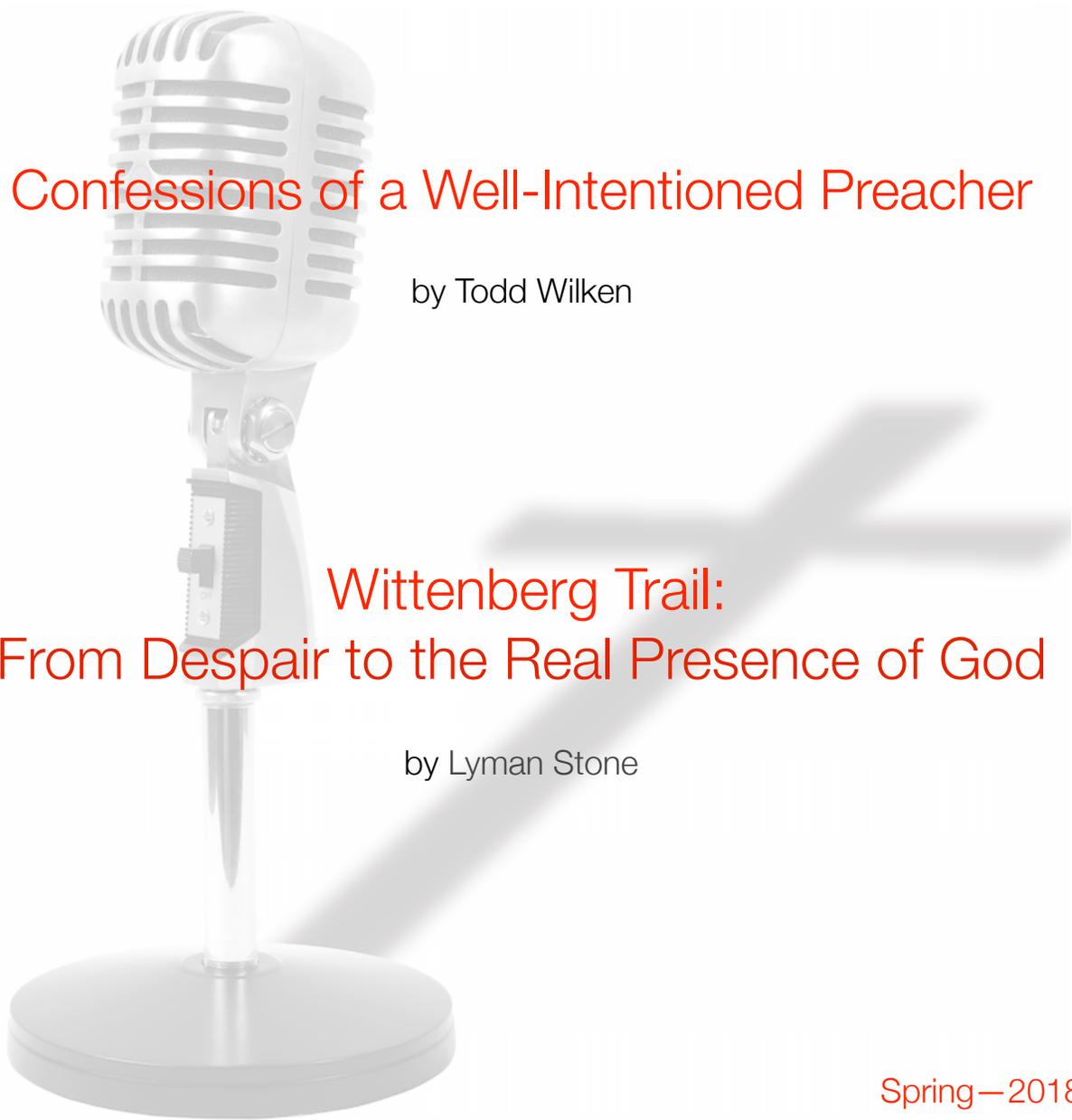


Issues, Etc.

JOURNAL



Confessions of a Well-Intentioned Preacher

by Todd Wilken

Wittenberg Trail:
From Despair to the Real Presence of God

by Lyman Stone

Spring—2018

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

Greetings in the name of Jesus.

