

Issues, Etc.

JOURNAL

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

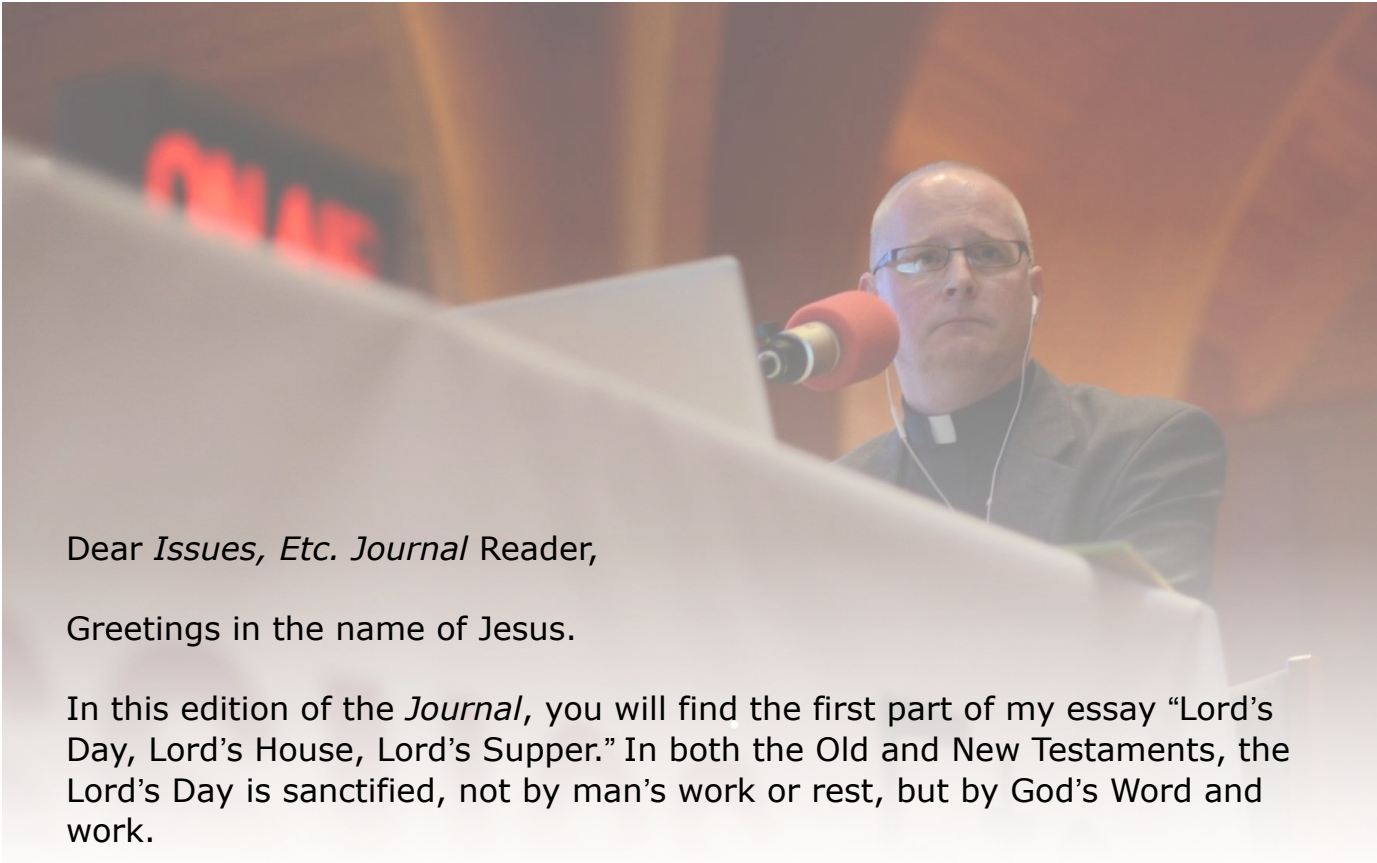
by Todd Wilken

*Wittenberg Trail:
From Baptist Minister to Lutheran
My Six Decade Journey on the Wittenberg Trail*

by Dennis McFadden

Summer, 2014

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A photograph of a man with glasses and a clerical collar speaking into a red microphone at a podium. The background is slightly blurred, showing some red and orange lighting.

Dear *Issues, Etc. Journal* Reader,

Greetings in the name of Jesus.

In this edition of the *Journal*, you will find the first part of my essay “Lord’s Day, Lord’s House, Lord’s Supper.” In both the Old and New Testaments, the Lord’s Day is sanctified, not by man’s work or rest, but by God’s Word and work.

Our Wittenberg Trail feature is from former Baptist minister turned Lutheran pastor, the Rev. Dennis McFadden. He retraces his steps from the subjectivity of experience and rationalism to the objectivity of the Lutheran confession of faith.

You’ll also find our sponsoring congregations in the **Issues, Etc. 300** list 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 grey ink that reads "Todd Wilken".

Todd Wilken

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

by Todd Wilken

Picture the proverbial Sunday morning visitor. Church leaders of the last 50 years have been thinking about him a lot. He is the hypothetical “man off the street” who wanders into our church on Sunday morning, knowing nothing about the Church, Christianity or Christian worship. As far as he knows, Sunday is just the last day of the weekend, your church is no more sacred a place than the Applebee's down the street and as to what happens there Sunday morning? He has no clue.

