Dear Issues, Etc. Journal Reader,

Greetings in the name of Jesus.

In this issue, I present a little thought experiment. Gospel Reductionism replaces the Bible as the source and norm of all theology with the Gospel. Instead of asking, “Does this idea agree with the Bible?” Gospel Reductionism asks, “Does this idea agree with the Gospel?” What would a Gospel Reductionist edition of Luther’s Small Catechism look like? Read on and see.

In our Wittenberg Trail feature, Dr. Russell Dawn tells us about his discovery of the firm reality of the Cross in the Lutheran confession of faith after his time tottering on the flimsy foundation of experiential Anglicanism.

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

Enjoy reading this edition of the Journal.

Wir sind alle Bettler,

Todd Wilken, host
Issues, Etc.

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I have written about Gospel Reductionism a lot in the last several years. The reason is that I am convinced that Gospel Reductionism is alive and well in American Lutheranism.

In its crassest form, Gospel Reductionism replaces the Bible as the source and norm of all theology. It replaces the Bible with the Gospel. The Gospel becomes the standard by which theological ideas are judged to be true or false. Instead of asking, “Does this idea agree with the Bible?” Gospel Reductionism asks, “Does this idea agree with the Gospel?”

Gospel Reductionism is the big, unpaid bill of the 20th century’s Battle for the Bible in American Christianity, and in American Lutheranism in particular. There were two allied, hostile forces during the Battle for the Bible. First and more obviously, there was liberal Bible scholarship. Second and less obviously, there was Gospel Reductionism. Many in American Lutheranism simply surrendered to both. A few didn’t. But among those who entered the battle, most focused their attention almost entirely on combatting liberal Bible scholarship. Relatively few recognized Gospel Reductionism as an enemy allied with liberal Bible scholarship.
Gospel Reductionism invaded Lutheranism along with liberal Bible Scholarship. The “Battle for the Bible” drove back liberal Bible scholarship, but failed to do the same to Gospel Reductionism. Gospel Reductionism stayed, settled down, applied for, and was granted citizenship.

Gospel Reductionism divides the Bible into important doctrines and unimportant doctrines. Doctrines that agree with the Gospel are important. Doctrines that don’t aren’t. What kind of doctrines have been judged to be unimportant? In some cases, Gospel Reductionism eventually decided that most of the Bible had no direct relationship to the Gospel. Today, in denominations where Gospel Reductionism holds sway, almost everything in the Bible can be questioned or denied, up to and including the resurrection of Jesus, all in the name of the Gospel.

Gospel Reductionism also pits Law and Gospel against one another. Some brave souls attempted this to deny the Law entirely, lapsing into complete antinomianism. But true antinomianism is like one of those radioactive isotopes with a very short half-life. It decays quickly, usually into what Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton have famously called, “moralistic therapeutic deism.”

In actual practice, Gospel Reductionists have rejected only particular parts and uses of the Law. It’s still wrong to cheat on your wife, unless she’s fine with that. Then you call it “serial non-monogamy.” Killing is wrong, unless the victim is an unborn child, a mentally disabled person, or the elderly.

Gospel Reductionism also manifests itself in less obvious ways. Does your pastor’s preaching and teaching give you the impression that the Gospel is good but the Law is bad, or a necessary evil? He may be under the influence of Gospel Reductionism. Ask your pastor, “Why did God give us His Law?” If he answers, “To show us both our sin and what the life of good works and love for the neighbor looks like,” good! But if he answers, “To show us our sin” and then
stops talking, you may well be talking to a Gospel Reductionist. Gospel Reductionism can be found not only in what a pastor says, but also in what he doesn’t say, or refuses to say. If a pastor refuses to say that God’s Law is also teaching God’s good will for the Christian’s life, he is likely under the influence of Gospel Reductionism.

This refusal to talk about the positive teaching of the Law for the Christian is sometimes couched in the language of Christian Freedom. “You are free in Christ” replaces the positive teaching of the Law. What does that freedom look like? Am I free to steal from my employer? Am I free to serve my neighbor by taking her to an abortion clinic? Am I free to serve my Muslim neighbor by worshipping with him at the local mosque? If not, why not? The answers to these questions aren’t found in the Gospel. They are found in the Law. But if the shape of that freedom is deliberately left unspecified, and the positive teaching of the Law is avoided, those answers are never given. This is textbook Gospel Reductionism.