In this edition of the **Journal**, I confess how, for years as a Lutheran preacher, I ignored or explained away entire verses, paragraphs and chapters of Scripture. Why did I do this? I thought I was protecting my hearers from legalism. I was wrong.

This edition's Wittenberg Trail feature is from Lyman Stone. It is his story of growing up in the Christian faith, yet without a clear object of that faith, found only in the presence of Christ in His Word and Sacraments.

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 large, black, handwritten signature of Todd Wilken, written in a cursive style.

Issues, Etc.

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Confessions of a Well-Intentioned Preacher

by Todd Wilken

We teach not only how the Law can be observed, but also how God is pleased if anything be done, namely, not because we render satisfaction to the Law, but because we are in Christ.

—Apology of the Augsburg Confession, III, 19

For many years, I have been fond of saying, “The reason I love being a Lutheran is that I don’t have to ignore or explain away a single syllable of Scripture.” But for the first 15 to 20 years of my ministry as a Lutheran pastor I did that very thing almost every time I stepped into the pulpit.

I can cite hundreds of sermons from the first half of my ministry that ignored or explained away entire verses, paragraphs and chapters of Scripture. I ignored those verses, paragraphs and chapters, because they said things I thought my people didn’t need to hear. I explained them away, because they said things I thought might be harmful to my people’s faith. I ignored or explained them away, because they contained the instruction and guidance of the Law.

It’s not that I had no use for God’s Law in my preaching, but I had an extremely limited use for it. Simply put, I was intentionally limiting my preaching of the Law to the Law’s accusations, and intentionally avoiding preaching the instruction and guidance of the Law.

I had what I thought were two super-Lutheran reasons for preaching this way. The first reason went like this: The Law can tell a person what to do but

cannot give him the power to do it. Only the Gospel can produce good works in a Christian. Therefore I reasoned, for the Christian, the instruction and guidance of the Law is unnecessary.

The second reason went like this: As a Christian, I am both saint and sinner. The saint needs no instruction or guidance from the Law. The sinner cannot be instructed or guided by the Law. Therefore I reasoned, the instruction and guidance of the Law is unnecessary for the Christian.

Moreover, I reasoned, such instruction and guidance might actually be dangerous. It might give the impression that Christians are saved by faith in Jesus plus their good works. Therefore I reasoned, I should avoid preaching the instruction and guidance of the Law.

And that's exactly what I did. I rigorously avoided anything that would even hint at the Law's guidance or instruction.

This was really very foolish of me. I knew that I had no control over how the Holy Spirit uses His Law in preaching, but that didn't stop me from trying!

I had good intentions. I also knew exactly what I was doing. I knew that Scripture was full of the Law's instruction and guidance for the Christian, strongly indicating that Christians still need such preaching of the Law—not to produce good works but to guide them. I also knew that the Lutheran Confessions clearly taught that Christians do need such application of the Law: "We teach not only how the Law can be observed, but also how God is pleased if anything be done, namely, not because we render satisfaction to the Law, but because we are in Christ." (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, III, 19)

We unanimously believe, teach, and confess that although the truly believing and truly converted to God and justified Christians are liberated and made free from the curse of the Law, yet they should daily exercise themselves in

the Law of the Lord, as it is written, Ps. 1:2;119:1: Blessed is the man whose delight is in the Law of the Lord, and in His Law doth he meditate day and night. For the Law is a mirror in which the will of God, and what pleases Him, are exactly portrayed, and which should [therefore] be constantly held up to the believers and be diligently urged upon them without ceasing. (Solid Declaration, VI, 5)

I also knew that the Lutheran Confessions describe instruction and guidance in good works as part of the preaching of the Gospel in the broad sense:

The sum of the preaching of the Gospel is this, namely, to convict of sin, and to offer for Christ's sake the remission of sins and righteousness, and the Holy Ghost, and eternal life, and that as regenerate men we should do good works. (Apol. VII, 29)¹

I knew that the Christians need the instruction and guidance precisely because they are both saint and sinner. The saint delights in the instruction and guidance of the Law, and the sinner needs such instruction and guidance to restrain him:

Because so far as they have been born anew according to the inner man, they do what is pleasing to God, not by coercion of the Law, but by the renewing of the Holy Ghost, voluntarily and spontaneously from their hearts; however, they maintain nevertheless a constant struggle against the old Adam. For the old Adam, as an intractable, refractory ass, is still a part of them, which must be coerced to the obedience of Christ, not only by the teaching, admonition, force and threatening of the Law, but also oftentimes by the club of punishments and troubles (S.D., VI, 23-24)

I also knew that both Scripture and the Confessions teach that the Holy Spirit produces good works and new obedience to God's Law in the Christian. Scripture never avoids the Law's instruction and guidance for the Christian, and the Lutheran Confession speak positively about it.