Church leaders have not only been thinking about this 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, when he wanders into church Sunday morning, he doesn't see or hear anything he hasn't seen or heard before. Sunday morning church has been turned into just another way for him to spend his time.

By focusing on the Sunday morning visitor, these church leaders have forgotten what Sunday morning is all about. Sunday morning doesn't belong to the Sunday morning visitor. It belongs to the Lord. It is all about the Lord's Day, the Lord's House and the Lord's Supper.

God's Time

Of the many things scientists can explain, one thing they can't explain is time. Cosmologist Sean Carroll, author of “From Eternity to Here: The Quest for the Ultimate Theory of Time,” has recently written:

The weird thing about the arrow of time is that it's not to be found in the underlying laws of physics. It's not there. So it's a feature of the universe we see, but not a feature of the laws of the individual particles. So the arrow of time is built on top of whatever local laws of physics apply.¹

Why does something as basic to the universe and our lives as time still baffle scientists? Perhaps we shouldn't expect to understand everything God has made. Christians know that time belongs to its Creator. A common misconception is that since God is eternal He doesn't really care about time, that time is just a human concern. The truth is that God made time, structured time and sanctified time. Time matters to God. Moreover, God has entered time in the person of Jesus Christ. God keeps and marks time toward a purpose. He even has His own way of marking time, punctuated by a day He reserves to Himself — His own day, the Lord's Day.

The Day of Rest

The original Lord's Day was the Sabbath or "seventh" day. It was the literal seventh day after the first six days of creation:

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.²

The Sabbath was both blessed and made holy by the Creator of time. It was not just another day; it was unique and special. In fact, it is clear that, from creation on, God Himself marked time by the Sabbath.

So the Sabbath Day, God's way of marking time from creation, is rooted in creation. It isn't just another day. It isn't just an accident of the calendar. The Sabbath Day is how God has created, designed and structured time. It is baked into creation from the very beginning.

Of all the Ten Commandments God established with His Old Testament people, only the Sabbath commandment comes with an explanation dating all the way back to the original seventh day:

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.³

The Sabbath commandment is based in God's action before the fall. The Sabbath commandment was intended to shape fallen man's time according to the pattern of creation. It required man to mark time the same way God marks time. This requirement was of utmost importance to God. As Moses stood on Mount Sinai, God closed the giving of the entire Law with this solemn injunction:

Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you. You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.⁴

God takes the Sabbath so seriously, He requires the death penalty for violating it. There is even an account of a man being stoned to death for gathering sticks on the Sabbath.⁵ At first, this punishment hardly seems to fit the crime. But to break the Sabbath was tantamount to rejecting God, His covenant and His holiness: "For this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you."

Yet, the Sabbath commandment was also given as a gift to fallen man. The Sabbath command, even with its penalty of death, was about grace. After Adam's fall, God cursed creation because of Adam:

Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were



taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.⁶

Notice that the curse was *not* that Adam would have to work. Adam was created to work. God had put him into the garden “to work it and keep it.”⁷ The curse was that Adam’s work would henceforth be marked by futility. His work would not produce its intended results. Adam would get out of the ground even less than he put into it. Adam would work himself to death. This futility and death would mark all human work. Creation would no longer produce for man as he worked it and kept it. Man’s work would be a bitter exchange of pain and sweat for diminishing returns.

After the fall, the day of rest was intended to be a small window of grace in a completely graceless creation ruined by Adam’s sin. Under the curse of sin, Adam’s decedents work was marked by futility. They got out of their daily work only (indeed, even less than) what they put into it. The Sabbath day was different. On that day, they would rest; the bitter exchange of pain and sweat in exchange for diminishing returns would be temporarily suspended. The Sabbath day was intended to be a flashback for fallen man back to a time before sin when God and all He had made rested. It was intended to be a foretaste of a time when that rest would be restored eternally.⁸ God gave this day of rest to show man why He had created time for man.

Avoiding Work, Not Resting

By the time of Jesus’ public ministry, almost two centuries of the Pharisees’ teaching had turned the Sabbath commandment on its head. This school of Jewish thinking took the commandment that was about rest and made it about work. By the time Jesus came, the Jews were no longer resting on the Sabbath; rather they were working very hard to avoid work — the exact opposite of God’s intention.

Classical physics measures “work” as force multiplied by displacement: $W=Fs$. And the Jews had turned the Sabbath Day into a weekly, day-long physics lesson. The “laws” of the Pharisees limited the types of and amount of work a man could do during the 24 hours of the Sabbath Day. Their rules stipulated the maximum amount of work a Jew could do and still be in compliance with the Sabbath commandment. In effect, they described how much work a person could get away

with on the day of rest. Again, the Sabbath had become about work (and working to avoid it) and not about rest.

The Sabbath Day was never intended to be spent this way. The Sabbath commandment was never about avoiding work. Jesus demonstrates this in a very interesting way.

