

# Issues, Etc.

JOURNAL



Is the Law Bad?

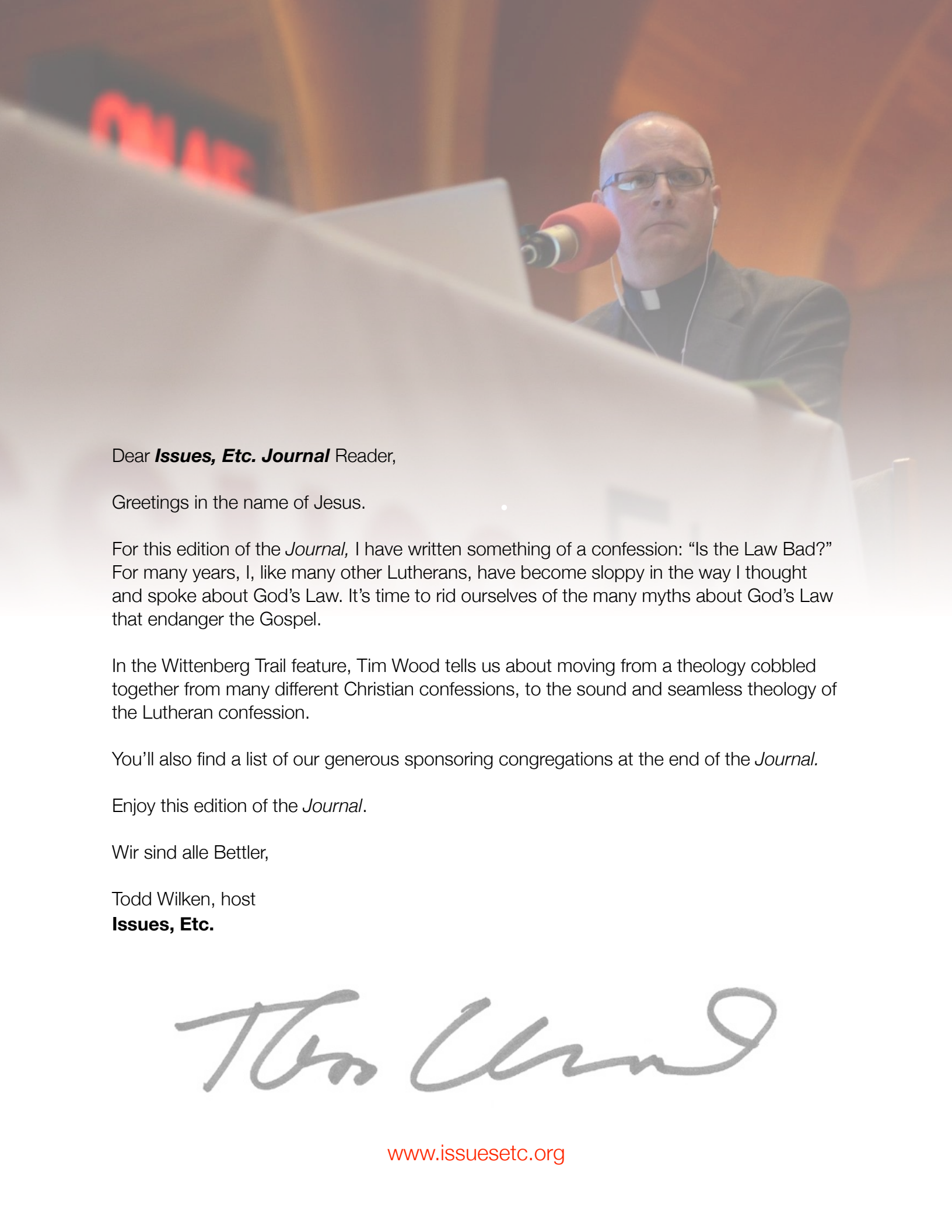
by Todd Wilken

Wittenberg Trail:  
A Journey to Sound Doctrine

by Tim Wood

Winter —2016

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A man with glasses and a clerical collar is 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 something of a confession: "Is the Law Bad?" For many years, I, like many other Lutherans, have become sloppy in the way I thought and spoke about God's Law. It's time to rid ourselves of the many myths about God's Law that endanger the Gospel.