I knew all these things, but I also thought I knew better. I was convinced that the instruction and guidance of the Law was unnecessary and probably dangerous for Christians. I was determined to avoid it as all costs.

So I preached as though the one and only purpose of the Law in Christian preaching was to accuse the hearers of sin.

Now the Lutheran Confessions do teach that God's Law always accuses sinners, but I was taking this a step further. I was preaching as though God's Law only accuses, and nothing more.

Granted, it was often difficult to explain why the Scriptures and Confessions described the Law not only as an accuser, but also as a guide and teacher. It was difficult to explain why the Scriptures and Confessions described the new obedience produced in Christians by the Holy Spirit. It was difficult to explain why the Scriptures and Confessions constantly urged Christians to obedience, offering the constant teaching or guidance of the Law. I couldn't offer an explanation for any of this, so I just ignored it.

I did the same thing from the pulpit. When the sermon text had any kind of teaching or guidance of a moral nature, I usually ignored it. Sometimes I explained it away. For example, when confronted with the fact that the Apostle Paul regularly gave moral instruction to his Christian readers, I would dismiss it, saying, "Paul wrote that only to show us that we can't obey any of it." I turned what was clearly teaching or guidance into only accusation.

I believed that if I told my hearers about the work of the Holy Spirit to begin obedience in them, and that God's Law continued to guide and instruct them in this new obedience, I would be taking their eyes off of Jesus' perfect obedience. I



believed that if I mentioned the obedience produced in Christians by the Holy Spirit from the pulpit, I would turn my people into Pharisees. In short, I believed that I had to ignore or explain away parts of the Bible for the good of my hearers and for the sake of the Gospel.

And, then there were the legalists.

I think that I realized even then that explaining away parts of the Bible and ignoring parts of the Lutheran Confessions wasn't the answer. I knew my reasons for doing so were weak and indefensible. So what did I do? I went on the offense! Not only did I avoid anything that would even hint at the Law's guidance or instruction in my own preaching, I branded any sermon containing such things as the product of legalism. I made little, if any distinction between Rick Warren preaching nothing but practical principles for living and a fellow Lutheran pastor preaching Law and Gospel and instructing his people in good works. Both were legalists in my book.

Another category of legalists I often decried were preachers who warned Christians not to abuse God's grace; preachers who were concerned that the freedom of the Gospel be abused as an opportunity for sin. I regarded these preachers as timid, moralists and closet pietists who were scared of God's grace and of Christian liberty.

Did I know that the Apostle Paul himself often warned Christians not to abuse God's grace, and not to misuse the freedom of the Gospel as an opportunity for sin? Yes, but I ignored that. Did I know that the Lutheran Confessions did the same? Yes, but I ignored that too. Why? These facts did not fit into my idea of what Lutheran preaching was supposed to be.

My occasional crusade against legalism distracted me from my increasing alienation from the Scriptures I was supposed to be preaching and the Confessions

I was supposed to be upholding and practicing. It was far easier to criticize someone else's preaching than to diagnose the problems with my own. I continued to regard myself as a thoroughly confessional Lutheran preacher.

Did I mean well? Maybe I did, or maybe I didn't. I sincerely wanted to keep my hearers eyes on Jesus. But in order to do that, I was willing to ignore and explain away parts of the text. I was willing to violate my ordination vow to teach and preach according to the Lutheran Confessions.

I often justified this by telling myself that I was "erring on the side of the Gospel." I wasn't. I was just ignoring what the text said, what the Scriptures teach and what I had promised to do at my ordination vow. I had promised that all my preaching and teaching would conform to Scripture and the Confessions. It didn't. Instead, I was second-guessing Scripture and the Confessions.

