. In my case, this kind of preaching led to a preaching of the Law that was disconnected from the text and therefore an abstract view of sin. Even worse, this kind of preaching led to a preaching of the Gospel that was also disconnected from the text and therefore an abstract view of the Gospel.

God delivers His Word of Law and Gospel through the particular texts of Scripture, and in no other way. When the Gospel is used to trump the those texts, God's Word is silenced in the name of the Gospel.

Myth: The Gospel is the only way that Christians can address issues of doctrine and practice in the Church.

You may have begun to suspect that the previous myth is but one example of a larger misconception regarding the Gospel, namely that the Gospel is the only legitimate way to address any issue in the Church. This approach argues that we

need to find “Gospelly” ways to deal with errors in doctrine and practice. Certainly we ought to deal with errors in doctrine and practice with kindness and patience, but does the Gospel provide correction for errors in doctrine and practice? No, it doesn’t.

This again is a confusion of the formal and material principles of theology. Remember: While every doctrine points to the Gospel, we don’t argue every doctrine from the Gospel. The Gospel was never intended to be used that way. When errors in doctrine and practice arise in the Church, we don’t consult the Gospel to find a corrective. We consult and apply whatever Scripture speaks directly to the error.

Examples may be found in the issues of the ordination of women or closed Communion. In a recently online discussion of the all-male pastorate in the LCMS, one participant referred to appeals to Paul’s prohibition as “prooftexting,” asking, “Can’t we discuss this subject without quoting Paul?” But the fact is that the basis for ordaining only men to the pastoral office is based largely on Paul’s prohibition against women publicly teaching and preaching in the Church. The basis for ordaining only men to the pastoral office is not the Gospel, and the doctrine cannot be derived from the Gospel. Search as you may, you will not find a “Gospelly” way of arguing the point. The same is true of closed Communion. The basis for this teaching and practice is not the Gospel and cannot be derived from the Gospel. Its basis is, among other things, Paul’s explicit warning against unworthily eating the body and blood of Christ. Try as you may, you will not find a “Gospelly” way of arguing the point.

There are two possible outcomes from trying to establish every doctrine from the Gospel. On one hand, you misrepresent what Scripture actually teaches on the subject by avoiding the passages that teach the doctrine in question. On the other

hand, you might conclude that the doctrine in question just isn't really that important since it can't be established by the Gospel. Gospel reductionists of the past quickly drew both of these conclusions depending on the doctrine.

Martin Luther leaves us a great example to follow in his 1529 debate with Ulrich Zwingli on the subject of the Lord's Supper. Luther based his position and argument entirely on Christ's words of institution: one text. Luther understood that Christ's bodily presence was established in several places in Scripture, but when challenged to demonstrate this doctrine, Luther stuck to the clearest text.

Granted, some biblical doctrines are established in part or entirely by the Gospel itself, but not all are. Certainly you can show how these teachings and practices are related to the Gospel, the center of all doctrine and practice, but to instruct and correct the Church on all doctrine and practice, we need all of Scripture. Again, while every doctrine points to and serves the purpose of the Gospel, we don't argue every doctrine from the Gospel.

The Gospel is the best news there is. There is no need to improve it. The Gospel does what no other word can do: It declares you forgiven for Jesus' sake, works saving faith and produces a life filled with good works for your neighbor. There is no need to make the Gospel do the work of the Law or serve as the basis for every doctrine. Every attempt to improve the Gospel diminishes the Gospel.

What is the danger of Gospel reductionism past and present? It isn't that it focuses too much on the Gospel. The real danger of Gospel reductionism is that it has forgotten that all of Scripture is already focused on the Gospel. Gospel reductionism pits the Gospel against Scripture—against Scripture's word of Law, against Scripture's doctrines and against Scripture's texts.

The heart, center, and ultimate message of the Bible is that God wishes to be gracious to sinners for Christ's sake. Unless one hears this voice of the Gospel, that is, the voice from heaven speaking absolution to terrified

consciences, the whole point and purpose of the Scriptures has been missed. ¹⁸

Ironically, this is exactly what Gospel reductionism does: It misses the point and purpose of Scripture, not by failing to hear the Gospel but by regarding Scripture's word of Law, Scripture's doctrines and Scripture's texts as enemies of the Gospel. Tragically, in an attempt to protect the Gospel from these supposed enemies, Gospel reductionism undermines the Gospel. Gospel reductionism simply fails to understand that Scripture and all it teaches are given by God for the purpose of proclaiming the Gospel. Scripture and all it teaches are the Gospel's best allies.

