

# Issues, Etc.

## JOURNAL



### Lutheran Comfort

by Todd Wilken

### Wittenberg Trail: From “Me for Jesus” to “Jesus for Me”

by Peter Slayton

Fall—2020

A man with glasses and a clerical collar is speaking into a microphone. He is wearing a dark suit jacket over a white shirt and a black clerical collar. The background is blurred, showing some red and orange lights.

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

Greetings in the name of Jesus.

I'm a lifelong Lutheran. Some would suggest that a lifelong Lutheran can't really appreciate Lutheran theology. I disagree. In this issue of the **Journal**, I lay out the particular comforts of Lutheran theology and practice for this lifelong Lutheran.

In our Wittenberg Trail feature, Peter Slayton tells us about growing up in a Christianity that was more about him and what he was doing than about Jesus and what He is doing. Thankfully, Peter found in the Lutheran confession a Christianity that focused him on Jesus.

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  
**Issues, Etc.**

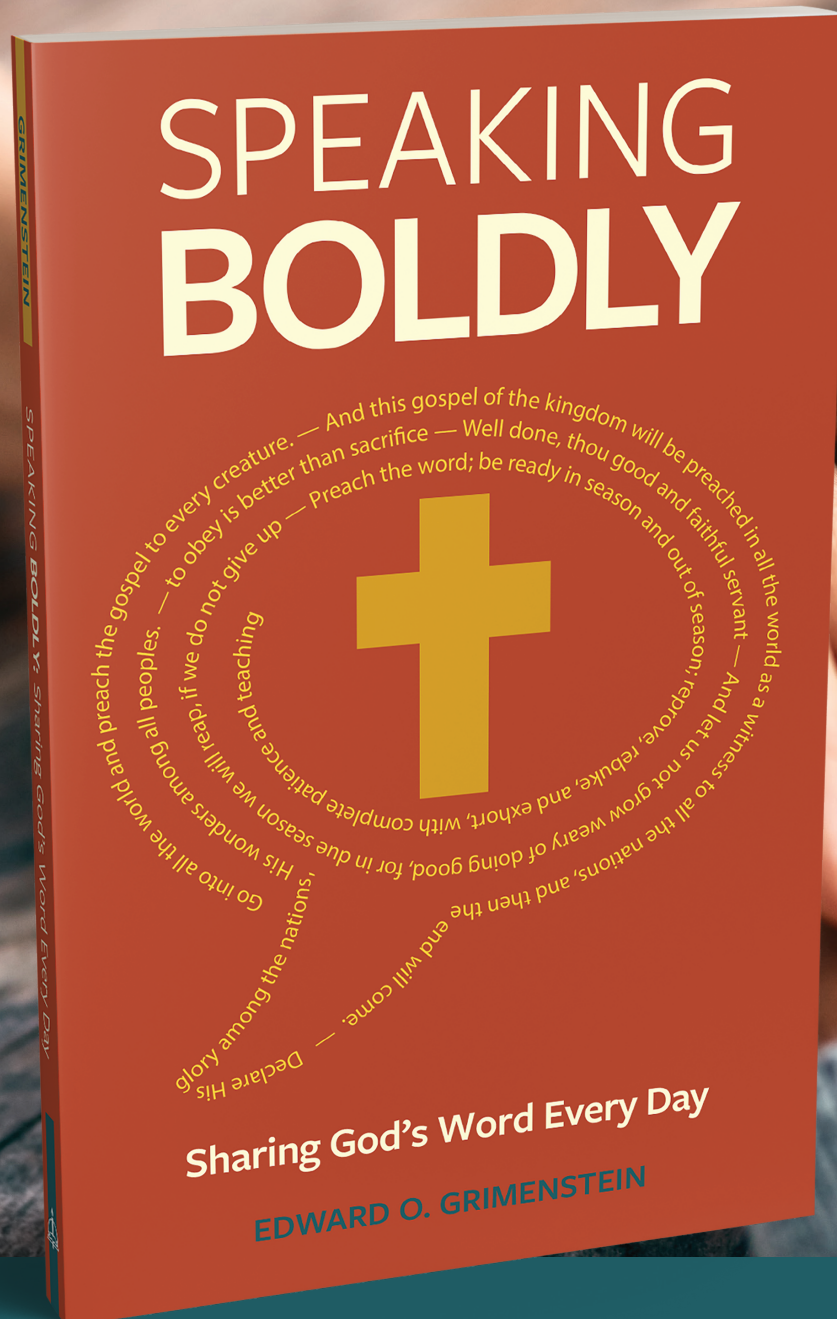
A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Todd Wilken".