All this is the result of attempting to replace the Bible with the Gospel. If applied consistently, Gospel Reductionism effectively reduces theology to only those very few doctrines that are considered directly related to the Gospel. The Bible is selectively mined for Gospel-friendly ideas. But the Gospel doesn’t exist in a Scriptural vacuum. The Gospel itself depends on the rest of the Bible. As the Bible is reduced, so the Gospel itself is also reduced to a vague message of divine forgiveness, or more likely today, affirmation.

When I hear pastors make statements like, “How would the Gospel be threatened if Adam and Eve weren’t real, historical people?” or “I’m not too concerned if someone denies the doctrine of __________ as long as they don’t deny the Gospel,” or “The Gospel is all that matters,” I hear the echoes, if not the voice, of Gospel Reductionism.
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I wonder what they are actually teaching the people under their care. What do you teach in Bible class if the only important teaching of the Bible is the bare Gospel? What do you teach your catechism classes?

And that got me thinking: What would a Gospel Reductionist edition of Luther’s Small Catechism look like? Let’s see.

Luther's Small Catechism
Gospel Reductionism Edition

As the head of the family should teach it in a simple way to his household.

I. The Ten Commandments

The First Commandment.
*Thou shalt have no other gods.*

What does this mean?—Answer.
*We should don’t fear, love, and trust in God above all things.*

The Second Commandment.
*Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord, thy God, in vain.*

What does this mean?—Answer.
*We should don’t fear and love God that we may not curse, swear, use witchcraft, lie, or deceive by His name, but call upon it in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks.*

The Third Commandment.
*Thou shalt sanctify the holy day.*

What does this mean?—Answer.
*We should don’t fear and love God that we may not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred, and gladly hear and learn it.*

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The Fourth Commandment.  
_Myth shalt honor thy father and thy mother [that it may be well with thee and thou mayest live long upon the earth]._

What does this mean?  
_We should don’t fear and love God that we may not despise nor anger our parents and masters, but give them honor, serve, obey, and hold them in love and esteem._

The Fifth Commandment.  
_Myth shalt not kill._

What does this mean?  
_We should don’t fear and love God that we may not hurt nor harm our neighbor in his body, but help and befriend him in every bodily need._

The Sixth Commandment.  
_Myth shalt not commit adultery._

What does this mean?  
_We should don’t fear and love God that we may lead a chaste and decent life in words and deeds, and each love and honor his spouse._

The Seventh Commandment.  
_Myth shalt not steal._

What does this mean?  
_We should don’t fear and love God that we may not take our neighbor’s money or property, nor get them by false ware or dealing, but help him to improve and protect his property and business._

The Eighth Commandment.  
_Myth shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor._

What does this mean?  
_We should don’t fear and love God that we may not deceitfully belie, betray, slander, or defame our neighbor._

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but defend him, speak well of him, and put the best
construction on everything.

The Ninth Commandment.
Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house.

What does this mean?
We should don’t fear and love God that we may not craftily
seek to get our neighbor’s inheritance or house, and obtain
it by a show of justice and, right, etc., but help and be of
service to him in keeping it.

The Tenth Commandment.
Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife, nor his man-
servant, nor his maid-servant, nor his cattle, nor anything
that is his.

What does this mean?
We should don’t fear and love God that we may not
estrange, force, or entice away our neighbor’s wife,
servants, or cattle, but urge them to stay and do their duty.

What Does God Say of All These Commandments?
He says thus (Exod. 20:5f): I the Lord, thy God, am a jealous
God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children
unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me,
and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love Me
and keep My commandments.

What does this mean?
God threatens to punish all that transgress these
commandments. Therefore we should dread His wrath and
not act contrary to these commandments. But He promises
grace and every blessing to all that keep these
commandments. Therefore we should also love and trust in
him, and gladly do according to his commandments.