Did my preaching send anyone to hell? I sincerely hope not. But, here's what Martin Luther himself had to say about preachers like me:

*That is what my antinomians, too, are doing today, who are preaching beautifully and, as I cannot but think, with real sincerity about Christ's grace, about the forgiveness of sin and whatever else can be said about the doctrine of redemption. But they flee as if it were the very devil the consequence that they should tell the people about the third article, of sanctification, that is, of the new life in Christ. They think one should not frighten or trouble the people, but rather always preach comfortingly about grace and the forgiveness of sins in Christ, and under no circumstances use these or similar words, "Listen! You want to be a Christian and at the same time remain an adulterer, a whoremonger, a drunken swine, arrogant, covetous, a usurer, envious, vindictive, malicious, etc.!" Instead they say, "Listen! Though you are an adulterer, a whoremonger, a miser, or other kind of sinner, if you but believe, you are saved, and you need not fear the law. Christ has fulfilled it all!" (Martin Luther, *On The Councils And The Church*, AE, 41:114-116)*

Was Luther, who championed salvation through faith alone apart from works, now adding works back into salvation? Not at all. Rather, he is saying that such preaching preaches a *false* Christ:

*For there is no such Christ that died for sinners who do not, after the forgiveness of sins, desist from sins and lead a new life... They may be fine Easter preachers, but they are very poor Pentecost preachers, for they do not preach about the sanctification by the Holy Spirit, but solely about the redemption of Jesus Christ, although Christ, whom they extoll so highly, and rightly so, is Christ, that is, he has purchased redemption from sin and death so that the Holy Spirit might transform us out of the old Adam into new men— we die unto sin and live unto righteousness, beginning and growing here on earth and perfecting it beyond, as St. Paul teaches. Christ did not earn only grace, for us, but also the gift of the Holy Spirit, so that we might have not only forgiveness of, but also cessation of, sin. (Martin Luther, *On The Councils And The Church*, AE, 41:114-116)*

If Luther was right, by avoiding “as if it were the very devil” any instruction or guidance of God’s Law in my preaching, I was preaching a Christ *who doesn’t exist*.

If Luther is right, I was withholding one of Christ’s gifts from my hearers. Every time I ignored or explained away some passage for Scripture, thinking that I was protecting my hearers, I was actually robbing my hearers of God’s Word.

The legalist and the antinomian operate with the same premise: There is something in God’s Word that is dangerous to a Christian’s salvation. For the legalist it is the Gospel. For the Antinomian it is the Law. There is nothing in God’s Word that is dangerous to a Christian’s salvation.

Can God’s Word be misapplied? Of course. Can that misapplication of God’s Word endanger salvation? Of course. Was ignoring and explaining away parts of God’s Word the way to protect against that danger? No.

By ignoring and explaining away parts of God's Word in my preaching, I was teaching my hearers to read the Bible that way too. I was teaching them to ignore and explain away God's Word. In retrospect, I can think of few things more harmful I

could have done to my hearers than that. Despite what I thought were my super-Lutheran reasons for what I did, there was no excuse for that.

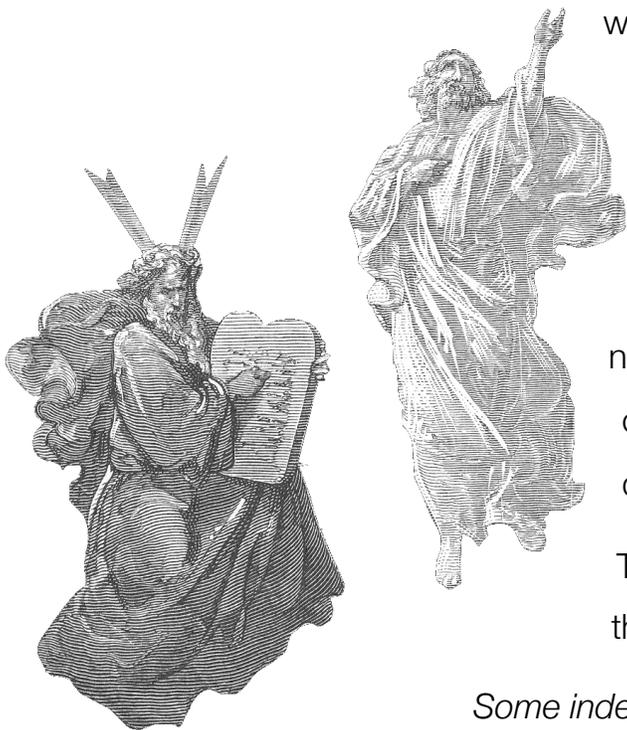
As I said, it was foolish of me to think that I could control how the Holy Spirit used His Law. And, thank God, as hard as I tried, I never managed to do it. The Holy Spirit was in control of His Law and His Gospel all along, despite my efforts to improve on His work.