Todd Wilken



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# Lutheran Comfort

by Todd Wilken

I am a lifelong Lutheran. Since my Baptism on July 26, 1964, I have been a Lutheran. I have what you might call a Lutheran pedigree. I am the product of the Lutheran educational system from kindergarten to post-seminary graduate studies. I have never known anything other than being a Lutheran.

Some would suggest that a lifelong Lutheran can't really appreciate Lutheran theology. Unless you have experienced the dark night of the soul under Evangelicalism, Roman Catholicism or Atheism, you will never understand how comforting Lutheran theology and practice are. I disagree.

The only experience you need to really appreciate the comfort of being a Lutheran is the experience of your own sin. The idea that a lifetime of receiving the forgiveness of sins makes the lifelong Lutheran less able to appreciate that forgiveness is just wrong. That's like thinking that a lifetime of being loved by your parents makes children less able to appreciate their parents' love. Of course, the opposite is true.

So, whether you're a new, old or lifelong Lutheran, what are the particular comforts of Lutheran theology and practice?

## **Scripture**

As a Lutheran, I don't need to ignore or explain away a single syllable of Scripture. I don't need to fear that there are verses lurking in the Bible that might overturn some part of Lutheran doctrine and practice. Believe it or not, not all Christians can do this. In fact, every other Christian confession must ignore or find a way to explain away parts of Scripture to one degree or another.

If Scripture says God created the universe in six days, I can believe it. I don't have to worry that the consensus of science or enlightened popular opinion have declared my belief defunct. If Scripture says that Jesus' body and blood are present with bread and wine in the Lord's Supper, I can believe it.

This makes some Lutherans nervous. They worry that "The Bible says it, I believe it" sounds too much like Fundamentalism. We need to get over this needless concern. Yes, Fundamentalists may say "The Bible says it, I believe it," but so do Lutherans! Fundamentalism has its errors, but believing what the Bible says is not among them.

For Lutherans, everything begins and ends with Scripture. Really, our whole list of comforts rests on Scripture, comes from Scripture, and returns us to the comfort of God's Word.

You might ask, why isn't the Gospel my number one comfort of Lutheran theology and practice? Good question. The answer is simple. I have no knowledge of (much less access to) the fact that Jesus lived, died and rose again for me apart from Scripture. The only revelation of the Gospel is found in Scripture. The Gospel is the center of Scripture, but Scripture must come before the Gospel.

## **Sacraments**

How does Scripture bring the Gospel of Jesus crucified to me? Lutherans talk about *Word and Sacraments*, but we need to understand this phrase correctly. Like the Gospel itself, the Sacraments come from the Word of God. In other words, when we say *Word and Sacraments* we aren't really talking about two different things. We are talking about one thing, the Word of God, coming to us in two different ways.

The first way the Word of God usually brings the Gospel to people (chronologically at least) is in the Sacrament of Baptism. That's why I began by

saying that since my Baptism on July 26, 1964, I have been a Lutheran. Even though I don't remember it, I can be completely certain that God spoke His Word to me on July 26, 1964. Ever since, He has continued to speak that Word in the Absolution I hear and the Lord's Supper I receive every Sunday morning.