In the Wittenberg Trail feature, Tim Wood tells us about moving from a theology cobbled together from many different Christian confessions, to the sound and seamless theology of the Lutheran confession.

You'll also find a list of our generous sponsoring congregations at the end of the *Journal*.

Enjoy this edition of the *Journal*.

Wir sind alle Bettler,

Todd Wilken, host  
**Issues, Etc.**

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

Todd Wilken





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## Is the Law Bad? Some Myths about God's Law

by Todd Wilken

*Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully. —1 Tim. 1:8*

*Without the Law the Gospel is not understood. —C. F. W. Walther*

Do you think that God's Law is a bad thing? Don't answer too quickly.

Your response might be, "Yes. I'm a Lutheran! I'm all about the Gospel, not the Law." If so, read on, because you're dead wrong.

Or your response might be, "Of course not! The Bible says that the Law of God is good, holy and righteous." If so, you're right! But read on to make sure you really believe that.

Either way, I want you to think about some common myths Lutherans sometimes entertain about God's Law. These myths can lead Lutherans (who, of all people, should know better) to conclude that God's Law is actually a bad thing. These myths can also lead Lutherans who know that God's Law is good to despise the Law in practice.

The truth is that Lutherans in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century were and have become sloppy. We've become sloppy in the way we think and talk about the Law. You might ask, "So what? Shouldn't we be more concerned about the pure Gospel?" The answer is that any error regarding the Law always comes with an error regarding the Gospel. Sloppiness in the way we think and talk about the Law brings sloppiness in the way we think and talk about the Gospel. If you really care about the pure Gospel, you'll care about the pure Law too.

The Law is the unchanging will of God for us to live in love — love for Him above all and love for our neighbors as ourselves. Is this Law a bad thing?

You might say, "Wilken, you're just setting up a straw man. No Lutheran really thinks that the Law is a bad thing." I certainly did . . . without even realizing that I did. In truth, this is a personal story. For the better part of the last 25 years, I have been sloppy too. How? Because at one time or another, intentionally or unintentionally, I accepted and perpetuated some or all of the following myths about the Law.

### **Myth: Any Bad Situation Is the Law**

The old Lutheran liberals of the last century loved to say that the Gospel is any good news in a bad situation. They had a generic Gospel. If you were thirsty, the Gospel was a drink of water. If you were hungry, the Gospel was a square meal. This allowed the old liberals to avoid the biblical Gospel (with its dependence on ideas like the divinity of Jesus and His bodily resurrection) and replace it with the social gospel. "Preach the Gospel" no longer meant preaching the death and resurrection of Jesus; it meant any good news applied to a bad situation.

But many Lutherans who reject this way of talking about the Gospel accept this way of talking about the Law. They have a generic Law. If you have a bad day, that's Law. If your job is demanding, that's Law. If you're just feeling the many pressures of life, that's Law. It's not a big jump, is it? After all, if the Law is bad news, then any bad situation is Law, right? Wrong.



This misconception about the Law has led to a very strange idea, namely, that the world and even our church pews are full of people who don't need to hear the Law:

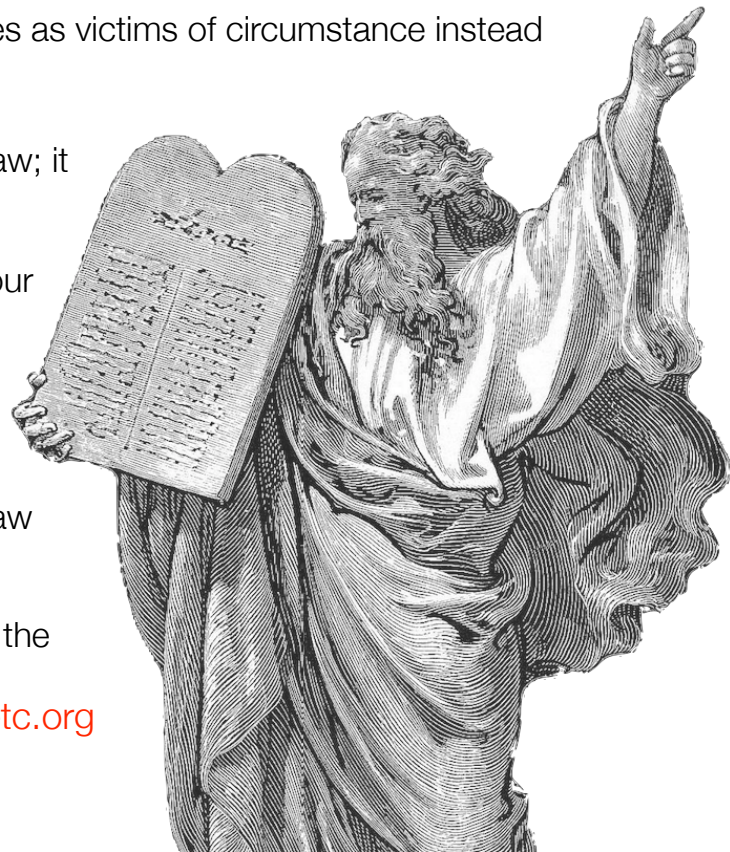
*Very often the people who fill our pews have already felt the death arrows of the law in their daily life. The law calls upon people to perform. In daily life people are called to perform endlessly on the job, in their families, in their communities. The pressure to perform is relentless. Life so beats people down. They are painfully aware that they do not measure up. The last thing such persons need when they go to church is to be beaten down even more by the law!*<sup>1</sup>

Life is tough for everyone. Everyone feels “the pressure to perform” of one kind or another. By this reasoning, why anyone would need to hear the Law?

But not every “pressure to perform” is God's Law. A person can feel beaten down by an employer's unrealistic expectation of an 80 hour work week. People feel guilty for all sorts of reasons that have nothing to do with God's Law. Some people feel guilty for the size of their carbon footprint without a touch of guilt over sleeping around.

When this idea of generic “Law” prevails, the Law is divorced from Scripture, any of its specific commands and the very idea of sin. It also breeds a generation of pastors and Christians who think of themselves as victims of circumstance instead of sinners accountable to God and His Word.

“Life so beats people down” isn't the Law; it may just be life in a fallen world. Are the difficulties of life in a fallen world the result of our sin? Yes. But the Law isn't just suffering in a fallen world; it is the specific commands of God flowing from His eternal will. This “Law” isn't God's Law; it's just the daily grind. The Law isn't any tough situation or life's pressure to perform, the Law is the Ten Commandments, the





specific commands of Scripture.

Moreover, for a Law that consists of life's difficulties and troubles, any practical solution will do. This kind of "Law" certainly doesn't require a sinless Jesus to die on the cross for you. Jesus didn't die because life is hard; He died because we failed to keep God's commandments. God's Law isn't generic. His Law is specific, addressed to real sinners who commit real sins. His Law requires a sinless Jesus to give His life for those sinners.

### **Myth: The Law Is the Opposite of the Gospel**

It's easy to understand the origin of this myth about the Law. God's Law and Gospel are often distinguished from one another by their differences. C. F. W. Walther's classic work, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* has the comprehensive list:

*The true points of difference between the Law and the Gospel are the following: —*

- 1. These two doctrines differ as regards the manner of their being revealed to man;*
- 2. As regards their contents;*
- 3. As regards the promises held out by either doctrine;*
- 4. As regards their threatenings;*
- 5. As regards the function and the effect of either doctrine;*
- 6. As regards the persons to whom either the one or the other doctrine must be preached.<sup>2</sup>*