Have you ever noticed that the only specific commandment Jesus is accused of breaking in the New Testament Gospels is the Sabbath commandment?⁹ He is accused of all kinds of sin, but the only specific commandment mentioned is the Sabbath commandment. I don't think that this is a coincidence. Jesus is very busy on the Sabbath. This attracts the attention and criticism of His opponents. These Sabbath Day encounters with His opponents afford Him the perfect opportunity to contrast grace and works. In each encounter, Jesus or His disciples are accused of breaking the Sabbath law.

In one of these encounters, Jesus anticipates their accusation with a question about the Sabbath on the Sabbath:

One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully. And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy. And Jesus responded to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" But they remained silent. Then he took him and healed him and sent him away. And he said to them, "Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?" And they could not reply to these things.¹⁰

Jesus is describing a scenario straight from the Old Testament, from a law that the Pharisees would have known well: "You shall not see your brother's donkey or his ox fallen down by the way and ignore them. You shall help him to lift them up again."¹¹ According to this commandment, the Pharisees' answer to Jesus' question should have been a simple matter. But because they had made the Sabbath about avoiding work, they could not reply without conceding that it was indeed lawful for Jesus to heal on the Sabbath.

Jesus is clever. The commandment originally mentions "your brother's donkey or his ox." Jesus substitutes one of the Pharisees' sons for the donkey. This is a valid substitution, since a man who would pull his neighbor's donkey out of a well would not hesitate to do the same for his own son.

Even then, the Pharisees can't answer. They are busy running a mental physics experiment. How much does the son in question weigh? How deep is the well? Since this hypothetical situation is supposed to take place on the Sabbath, they are thinking of Jesus' question entirely in terms of the amount of work required.

Again, Jesus is very clever. The work required to lift your son out of a well is easy to calculate. One man might be able to lift his son out of a well with relatively little effort in a relatively short time. But Jesus hasn't asked only about a son. He has also asked about an ox. And here the calculations are more difficult. How much does the ox weigh? Even a shallow well would prove a challenging extraction point for the lightest of oxen.

Let's think of Jesus' question in the Pharisees' terms. Realistically, what is it going to take to get a full-grown ox out of a well? It will take not one man, but many men. It will take hours, if not an entire day or more of hard, back-breaking work. In addition, there will have to be food and water for the workers, equipment and materials carried to the site of the well, clean up, perhaps repairs to the well and countless other details to such an operation. Realistically, the workforce of an entire village would have to be employed to pull an ox out of a well. And at the end of it all, everyone would have spent the entire day working in some way, some to the point of exhaustion.

And, Jesus says, not one of them would have broken the Sabbath.

This is why the Pharisees cannot answer His question. Their view of the Sabbath made it impossible for them to imagine all that work on the Sabbath without breaking the Sabbath. But for Jesus' view of the Sabbath, it presented no problem whatsoever. For Jesus, the Sabbath was not about physics, calculations or even avoiding work. For Jesus, the Sabbath was about grace.

In another encounter, Jesus' disciples are accused by the Pharisees of breaking the Sabbath by plucking heads of grain on the day of rest. Jesus' response is to remind them that David had fed himself and his companions with the Temple's sacred showbread:

Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?

Jesus' opponents assumed that the Sabbath was like that showbread, made and set aside for God. Even so, they would have argued that David, being the Lord's anointed, was permitted to do what he did. Jesus capitalizes on this: "And he said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.'"¹²

Jesus' claim would have stunned His opponents. "The Lord of the Sabbath" is one of the clearest and most pointed claims to His divinity Jesus ever makes. He is the creator of the Sabbath, the God who rested on the seventh day, the author of the Sabbath Day command. And, Jesus reasons, if David was permitted to make use of something made and set aside for God, how much more is the creator of the Sabbath Himself permitted to use it for man, especially since He made the Sabbath for man in the first place?

Jesus' statement, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath," means that Jesus made the Sabbath to serve man, not the other way around. "I am using the Sabbath for man. This is why I created it." With one sentence, Jesus turns the Pharisees' idea of the Sabbath upside down and sweeps aside all of their Sabbath rules designed to avoid work. In Matthew's account, Jesus adds:

Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. And if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.¹³

The disciples' "unlawful" work on the Sabbath has broken only their rules, not the Sabbath.

Lord of the Sabbath

Jesus came not only to restore the Sabbath but He also came to fulfill the Sabbath. All four Gospels note that Jesus is crucified on the sixth day of the week

and is dead and buried before the beginning of the Sabbath.¹⁴ John's account provides the reason for this:



Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away . . . Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.¹⁵

Jesus' opponents did not want the spectacle of dying men on crosses immediately outside the walls of Jerusalem on the Sabbath. The Sabbath began at sundown Friday, so the bodies needed to come down off the crosses before sundown.

But Jesus' opponents weren't the only ones concerned about keeping the Sabbath that day. Jesus was too. Jesus' prediction had been that He would be crucified and raised on the third day.¹⁶ The Gospel accounts show that Jesus died about 3:00 p.m. Friday, was buried before the beginning of Sabbath (sundown on Friday) and remained in the tomb until before sunrise Sunday. He was in the tomb not three, 24-hour days, but over the course of three days. Jesus was probably in the tomb less than 36 hours. In fact, the only full day Jesus was in the tomb was the Sabbath day. This is no coincidence. The Lord of the Sabbath, the creator of the Sabbath, was keeping the Sabbath. Just as He had rested on the first Sabbath after

finishing His work of creation, so also He rested on the final Sabbath after finishing His work of redemption.