The Sacraments of Baptism, Absolution and the Lord's Supper are God speaking to me and comforting me with the forgiveness of sins won for me in Jesus' life, suffering, death and resurrection. These Sacraments are a comfort because they are God's Word, not mine; God's doing, not mine; and God's promise, not mine.

## **Law and Gospel**

The second way (chronologically at least) that the Word of God brings the Gospel to people is through preaching. Lifelong Lutherans like myself are often surprised to learn that Lutheran preaching is different from Evangelical, Roman Catholic, other kinds of Christian preaching. Lifelong Lutherans may assume that other Christians are hearing the same kind of preaching they hear: the Scriptural proclamation of God's Word of Law and Gospel. But the fact is, you won't often hear that kind of preaching —Lutheran preaching— outside Lutheran churches.

The nineteenth century Lutheran theologian, C.F.W. Walther observed,

*The true knowledge of the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is not only a glorious light, affording the correct understanding of the entire Holy Scriptures, but without this knowledge Scripture is and remains a sealed book. (C.F.W. Walther, The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel, Thesis IV)*

Think of Law and Gospel as God's native tongue, God's language. When God speaks, he speaks the language of Law and Gospel.

Lutheran preaching distinguishes between, but never separates, God's Word of Law and God's Word of Gospel. God's Law shows us God's will



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regarding how we ought to think, speak and behave. God accomplishes three things by speaking His Law to us. First, He keeps the worst of our sinful impulses in check. Second and most importantly, He shows us how we have personally violated His will in thought, word and deed. And third, He teaches and guides our thoughts, words and deeds according to His will.

God's Word of Gospel is the message that all our sins have been paid for by Jesus in His life death and resurrection. God accomplishes two things by speaking His Gospel to us. First and most importantly, He forgives us. He delivers the forgiveness won at the Cross to us personally. Second, He makes us a new creation. God actually produces in us a new way of thinking, speaking and acting that conforms to His will.

It is important to say that Lutherans *distinguish between* God's Word of Law and God's Word of Gospel. Lutherans do not separate Law from Gospel. Lutherans do not pit the two against each other. Remember, it's Law AND Gospel, not Law OR Gospel.

By His Law and Gospel, God continually calls us to repentance, grants us forgiveness, teaches us His will and produces that will in our thoughts, words and deeds. The end result is a life lived in the confidence of sins forgiven and the freedom to live according to God's will.

### **The Small Catechism**

I mentioned being the product of a Lutheran education since Kindergarten. My Kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Strausberger, taught me my ABCs. I remember writing the individual letters on her chalkboard over and over again. At only 5 years old, it was hard work.

I don't even think about my ABCs anymore. They are second nature. But what if I suddenly forgot them? I would no longer be able to read or write. Even though they are second nature, I still need my ABCs. Without them I cannot form

words, much less sentences or paragraphs.

Luther's Small Catechism is the alphabet, the ABCs, of the Christian Faith. It gives us the basic units of the Christian faith. Without this alphabet, a Christian remains theologically illiterate.

Lutherans love doctrine. It's not a dirty word to us. Doctrine is good because doctrine is teaching. Lutherans are very doctrinal people. But it all begins and is built on the simplest things: the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Baptism, Absolution and the Lord's Supper. These are the comforting teachings of God's Word that form the foundation for all Lutheran theology and practice.

### **The Book of Concord**

But Luther's Small Catechism is only a small part of the larger body of documents Lutherans call their "Confessions." We celebrate Reformation Day on October 31 because it was on that day in 1517 that Martin Luther published his 95 Theses. The 95 Theses may have started the Reformation, but they don't really contain much Lutheran theology. Luther was still struggling his way out of the errors and abuses of medieval Roman Catholicism when he posted them.