As you can see, Gospel Reductionism, if consistently applied, reduces the
Ten Commandments to a truncated, non-specific accusation of violating the
First Commandment. All the particulars are lost. It is true that the First
Commandment encompasses all of the Ten Commandments. But the First Commandment doesn’t exhaust the other commandments.

Also, since the Law can only accuse, the Ten Commandments have nothing to teach us. They reveal only our sin, and nothing of God’s order and will for one’s life. Does the Creed fare any better?

II. The Creed

As the head of the family should teach it in a simple way to his household.

The First Article, Of Creation.

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

What does this mean?--Answer.

I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my limbs, my reason, and all my senses, and still preserves them; in addition thereto, clothing and shoes, meat and drink, house and homestead, wife and children, fields, cattle, and all my goods; that He provides me richly and daily with all that I need to support this body and life, protects me from all danger, and guards me and preserves me from all evil; and all this out of pure, fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me; for all which I owe it to Him to thank, praise, serve, and obey Him. This is most certainly true insofar as it agrees with the Gospel.

The Second Article, Of Redemption.

And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

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What does this mean?

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins as I define sin, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, in order that I may be His own, and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true insofar as it agrees with the Gospel.

The Third Article, Of Sanctification Conversion.
I believe in the Holy Ghost; one holy Christian Church, the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.

What does this mean?

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith; even as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctified the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith; in which Christian Church He forgives daily and richly all sins to me and all believers, and at the last day will raise up me and all the dead, and will give to me and to all believers in Christ everlasting life. This is most certainly true insofar as it agrees with the Gospel.

To be honest, if I consistently applied Gospel Reductionism’s principle to the Creed and its explanations, nothing would have survived the cut. As stated above, there is little in the Bible that cannot be questioned or denied when Gospel Reductionism is at work. Imposing the Gospel as the only norm of truth leaves very little of the Bible’s teaching intact. This is why practitioners of Gospel Reductionism are highly selective in what they impose their Gospel
III. The Lord's Prayer

As the head of the family should teach it in a simple way to his household.

*Our Father who art in heaven.*

What does this mean?

*God would thereby tenderly urge us to believe that He is our true Father, and that we are his true children, so that we may ask Him confidently with all assurance, as dear children ask their dear father.*

The First Petition.

*Hallowed be Thy name.*

What does this mean?

*God's name is indeed holy in itself; but we pray in this petition that it may become holy among us also.*

How is this done?

*When the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity, and we as the children of God also lead holy lives in accordance with it. To this end help us, dear Father in heaven. But he that teaches and lives otherwise than God's Word teaches profanes the name of God among us. From this preserve us, Heavenly Father.*

The Second Petition.

*Thy kingdom come.*

What does this mean?

*The kingdom of God comes indeed without our prayer, of itself; but we pray in this petition that it may come unto us also.*

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How is this done?

_When our heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit, so that by his grace we believe his holy Word Gospel and lead a godly life here in time and yonder in eternity._

The Third Petition.

_Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven._

What does this mean?

_The good and gracious will of God is done indeed without our prayer; but we pray in this petition that it may be done among us also._

How is this done?

_When God breaks and hinders every evil counsel and will which would not let us hallow the name of God nor let His kingdom come, such as the will of the devil, the world, and our flesh; but strengthens and keeps us steadfast in his Word Gospel and in faith unto our end. This is his gracious and good will._

The Fourth Petition.

_Give us this day our daily bread._

What does this mean?

_God gives daily bread, even without our prayer, to all wicked men; but we pray in this petition that He would lead us to know it, and to receive our daily bread with thanksgiving._

What is meant by daily bread?

_Everything that belongs to the support and wants of the body, such as meat, drink, clothing, shoes, house, homestead, field, cattle, money, goods, a pious spouse, pious children, pious servants, pious and faithful magistrates, good government, good weather, peace, health, discipline, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like._

The Fifth Petition.

_And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us._

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What does this mean?

We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven would not look upon our sins, nor deny such petitions on account of them; for we are worthy of none of the things for which we pray, neither have we deserved them; but that he would grant them all to us by grace; for we daily sin much, and indeed deserve nothing but punishment. So will we verily, on our part, also heartily forgive and also readily do good to those who sin against us.

The Sixth Petition.

And lead us not into temptation.