But Walther prefaces this list of differences by saying that the Law and the Gospel in no way contradict one another: "Nor can we establish a difference by claiming that the Law and the Gospel contradict each other. There are no contradictions in Scripture. Each is distinct from the other, but both are in the most perfect harmony with one another."<sup>3</sup>

With all these differences, it is understandable that some Lutherans could conclude that the Law and the Gospel are opposites. But they're not. For example, the Gospel says that Jesus died for you. The Law doesn't say Jesus didn't die for

you. The Gospel says that your sins are completely forgiven for Jesus' sake. The Law doesn't say that your sins aren't forgiven. The Gospel says that you have been reconciled to God. The Law doesn't deny this. In fact, the Law has *nothing whatsoever* to say about any of these things.

God is telling the truth in the Law when He says, "Do this and you will live." (Lev. 18:5; Luke 10:28). And the Gospel doesn't say, "Do this and you will die" or "Don't do this and you will live." No. The Gospel says, "*Jesus did this for you and you will live.*" As Walther says,

*The Law tells us what we are to do. No such instruction is contained in the Gospel. On the contrary, the Gospel reveals to us only what God is doing. The Law is speaking concerning our works; the Gospel, concerning the great works of God. In the Law we hear the tenfold summons, "Thou shalt." Beyond that the Law has nothing to say to us. The Gospel, on the other hand, makes no demands whatever.*<sup>4</sup>

If we think of the Law as the opposite of the Gospel, as though whatever one says, the other says the opposite, we make a mess of both. We end up with a Law that denies the Gospel, and a Gospel that denies the Law. In other words, we end up with neither God's Law nor His Gospel.

The Law and the Gospel are different in many ways, but they are not opposites. They are two different words from God that are perfectly complementary. The Law says "Do this," and nothing more. The Gospel tells us much more. The Gospel tells us that Jesus has done this for us.

### **Myth: The Law Is the Same Thing as the "Opinion of the Law"**

The "opinion of the Law" sounds like it should be the same thing as the Law, doesn't it? It isn't. The "opinion of the Law" is a phrase that comes from the Lutheran Confessions, specifically from the Apology to the Augsburg Confession (III, 144–145):

*Works become conspicuous among men. Human reason naturally admires these, and because it sees only works, and does not understand or consider*

*faith, it dreams accordingly that these works merit remission of sins and justify. This opinion of the Law inheres by nature in men's minds; neither can it be expelled, unless when we are divinely taught. But the mind must be recalled from such carnal opinions to the Word of God.*

The “opinion of the Law” is that set of “carnal opinions” that hold that human works can merit forgiveness and justify us before God. But that isn’t what God’s Law says, is it? Not at all. The Law demands good works, yes. It demands perfect good works. And by this demand of perfection, the Law dispels and destroys any hope of relying on such works in sinners convicted by the Law. When the Law is rightly heard, it teaches you to distrust your own works.

Far from being the same thing as the Law, the “opinion of the Law” is merely fallen man’s reliance on his own works, his own self-righteousness. The “opinion of the Law” is not the teaching of God’s Law; rather, it is man’s failure to heed that teaching. The “opinion of the Law” completely misconstrues the purpose of the Law. Hymn writer Paul Speratus captured this in his Reformation hymn, “Salvation Unto Us Has Come:”

*It was a false, misleading dream  
That God His Law had given  
So sinners could themselves redeem  
And by their works gain Heaven.  
The Law is but a mirror bright  
To bring the inbred sin to light  
That lurks within our nature.*

This “false, misleading dream” isn’t the Law; it is the idea that God had given His Law so that sinners could redeem themselves. This dream doesn’t come from God or His Law but from sinners who misunderstand the Law as a means of self-justification.

