

Issues, Etc.

JOURNAL



*Lord's Day, Lord's House, Lord's Supper
Part Two*

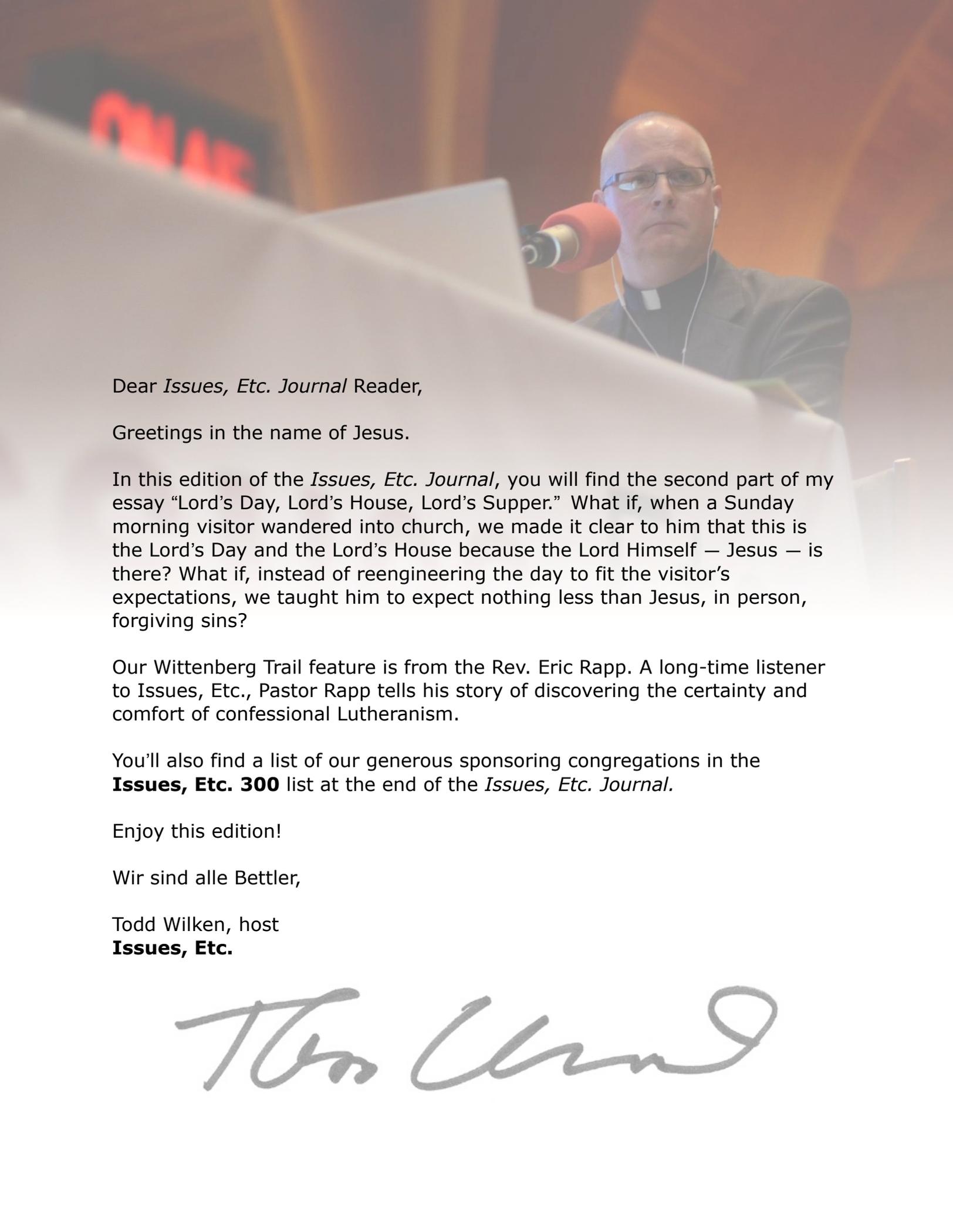
by Todd Wilken

*Wittenberg Trail:
Good To Know*

by Eric Rapp

Winter, 2015

www.issuesetc.org



Dear *Issues, Etc. Journal* Reader,

Greetings in the name of Jesus.