Sanctify the Holy Day

In his explanation of the Sabbath commandment, “Thou shalt sanctify the holy day,” sixteenth-century reformer Martin Luther did a very interesting thing. He said that this commandment means, “We should fear and love God that we may not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred, and gladly hear and learn it.”¹⁷ Notice what is missing. There is nothing in this explanation about work or even the Sabbath day itself. Instead of the “Sabbath day,” Luther speaks of the “holy day.” Instead of rest from work, Luther put the emphasis on the preaching of God’s Word.

Did Luther miss the point of the Sabbath command? Not at all. Elsewhere Luther writes:

This commandment, therefore, according to its gross sense, does not concern us Christians; for it is altogether an external matter, like other ordinances of the Old Testament, which were attached to particular customs, persons, times, and places, and now have been made free through Christ.¹⁸

But the essence of the commandment remains:

Most especially, that on such day of rest (since we can get no other opportunity) freedom and time be taken to attend divine service, so that we come together to hear and treat of God's Word, and then to praise God, to sing and pray.¹⁹

Luther understood that the Sabbath command was never about man’s work. It was always about God’s work. We rest from our work and give attention to what God is doing. God’s work is the preaching of His Word. Again, the Sabbath command is not about our work, but God’s Word:

How, then, does such sanctification take place? Not in this manner, that with folded hands we sit behind the stove and do no rough external work, or deck ourselves with a wreath and put on our best clothes, but (as has been said) that we occupy ourselves with God's Word, and exercise ourselves therein.²⁰

Luther’s insight was that even the original Sabbath was sanctified, not by man’s work or rest, but by God’s Word and work: “For the day needs no sanctification for

itself; for in itself it has been created holy from the beginning of the creation it was sanctified by its Creator.”²¹

This is why Christians can still speak of the Lord’s Day, even though the Sabbath Day and its observance has been fulfilled by Jesus Christ and no longer applies to Christians. This is why Christians still observe the Lord’s Day, sanctified (just as the original Sabbath was) by God’s Word and God’s work.

Indeed we Christians ought always to keep such a holy day, and be occupied with nothing but holy things, i.e., daily be engaged upon God’s Word, and carry it in our hearts and upon our lips . . . God’s Word is the treasure which sanctifies everything, and by which even all the saints themselves were sanctified. At whatever hour, then, God’s Word is taught, preached, heard, read or meditated upon, there the person, day, and work are sanctified thereby, not because of the external work, but because of the Word, which makes saints of us all. Therefore I constantly say that all our life and work must be ordered according to God’s Word, if it is to be God-pleasing or holy. Where this is done, this commandment is in force and being fulfilled.²²

Luther wasn’t repurposing the original Sabbath day command to apply to an arbitrary Christian day of worship. Luther was getting to the heart of why God gave the Sabbath day command in the first place: to sanctify every day — indeed all of time — for man.

The Lord of the Lord’s Day

Of course, Scripture does speak of the “Lord’s Day.”²³ Christians adopted the first day of the week for worship almost immediately after Jesus’ ascension.²⁴ Why did they do this? They understood that Jesus had fulfilled the Sabbath, along with all of the Old Testament.²⁵ In fulfilling the Sabbath, Jesus declared not just one day, but all days holy.

The first Christians gathered each week on the day of Jesus’ resurrection. They understood that just as the Sabbath had been rooted in creation, their Lord’s Day was rooted in the new creation Jesus had brought into existence by His death and resurrection. They understood that the Sabbath was never about man’s work; it was always about God’s work. So also they understood the Lord’s Day to be a time to rest from work and give attention to what God is doing.

This idea that “Since God is eternal, He doesn’t care about time” would have made no sense to the first Christians. They would have realized that such an idea has absolutely no basis in Scripture. They understood that God desired to give mankind eternal rest. They knew that from the seventh day of creation, by His Word, God had been sanctifying all time to serve mankind. They believed that Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath, had come to fulfill the Sabbath in His death and rest in the tomb. Every Lord’s Day, they celebrated the dawn of a new creation and a new time in Jesus’ resurrection. The first Christians, like their Old Testament counterparts, understood that time mattered to God and marked it accordingly.

So what about that visitor, wandering into our church on Sunday morning, knowing nothing about the Church, Christianity or Christian worship? For him, Sunday isn’t the Lord’s Day; it is just the last day of his weekend. Is he right? No, he isn’t. In order to attract him, should Christians adopt his idea of Sunday? Many believe we should and have done so. They have reengineered Sunday morning into exactly what that visitor wants and expects. Sunday morning church has been turned into just another way for him to spend his time.

When that Sunday morning visitor wanders into church, instead of acting like the day is just the end of his weekend, what if we made it clear to him that this is the Lord’s Day? What if everything we said and did while he was visiting our church confessed this? What if, instead of reengineering the day to fit his expectations, we taught him to expect something better — God’s Word, God’s work, God Himself? Jesus, the Lord of the Lord’s Day, is there Sunday morning in person, forgiving sins, redeeming His people, redeeming creation, redeeming time.