God’s Law doesn’t agree with the “opinion of the law;” rather, the mirror of the Law exposes this opinion as false and misleading. And yet it is not unusual to find Lutherans speaking of the “opinion of the Law” as though it were the same

thing as the Law. Theologian Steven Paulson describes the “opinion of the Law” as “the basic scheme of the law and its morality.”<sup>5</sup> Another example comes from a layperson writing for a Lutheran blog:

*Martin Luther called it the Opinion of the Law, or “Opinio Legis”. In Romans 2, Paul tells us that, whether or not we accept God’s Law, law has been written into our hearts and consciences; and, as a result, our thoughts are constantly expressing our internal Opinion of the Law, as we understand it. We are always alternately accusing or defending in every situation we encounter. Law is, quite simply, the default mode of all human beings. It is the lens through which we naturally and initially view everything.*<sup>6</sup>

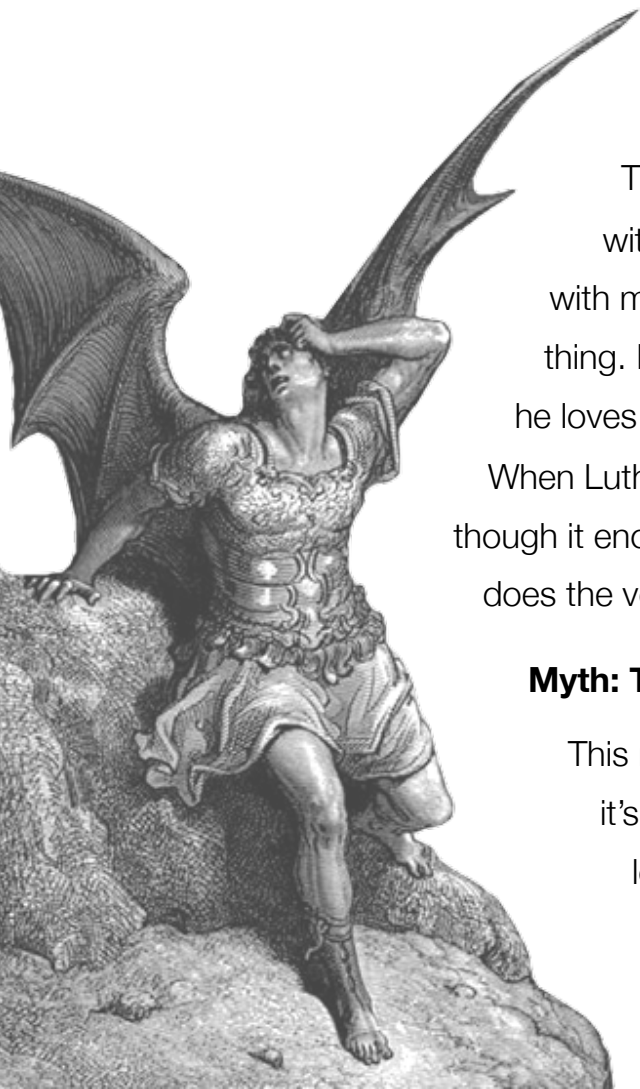
The writer has unwittingly confused God’s Law (in this case, written on the heart) with fallen man’s “opinion of the Law,” with man’s trust in his own works. The two are not the same thing. The Law is not the default mode of fallen man; the sinful “opinion of the Law” is.<sup>7</sup> The Law is not the lens through which fallen man views

everything (would that it were!); reliance on works, self-justification and self-righteousness are.

This myth confuses man’s works and his love of them with what the Law demands. Don’t confuse God’s Law with man’s “opinion of the Law.” They are not the same thing. Fallen man does not love the Law or desire to keep it; he loves his own works and relies on them to save himself. When Lutherans confuse the two, they speak of God’s Law as though it encourages reliance on works when the Law actually does the very opposite.

### **Myth: The Devil Loves the Law**

This misconception flows from the previous one and has its variations: The Old Adam loves the Law, unbelievers love the Law, the devil loves your good works, etc.



The reasoning goes like this: If the Law encourages reliance on works (it doesn't), and the devil wants man to rely on his works (he does), then the Law is really the devil's ally, and the devil must love it.