What does this mean?

God, indeed, tempts no one; but we pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us, so that the devil, the world, and our flesh may not deceive us, nor seduce us into misbelief, despair, and other great shame and vice; and though we be assailed by them, that still we may finally overcome and gain the victory.

The Seventh Petition.

But deliver us from evil.

What does this mean?

We pray in this petition, as in a summary, that our Father in heaven would deliver us from all manner of evil, of body and soul, property and honor, and at last, when our last hour shall come, grant us a blessed end, and graciously take us from this vale of tears to himself into heaven.

Amen.

What does this mean?

That I should be certain that these petitions are acceptable to our Father in heaven and heard; for he himself has commanded us so to pray, and has promised that he will hear us. Amen, Amen; that is, yea, yea, it shall be so.

The Catechism’s treatment of the Lord’s Prayer fares better than the Commandments and the Creed under Gospel Reductionism. However, you will find more at www.issuesetc.org
notice that because the standard of truth is no longer the Bible, but the Gospel, all references to God’s Word must go. This is especially in evidence in the second half of the Catechism.

IV. The Sacrament of Holy Baptism

As the head of the family should teach it in a simple way to his household.

What is Baptism?
Baptism is not simple water only, but it is the water comprehended in God’s command the Gospel and connected with God’s Word the Gospel.

Which is that word of God Gospel?
Christ, our Lord, says in the last chapter of Matthew: Go ye into all the world and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

What does Baptism give or profit?
It works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the Word Gospel and promises of God declare.

Which are such words Gospel and promises of God?
Christ, our Lord, says in the last chapter of Mark: He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.

How can water do such great things?
It is not the water indeed that does them, but the word of God Gospel which is in and with the water, and faith, which trusts such word of God Gospel in the water. For without the word of God Gospel the water is simple water and no baptism. But with the word of God Gospel it is a baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a washing of
PONDER WHAT MATTERS
regeneration in the Holy Ghost, as St. Paul says, Titus, chapter three: By the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost, which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ, our Savior, that, being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. This is a faithful saying.

What does such baptizing with water signify?

*It signifies that the old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts as we define them and, again, a new man daily come forth and arise; who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever.*

Where is this written?

St. Paul says Romans, chapter 6: We are buried with Christ by Baptism into death, that, like as he was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

Consistently applied, Gospel Reductionism cannot appeal to Scripture. It must concern itself with what the Gospel alone teaches, not with what the Bible teaches. Since only the Gospel is the norm and source of theology, citing Bible passages makes no sense. Seeing this laid out this way, it quickly becomes evident that the Gospel Reductionist approach to Scripture is self refuting.

As in Gospel Reductionism’s treatment of the Commandments, we must reject those parts of the Bible that speak of the results of Baptism that have anything to do with the Law other than its accusation, since these results are not, (strictly speaking) part of the Gospel.

And, since Gospel Reductionism has evacuated the particular content of the Ten Commandments, sin has no definition. We are free to define it for ourselves.
V. Confession

How Christians should be taught to confess.

What is Confession?
Confession embraces two parts: the one is, that we confess our sins as we ourselves define them; the other, that we receive absolution, or forgiveness, from the confessor, as from God Himself, and in no wise doubt, but firmly believe, that our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven.

What sins should we confess?
Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even of those which we do not know, as we do in the Lord's Prayer. But before the confessor we should confess those sins alone which we know and feel in our hearts. Whatever we define as sinful.

Which are these?
Here consider your station according to the Ten Commandments, whether you are a father, mother, son, daughter, master, mistress, a man-servant or maid-servant; whether you have been disobedient, unfaithful, slothful; whether you have grieved any one by words or deeds; whether you have stolen, neglected, or wasted aught, or done other injury own definition of sin.

Set free by the Gospel from the constraints of the Bible, the Gospel Reductionist isn’t only at liberty to define sin for himself, he is actually required to do so. What other moral authority is there? The Gospel Reductionist’s personal moral standard is as good as anything else. There was a time during the heyday of Gospel Reductionism when its practitioners attempted to find moral limits and guidance in the Gospel itself. They called these rules by the oxymoron “Gospel Imperatives.” At first, these imperatives corresponded to the Ten Commandments. Later, they would conform to the prevailing cultural standards of morality. Cut free from the Bible, this was inevitable.
So what sins do you confess to God when you decide for yourself what is right and wrong? Do you need to confess at all?