In this edition of the *Issues, Etc. Journal*, you will find the second part of my essay “Lord’s Day, Lord’s House, Lord’s Supper.” What if, when a Sunday morning visitor wandered into church, we made it clear to him that this is the Lord’s Day and the Lord’s House because the Lord Himself — Jesus — is there? What if, instead of reengineering the day to fit the visitor’s expectations, we taught him to expect nothing less than Jesus, in person, forgiving sins?

Our Wittenberg Trail feature is from the Rev. Eric Rapp. A long-time listener to *Issues, Etc.*, Pastor Rapp tells his story of discovering the certainty and comfort of confessional Lutheranism.

You’ll also find a list of our generous sponsoring congregations in the **Issues, Etc. 300** list at the end of the *Issues, Etc. Journal*.

Enjoy this edition!

Wir sind alle Bettler,

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Lord's Day, Lord's House, Lord's Supper: Part Two

by Todd Wilken

We began our discussion of Sunday morning by thinking about the proverbial Sunday morning visitor who comes to church knowing nothing about the Church, Christianity or Christian worship. First, we discussed the Lord's Day, that God's Word continues to sanctify all of time and especially the time of Christian worship. When our Sunday morning visitor walks into our church, he ought to know what time it is, so to speak. It is time for us to rest from what we are doing and receive what God is doing. This day is about God's work for us in Jesus Christ. This is the Lord's Day.

Now we need to talk about the Lord's house. Our Sunday morning visitor also needs answers to the questions: "Where am I?" and "What happens here?"

Everywhere and nowhere

The Sunday morning visitor's question, "Where am I?" can only be answered by first answering the question: "Where is God?" People are generally comfortable with the idea of the Lord's Day — but not necessarily for biblical reasons. We are comfortable with the idea of a holy day or a holiday. They are common in all cultures. These next two ideas — the Lord's house and the Lord's Supper — are more difficult, even for some Christians. This difficulty is perhaps caused by a failure to understand God's presence.

The misunderstanding can be stated like this: God is everywhere. And if God is present everywhere, then He isn't present at any specific place.

This misconception posits a God who is everywhere in general and thus nowhere in particular. We sinners think we like that kind of a God. That way, we can assure ourselves that God isn't really here where we are. He's just out there, everywhere and (we hope) nowhere. That way, we don't have to deal with Him here and now. But Scripture doesn't describe God's presence that way:

"Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him?" declares the Lord. "Do I not fill heaven and earth?" declares the Lord.¹

The eyes of the Lord are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good.²

Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, your right hand shall hold me.³

The fact that God is everywhere ought to give us sinners pause. Really, it ought to terrify us. If God is everywhere, sinners like us can't avoid Him, get away from Him or hide from Him. Adam and Eve discovered this soon after their fall into sin. They were afraid of God and tried to hide from Him, but God found them. If God is everywhere, no matter where you hide, He will find you. God's omnipresence isn't particularly good news for sinners. In fact, by itself, it is really bad news.

God's omnipresence isn't enough. Sinners need a God who isn't just everywhere in general. That is only a God who sees everything you do and can find you and punish you for your sins. Sinners need a God who is somewhere in particular to forgive sins.

The Lord's house: where God was for sinners

From the very beginning, the omnipresent God has been locating Himself in particular places to forgive sinners. Even while Adam and Eve were hiding, the Lord was "walking in garden the cool of the day," seeking them out. When He found them, He spoke a word of judgment against them and the serpent who had tempted them. But God's curse against the serpent was at the same time a promise of blessing and forgiveness to Adam and Eve: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."⁴ Even there in the garden, for the very first sinners, the omnipresent God located Himself for sinners with a word of forgiveness.