Even theologian Gustaf Wingren, author of the definitive work, *Luther on Vocation* perpetuates this myth:

*In the conscience, or before God, the Law is a tyrant and the work of the devil, which must be reduced to its proper place, the body and earth, by the gospel of Christ. In the conscience, Law and free will are evil in their activity; all of it the devil's activity against God.*<sup>8</sup>

As you can see, in the end, this myth regards the Law as the devil's word rather than God's Word. It is no wonder that Lutherans devoted to this myth tend toward antinomianism, that is, a rejection of the Law. After all, if the Law is the devil's ally or even the devil's word, then the Law is actually diabolical, and not divine.

But when considered this way, it is obvious that the Law is not the word of Satan; it is the Word of God. Satan's accusations against man, his temptations to sin or to despair of God's mercy aren't the Law; they are a terrible distortion of God's Word. The devil doesn't love God's Law; he loves his own lies.<sup>9</sup>

### **Myth: The Law Is a Theology of Glory** <sup>10</sup>

Many have observed that theology is the art of making distinctions. Martin Luther is a great example. Along with Law and Gospel, justification and sanctification, right and left hand kingdoms, faith and reason, and many others, Luther drew one of his most famous (and misunderstood) distinctions very early in his career: the theologian of glory and the theologian of the cross. Briefly, a theology of glory is one that tries to measure God's disposition toward the sinner by "visible and manifest things" *apart from* the suffering and death of Jesus. The theologian of glory looks to life's circumstances as signs of God's favor or disfavor. By contrast, the theologian of the cross comprehends all of life's circumstances *through* the suffering and death of Jesus. He looks to the cross alone to find God's favor.



Theology is the art of making distinctions, but not all of theology's distinctions distinguish the same things. The distinction between Law and Gospel is indispensable for rightly understanding all the other Lutheran distinctions, but that doesn't mean that those other distinctions are just versions of the Law/Gospel distinction. A failure to understand this is at the heart of the misconception that the Law is a theology of glory.

It's this simple: A theology of glory is always a false way of understanding God while the Law is a true but incomplete way of understanding God. The Law speaks the truth as far as it goes, but it is given to and prepares us to hear the Gospel.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, the theology of glory is never true in any sense whatsoever. In other words, the distinction between the theology of glory and the theology of the cross is not a parallel to the distinction between the Law and the Gospel.