No More Myths

In the course of the last three essays, I have laid out myths regarding God's Law and myths regarding God's Gospel. My list wasn't difficult to compile because, as I have said, I have entertained most of these misconceptions at one time or another. My list isn't comprehensive, nor are all these myths held by everyone who has been influenced by, flirts with or buys into gospel reductionism. Some of these myths are more common, some less. Some are more obvious, some less. Some are more immediately dangerous to one's theology, some less. Some can linger in a pastor's or layperson's thinking for years without doing any great damage. However, none of them are harmless.

I am sure that most of those who have been influenced by, flirt with or buy into gospel reductionism don't realize the danger of these myths. They sincerely believe that they are emphasizing and magnifying the biblical Gospel. You might be just such a person. Part of my goal in writing this is to warn you. These myths do not lead you or others closer to the comfort of the Gospel. They will lead you and others away from that comfort.

The Apostle says, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the Word of truth.”¹⁹ This is why the ability to recognize and reject these myths is so important. When Christians talk about “Law and Gospel” we aren’t talking about abstract concepts; we are talking about the Scriptures themselves, God’s Word of truth. The Lutheran reformers saw this:

*We believe, teach, and confess that the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is to be maintained in the Church with great diligence as an especially brilliant light, by which, according to the admonition of St. Paul, the Word of God is rightly divided.*²⁰

These myths employ Law and Gospel not as a light, that “the Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles may be properly explained and understood,”²¹ but as a way of ultimately obscuring Scripture. Whenever Scripture is obscured—whether by disparaging God’s Law or attempting to improve on God’s Gospel—Christ is obscured. Whenever Christ is obscured, “the merit of Christ is obscured and troubled consciences are robbed of their comfort.”²²

¹ AC, VII, 2–6.

² 2 Cor. 7:10, “For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.”

³ Joel Osteen, “What the Resurrection Means to Us as Believers” cited by Philip Sinitiere, *Salvation with a Smile: Joel Osteen, Lakewood Church, and American Christianity* (New York: New York University: 2015), 223.

⁴ Rom. 2:1–5.

⁵ Gerhard Forde, *Justification by Faith, a Matter of Death and Life* (Mifflintown: Sigler Press, 1990), 93. Elsewhere Forde writes, “Just the sheer and unconditional announcement ‘You have died!’ the uncompromising insistence that there is nothing to do now, that God has made his last ‘move’ just that, and that alone, is what puts the old being to death, precisely because there is nothing for the old being to do.” Forde, *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press 1988), 234. Paul Althaus also entertains the idea of the Gospel doing the work of the Law and vice versa: “For Luther, then, God’s word can, in the final analysis, definitely not be categorized into law and gospel. The one and the same word strikes sinful man as both law and gospel... This one and the same gospel lead to repentance and to faith, to despair and to peace... The Gospel carries out the work of the law on a man by making him guilty.” Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, Robert Schultz, trans. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 264–5.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Forde's suggestion is a textbook tenet of antinomianism. At the time of the Lutheran Reformation, Joannes Agricola taught that the Gospel, not the Law, produces contrition: "Repentance consists in this, that the heart of man, experiencing the kindness of God which calls us to Christ and presents us with His grace, turns about, apprehends God's grace, thanks Him heartily for having spared it so graciously, begins to repent, and to grieve heartily and sorrowfully on account of its sins, wishes to abstain from them, and renounces its former sinful life." And, "The Law merely rebukes sin, and that, too, without the Holy Spirit; hence it rebukes to damnation." And, "There is need of a doctrine which does not only condemn with great efficacy, but which saves at the same time; this, however, is the Gospel, a doctrine which teaches conjointly repentance and remission of sins." Fredrick Bente, "Historical Introductions to the Lutheran Confessions," in *Triglot Concordia* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 169.

⁸ Tullian Tchividjian, *One Way Love* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2013), 182.