This is the pattern God follows throughout the Old Testament. He appeared to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre, to Jacob at Bethel, to Moses at the burning bush,

to all of Israel at Mount Sinai. During their time in the wilderness, God even gives the Israel the “tent of meeting,” the tabernacle:

I will meet with you, to speak to you there. There I will meet with the people of Israel, and it shall be sanctified by my glory. I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar. Aaron also and his sons I will consecrate to serve me as priests. I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God.⁵

Later, the temple at Jerusalem served the same purpose. At its dedication, King Solomon prayed that the omnipresent God would locate Himself for sinners with a word of forgiveness at that particular place:

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built! Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O LORD my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you this day, that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you have said, ‘My name shall be there,’ that you may listen to the prayer that your servant offers toward this place. And listen to the plea of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive.⁶

God answered Solomon’s prayer:

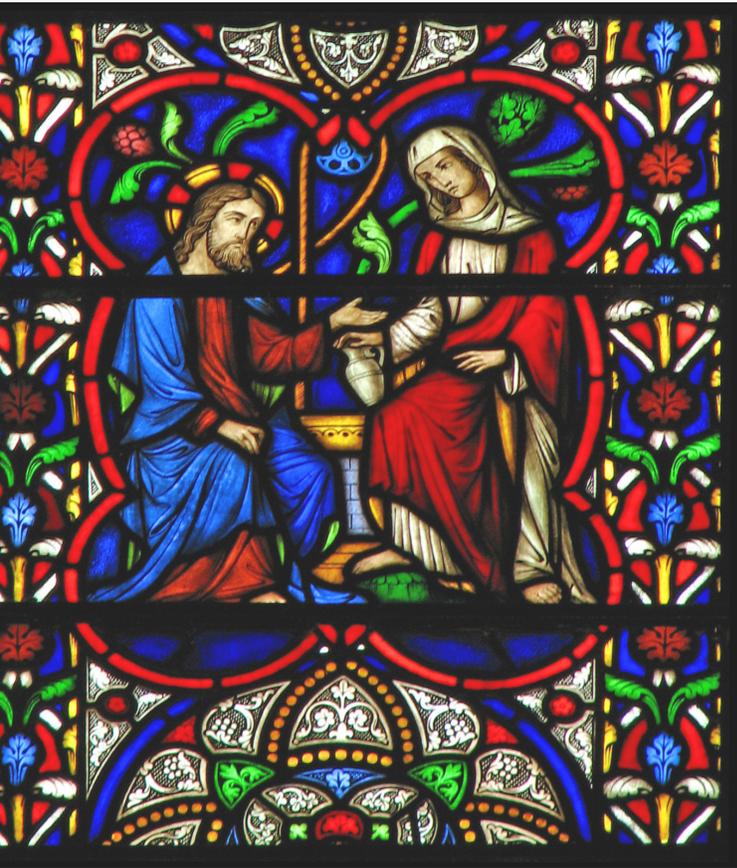
I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a house of sacrifice. . . . Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place. For now I have chosen and consecrated this house that my name may be there forever. My eyes and my heart will be there for all time.⁷

Not only did God promise to be present at the temple in Jerusalem, He also prohibited the people from seeking His presence anywhere else.

You shall seek the place that the LORD your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. There you shall go, and there you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, your vow offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock. . . . Take care that you do not offer your burnt offerings at any place that you see, but at the place that the LORD will choose in one of your tribes, there you shall offer your burnt offerings, and there you shall do all that I am commanding you.⁸

Why was it so important that the Old Testament people of God seek forgiveness from God in that particular place? Simple. The omnipresent God had

not promised to be present, forgiving sins, anywhere else. I'm sure the ancient Israelites wondered from time to time, "Why do we have to go all the way to Jerusalem for the forgiveness of sins? Isn't God everywhere? Can't He forgive sins anywhere?" Yet it wasn't a question of where God *could* be but of where God had promised to be. It wasn't a question of what God *could* do but of what God had promised to do. God had promised to be present, forgiving sins, at the temple and nowhere else. To seek God elsewhere was to seek another god. To make sacrifice and offerings someplace other than where God had promised to be was idolatry.



Dislocating God

You might say, "That was the Old Testament. Today Christians can worship God anywhere." Not exactly. Yes, Christians can worship anywhere. That is, God has not commanded Christians to worship in only one place, like the temple. But God has still promised to be somewhere in particular forgiving sins. He has located Himself someplace and nowhere else. But now that somewhere is many places.

Confused? I don't blame you.