What if, when that Sunday morning visitor left our church on the Lord’s Day, he knew that he hadn’t spent (or wasted) his time there at all? Rather, he had been given this day — and all time and eternity — by Jesus, the Lord Himself? This is, after all, why God created time in the first place.

Next edition: *Lord’s Day, Lord’s House, Lord’s Supper, Part Two.*

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¹ Erin Beba, "What Is Time? One Physicist Hunts for the Ultimate Theory," <http://www.wired.com/2010/02/what-is-time/>

² Gen. 2:1–3.

³ Ex. 20:8–11.

⁴ Ex. 31:13–17.

⁵ Num. 15:32–36.

⁶ Gen. 3:17–19.

⁷ Gen. 2:15.

⁸ Heb. 4:9–10.

⁹ Matt. 12:1–14; Mark 2:23–28; 3:1–6; Luke 6:1–4; 13:10–16; 14:1–6; John 5:16–18; 7:21–24; 9:16.

¹⁰ Luke 14:1–6.

¹¹ Deut. 22:4.

¹² Mark 2:25–28.

¹³ Matt. 12:5–8.

¹⁴ Matt. 28:1; Mark 15:42; 16:1; Luke 23:54–56; John 19:31–42.

¹⁵ John 19:31, 41–42.

¹⁶ Matt. 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; Luke 9:22; 18:33.

¹⁷ Small Catechism, Third Commandment.

¹⁸ Large Catechism, 81–82.

¹⁹ Ibid., 84.

²⁰ Ibid., 88.

²¹ Ibid., 87.

²² Ibid., 89, 91–92.

²³ Rev. 1:10.

²⁴ Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2.

²⁵ Col. 2:16–17.

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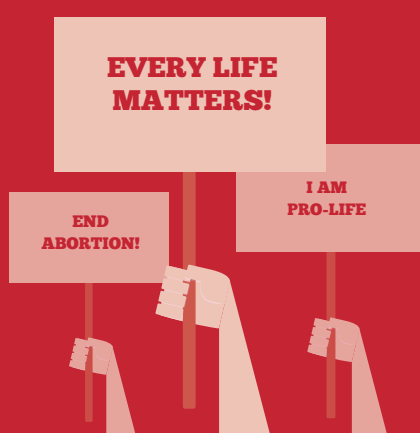
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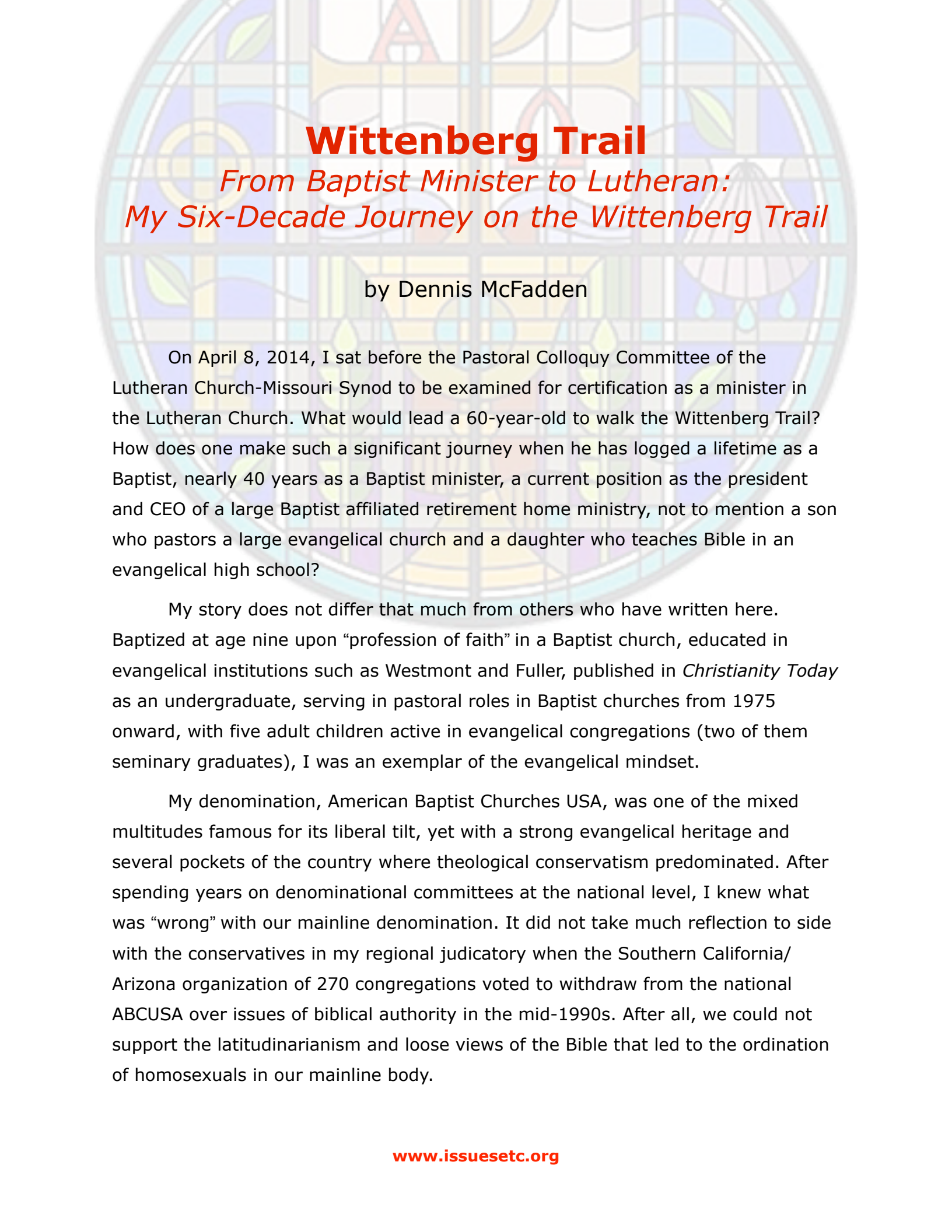