To find the full flower of Lutheran theology you must wait another 63 years (a full 34 years after Luther's death) until 1580 and the publication of the Book of Concord. This book is the production of 63 years of reform. It contains the documents that Lutherans regard as faithful expositions of God's Word. Together they define what Lutherans believed, taught and confessed at the end of the Reformation, and what Lutherans continue to believe, teach and confess today.

It might surprise you to know while many other Christian confessions of faith have documents and statements of faith, no other Christians have a single book to which they can point and say, "This is what we believe, teach and



confess.”

Some think that asking Lutherans to commit themselves unconditionally to believe, teach, and confess the teaching in the Book of Concord is stifling and restrictive. Nothing could be further from the truth. Lutherans find great comfort in having a confession of faith that has been tested against the touchstone of Scripture. Unlike so many other Christians, Lutherans aren’t allowed to believe whatever they want. Lutherans want to believe exactly what the Bible says.

### **The Church’s Tradition**

The authors of those documents that make up the Book of Concord weren’t reinventing the wheel. In fact, the very first part of the Book of Concord is nothing but the historic Creeds: the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed. Over and over again, the reformers cited sources like the ancient Church councils and Church fathers to support what they wrote.

We live in anti-traditional times. Valued, time-honored traditions are rejected, reinvented, and deconstructed. Even in the Church the anti-traditional impulse has caught on. Lutherans resist this impulse. Lutherans have always understood that the things handed down to us from previous generations of Christians are our ancestors’ way of teaching us, helping us and warning us. The reformers understood this and adopted a generally friendly attitude toward Church tradition. It has been said that the Reformation is better understood by what it retained than by what it rejected. The reformers gave Church tradition the benefit of the doubt, unless it could be demonstrated that a tradition contradicted God’s Word.

Not only did the reformers test tradition against the Bible, they also showed how their own teaching was in line with Church tradition. The Book of Concord contains an appendix called “The Catalogue of Testimonies.” It is a rather lengthy set of quotations from Church councils and Church fathers,



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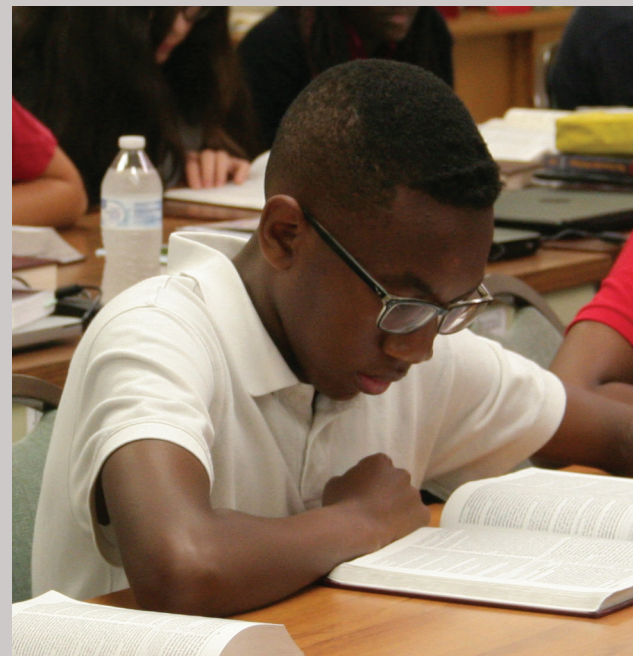
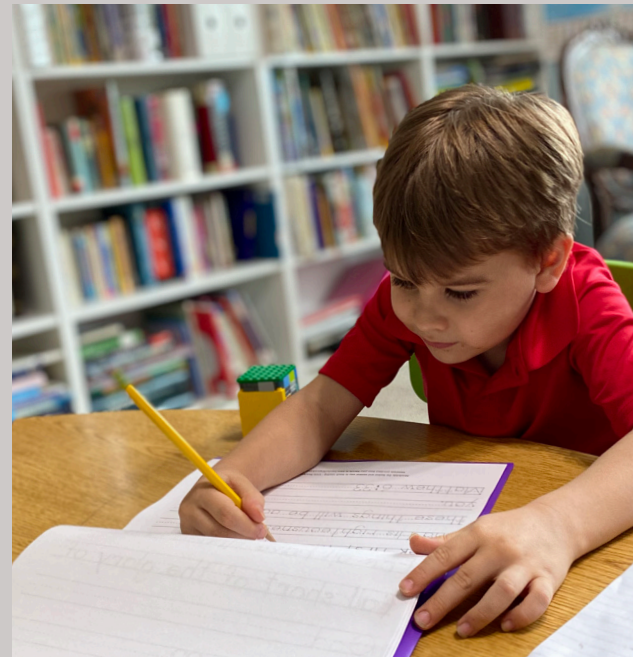
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demonstrating that what Lutherans believe has been believed and taught in the Church dating back to the time of the Apostles.