In John's Gospel, when Jesus met the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well, one of the things she wanted to discuss was the place of worship. Samaritans and Jews worshipped in two different places:

Samaritans at Mount Gerizim, Jews at the temple in Jerusalem. The woman began:

"Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and

Truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and Truth.”⁹

Was Jesus saying that Christians can worship God anywhere? No. But, many Christians think that is exactly what He is saying. Now, take a moment to consider what this means to the proverbial Sunday morning visitor. If God is everywhere and can be worshipped anywhere, why should the visitor come to church at all? Couldn't he have stayed home and worshipped the omnipresent God without leaving the comfort of his bed? Why can so few Christians offer any real response to this question?

First, many Christians misunderstand Jesus' phrase "spirit and truth." They think Jesus is contrasting worship in a particular place with some kind of dislocated "spiritual" worship. But if this were the case, shouldn't Jesus have said, "The hour is coming when *either* on this mountain *or* in Jerusalem will you worship"? Then His point would have been that Christians can worship God anywhere, *including* Gerizim, Jerusalem, one's bed, backyard deck or fishing boat. Instead, Jesus says, "*Neither* on this mountain *nor* in Jerusalem." He *excludes* those two places. In other words, the promise of God's presence is no longer attached to the temple in Jerusalem (or any other mountain), *but somewhere else*. But where?

Second, many Christians fail to realize that the phrase, "worship the Father in Spirit and Truth" is a clear reference to the Trinity. Jesus is contrasting false worship with true worship: "You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know."¹⁰ According to Jesus, true worship must be of the triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And just because such worship will not take place on "this mountain nor in Jerusalem" doesn't mean the triune God is dislocated. In fact, just as in the Old Testament, New Testament worshippers will find God only where He has promised to be present, forgiving sins.

The Lord's Supper: where God is for sinners

Where has God promised to be today? The answer is found in Matthew's account of Jesus' birth:

When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an

angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" which means, God with us.¹¹

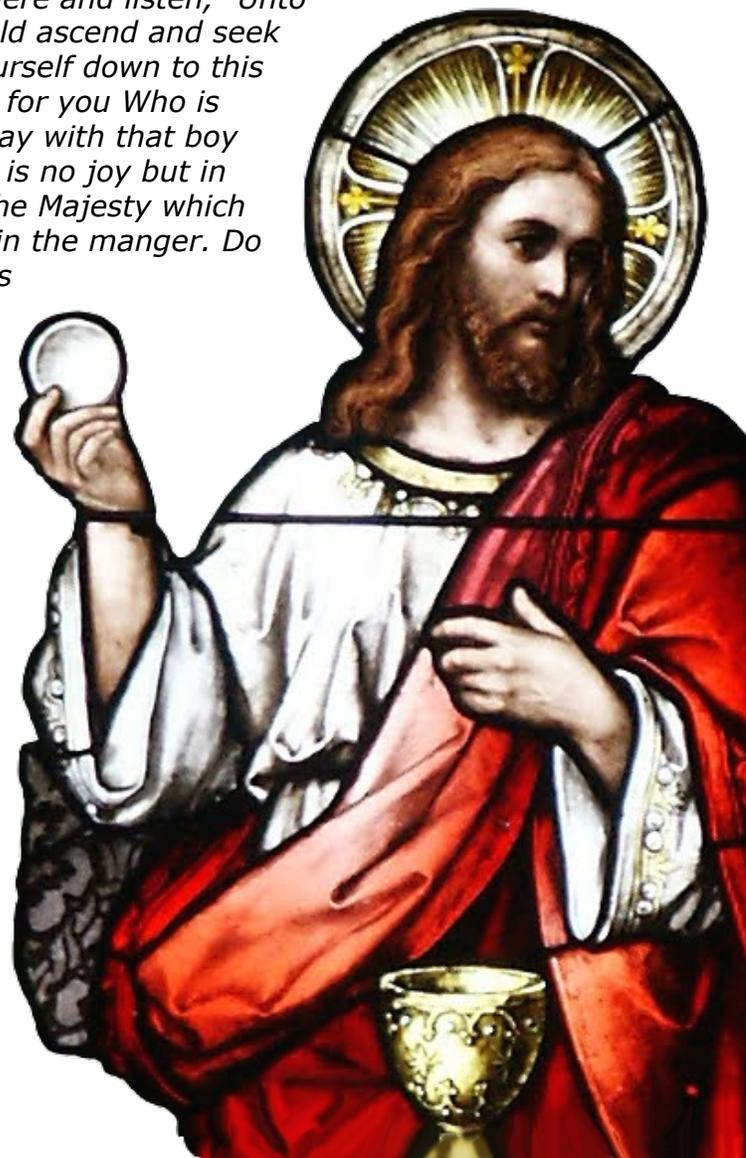
This isn't just another Christmas story. This is the answer to our question. In the person of Jesus, the omnipresent God is present with us. All of Scripture points to Jesus, and from the time of His conception in Mary's womb, the Bible says, "**Here** is God, and nowhere else!" With the incarnation of Jesus, true worship takes place "neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem." Jesus' own body literally replaces the temple in Jerusalem as the place where God is present, forgiving sins. The often-cited 1527 Christmas sermon of Martin Luther captures the truth of this answer:

Our joy is not that we ascend and put on his nature as is the case when the Mass is made a boastful decking of ourselves in divinity. Do not be driven to distraction, but remain down here and listen, "Unto you a Savior." . . . Reason and will would ascend and seek above, but if you will have joy, bend yourself down to this place. There you will find that boy given for you Who is your Creator, lying in a manger. I will stay with that boy as He sucks, is washed, and dies. There is no joy but in this boy. Take Him away and you face the Majesty which terrifies. I know of no God but this One in the manger. Do not let yourself be turned away from this humanity.¹²

Luther's insight is very important.

"Reason and will would ascend and seek above." Worship that seeks God in His omnipresence, apart from the humanity of Jesus, finds only "the Majesty which terrifies," not the forgiveness of sins. Luther is pointing into the manger where the newborn Jesus is and saying, "**Here** is God for us, and nowhere else."

The only question that remains is, "Where has Jesus, once found in the manger, promised to be today?" Jesus Himself



answers this question very clearly (although many Christians stubbornly refuse to believe it).

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."¹³

In the Lord's Supper, the incarnate Jesus has promised to be as present as He once was in the manger and on the cross. In the Lord's Supper, the incarnate Jesus has promised to be present, forgiving sins. This is that worship "of the Father in Spirit and truth" of which Jesus spoke, which takes place "neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem," but everywhere Jesus' body and blood are present and given to sinners to eat and drink for the forgiveness of their sins.

God has still promised to be somewhere in particular forgiving sins. He has located Himself someplace and nowhere else. Only now, that somewhere is many places — every place where the Lord's Supper is given and received.

This is precisely what happens in on the Lord's Day in the Lord's house.

Church leaders of the last 50 years have been thinking about that proverbial Sunday morning visitor. They have been reengineering Sunday morning — and everything about it — around him. Their answer to his unfamiliarity with Sunday morning has been to remake Sunday morning into something as familiar to him as possible. Whatever the Sunday morning visitor doesn't find instantly familiar has been abandoned and replaced with something he does. Now on Sunday morning, he doesn't see or hear anything he hasn't seen or heard before.

But what if he did?

What if, when that Sunday morning visitor wandered into church, we made it clear to him that this is the Lord's Day and the Lord's house because the Lord Himself — Jesus — is there? What if everything we said and did while he was visiting our church — every word, gesture, action, song and prayer — clearly confessed this? What if, instead of reengineering the day to fit his expectations, we taught him to expect nothing less than Jesus, in person, forgiving sins?

Would that visitor think he was wasting the end of his weekend? Perhaps, but this isn't his weekend it's the Lord's day. Would he feel at home? Probably not. After all, this isn't his house; it's the Lord's house. Would he be comfortable? Certainly not. How could he be? He is a sinner, like everyone else there, in the presence of God Himself.

What should we do with this uninterested, unfamiliar, uncomfortable visitor? We should be honest. We should say, "Do you want to know why we do what we do, say what we say and act as we do here on the Lord's Day in the Lord's house as we celebrate the Lord's Supper? *We believe that Jesus is actually here now in this place, forgiving our sins.*" If that was all we said, that visitor would then know more about what Sunday morning is really about than many regular church-goers today, wouldn't he?