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Wittenberg Trail

From Baptist Minister to Lutheran: My Six-Decade Journey on the Wittenberg Trail

by Dennis McFadden

On April 8, 2014, I sat before the Pastoral Colloquy Committee of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod to be examined for certification as a minister in the Lutheran Church. What would lead a 60-year-old to walk the Wittenberg Trail? How does one make such a significant journey when he has logged a lifetime as a Baptist, nearly 40 years as a Baptist minister, a current position as the president and CEO of a large Baptist affiliated retirement home ministry, not to mention a son who pastors a large evangelical church and a daughter who teaches Bible in an evangelical high school?

My story does not differ that much from others who have written here. Baptized at age nine upon “profession of faith” in a Baptist church, educated in evangelical institutions such as Westmont and Fuller, published in *Christianity Today* as an undergraduate, serving in pastoral roles in Baptist churches from 1975 onward, with five adult children active in evangelical congregations (two of them seminary graduates), I was an exemplar of the evangelical mindset.

My denomination, American Baptist Churches USA, was one of the mixed multitudes famous for its liberal tilt, yet with a strong evangelical heritage and several pockets of the country where theological conservatism predominated. After spending years on denominational committees at the national level, I knew what was “wrong” with our mainline denomination. It did not take much reflection to side with the conservatives in my regional judicatory when the Southern California/Arizona organization of 270 congregations voted to withdraw from the national ABCUSA over issues of biblical authority in the mid-1990s. After all, we could not support the latitudinarianism and loose views of the Bible that led to the ordination of homosexuals in our mainline body.

More locally, we were all committed evangelicals in every way. My pastorates in small, medium and larger congregations were marked by a strong church growth orientation. Each year, one week would be spent with our junior high students and another with our senior high young people at camp. Each summer, my colleagues and I shared the preaching duties, challenging groups of 300 teens to come forward and “accept Jesus into their hearts.” Using contemporary music, video and the latest means, we saw streams of teary-eyed teens coming forward to decide for Christ and to commit to be baptized when they returned home as their “first act of obedience.” We always shared Communion that final evening of camp where the kids were instructed that this was only a symbol, but one Jesus ordained, as a memorial of His sacrifice and our participation in the Christian family. In 1990, the congregation where I served as senior pastor was an early adopter of contemporary music in worship, featuring a traditional service with about 250 folks and another one with 95 decibel rock music for another 250.

Even after completing further graduate studies in management and leaving local church ministry to become an executive for our Baptist-affiliated retirement home in southern California, my orientation was decidedly “broad evangelical.” For more than three decades, it was my role on a judicatory committee to examine 500 candidates for ordination in the Baptist Church and to certify them ready.

Yet doubts nagged at me and left me disquieted. Evangelicalism seemed so earnest, yet dependent on flimsy human efforts and beset with a thoroughly moralistic orientation; fervent in its desire to experience God, yet stunningly shallow in its theory of how to do it; proclaiming to be “Bible-centered,” yet forced to practice hermeneutical gymnastics in order to reconcile the witness of the biblical record with our teaching, particularly our non-sacramental interpretations.

Evangelicalism as practiced in America suffers from moralism, mysticism and rationalism. This critique appears commonly enough in Lutheran writings. However, it accurately reflects my experience on the ground as an evangelical insider of nearly six decades who served in leadership in numerous evangelical congregations, denominational posts and institutions.

At the congregational level, evangelicals are beset with a *Little Engine that Could* type of moralism. Sermons intended to be “practical” and “applicable” to the real needs of the people often devolve to “Five Ways to Conquer Depression,” “Three Principles for a Happier Marriage” or some such thing. Use of the Bible, a much touted hallmark of evangelicalism, often ignores the Christological theme of Scripture (cf. Luke 24) in favor of moralistic principalizing of biblical narratives. Preachers exhort their listeners to “become a friend” like David with Jonathan or to conquer the Goliaths in our lives. Current preaching even tends to blur with that of motivational speakers and life coaches who dispense “power principles for successful living” and how to experience “your best life now.”

When my wife and I visited a large Bible church a few months back, we heard the preacher begin his sermon with a list of “shoulds,” conclude with more “shoulds” and basically “should” all over the congregation in between. The only mention of Jesus Christ came in the list of a half dozen applications at the end where (you guessed it) we were told that we “should” be Christ-centered. As a preacher, my sermons employed powerful emotive illustrations, supported by evocative music and concluding with stirring appeals to the will. I challenged people to “decide” to surrender to Christ and to “do something” about their faith.