The Apostle Paul writes to the Philippians words that applied to me as a preacher:

Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. (Philippians 1:15-18)

I preached Law and Gospel in the narrowest sense possible, out of a conviction that those verses, paragraphs and chapters of Scripture that I was ignoring weren't necessary for my hearers to hear. I preached out of a needless fear that the parts of Scripture I was glibly explaining away would be harmful to my hearers. I preached to spite the legalists, real and imagined.

What finally changed my mind and my preaching? The patient correction of fellow pastors, who didn't buy my allegedly Lutheran self-justifications, who held me



to my promise to conform all my preaching and teaching to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, and who showed me a better, more faithful way found in that very Scripture and those very Confessions.

Moreover, the very Jesus Whom I wanted so earnestly to preach was patient with this poor, unfaithful preacher. He didn't let me ignore His Word for good. Through that Word He showed me what I was withholding from my hearers and myself. And His Gospel was there for me.

The **Issues, Etc.**

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¹ See also: "It is written in the prophet, Jer. 31:33: 'I will put My Law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts.' And in Rom. 3:31, Paul says: 'Do we, then, make void the Law through faith? God forbid! Yea, we establish the Law.' And Christ says, Matt. 19:17: 'If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.' Likewise, 1 Cor. 13:3: 'If I have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.' These and similar sentences testify that the Law ought to be begun in us, and be kept by us more and more that we are to keep the Law when we have been justified by faith, and thus increase more and more in the Spirit." (Apol. III, 2-3) "Therefore it is given for a daily pasture and sustenance, that faith may refresh and strengthen itself so as not to fall back in such a battle, but become ever stronger and stronger. For the new life must be so regulated that it continually increase and progress" (LC, Sacrament of the Altar, 24) "Because, indeed, faith brings the Holy Ghost, and produces in hearts a new life, it is necessary that it should produce spiritual movements in hearts. And what these movements are, the prophet, Jer. 31:33 shows, when he says: I will put My Law into their inward parts, and write it in their hearts. Therefore, when we have been justified by faith and regenerated, we begin to fear and love God, to pray to Him, to expect from Him aid, to give thanks and praise Him, and to obey Him in afflictions. We begin also to love our neighbors, because our hearts have spiritual and holy movements there is now, through the Spirit of Christ a new heart, mind, and spirit within." (Apol. III, 4) "For Christ has overcome the devil, and has given to us the promise and the Holy Ghost, in order that, by divine aid, we ourselves also may overcome. And 1 John 3:8: For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil. Again, we teach not only how the Law can be observed, but also how God is pleased if anything be done, namely, not because we render satisfaction to the Law, but because we are in Christ." (Apol. III, 18-19) "Man observes the Law however, when he hears that for Christ's sake God is reconciled to us, even though we cannot satisfy the Law. When, by this faith Christ is apprehended as Mediator, the heart finds rest, and begins to love God and observe the Law, and knows that now, because of Christ as Mediator, it is pleasing to God, even though the inchoate fulfilling of the Law be far from perfection and be very impure." (Apol. III, 149-50) "Christ often connects the promise of the remission of sins to good works, not because He means that good works are a propitiation, for they follow reconciliation; but for two reasons. One is, because good fruits must necessarily follow. Therefore He reminds us that, if good fruits do not follow, the repentance is hypocritical and feigned. The other reason is, because we have need of external signs of so great a promise, because a conscience full of fear has need of manifold consolation. As, therefore, Baptism and the Lord's Supper are signs that continually admonish, cheer, and encourage desponding minds to believe the more firmly that their sins are forgiven, so the same promise is written and portrayed in good works, in order that these works may admonish us to believe the more firmly. And those who produce no good works do not excite themselves to believe, but despise these promises. The godly on the other hand, embrace them, and rejoice that they have the signs and testimonies of so great a promise. Accordingly, they exercise themselves in these signs and testimonies." (Apol. III, 154-55) "Therefore we must by faith accept the remission of sins before we do the works of the Law; although, as has been said above, love follows faith, because the regenerate receive the Holy Ghost, and accordingly begin to become friendly to the Law and to do the works of the Law." Apol. XII, 82