Yes, he would.

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¹ Jer. 23:24.

² Prov. 15:3.

³ Ps. 139:7–10.

⁴ Gen. 3:15

⁵ Ex. 29:42–46.

⁶ 1 Kings 8:27–30.

⁷ 2 Chron. 7:12, 15–16.

⁸ Deut. 12:5–7, 13–14.

⁹ John 4:20–24.

¹⁰ John 4:22.

¹¹ Matt. 1:18–23.

¹² Luther's Christmas Sermon, 1527, quoted by Norman Nagel, "Martinus: 'Heresy, Doctor Luther, Heresy!' The Person and Work of Christ" in *Seven-Headed Luther: Essays in Commemoration of a Quincentenary, 1483–1983*, Peter Brooks, ed. (New York: Oxford University, 1983), p. 49.

¹³ Matt. 26:26–28.

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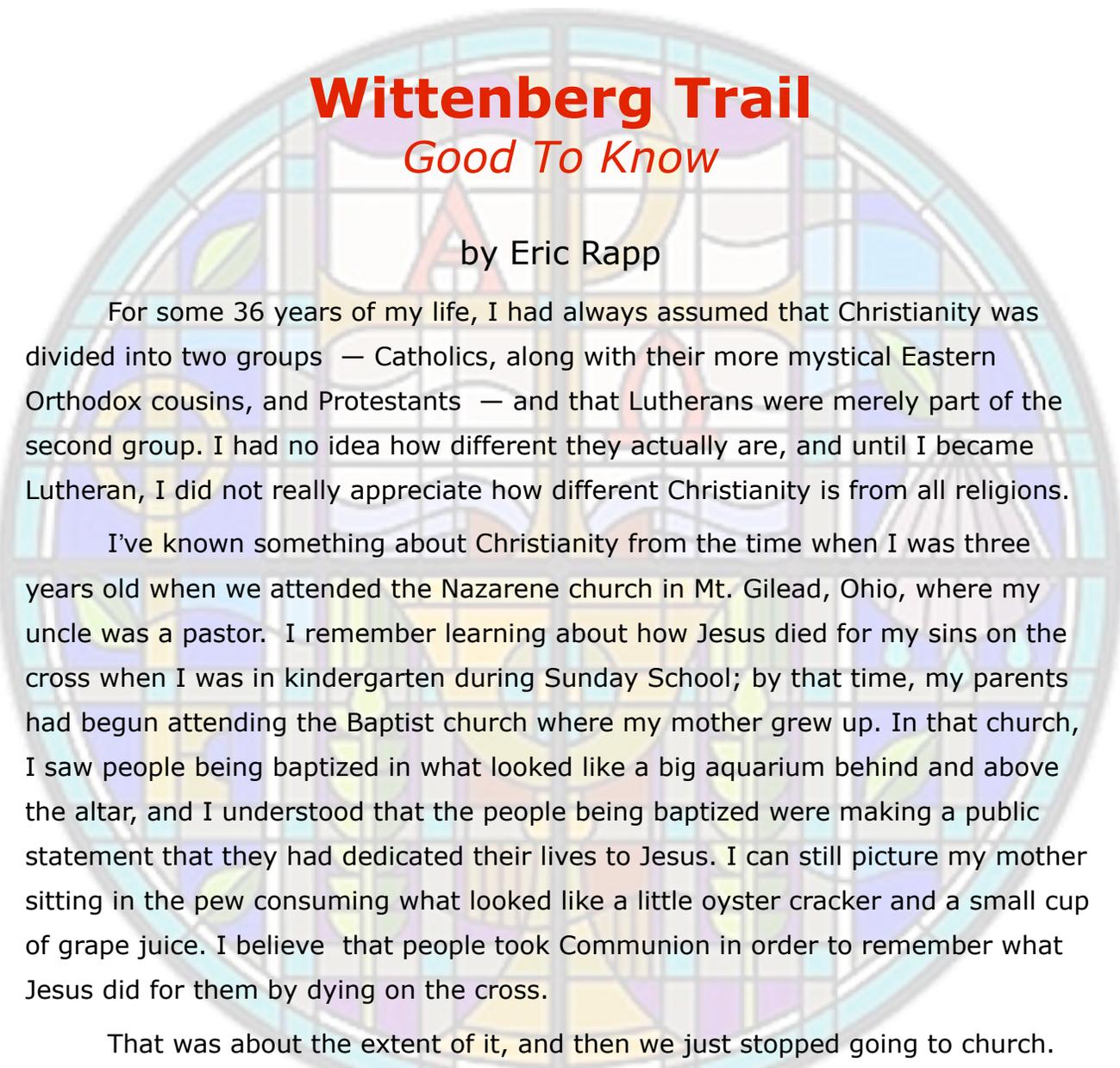