Coupled with the moralism, evangelical practice eschews the biblical means of grace in favor of immediacy in the experience of the divine. Revivalism and the Second Great Awakening helped create the modern American mind; and yet the American mind, with its voluntarism and individualism, powerfully defined and shaped the modern religious experience of Americans as well. The resulting direction is one of a faith turned inward and inveterately individualistic.

Rather than expecting to meet God in the objectivity of the Word and the Sacraments, evangelicals seek an audience that takes place in the subjectivity and inner recesses of the human heart. In place of a mediated means of grace, evangelicals crave an immediacy of a mystical sort. In charismatic and Pentecostal circles, this type of connection with God can come with experiences ranging from “words of knowledge” and prophetic visions to the ever-present evidence of speaking in tongues. For non-charismatic evangelicals, the pattern may involve more Keswickian, or holiness style, spirituality or simply the individualized

decisional theology of revivalism. To facilitate these immediate divine encounters, worship leaders skillfully move the participant through the flow of the service with music designed to evoke and produce a strong emotional response in the listener, often concluding (as one parody of evangelical worship puts it) with “strings that will make you cry.” Arms raised high and tears streaming down cheeks “prove” that it all “works.”

When one turns from the congregation to the academy, evangelicalism suffers from a pervasive and destructive rationalism. One of my seminary alma maters was founded on the premise of a non-legalistic fundamentalism (first dubbed “neo evangelicalism” before becoming known by the shorthand “evangelicalism”). Yet within two decades of its startup, inerrancy was dropped from the statement of beliefs and soon afterward numerous other doctrines came in for scrutiny too. Schooled in higher critical methodologies, yet proudly clinging to the badge of evangelical identity due to being “born again,” such scholarship often affects the mien of a white-coated scientist treating God as a frozen section sample to be put under the microscope and subjected to objective scrutiny.

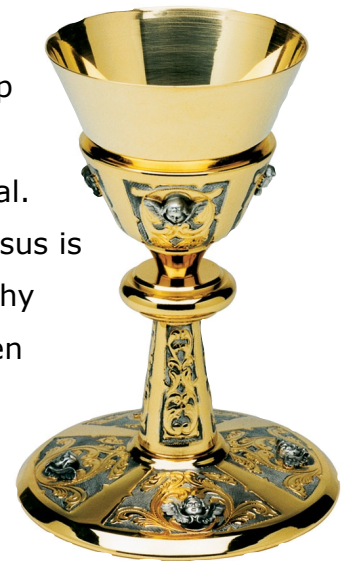
The rationalism of the academy may be partly blamed on the characteristic way in which the Bible and Christian faith are addressed without confessional boundaries and ecclesiastical controls. In order to be transdenominational, doctrinal distinctives were shed, reducing the required core beliefs to a mere handful. Historian David Bebbington observes that evangelical priorities may be properly described by a quadrilateral of distinctive traits: conversionism, biblicism, crucicentrism and activism. So narrow a foundation can hardly bear the accumulated weight of a robust superstructure. Recent examples of evangelical leaders denying the existence of hell, a vicarious atonement, justification by faith alone and embracing universalism make sense in a world without confessions or with only a reductionist doctrinal core.

Another reason for evangelical rationalism probably comes from the more pernicious effects of revivalism and pietism. The shift from the objective means of grace, such as Word and Sacrament, to the interior life of the believer leaves little basis for judgment beyond omnipotent autonomous reason.

Finally, the history of contemporary evangelicalism traces to the Reformed side of the Reformation. Luther's commitments led him to "believe, teach and confess" whatever the Bible said, sometimes permitting elements of paradox and open issues to remain without a complete and final resolution. Calvin and his successors were rigorous in insisting upon a tighter system of logical consistency and coherence. Once one privileges the sovereignty of God as a first principle, the full system of Dordtian Calvinism follows rather logically and self-evidently with an almost "Q.E.D." mathematical elegance. Difficult doctrines such as double predestination, irresistible grace and limited atonement come almost naturally by rationalistic deduction.



In addition to these problems, decades of pastoral ministry left me dissatisfied with my doctrine of the "real absence of Jesus" from the Lord's Supper and the merely symbolic meaning of Baptism. Obviously nobody expects George Washington or Benjamin Franklin to show up for a July Fourth fireworks display. That patriotic commemoration is clearly a memorial. But unless we believe, teach and confess that Jesus is truly "in, with and under" the bread and the cup, why even bother with it? And turning to Baptism, even Baptists seem to sense that something is horribly amiss in their practice, inventing baby dedication (a "dry Baptism"?), a practice unmentioned by the Bible.



The lack of sacramentology and the tendency toward moralism, mysticism and rationalism led me to begin a quest to re-examine our Reformational roots. As a Baptist, it was not too difficult to read Calvin. Even in its most non-Calvinistic instantiation, the theological architecture of Baptist theology follows closely the forms and patterns of the great Reformer of Geneva. And with the growing interest in Reformed theology among evangelicals, Baptists like John Piper, Wayne Grudem and Al Mohler were not much different from more Presbyterian R.C. Sproul, Michael Horton or other five-point Calvinists.