⁹ <https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/tullian/2011/10/11/grace-without-buts-and-brakes/>

¹⁰ Sometimes the confusion of the effect of the Gospel with those of the Law is the result of mere sloppy descriptions of the two or attempts to portray grace and the Gospel as edgy or revolutionary. Here are examples from two Lutheran blogs: "Good preaching announces and delivers the answer. Christ was greater than your sins. Yes, yours—specifically you. He's not bringing them up on that day because they've been dealt with already, on the cross, by Jesus. Because of blood already shed on your behalf, you have been, are now, and, thus will be declared not guilty. But, I'm afraid, it is this sort of preaching that utterly terrifies us. And it should! I mean, just think of the audacity of someone telling you now what God will say then! Where does a preacher get off posting the results before we actually experience the Last Day? If you preach like this, it is suggested, you'll ruin the watching experience. It ruins all of the moral, spiritual, and intellectual projects I've engaged in to prepare myself for the end. It ruins all of my aspirations of thinking that my life is going to have some kind of impact on that final verdict. This sort of preaching doesn't just ruin the end; it ruins me!" (<https://thejaggedword.com/2016/08/12/preaching-ruins-everything/>) "Grace calls B.S. on any theology that focuses more on what you do than what's been done.... May God wreck us with his Word of Law and remind us that we're not as good as we think we are. When the Law does its work, it will make us honest. The Law will cut through the images we've created for ourselves to reveal what's inside." (www.chrightholdfast.org/blog/calling-bull-on-theology)

¹¹ The Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Gospel and Scripture: The Interrelationship of the Formal and Material Principles in Lutheran Theology*, November 1972, 10, 21.

¹² Best-selling author Perry Noble went to far as the rewrite the commandments based on a similar argument: <https://perrynoble.com/blog/the-10-commandments-sayings-or-promises>

¹³ 1 Tim. 3:1–7.

¹⁴ <http://www.200proofgospel.com/2015/06/youre-not-fit-for-ministry.html>

¹⁵ CTCR, *Gospel and Scripture*, 13.

¹⁶ This is not an exaggeration; the argument has actually been made that restoring such a pastor would be following Jesus example of healing on the Sabbath and "a splendid example of grace and forgiveness in action." "...consider the pastor who divorces his wife, marries the woman he had the affair with, and then suggests to the elders of the church that their allowing him to remain in the pulpit would be a splendid example of grace and forgiveness in action."

<https://thefirstpremise.wordpress.com/2015/09/27/sermon-on-luke-1411-jesus-is-bad-news-for-good-manners/>

¹⁷ 2 Tim. 3:16–4:2.

¹⁸ CTCR, *Gospel and Scripture*, 6.

¹⁹ 2 Tim. 2:15.

²⁰ Ep. V, 2.

²¹ SD, V, 1.

²² Ibid.

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Witness Always

Wittenberg Trail: How I Became a Confessional Lutheran

by Joy Pullmann

As a child, I was taught to be deeply suspicious of liturgical churches. Both my parents are cradle Catholics who became charismatic evangelicals during their courtship. So, because most of our family on both sides remained Catholic, I was regularly exposed to a historic liturgy by attending baptisms, weddings and funerals.

When it came time for the Sacrament, my six siblings and I sat quietly in the pew as my parents had instructed instead of filing up to the front of the church with our extended family and their fellow congregants. I remember piously congratulating myself that we were not “religious” like our Catholic family and friends—those poor, misguided souls who only had boring old hymns to sing instead of exciting 1960s-style rock ballads.

You see, we believed in the freedom of the Spirit, not a dead, dry, formal religion. In our churches, people danced, fell down and raised their hands, and you could never tell how long the service would be. It was all up to the Holy Spirit. Sometimes He would keep us there all day.

This is how I thought as a child, but as I grew older, things got more complicated. Underlying all the religious excitement was a deep restlessness. Our churches were fractious because people came precisely to feel a spiritual high. Once they got their hit, they moved on. We began to attend churches in bursts, floating here and there for a few years or even months at a time. It unsettled me. I wanted a spiritual home. Life was unstable enough to transfer that instability to the one domain that ought to offer eternal surety.

The religious enthusiasm also weighed on me. I felt emotionally manipulated by my peers, family, pastors and other religious leaders. Why should my feelings be the standard by which to measure God's presence, let alone truth? How was it just to imply that a person with a quieter, less suggestible personality is less affected by God "moving" (whatever that means)?