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Wittenberg Trail

Good To Know

by Eric Rapp

For some 36 years of my life, I had always assumed that Christianity was divided into two groups — Catholics, along with their more mystical Eastern Orthodox cousins, and Protestants — and that Lutherans were merely part of the second group. I had no idea how different they actually are, and until I became Lutheran, I did not really appreciate how different Christianity is from all religions.

I've known something about Christianity from the time when I was three years old when we attended the Nazarene church in Mt. Gilead, Ohio, where my uncle was a pastor. I remember learning about how Jesus died for my sins on the cross when I was in kindergarten during Sunday School; by that time, my parents had begun attending the Baptist church where my mother grew up. In that church, I saw people being baptized in what looked like a big aquarium behind and above the altar, and I understood that the people being baptized were making a public statement that they had dedicated their lives to Jesus. I can still picture my mother sitting in the pew consuming what looked like a little oyster cracker and a small cup of grape juice. I believe that people took Communion in order to remember what Jesus did for them by dying on the cross.

That was about the extent of it, and then we just stopped going to church. My father was a deacon, which meant that he could not drink or smoke. At the time, he did smoke, though he was never a heavy drinker, but he sensed a hypocrisy in all of it, and being a math and science teacher, he was inclined to believe the Darwinian model of creation rather than the biblical model. So he stopped going to church. Eventually, my mother, sister and I all stopped going too.

In high school, my interests leaned toward the arts, music and writing. I wanted to be a singer-songwriter, rock musician or a writer, so I majored in English at Ohio State. After graduation, I had the opportunity to stay in Columbus, sharing a house with the fellow members of a rock band to which I belonged. But knowing how my band mates spent most of their time smoking dope and partying, I sensed

that I'd be better off doing something else, and I applied to graduate school. Perhaps English professors were very close to being writers, and maybe I could still be a musician in my spare time. I went to the University of Toledo, where I taught English Composition while working first on a Masters and then a Ph.D.

Like a lot of guys in their early to mid-twenties, I was pretty confused, had low self-esteem and overall was rather goofy. I had an urge for exploring spiritual things and ended up discovering a place that called itself the Unity Church of Christianity, which was founded by a man named Charles Fillmore in Kansas back in the early 20th century. It was New-Age religion, heavily influenced by Eastern mysticism, with a worship service that had a Reformed Protestant structure. There were prayers and a sermon. There might have even been a reading of some sort and hymns. Every service ended with the singing of "Let There Be Peace on Earth." In this church, all religions lead to the same thing: a realization that you are one with the cosmic consciousness. If you could achieve this realization by stripping away your ego, then you would achieve happiness and even success, since you'd be in tune with the universe.

I was enamored with their library, which had everything from Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, the Upanishads, the Baghavad Gita, books on Buddhism, Maryann Williamson, *A Course in Miracles* and even Shirley Maclean. If it had something to do with being one with the universe, they had it. I spent a lot of time talking to the librarian there, who had a crippled body, sort of contorted and twisted so that she could barely walk. Her hope was that if she could just get herself to think the right way, her problems would go away. I hoped the same.