VI. The Sacrament of the Altar

As the head of the family should teach it in a simple way to his household.

What is the Sacrament of the Altar?

It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and wine, for us Christians to eat and to drink, instituted by Christ Himself The Gospel.

Where is this written?

The holy Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and St. Paul, write thus:

Our Lord Jesus Christ, the same night in which He was betrayed, took bread; and when He had given thanks, He brake it, and gave it to His disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is My body, which is given for you. This do in remembrance of Me.

After the same manner also He took the cup, when He had supped, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Take, drink ye all of it. This cup is the new testament in My blood, which is shed for you for the remission of sins. This do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of Me.

What is the benefit of such eating and drinking?

That is shown us in these words the Gospel: Given, and shed for you, for the remission of sins; namely, that in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given us through these words. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.

How can bodily eating and drinking do such great things?

It is not the eating and drinking, indeed, that does them, but the words which stand here, namely: Given, and shed for you, for the remission of sins. Which words are, beside the
bodily eating and drinking, as the chief thing in the Sacrament; and he that believes these words has what they say and express, namely, the forgiveness of sins.

Who, then, receives such Sacrament worthily? Fasting and bodily preparation is, indeed, a fine outward training; but he is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words: Given, and shed for you, for the remission of sins.

But he that does not believe these words, or doubts, is unworthy and unfit; for the words “For you” require all hearts to believe.

Without the ability to appeal to Scripture as authoritative, Gospel Reductionism cannot assemble the Bible passages necessary to coherently answer the questions posed in the Catechism. The answers to those questions aren’t found in the Gospel itself.

Why is it difficult for a pastor influenced by Gospel Reductionism to actually teach the Catechism in this way?

First, Gospel Reductionism isn’t consistently applied, even by those devoted to it. Why? As stated above, Gospel Reductionism is self-refuting. Gospel Reductionism forces Scripture to conform to the Gospel alone. But the Gospel doesn’t exist alone. The Gospel only exists as supported and informed by Scripture. This is why traditional Lutheran teaching spoke not of only the Gospel, but of “the Gospel and all its articles.”

Second, even pastors who employ Gospel Reductionism know that it isn’t an honest approach to the Bible. Gospel Reductionism may begin as an amusing theological parlor trick, but it is just that: a trick. Instead of dealing with the teaching of the Bible, honestly exploring those teachings to understand not only how they relate to the Gospel, but also everything God is teaching through
them, Gospel Reductionism gives Christians permission to ignore, disregard, or even deny whatever inconvenient truths they may find.

Even more disingenuous is Gospel Reductionism’s claim to do this in the name of the Gospel, for the sake of the Gospel. This claim is false. Gospel Reductionism is not about the Gospel. It is about avoiding God’s Word in its totality. Gospel Reductionism guts the Bible, and in the process, guts the Gospel too.

Third, by the time a thoroughgoing Gospel Reductionist is done using the Gospel to ignore, explain away, or deny Scripture, why do catechesis at all? What’s left to teach? A Gospel Reductionist edition of the Catechism turns out to be a very short and insubstantial document.

In October of 2017, for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, I interviewed Elizabeth Eaton, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It was a remarkable interview. The casual listener would have come away with the impression that the ELCA was all about the Gospel. Bishop Eaton spoke glowingly of the Gospel, the Bible, and of the Lutheran Confessions (of which Luther’s Small Catechism is a part).

Afterward, a listener asked me how Bishop Eaton could so strongly affirm the justification of the sinner by grace, though faith, for Christ’s sake, and yet preside over a denomination that also affirms and celebrates homosexual marriage and clergy, abortion on demand, radical feminism, and the entire agenda of the Sexual Revolution.

