

# Issues, Etc.

## JOURNAL



### All Things to All Men

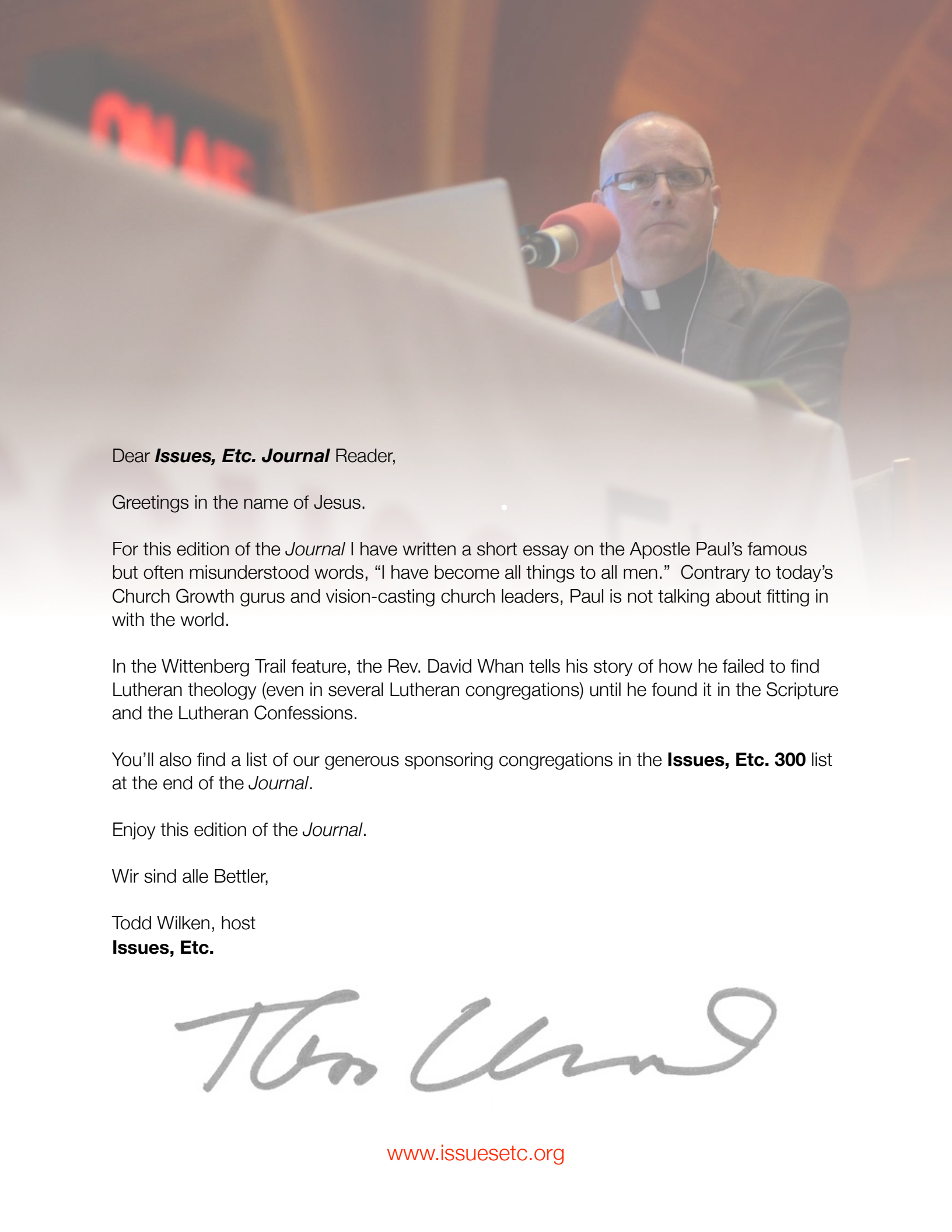
by Todd Wilken

### Wittenberg Trail: How Are They to Believe?

by David Whan

Summer, 2015

[www.issuesetc.org](http://www.issuesetc.org)

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

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

Greetings in the name of Jesus.

For this edition of the *Journal* I have written a short essay on the Apostle Paul's famous but often misunderstood words, "I have become all things to all men." Contrary to today's Church Growth gurus and vision-casting church leaders, Paul is not talking about fitting in with the world.

In the Wittenberg Trail feature, the Rev. David Whan tells his story of how he failed to find Lutheran theology (even in several Lutheran congregations) until he found it in the Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions.

You'll also find a list of our generous 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 large, stylized handwritten signature in grey ink, which appears to read "Todd Wilken".