Lutherans find comfort in the teaching, guidance and warnings of Christians throughout history. We let these Christians speak and listen carefully because we have a lot to learn from them.

## **The Liturgy**

Speaking of tradition, if you were to go to church on a Sunday morning at the time of Reformation, what would you have seen and heard? Some imagine that a church service back then would look and sound like the opposite of a Roman Catholic service. But the opposite is true. Pound for pound, Lutherans kept almost all of the Sunday morning liturgy. The only changes they made, by and large, were to omit those parts of the Roman rite that were contrary to Scripture. Likewise, they introduced very few additions of their own. The reformers wrote:

*We do not abolish the Mass, but religiously maintain and defend it. For among us masses are celebrated every Lord's Day and on the other festivals, in which the Sacrament is offered to those who wish to use it, after they have been examined and absolved. And the usual public ceremonies are observed, the series of lessons, of prayers, vestments, and other like things. (Apol. XXIV, 1)*

The native form of worship for Lutherans is the historic liturgy. It is the vocabulary and language of our worship.

Some Lutherans have rejected this approach. They reject the native language of Lutheran worship for a foreign tongue, and adopt forms of worship alien to Lutheran doctrine. They don't know what they have given up! The historic liturgy isn't an accident of history or tradition. It is specifically designed and perfected by many hands over many generations to deliver the comfort of God's Word and Sacraments.

Not only that, but the liturgy is mostly Bible passages. In rejecting this

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masterpiece of prayer, songs, hymns and psalms, they have robbed themselves of so much of what God's Word gives sinners in need of Scriptural comfort.

I'm a lifelong Lutheran. I have never know a time in my life without the comfort of the liturgy. But I have heard from countless Christians who grew up not even knowing the liturgy existed. Now that they have found it in the Lutheran church, they would never give it up.

### **Lutheran Comfort**

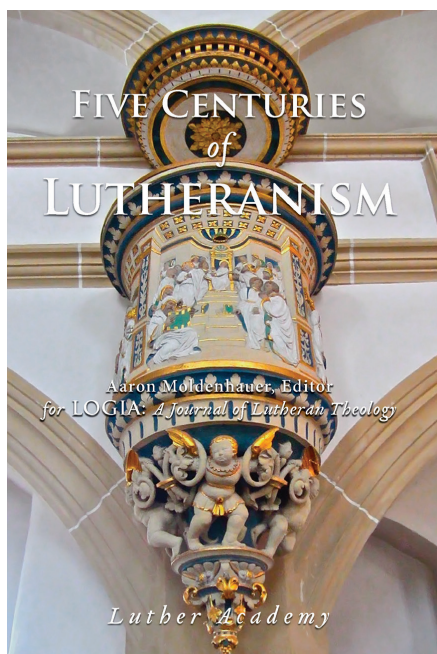
Finally, notice what I haven't included in my list of the comforts of being a Lutheran. I haven't included beer, German culture, or even Martin Luther himself. For too long Lutherans have allowed themselves to be defined by cultural stereotypes rather than by our theology and practice. We Lutherans have believed what Garrison Keillor used to say about us. Garrison Keillor was the creator and host of the long-running radio program "A Prairie Home Companion." Keillor, once a Lutheran himself, wrote:

*We make fun of Lutherans for their blandness, their excessive calm, their fear of giving offense, their lack of speed and also for their secret fondness for macaroni and cheese.... Lutherans believe in prayer, but would practically die if asked to pray out loud. Lutherans like to sing, except when confronted with a new hymn or a hymn with more than four stanzas. Lutherans usually follow the official liturgy and will feel it is their way of suffering for their sins. Lutherans feel that applauding for their children's choirs would make the kids too proud and conceited. Lutherans think that the Bible forbids them from crossing the aisle while passing the peace. And finally, you know when you're a Lutheran when: You hear something really funny during the sermon and smile as loudly as you can! (Garrison Keillor, "Singing with Lutherans.")*

No surprise, Keillor is no longer Lutheran —if he ever was one theologically. Whether you are a lifelong Lutheran like me, or brand new to this comfort, know this: Being a Lutheran isn't a stereotype. Being a Lutheran is all about comfort. It is the comfort of the unchangeable Word of God and its unchanging message of Law and Gospel to sinners. It is the comfort of that message delivered through the certain and sure means of Baptism, Absolution



and the Lord's Supper. It is the comfort of having a confession that listens to the voice of fathers in the faith, and a living liturgy that teaches and sustains that faith for a lifetime.



Book size — 6" x 9"

## A resource for Bible class or private study

### FIVE CENTURIES OF LUTHERANISM

*Aaron Moldenhauer, Editor*

The chapters of this book were originally published in *LOGIA* (Reformation 2020, XXIX:4). We offer the same essays here in booklet form as a resource for all interested in the history of Lutheranism. Researchers looking for a historical survey can use the book to locate their own work in the broader sweep of Lutheran history. They can turn to the bibliographies to find sources for more detailed historical work. Professors teaching church history can use the book as a textbook, as well as pastors looking to teach a Bible class or other course on the history of the Lutheran church.

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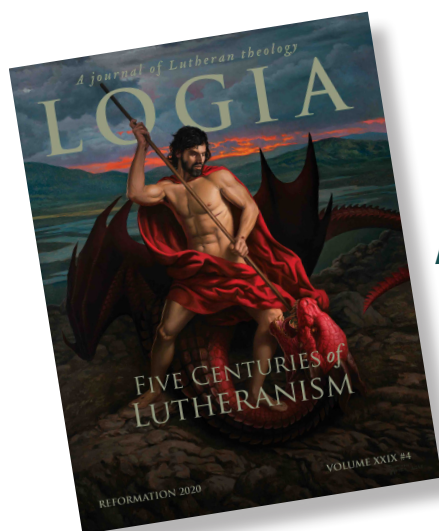
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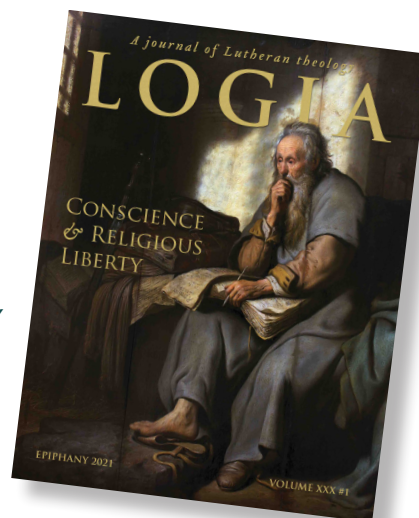
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Wir sind alle Bettler,

Todd Wilken, Host  
**Issues, Etc.**

# Wittenberg Trail

## From “Me for Jesus” to “Jesus for Me”

by Peter Slayton

My story isn't sensational. It isn't extreme. It isn't even very exciting like “testimonials” are supposed to be. I wasn't at rock bottom, in the depths of despair, searching for the truth when I finally “discovered Lutheranism.” In fact, I didn't feel like anything was missing. If you had told me that my faith was incomplete, I wouldn't have believed you. Yet looking back, I was like a man missing his limbs, while believing and being taught that everything was as it should be. Through the Holy Spirit, Christ called me to himself. As he did that, I eventually became a Lutheran.