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Wittenberg Trail: From Despair to the Real Presence of God

by Lyman Stone

Reflecting on his faith when he was my age (mid 20s), Martin Luther said that he had “Lost touch with Christ the Savior and Comforter, and made of him the jailer and hangman of my poor soul.” I keep that in mind when I consider how to tell my own story: how different might this story look told fifteen years from now versus the way I will tell it today? But it is fitting to begin there, because my story, though it may sound presumptuous, begins in a similar place as Luther’s: despair.

I was born into a family of living and vibrant faith. My father is ordained in the United Methodist church and teaches Old Testament at Asbury Seminary. My grandfather at age 90 is still a globe-trotting evangelist and preacher who packs stadiums when he speaks. My mother is the most passionately and faithfully confessing person I have ever known, and my grandmother was, before she went home, the finest model of Christian service and humility a person can hope to have. I have been, from birth to the present day, spoiled with rigorous and winsome examples in the faith. I was raised in an environment where conversancy in theology was necessary for dinner-table conversations and the bookshelves had books in at least three dead languages on them; but where we also spent some of our holidays serving homeless people instead of decking out our table, where we read mission support letters together nightly at dinner, and the quiet liturgies of prayer and study in the home were given first priority. The town I grew up in was, and remains today, packed with similar families; it is a living, breathing community of faith that I genuinely believe has few equals on the earth (that may be my local patriotism

showing). Over the course of my school years I had the normal teenage doubts, skepticisms, rejections, and returns. But, at the end of the day, my upbringing gave me no inspiring target for rebellion. I could not rage against inconsiderate parents, or unkind siblings, or corrupt church politics. I attended a nondenominational megachurch for my formative years, and, truth be told, was well-formed as a result, schooled in good theology by my parents, and urged on to faithful vocation by my pastors.

And yet, when I look back on those days, I see despair. Not despair as just emotional anguish, but despair as my favorite faithful believing Lutheran from the past, Soren Kierkegaard, described it: “Wanting in despair to be oneself.” That is, I wanted desperately to be “truly myself,” and yet resisted actually having that as well, because, as Kierkegaard realized, “becoming a self” is not actually about self-actualization. It is about “relating to the infinite,” that is, receiving a new self, a call to renewed identity and humanity in Christ. I wasn’t ready to give up being who I wanted to be, in order to become something, someone, I did not truly understand.

The trouble was that although I had a good theological education, although I knew that I was justified by grace through faith, and although I could recite councils and creeds and Bible verses, I could not have told you where my faith, where my actual identity, really rested. If asked, “How do you know that you are saved?” I would have given you a rhetorically satisfying answer that, on reflection, you would have realized boils down to, “Because I feel saved,” or, perhaps, “Because I feel that I ought to feel saved.” I had numerous facts about faith, and beyond that I had passionate feelings about faith, I burned with fire and zeal, but when I look back, I wonder what it was I thought I had faith in. It was not my baptism. It was not communion. It was not prayer. It was not even scripture: yes, I believed it was an inerrant and inspired book, God’s Word even, and I could perhaps have described

broadly what that meant. But did I have any real grasp of the incarnate Word, what it actually means to have that Word given to us in a form we can read and understand? Hardly.

And so even though I have no doubt today that the Holy Spirit had already worked faith in me through the Word in a valid Trinitarian baptism, orthodox preaching, and exposure to scripture, at the center of my faith was a hazy, ethereal emptiness. The final ground of my faith amounted to some degree of hand-waving away the basic problem: I could not even begin to venture an explanation of how God comes to man, how He meets us, how He works in our life, and what that means for our broken lives. I could not see the Cross.