Desperate for spiritual highs, my family and many of our friends made regular pilgrimages to "revivals" across North America—places the Spirit had gone, I guess, because he apparently wasn't with us all the time. Or at least not with us all the way all the time. We were to believe that the Holy Spirit spoke to us directly with personal advice, like a sort of combined personal therapist and horoscope reader.

People who couldn't make sense of these insults to God's character were considered lower forms of Christians—not openly, of course, but all by suggestion and implication. It was the logical conclusion of their thoughtworld. It led to absurd things like people insisting God had "told them" to do things like wear two different colors of socks or send money to this particular preacher. More darkly, it caused people to despair of salvation or God's love because they didn't feel forgiven or couldn't rid themselves of besetting sins.

In college, this kind of emotional manipulation and doublespeak began to weigh on me more deeply. I started to compare what the charismatics said with what the Bible says, and the charismatics kept coming up short. They seemed to ignore or explain away big chunks of the Bible, such as commandments to attend church and beware of false prophets. Why were we focusing so much on "saving the world for Christ" when the church couldn't even save its own children for Christ? As churches focused more and more on emotional appeals and fund drives for "reaching the lost," their congregants' own children were losing their faith. I watched it happen to scores of my own friends. How, I wondered, could these folks "save the lost" in Africa or Detroit when they couldn't even save the lost in their own pews?

Providentially, I landed at one of the few good colleges left, so as I filled in more knowledge about world history, I became enthralled with the beauty of old things, with the sense of belonging one can develop by joining a specific set of traditions people have been preserving for centuries. It was a comfort to someone who felt spiritually homeless. College opened the wonders of history to me for the first time, and this deepened my love of and desire to know the church's heritage. For this was—is—my heritage now too.

Historic churches no longer seemed “religious” and “stuffy;” they seemed beautiful. Their mystery now attracted rather than repelled me. They had a depth I felt I could spend my whole life searching out. So I started to look into specific Christian faith traditions, starting with Catholics. Because of my parents' hostility to the tradition they'd spurned, I didn't tell them. I inquired alone.

Even so, my parents shaped my spiritual inquiry by having taught me as a young child to treasure the Bible and trust it as true, every word. Although I wanted very much to connect myself to the historic Christian church, I just couldn't get over all the things the Catholic Church teaches that aren't in the Bible. (Sorry, Catholics. Love you anyway.) As fate—or perhaps the Holy Spirit?—would have it, I knew a few conservative Lutherans. One handed me Gene Edward Veith's *The Spirituality of the Cross*.

After that, it was over. I kept re-reading that thin little book, saying to myself, “But I already believe this! Is this Lutheran?” It took an inquiry class with a local pastor to help get me through infant Baptism and the real presence, but largely he just had to show me how the Bible says “Baptism now saves you” and “This IS My body.” I was done with people trying to interpret away God's plain Word. He said it. I believe it. The end.

It was a comfort to think that I didn't have to get a specific “word from God” about every single thing in my life and muddle about in perpetual worry that I could be misunderstanding Him and thus accidentally committing colossal, irredeemable

blunders. God has already given me all the sure and certain words He thinks I need. On the rest, I'm free to decide what socks I wear, what man I marry, what job offer I'll accept. What a paradox that accepting limits to God's Word actually creates rather than stifles one's sense of freedom.

That dear pastor the Rev. Roger James confirmed me, and then I was a Lutheran. When I "came out" to my parents, they nearly disowned me. It cost me my wedding, many sleepless nights and much else. But there, as a confessional Lutheran, I stood. I could do no other.

Perhaps now you can see why the historic liturgy is such a treasure to me, a person who has been fed Christianity broth for most of her life instead of the meat. The Word and Sacrament truly do feed my soul, and their faithful administration according to centuries of Christian tradition protects me from feeling spiritually manipulated again. It's so important to us that the availability of a church that offers us and our children this feast perpetually was a deciding factor when my husband and I discussed moving from Washington D.C. to Fort Wayne, Ind.

We are blessed beyond measure to attend Redeemer Lutheran Church in downtown Fort Wayne. It's a singular church within a singular expression of the ancient Christian faith. Praise be to God for taking His spiritually homeless child and giving her a home in His own Church, where He feeds her His own precious body and blood for life everlasting.



Joy Pullmann is the managing editor of The Federalist.

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