Let me be very clear. I grew up a Christian, surrounded by Christians, raised by Christian parents from a Christian family. I heard the Gospel and believed it at a very young age. In fact, my first memory of this was when I was three years old: I asked Jesus into my heart. Was this decision theology? Certainly. Was it my decision that saved me? Definitely not. But why would a three-year-old do something like this? Having already believed the Gospel that I heard, I was led by the Holy Spirit to confess Christ as my Savior. It was an outward sign of an inward change. Oh, the irony! But more than 30 years would pass before I finally grasped that truth.

For most of my life, my parents served as missionaries with non-denominational mission agencies. As part of that life, we attended mostly Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA) congregations, with occasional non-denominational churches sprinkled in. The theology taught in our churches, the Christian schools I attended, and the youth groups of which I was a part were

your typical conservative American Evangelical variety: A Christian is one who decides to follow Jesus, is baptized as an outward sign of an inward commitment, partakes of the Lord's Supper a few times a year as a symbolic remembrance of Jesus, and (most importantly) lives a life exemplified by strong moral character and an increase in sanctification.

The Gospel was definitely present in my life. It was proclaimed in pulpits, taught in studies, and emphasized in my schools. But it was the *starting point* of the Christian life, and was most often proclaimed as part of an "altar call". After you heard it and asked Jesus into your heart, it was time to get on with the real work of the Christian life: faithful living. And that work was up to you.

Thus the vast majority of teaching focused on "how to be a better Christian." Sermons and Bible studies were expected to be "encouraging." This translated to "giving me practical steps I can do in order to be a better Christian this week." The Christian life was all about *me* and what *I* was doing.

I was taught that sin was very real and serious. It was not downplayed or ignored at all in my upbringing. But sin was something which could be fought, and perhaps even conquered, by my own will and works. Remember, it was up to me to sustain my salvation, so it was also up to me to fight and conquer sin in my life. This meant that one of the worst things that could happen to a Christian would be to "backslide." "Backsliding" was the process whereby a complacent Christian wasn't diligent in seeking improvement, or compromised morally. Instead, they would sin more and more, to the point where their very salvation would be called into question. If your life didn't look Christian, you probably weren't a Christian.

I didn't know it, but what I needed most was Jesus for me, not me for Jesus. I needed a Savior who saved me *and* sustained me.

The change in my perspective came slowly, and with a lot of struggle

(*tentatio*). It started when I got engaged to a Lutheran woman. My wife had grown up in the Lutheran church, attending the same one her entire life. I visited many times while we dated, and had begun attending regularly the year before. I was familiar with the services, Bible studies, and life of the church. In fact, there were very few (if any) differences that I could see.

How could this be? It turned out that the church body of my wife's congregation had come from the same Scandinavian pietist Lutheran group as the EFCA where I grew up! The primary difference was that the EFCA had intentionally chosen a symbolic view of the Sacraments, and split from the Lutheran pietists after settling in the United States. While some churches in that group still hold to orthodox Lutheran teachings, my wife's church was not one of them. There was very little practical difference between it and the EFCA in which I had grown up. The transition from Evangelicalism to Lutheranism was easy! Or so I thought. My *tentatio* had yet to begin.