When I went to college, two providential interventions bent my path towards confessional Lutheranism. The first was that I went to a college where there were very few Christians of any kind, and indeed a large amount of active antagonism towards Christians. The pressure-cooker environment where my outspoken beliefs could earn me, at best, respectful disagreement and, at worst, actual violence, forced me to take stock of myself. How far was I willing to go? What sacrifices were worth making? I had nowhere to turn to besides Scripture. My church was great in many ways, but seemed more focused on winning over the culture than on helping me survive its onslaught. My family was always supportive, but a college student (and indeed any adult) cannot just run home every weekend for relief. Our Christian fellowship group was invaluable, but I was too-rapidly placed in leadership, when above all else I felt that I needed to be led, and, what's more, to be fed, rather than asked to lead others. As a result, I poured my energies into scripture, reading and re-reading the Psalms and Prophets every day.

Jeremiah 15:15-18 became my lonely prayer:

*You who know, O Lord,
Remember me, take notice of me,
And take vengeance for me on my persecutors.
Do not, in view of Your patience, take me away;
Know that for Your sake I endure reproach.
Your words were found and I ate them,
And Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart;
For I have been called by Your name,
O Lord God of hosts.
I did not sit in the circle of merrymakers,
Nor did I exult.
Because of Your hand upon me I sat alone,
For You filled me with indignation.
Why has my pain been perpetual
And my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?
Will You indeed be to me like a deceptive stream
With water that is unreliable?*

As I saw possible friendships wither, a romantic relationship end, and my life narrow to a small circle of faithful companions, all because of this strange mystery of faith, I could barely even articulate, this prayer became my encouragement. I had no rock left except the Rock. I was forced to see that there were several ways my life could go: I could acculturate, despairing of any hope for Christian vocation in my life, or else, I could accept what was, in hindsight, not actually a terribly heavy cross to bear: I could despair of the admiration of my peers. I could cease the striving-in-despair to be who I wanted to be, and allow God to form me in the vocation into which He was calling me.

A second providence made my college years truly productive: I met my wife! She was the only Lutheran at my university. I wasn't Lutheran, but I had read quite a bit of Luther (an irritating side effect of being raised by a theologian), and so I would torment my then-friend Ruth by playing "Luther vs. Lutherans." I'd look up the faith statements of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, then find quotes from Luther's

writings or table talks which seemed to contradict those statements. While this frustrated my eventual-wife to no end (I have continued to be endlessly frustrating), in hindsight I realize that I was accidentally taking a catechism class. I was finding Lutheran confessions or Luther's writings, and asking that simple, but dangerous-to-the-skeptic, question of the catechism, "What does this mean?"