The answer was simple: Gospel Reductionism. And it was found tucked into one of Bishop Eaton’s final answers. I asked her if the ELCA considered the Lutheran Confessions to be a right exposition of Holy Scripture. She answered, “The Lutheran Confessions, they are a right exposition and a witness to the Gospel, and that’s part of our ordination vows.”
By now you should be able to see the shift: I had asked about faithfulness to Scripture, she had answered about faithfulness to the Gospel. She substituted the Gospel for Scripture as the standard of faithfulness. This is how she could so strongly affirm justification, and at the same time affirm and celebrate so many things contrary to Scripture. Her standard of truth wasn’t Scripture, it was the Gospel.

The ELCA is what it looks like when a denomination embraces Gospel Reductionism. But make no mistake, Gospel Reductionism isn’t quarantined in progressive Protestantism.

Why have I chosen to use the Catechism to illustrate the danger of Gospel Reductionism? Two reasons: First, to provide a diagnostic for the laity. A Lutheran pastor should be able to teach Luther’s Small Catechism word for word. If he can’t, we need to ask what in the Catechism he cannot teach and why. Is it possible that he has substituted the Gospel for Scripture as his source and norm of truth?

Second, I chose to use the Catechism to illustrate the danger of Gospel Reductionism. Robust teaching of the Catechism itself is a remedy to Gospel Reductionism where it has taken hold, and a protection against it where it hasn’t.

The Catechism itself teaches us that while the Gospel is what matters most, the Gospel isn’t the only thing that matters. The Catechism itself teaches us that the Christian faith is centered upon the Gospel, but not exhausted by the Gospel. The Catechism itself teaches us that the only source and norm of truth—even the precious truth of the Gospel itself—is Scripture. If we want to extol the Good News of Jesus Christ, crucified and raised for the salvation of sinners, we don’t do so by downplaying anything else Scripture teaches. Downplaying anything Scripture teaches diminishes the Gospel. The fact is, everything else Scripture teaches is there to extol the Gospel.

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I was raised in the Episcopal Church USA which is now known as The Episcopal Church. That opening sentence may lead some readers to assume that this is a story of my escape from theological liberalism and “anything goes” teachings about sexuality. I did escape them by changing denominations, but that was to another Anglican denomination, and it happened years before I became Lutheran. Rather, this is a story of departing a tradition that I loved. The Anglican tradition was ultimately too theologically unclear, and too focused upon subjective experience.

Most Anglican denominations are non-confessional. That is, they do not have doctrinal statements with which clergy must agree. Even when the 39 Articles of Religion were binding in the Church of England, the content of those articles was relatively brief and general. England’s Queen Elizabeth I did not want the church to probe too deeply into people’s souls. In this way, she was able to maintain a significant measure of visible unity within the realm through the connective tissue of the Church. In her time (the late 16th century), only the most ardent Catholics or radical Puritans were unable to find a place in England’s established church. Everyone between these two extremes could be part of the local parish church, which happened also to be a local arm of royal power. Over the centuries since Elizabeth, as doctrinal confessions have faded into obscurity, visible unity has remained the strength of Anglicanism.

But this strength is also a profound weakness. Visible unity can (and generally does) hide doctrinal disunity. This disunity can lead to confusion or
even heresy. That is part of why many parishes and dioceses of The Episcopal Church, America’s largest Anglican denomination, now admit all sorts of heretical teachings and practices. It was due to these heresies that I left The Episcopal Church for a small, orthodox Anglican denomination when I was in my early 30s.

But even where Anglicanism has not strayed from the faith, the doctrinal disunity can be profound. In my years as an Anglican, I was taught that the Reformation was among the greatest events in history, and that it was a tragedy. I was taught that the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper are the Body and Blood of Christ, and that they are merely symbolic reminders of the Crucifixion in the same way that a birthday cake is a reminder of someone’s birth. I was taught that some are predestined to heaven and others to hell, that some are predestined to heaven but none are to hell, and that there is no predestination. I was taught that justification is by grace alone through faith alone, and that one must make a decision for Christ to partake of justification by grace. Which teaching I heard depended on which priest was preaching.

With such inconsistent teaching, it is little wonder that I was theologically confused. The one thing that was consistent in the teaching I received was the vital importance of experience. One might say that the central point of doctrine is the centrality of experience in the life of the Christian. This is not to say I was taught that experience brings salvation, but rather that certain kinds of experience are the incremental goals of the Christian life. Reaching these experiences helps to assure us of our salvation.