Todd Wilken

TALK



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## All Things to All Men

by Todd Wilken

“Mom, I just want to fit in!”

She is standing in Abercrombie & Fitch, shouting above DJ Snake’s “You Know You Like It” blaring from the store’s sound system, trying to convince her mother to pay \$115 for a pair of One Teaspoon Bandits jean shorts. All her friends already have them. If she doesn’t get them, her life is ruined — over . Why go on living? She’s just wants to fit in.

Her mother knows from experience that fitting in is overrated and overpriced. So she says no.

Her mother knows she will pay for this decision with a solid afternoon and evening of dirty looks and rolling eyes. She also knows that her daughter will forget about the shorts soon enough and move on to something else that she simply must have to fit in. But the girl will eventually grow up. She prays for patience.

“I have become all things to all men, that by all means I might save some.”

With these words, the Apostle Paul urges — no, requires— the Church to fit in. “Do whatever you have to do to be like those you want to save.” Like the fabled chameleon, the Church must camouflage herself in the colors of the culture. She



must be like that desperate daughter in Abercrombie & Fitch. Become all things, blend in, fit in, to save some.

Now, if you don't think this sounds like the Apostle Paul, you have come to know from the New Testament, you're right. It doesn't. That's because the real Paul never counseled, much less commanded, the Church to fit in.

The Paul who commands the Church to fit in is a postmodern fiction. He never existed. He exists only in the imaginations of Church Growth gurus and vision-casting church leaders. He is really just a projection of their own desire to fit in themselves.

But the real Apostle Paul did say, "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some," didn't he? Yes, he did. So, what did he mean?

### Context Helps

In 1 Cor. 9:19–23, Paul says:

*For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.*

Here, Paul is not talking about fitting in.

Paul is dealing with the most pressing question of the New Testament

Church, the question that ran through his entire apostolic ministry: "What do we do with the Gentiles?"



It wasn't a new question. In the Old Testament, there were two kinds of people: chosen and not chosen, God's people and everyone else, the circumcised and the uncircumcised, Jews and Gentiles. Yet the same Old Testament envisions a time when God's choice and favor would no longer be exclusive to one people, but would extend to all people and to the entire Gentile world.

In the New Testament Gospels, Jesus constantly bumps into that Gentile world. Have you noticed how many stories there are of Jesus dealing with Gentiles? These stories are included in the Gospels because the first Christians, the first readers of those Gospels, lived daily with that question, "What do we do with the Gentiles?"

That question comes to a head in the Book of Acts. It begins with the neglecting of the Greek widows (Acts 6:1), Philip and the apostles preach to the Samaritans (Acts 8:4–25), Philip baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–40), Paul is called as apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9), Peter baptizes the household of Cornelius the Roman centurion (Acts 10), Peter is accused by the Jews of fraternizing with Gentiles (Acts 11:1–3), Paul preaches a sermon in Gentile Antioch (Acts 13:46–48) and declares that God has "opened the door of faith to the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27).

The question is formally addressed by the apostles and pastors of the Church in Acts 15. They ask, "Do Gentiles need to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses in order to be saved?" (Acts 15:5) In the end, they issue an apostolic letter to Gentile believers, settling the question once and for all:

*The brothers, both the Apostles and the Elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for*

*the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell. (Acts 15:23–29)*

This is very important. In answer to the question, “Do Gentiles need to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses in order to be saved?” the apostles say that the Gentiles need neither circumcision nor the ceremonial law to be saved.

**This, and this alone,** is the true context for Paul’s statement in 1 Cor. 9:19–23: “I have become all things to all people.”

### **Jews, Gentiles and Weak Consciences**

When Paul says, “I have become all things to all people,” he is operating with the same Old Testament distinction of Jew and Gentile. Paul’s only concern is where his audience stands with respect to circumcision and the rest of the ceremonial law. There are only two groups in view, and those two groups, Jews and Gentiles, make up “all people.” Paul talks about the Jews as “those under the law” and the Gentiles as “those outside the law.” Look at Paul’s words again.

*For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.*

1. *To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews.*

*To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law.*

2. *To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.*

*To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.*

This is the key to rightly understanding Paul's statement, "I have become all things to all people." Paul is not requiring Jews to become Gentiles or Gentiles to become Jews. Paul is not urging the Church to fit in with the prevailing culture, customs, fashions or fads. Paul is not suggesting that the Church adapt itself to the spirit of the age or that Christians imitate unbelievers.