Luther, however, was a tougher read. He sounded more medieval, less modern; more bombastic, less moderate; more radical, less incremental. Yet Luther's stubborn insistence on being Christ-centered, cross-centered, catholic and always delivering forgiveness to comfort troubled consciences won me over. His doctrine of vocation, theology of the cross and hammering away at God's use of Word and Sacraments as the means of grace were transformational. Both my wife and I yearned to participate in a church that fit our theology.

Finding such a home did not take long. When Jeanette and I moved to Fort Wayne in 2011 so that she might become a stay-at-home grandma, we discovered it to be a LCMS Valhalla, a place where Lutheran theology was not merely an academic curiosity, but openly professed and practiced outside the classroom lecture hall. Decades ago in our evangelical college, we had enjoyed Lutheran theology professor Rod Rosenblatt, and my long-time administrative assistant in California was the wife of a LCMS pastor. So it did not seem too unusual to visit a Lutheran church in Fort Wayne.

Pastors from the church challenged us to read Luther's *Small Catechism with Explanations* and offered to discuss it with us. After devouring the book in one sitting, soon it was followed by *The Lutheran Difference*, *Lutheranism 101* and *Why I Am a Lutheran* over the next couple of weeks. Recognizing that he had me hooked, my pastor reeled in his Baptist fish with a suggestion to read Walther's *Law and Gospel*. Finally! All of the disquiet and nagging doubts formed over more than five decades, emerging concerns with the internal problems and contradictions of evangelicalism, and fears about the future of a Christianity more in tune with the American mind than the biblical Gospel came to a head when we took our confirmation vows before our congregation in Fort Wayne the first weekend in March 2012. It was only after finishing the liturgy that it hit me: This was the 34th anniversary of my original ordination as a Baptist! *Soli Deo Gloria* indeed!

The last two years as a Lutheran have been dramatic. The Law and Gospel structure of the Bible has been obscured in much evangelical teaching. In place of the freedom of the Gospel, evangelicalism offers a confusing mixture of the two that leads either to despair or to Pharisaical smugness. Walther correctly argued that when you mix Law and Gospel, you end up overthrowing Christianity

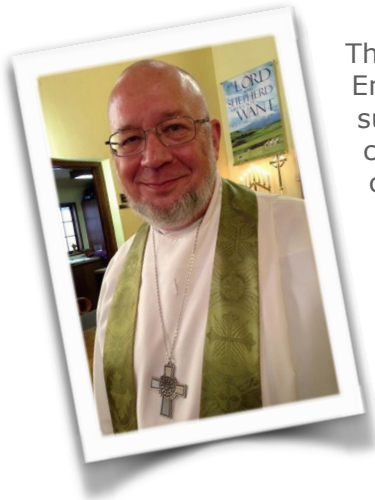
altogether. In place of the never-ending busyness of the program of evangelical moralism, we have appreciated the corrective of the Lutheran doctrine of vocation. While God does not need our good works, our neighbor does. Doing everything “as unto the Lord” frees the Christian from the artificial (and theologically incorrect) notion that some works are more spiritually important than others. In place of neomonasticism and neoclericalism (cf. the implications of “every member a minister” teaching), we have Luther’s wholesome and psychologically superior corrective of vocation.

The objectivity of the Sacraments introduced an epiphany for both my wife and me. Lutheran spirituality does not retreat into the subjectivity of the human heart with its inconstancy and fickleness. Rather, like the direction of the incarnation toward, not away from creation, it moves to the Word spoken and heard, the water, the bread and the wine. Lutheran piety begins with that which passes through the “eye hole, ear hole and pie hole,” as one wag put it.

Finally, the Lutheran insistence that we “believe, teach and confess” what the Bible says has released me from the hermeneutical gymnastics required by rationalism. Lutheran theologian Francis Pieper rightly observed that rationalism is not only futile, but injurious to faith. The studied effort to “get around” the plain teachings of Scripture in favor of a Calvinist, Arminian, Pentecostal, feminist or dispensational form of evangelicalism requires the exegete to privilege some teachings of the Bible while relativizing or outright disregarding others. It rarely succeeds, at least not for long. To the extent that one actually becomes proficient at this art, it only serves to undermine full confidence in the authority of the Bible as the Word of God. When you practice how to confront a biblical teaching and successfully deprive it of its power, you have learned how to assume the role of the tempter in the Garden: “Has God *really* said . . .”

These are some of the reasons that led me to sit in St. Louis, facing the Colloquy committee of the LCMS on that April day. All of my experience as a lifelong Baptist and minister in that tradition were juxtaposed with the very different traditions and teachings of Lutheranism. The next day the Colloquy committee voted to certify me for pastoral ministry in the LCMS. Three weeks later, the board of my Baptist retirement home ministry received and voted to accept my

resignation as president and CEO. One cannot imagine, and only God knows, how these next years will proceed. But by the grace of God, they will be found in the family of Missouri Synod Lutherans. Not every trip on the Wittenberg Trail, you see, can be completed quickly. Mine took almost six decades.



The Rev. Dennis E. McFadden and his wife, Jeanette, are members of Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, Ind. Dennis retired this summer after 17 years leading a large Baptist-affiliated retirement community in California, following 22 years pastoring Baptist congregations in southern California. He was admitted to the ministerium of the LCMS this spring by colloquy and intends to use his remaining active years assisting in ministry in his adopted LCMS family.

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