You can hear about much of my *tentatio* in my *Issues, Etc.* interview that aired October 27th, 2020. What I wasn't able to share in detail there was the difference that being a Lutheran has made in my perspective on life and Christianity. Suffice it to say that through nearly a decade of personal and professional struggles, I found myself listening to various Lutheran podcasts (such as *Issues, Etc.*), and then sitting down and reading Lutheran books. The three most impactful were John Pless's *Handling the Word of Truth*, Gene Veith's *Spirituality of the Cross*, and Gerhard Forde's *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*.

The cognitive dissonance created between the Lutheran theology I was learning and my decision theology upbringing finally came to a head while I was reading Forde. On pages 52-56 of his book, the final pieces of the Lutheran puzzle fell into place. Forde discussed Luther's Thesis 13 and 14 on free will. The last piece I just couldn't "get" was that of the human will. How did it work in





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salvation? How could I be saved against my will if my will was free? Everything in my experience told me that my free decisions made the difference. It was my decision to follow Jesus. It was my decision to keep my faith going. Decision theology defined my Christian experience, and it was the last holdout.

Forde killed it dead. The way he laid out the case from Scripture made it clear that my will was dead. And a dead will can do NOTHING. There was nothing that I could decide.

But that was GOOD NEWS. It meant that none of this depended on me. Not getting salvation. Not keeping it. Not maintaining it. It was all on Christ. I was brought to faith and kept there by Christ alone, not by my own will or deeds.

My Evangelical upbringing had given me a Christian life missing its limbs, because it was all about me. Baptism was my demonstration to God; my outward sign of an inward commitment. It was a human work done by human hands to demonstrate a human commitment. The Lord's Supper was my symbolic remembrance of Jesus. The Sunday service was my offering of praise to Jesus, where I learned practical ways to live out my Christian life. The pastor was the one teaching me how to do that.

But now I could see how Christianity was all about Jesus for me. With the last vestiges of decision theology cut away, I was a complete Christian, all my limbs in place and working. Baptism was God's work of saving me, not the work of human hands. In my baptism, Jesus was working; naming me, choosing me, marking me as his own. The Lord's Supper was also Christ working: forgiving my sins, strengthening my faith and preserving it. My sins were actually and truly forgiven, and my faith sustained for godly living, when I received my Savior's body and blood under the bread and wine.

In the Divine Service, Christ continued his work in my life. He was forgiving my sins, feeding me with his Word, forgiving my sins again, strengthening and

preserving my faith, teaching me his will and how to live - but not leaving that entirely up to me. The pastor was Christ's mouthpiece, forgiving my sins, shepherding me, teaching me God's Will for my life, caring for me.

Jesus was no longer just the starting point for my salvation. He was now the center of it all. Which is precisely what Scripture teaches us!

The Holy Spirit continues to teach me this, and will until the day I die. But I could not have begun on this path apart from the Lutheran—nay, Christian—doctrine that I heard and believed.



Peter Slayton is the social media manager for the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. He spends his days moderating flame wars, fending off trolls and herding cats —all while doing his best to share the Good News of Jesus Christ and the work of the LCMS on the internet. He spends his evenings with his family, enjoying reading or playing tabletop games with his wife and six children.



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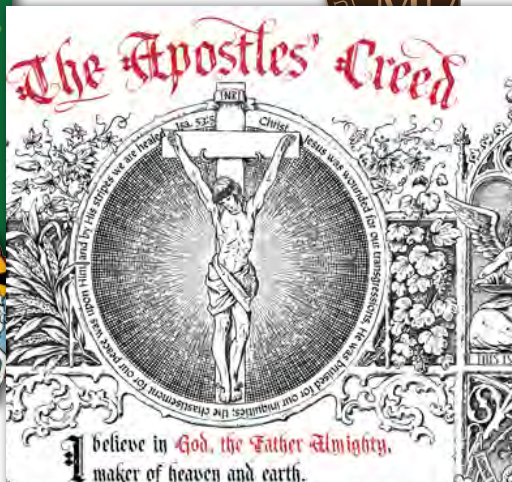
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