Above all, Paul is commanding the Church to preach the same Gospel of Jesus Christ to Jews and Gentiles — to *all* people. He is urging the Church to remember that some unbelievers are still under the Law and some unbelievers are still outside the Law.

He is also reminding the Church that unbelievers and even fellow believers — both Jews and Gentiles — are or can be weak in conscience and that their weakness also requires the Church and individual Christians to limit the exercise of Christian freedom. In fact, Paul spends all of 1 Corinthians 8 and the previous 18 verses of chapter 9 talking about the "weaker brother."

### **"All Things" Is a Limit to Liberty**

When asked why they have aped pop culture and allowed the world to set the agenda for the Church, Church Growth gurus and vision-casting church leaders quote Paul: "I have become all thing to all men!" They would have you believe that Paul is declaring a free-for-all of Christian liberty. But the opposite is true.

This is how Paul is misread and misapplied. "All things to all men" is not an assertion of Christian liberty; it is limitation of it. Paul is saying that he *sets aside* his Christian liberty for the sake of the Gospel. "For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all." Servants don't assert their liberty; they submit to the limits set on it by the requirements of their service. That is what Paul is saying the Church and the Christian should do. In other words, those who assert their



Christian freedom on the basis of Paul's "all things to all men" statement are doing the opposite of what Paul has commanded.

### **Sometimes Paul Does, Sometimes He Doesn't**

The real proof is in what Paul actually did. In Gal. 2: 11–14, Paul condemned Peter as a hypocrite for being a cultural chameleon, acting like a Gentile around Gentiles and like a Jew around Jews:

*But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"*

Wasn't Peter just trying to fit in? Yes, he was. And that was his problem. Peter's desire to fit in was undermining the Gospel.

In Acts 16:1–3, Paul appears to give in to the Jews of Derbe and Lystra.

*A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.*

Was Paul helping Timothy fit in with the Jews? In Gal. 2:2–5, under similar circumstances, the same Paul refused to let Titus be circumcised:

*Not even Titus who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. And this occurred because of false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage), to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the Gospel might continue with you.*

Martin Luther explains Paul's seemingly inconsistent behavior:

*St. Paul circumcised his disciple Timothy, not because he needed circumcision for his justification, but that he might not offend or condemn those Jews, weak in the faith, who had not yet been able to comprehend the liberty of faith. On the other hand, when they condemned liberty and urged that circumcision was necessary for justification, he resisted them, and would not allow Titus to be circumcised. For, as he would not offend or condemn any one's weakness in faith, but yielded for the time to their will, so, again, he would not have the liberty of faith offended or condemned by hardened self-justifiers, but walked in a middle path, sparing the weak for the time, and always resisting the hardened, that he might convert all to the liberty of faith. On the same principle we ought to act, receiving those that are weak in the faith, but boldly resisting these hardened teachers of works.<sup>1</sup>*

In neither of these cases was Paul the least bit concerned about fitting in. In both cases, Paul knew that the Gospel was at stake. To circumcise Titus would have undermined the Gospel. To leave Timothy uncircumcised would have undermined the Gospel.

This is Paul's only concern. "I have become all things to all men" is not guided by Paul's own Christian liberty, the unbeliever's felt needs, his audience's preferences, the prevailing culture or pagan ideas of God, religion or life. Paul's only concern is where the unbeliever stands with respect to the Old Testament law so that he might make the Gospel clear in every case.

Paul is not concerned about the Church fitting in among the Jews or Gentiles. He isn't even concerned that the Jews or Gentile fit in with the Church. This isn't about fitting in; it is about saving sinners with the Gospel of Jesus.

The real Apostle Paul never counseled, much less commanded, the Church to fit in. Fitting in to the expectations, preferences and pop culture of his day was



not a priority for Paul. Paul's priority was always and only the clear proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus crucified and risen for all people.

The Paul who commands the Church to fit in never existed. He has been manufactured in the imaginations of Church Growth gurus and vision-casting church leaders. They want to fit in. That is their priority. So they project their insecurities on to Paul and require it of the Church today. We should stop listening to them. The real Paul of Scripture and history would have none of their insecure desire to be accepted, affirmed and popular with the world. He did not care about fitting in with all people. He cared about bringing the Gospel to all people.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, "Concerning Christian Liberty," R. S. Grignon, trans., *The Harvard Classics*, vol. 36 (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1910), pp. 369–370.