After a while of meditating, attending *A Course in Miracles* and trying to think positive thoughts to align my mind with the cosmic consciousness, my hope vanished. I wasn't any different from what I had been. I was still confused, still full of anxiety and pretty lonely. After a woman with whom I had spent a lot of time rejected me, I found that I also had a lot of hate and anger inside me. I wasn't anything near that universal mind that the New Age movement taught had variously been called "God," "Christ" and "Love." I realized that I was far from being anything of the kind and that I never could be.

I decided to make another change. Instead of being a poor student, I got a

real job that made real money. I got a job as a technical writer in Detroit. For a while, I commuted from Toledo, but eventually I moved to the Motor City while still working on finishing up the Ph.D. I made several friends at my new place of employment. One friend was married and lived in the same apartment complex as I did. Another friend and I developed a musical partnership, playing together in coffee shops. As we were practicing in my apartment, my friend's wife suggested that I join the choir at her Methodist church.

I showed up at choir. The director asked me what I sing, and I figured I sang baritone, so he pointed me to my place. Shortly afterward, my future bride, Polly, walked in and sat down next to me. We were married in that Methodist church, where we were active in the music program, and our daughter was baptized there.

At the Methodist church, I heard the word "Gospel," and I'm sure I often heard the words, "Jesus died for your sins," but what I primarily heard were what amounted to interesting essays that had to do with the social gospel or how the female preacher was able to have a close relationship with God. There I was, sitting in the pew thinking that I didn't love my neighbor all that much, and I didn't really feel all that close to God, at least not in the way she described.

I kept on plugging along. I read the Bible every day, listened to people like Hank Hanegraaff, Charles Swindoll, R.C. Sproul, Ravi Zacharias and others on the way to and from work. I like listening to talk radio of all kinds, just to hear smart and articulate people talking. One day, as I was looking for some new talk radio on the Internet, I stumbled across Issues, Etc.

I enjoyed listening to the show for both the political and the theological discussions. After a couple of weeks, I found out that Lutherans believe that the Lord's Supper is actually the body and blood of Christ. That was a new one on me. The host, the Rev. Todd Wilken, kept on saying we're saved "by grace through faith for the sake of Christ alone," in one way or another. "It's all about Jesus and what He's done for you," he would say, and I would think, "Boy, he really likes to beat that horse, doesn't he?"

I know Lutherans don't really like to talk about conversion experiences. But let's just say that I can recall the moment when something suddenly clicked for me. It was in the morning when things hadn't been going all that well for me of late. I

didn't seem to be getting along with Polly well, my job was getting to me and I was facing other things that can get a person down. Before I read from the *One Year Bible*, as I did every day, I ended my prayer with, "Lord, I don't know anything. I don't know what to do. I guess I can't do anything anyway, so whatever. Please help me," or something along those lines. The reading that day was from Luke 7:36-50, where Jesus goes to Simon the Pharisee's house and a sinful woman anoints Jesus' feet with her tears and perfume. At the end of that account, Jesus says to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

All of a sudden I knew what Wilken was talking about. Of course! By grace through faith for the sake of Christ! It is about Jesus! Christ has done it all for me. It doesn't really matter that I might not be all that great at being a husband. It doesn't matter that I don't measure up very well in so many areas of life, whether in terms of a job, friends or family. Christ lived a perfect life for me and kept the Law perfectly for me. Where I fail, He succeeded in my place. He took the punishment I deserve for not loving God and my neighbor enough. He did more than enough to make up for what I lack.

Then I was hooked. I grabbed all of the Lutheran theology I could. I learned that Baptism wasn't some pledge that I was making, but that in Baptism, Christ delivered His righteousness and His victory over sin and death to me so that it's mine too. I learned that the Lord's Supper is indeed His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, given and shed for me. I learned that God uses His Law to show us our sins, preparing us to receive this wonderful Gospel. I learned that Christianity isn't a set of obligations and rules, but that it's all a gift. It is indeed all "by grace through faith for the sake of Christ alone." After 36 years of thinking otherwise, that was really good to know.



Rev. Eric Rapp lives with his wife, Polly, and his daughter, Lauren, in Green Isle, Minnesota where he is the pastor of St. Paul's and Zion Lutheran Churches. He and Polly play Lutheran folk music whenever they can. He is the author of "Hey Preacher Man" and other songs which are often played as bump music on **Issues Etc.**

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