For instance, experience might come in the form of a connection to the liturgy (whether traditional or innovative), or perhaps a “charismatic” manifestation such as an unfamiliar prayer language, or the ability to prophesy about the future. Most decisively, however, experience would come in the forms of an ever-increasing feeling of intimacy with Jesus, and ever-increasing holiness in life. These ideas were taught in different ways by different teachers. But
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ultimately the focus was more on the fruits of faith than on the Author of faith; on my subjective response of faith rather than the objective works of Christ on the Cross, and of the Holy Spirit in Word and Sacrament. I would know that I was living the Christian life by experiential progress.

The problem was, I didn’t. I uttered not a syllable in a language other than English. Further, I was too acutely aware of my own sin to believe that I was becoming more holy, and I did not often have an emotional experience of intimacy with Christ. No amount of effort or prayer changed any of this. At times I even questioned my salvation.

When I was in my mid-30s, I began to study theology formally at Oxford University. I did so for three reasons. First, it was a professional or vocational move, because I was unhappy in my profession as a lawyer. Second, it was an attempt to find and secure my status before God. Specifically, I thought that I would be better off spiritually if I gave up my lucrative profession. As it turned out, after leaving the legal profession, I found myself just as prone to greed and envy as I was before. Thus, I still saw myself as wanting to be saved but unable to be faithful enough, and I saw God as apparently not wanting to help me. Thankfully, my third reason for the change was that I loved the history of Christian thought, and hoped to find clarity by studying it. By God’s grace I not only found clarity, but peace.

I was approaching age 40 when God made clear to me how truly profound and extensive the Gospel of His love is. I found that my anxiety and fear had resulted not from an indifferent God, but from my own anemic view of His love. The turning point came in an unlikely setting but from a very likely source. The unlikely setting was that I needed a topic for an essay in my masters program. A friend encouraged me to write on Luther and the third use of the law. My
research took me down that road and straight to the likely source, Luther’s *On the Freedom of a Christian*.

Through Luther’s unpacking of Scripture, God showed me that my emphasis on experience was keeping me bound to the law. He taught me to look to Christ crucified, rather than my own emotions or holiness, for assurance of my salvation. He taught me that my sin should drive me to the foot of the Cross for forgiveness, rather than to the next redoubling of my own efforts to escape sin. My efforts should be for the sake of my neighbor, whom I am called to serve. In short, the handcuffs of the law fell from my wrists.

Soon afterward, I read the Formula of Concord in order to learn in detail what Lutherans believe about Scripture. What I saw there was one faithful and reliable interpretation of Scripture after another. I especially appreciated that, where Scripture does not provide a clear answer, the authors of the Formula were content to accept the mystery, rather than speculating about what the answer must be. After this, I went through formal catechesis at the Oxford Lutheran Mission, and became Lutheran shortly after my 40th birthday. My wife, a cradle Missouri-Synod Lutheran, was thrilled.

Doctrine, it turns out, is not dry or lifeless. It is not a mere distraction from all-important experience; it is the stuff of eternal life. True biblical doctrine tells us how complete and objectively reliable the grace of God is in raising us out of our spiritual death, into the life of Christ. Right doctrine provides firm ground for the believer. That firm ground is the objective truth of Christ crucified and risen for us.

Anglicanism today, like many strands of modern Christianity, does not see that the objective truth of the Gospel is the essence of the life of faith. Instead, Anglicanism sees that life as centered on the believer’s subjective experience. I never could find the peace that passes understanding in the highs and lows of
my emotions, or my perceptions of my own holiness. For me, that ground was simply too shaky, too unreliable. I found myself at times on the brink of despair. What Lutheranism has given me is the firm, objective reality of the Cross of Christ, with all the clarity of Law and Gospel presented there. In the Cross, God has given me peace.

Dr. Russell Dawn is president-elect of Concordia University Chicago. He previously served as professor of History and Political Thought, and director of the Pre-Law program at Concordia University Irvine. He holds a Doctorate of Philosophy from Oxford University, and a J.D. and M.B.A. from the University of Colorado.
For joy He went and sold all that He had and bought that field.

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