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# Wittenberg Trail: How Are They to Believe?

by David Whan

*How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? — Rom. 10:14*

Whenever I get the opportunity to tell others the confusing story of my life, I think most Lutherans don't know what to do with me. Honestly, even as I am telling the story to others, I find myself wondering how it all played out like it did. My story is about a guy who grew up spiritually tone deaf and theologically ignorant. I was like a sheep without a shepherd — harassed and helpless (Matt. 9:36). So, how did I become a confessing Lutheran? That's a testimony to God's faithfulness and not my own.

The story begins like so many other Lutheran stories have. I was born the middle child of three into a nominally Lutheran family. I was baptized in March 1970 in a Lutheran Church in America parish in Indiana. We went to church most Sundays. My parents were heavily involved. I went to Vacation Bible School. I was taught to believe in the triune God. I was taught the liturgy. This is all typical Lutheran stuff happening in my childhood, and I can honestly say that I believed. Sounds fine, right? Well, it seemed fine at the time.

The pastor of my early childhood took a call to another parish, and that's when my family began to bounce around to different parishes. My family tried different Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and Lutheran Church –Missouri Synod parishes because generally my parents were looking for a pastor



with “the right kind of personality.” We did this for a little while but everything changed in my teen years when my parents went through an ugly divorce. My dad stuck with the ELCA parish and the pastor he loved, while my mom went back to the parish where I was baptized. I just stopped going to church. Why?

Though I was raised to be Christian and taught Luther’s Catechism, I was your typical Lutheran teen; I didn’t really know or understand much. The things I felt were more important at the time distracted me. However, I remember there was a turning point when I had a theological discussion with two Baptist friends in high school. Two classmates told me that Lutherans weren’t Christians, that my Baptism didn’t mean anything, **that** I needed to be born again. They told me that Lutherans didn’t believe the Bible and the like. I had no idea what they were talking about, so I went to my mom’s new ELCA pastor for help. That turned out, in hindsight, to be a bad idea.

Pastor told me not to listen to my Baptist friends as “those fundamentalists didn’t know what they were talking about.” After all, he told me, “The Bible is kind of like Aesop’s fables. The Bible isn’t historically accurate or trustworthy. Everyone is going to heaven anyway, so don’t sweat the details.” Unfortunately, I took his word. It then occurred to me that if everyone was going to heaven, why go to church at all? Why be a practitioner of any religion for that matter? Between 17 and 24, I didn’t darken the door of a church narthex except on a couple of occasions. I thus became the prodigal son; I walked away from the Father’s house (Luke 15).

I won’t bore you with the details of this period of my life, but needless to say, I thought myself a sort of confused agnostic. Generally, I was disinterested. I was living life my way and that was all that mattered to me. Like so many confused, ignorant and ungrounded young people, I was enjoying my life to the fullest, burning the candle at both ends as you can imagine. I didn’t have a care in the world,

except for myself. Life was fun for a while, but I couldn't shake the thought that I was living life incorrectly and the decisions I was making were destructive and harmful. Not that it changed my course of action. I was the prodigal son, living in unbelief.

It was at the occasion of my 24<sup>th</sup> birthday that I reached the proverbial fork in the road. For whatever reason, it was clear in my mind that if I kept on living this way, I was going to end up dead or in jail. I guess seven years of partying like there was no tomorrow had taken its toll. I was burned out, distressed and miserable. It was on my birthday that I had a clear idea of what I needed to do. No, it wasn't a vision from heaven, but it was a clear, unmistakable notion that I had to change. I had to stop living this way and return to my Father's house. So I sobered up, bought a Bible and went back to the parish where I was baptized.

The same pastor was still at the helm of that parish. He welcomed me back, and so did everyone else. I was back, but things were different for me this time. I was voraciously reading the Bible and had a ton of questions concerning our previous conversations. I talked with the pastor. I talked with the laity. I quickly began to discover that these folks believed that just as "all roads lead to Rome;" so also all religions were equal and led to the same destination. This, of course, was in direct conflict with the very words of Christ: "I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). I don't know why, but at this point I began to trust the words of the Scriptures over what I was being taught in that ELCA parish. I was convinced that I needed to get out and find another church. But where? Lord, to whom shall I go?

I began the long process of searching through other denominations. I tried Pentecostalism, Arminianism and even non-denominationalism. Ironically, I even spent a few years in an LCMS parish. It was here that I was disciplined not with

Lutheran materials **but with** Baptist and other non-Lutheran materials instead. The membership class I took used Henry Blackaby's text *Experiencing God* as a requirement for membership. I also joined a leadership group that was led by a pastor who used *God's Plan for Man* by Finis Dake. So, an LCMS parish used Southern Baptist and Pentecostal teaching materials? Yes, they did. As you can imagine, I still knew little about Lutheranism and didn't see how Lutherans were any different than American Evangelicals even into my early 30s. I was a sheep still without an under-shepherd.