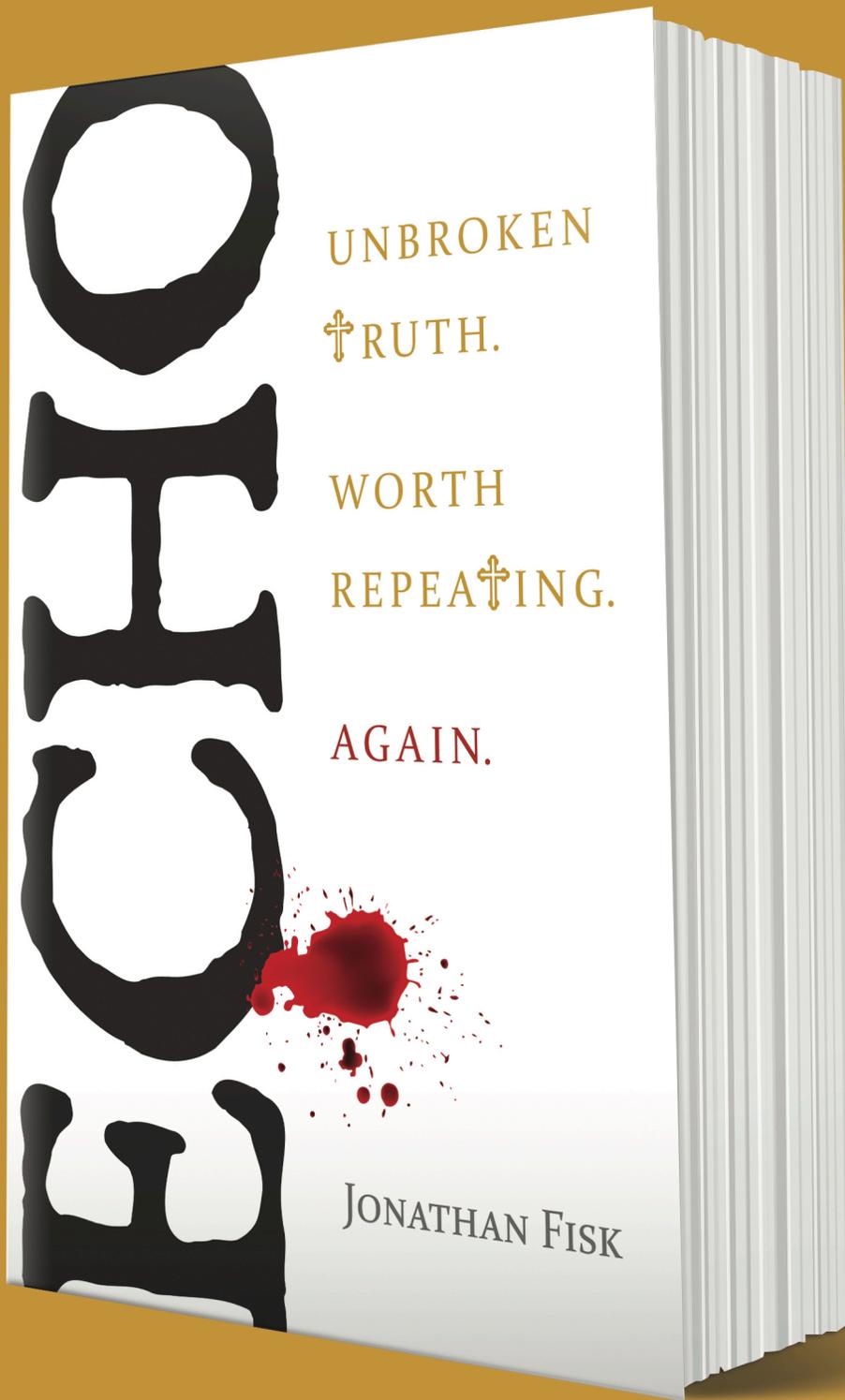
And as I, in despair of finding solid ground on which to stand, tormented my Lutheran interlocutor, one fact came up again and again: while she did not always have the answers to my questions, she knew with a mighty assurance what her faith was in. It was in her baptism, which was the Word in the water. Her faith was in the fact that Christ said, "This IS my body," and she took Him at His plain word, and received communion on that basis. I was intrigued, even unsettled, by the plain solidity of this faith. In time, as I read and studied more and more, I was more than intrigued. I became convinced of Lutheranism, but not because I was argued into the faith, nor because I was rebelling against the faith of my upbringing. Truth be told, I think I "won" most of the theological arguments my wife and I had (she may disagree), and to this day I see continuity between the faith of my childhood and my Lutheran confession, not contradiction. Rather, I came to see the truth of the Lutheran Confessions, because they were the only firm ground I could find in a culture cracking at the seams, because they were the only thing that could change that uncertain object of faith into certain, objective means, which in their humble appearances masking the Real Presence of God, situated all the power and humility of the Incarnation at exactly the place I needed it to encourage me in my daily vocation.

In time, after Ruth and I moved to Washington, DC, we were fortunate enough to attend Immanuel Lutheran Church, where, with enough remedial coursework and a very patient pastor, I was able to, as I explained to my family,

“Get Lutheranized.” We strive to fill our home today with liturgies oriented towards the substance of faith: morning canticles and hymnody, bible study with friends, and hospitality for all comers. And now, God has called us to another change in circumstances. While Ruth and I love our church, our jobs, and our home in DC, we will move to Hong Kong this summer to serve as missionaries in the local Lutheran school system. While we are sad to leave, we are excited to go, and would encourage readers to keep the Lutheran Church-Hong Kong Synod, and our work there, in their prayers.



Lyman Stone is an economist who specializes in population and regional economic forecasting. He writes for *The Federalist*, *Vox*, and the *Institute for Family Studies*, with bylines also in the *New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, and elsewhere. He is an Advisor at Demographic Intelligence, a consultancy, and an agricultural market forecaster for the US Department of Agriculture. He is married to fellow Kentuckian Ruth, and they live in Washington, DC, where they attend Immanuel Lutheran Church.



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