I left the LCMS in my early 30s because I believed the LCMS, as I ignorantly understood it, was boring. The praise and worship bands were lame. The LCMS parish I went to wasn't "cutting edge" and seemed trapped in the 70s and 80s. Instead, I became a pastor in the Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA). But eventually that experience also proved theologically and emotionally painful. After serving nearly three years in the EFCA, I found out my senior pastor was an emergent liberal. He had serious doubts about justification by grace through faith, substitutionary atonement and the like. I realized I was back in the ELCA again, only under a different denominational name. I began to have serious doubts that I could find any faithful churches or pastors in this world. It seemed to me that no matter where I went I found congregations and pastors that either didn't believe the Bible at any level or they had serious theological problems — not that even I myself understood the truth at this point of my life. I was quite blind, but by God's grace this was about to change.

Ironically, it was at this time that the LCMS pastors who had catechized me with Blackaby and Dake told my wife and me that we should return to the LCMS. I also thought about going to seminary as I was hungry to learn and grow in Christ. But they warned me that whatever I did, I shouldn't listen to any Lutheran professor

that would try and convince me of anything beyond the Augsburg Confession. “What’s the Augsburg Confession?” I asked. I didn’t have a clue.

I applied to become a student at the LCMS seminary in Fort Wayne because I was from Indiana and that made sense. It was only by the grace of God that I was accepted. I honestly don’t know why they let me in, but they did. I can only assume they knew that I needed catechizing and they would watch me closely to see if I came to a proper confession of the faith. Going to Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, means you are going to read and learn the Lutheran Confessions. I was blown away by what I was learning. I truly had no idea what Lutherans believed even though I was raised Lutheran. I was not taught this as a child or young adult. This kind of Lutheranism was very different. I wasn’t sure I could buy it all, but I was learning things I had never heard before and it was challenging me to examine everything I had previously believed to be true. Eventually, after four quarters of solid teaching and chapel, I began to really understand and embrace the evangelical Lutheran Confessions. I felt like a sheep who had been brought into the fold.

I had wandered all my life without ever having been taught the purity of God’s Word. I’ve had Lutheran pastors over the years that were just as unfaithful and theologically confused as non-Lutheran pastors. I would not have become a confessing and practicing Lutheran without the teaching and preaching I had received at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne. I would not have believed unless someone had preached to me. I would not have understood God’s faithfulness unless someone had enlightened me with a pure confession of God’s Word. I would not have grown to love the Divine Service and historic liturgies unless a called servant of the Word had formed me in its faithful practice. I would not have believed in God alone working salvation through the Word in the water, nor

received Christ's body and blood unless a man had been sent by God carefully and patiently to teach and preach to me. I would still be lost. I would still be wandering unless God had sent me faithful under-shepherds to tend and guide me to the green pastures of God's pure Word.

I will forever be in the debt of men who have given their lives to Christ to serve God's people. I will forever appreciate those men who faithfully teach Lutheran doctrine and practice. I myself want to be this man for others, to give to both young and old that same treasure that was passed to me. I find myself having tremendous compassion for those who, like me, were aimlessly wandering without a faithful under-shepherd. I also find myself having little patience with pastors who have gone astray from their ordination vows to run after other theologies. What we have in the evangelical Lutheran Confessions is a priceless treasure drawn out of God's pure Word. What we have in Lutheran liturgy is something far richer than any other practice can offer. I thank God for His faithfulness and mercy to me, a poor, miserable sinner. I thank Him for sending faithful preachers and teachers into my life to lead and guide me into all truth. I pray God will continue to send out men who will clearly and passionately communicate Lutheran doctrine and practice so that future generations may come to know the joy and honor of being Lutheran.



Rev. David Whan grew up on a small family farm in northeast Indiana. He and his lovely bride Natalie married in 1996 and since that time they have been blessed to have a daughter and two sons, all of whom attend Lutheran elementary school. He is a second career pastor and a veteran of the USAF. He enjoys gardening, landscaping, playing baseball, basketball, volleyball and tetherball with his kids at the parsonage. When he isn't serving God's people, he also enjoys reading military history, target shooting and smoking barbecue. The things he admires most about his parish is their over 150 year faithful devotion to the exclusive use of Lutheran liturgy, every Sunday communion with the common cup only, and their passion and support for Lutheran education pre-school through high school.



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