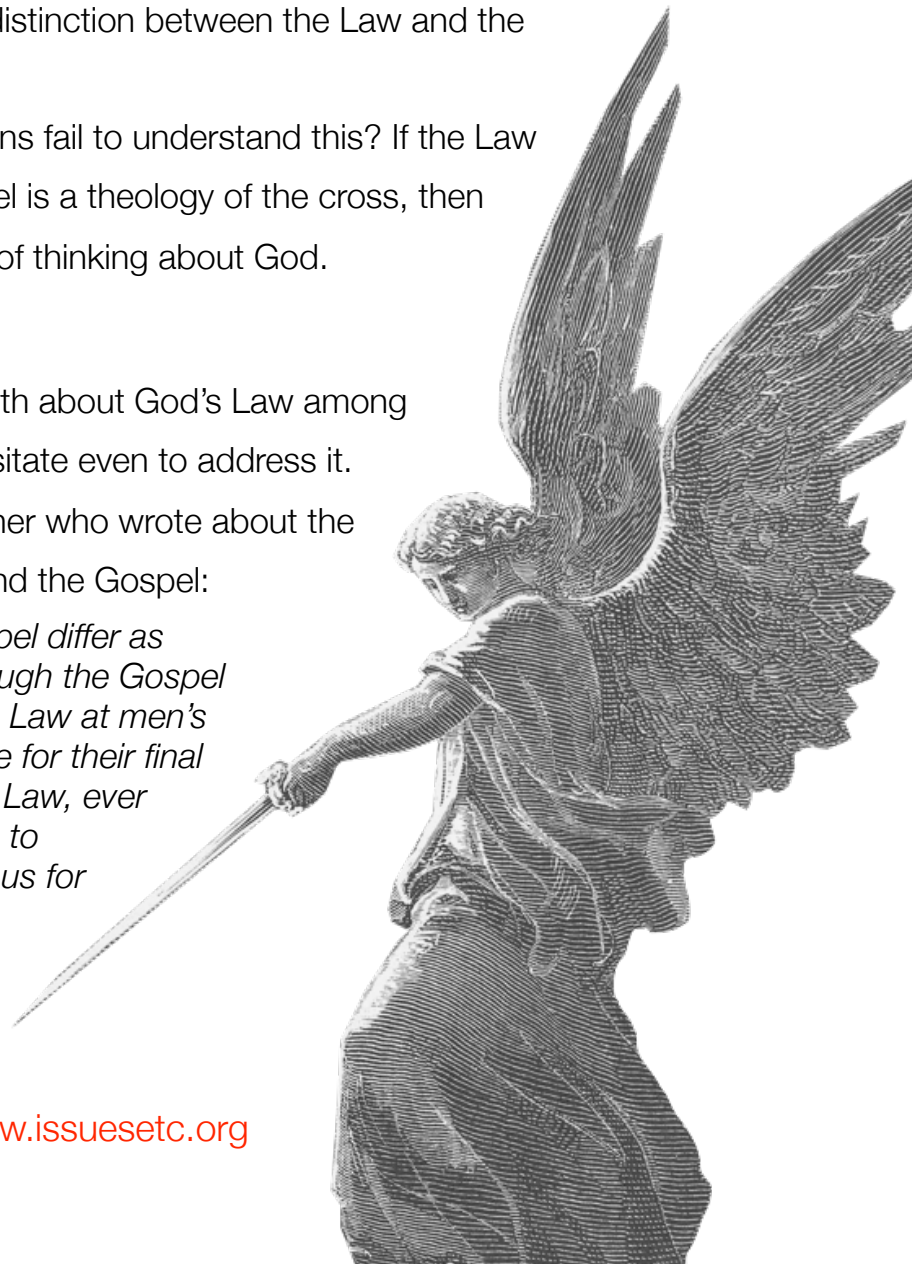
What happens when Lutherans fail to understand this? If the Law is a theology of glory and the Gospel is a theology of the cross, then the Law is regarded as a false way of thinking about God.

### **Myth: The Law's Aim Is to Kill**

This is the most common myth about God's Law among Lutherans. It is so popular that I hesitate even to address it. But let's turn again to C. F. W. Walther who wrote about the real differences between the Law and the Gospel:

*Nor do the Law and the Gospel differ as regards their final aim, as though the Gospel aimed at men's salvation, the Law at men's condemnation. No, both have for their final aim man's salvation; only the Law, ever since the Fall, cannot lead us to salvation; it can only prepare us for the Gospel.*<sup>12</sup>

Walther is being very careful. Does



the Law result in the condemnation and death of sinners? Yes. But is the aim of the Law to kill? No. Walther is guided by Paul's equally careful argument in Romans 7:8–13:

*Apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.*

Think carefully about what Paul is saying here. According to Paul, what killed him? The Law? No. Sin killed him. He says, “Sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me,” and “It was sin, producing death in me.” In fact, Paul says that the Law is “the very commandment that promised life” and “holy, righteous and good.” Then he asks, “Did that which is good [God’s Law], then, bring death to me?” His answer is an emphatic No. Paul is insistent: Sin, not the Law, killed him.<sup>13</sup>

What are we to make of this, especially when Paul elsewhere, speaking of the Ten Commandments, says, “The letter kills” (2 Cor. 3:6)? Here in Romans Paul is explaining exactly how the Law that promises life nevertheless proves fatal to sinners. Paul is saying that sin is dead apart from the Law. But the Law enlivens sin, and sin kills the sinner. The aim of the Law is not to kill but to give life. The Lutheran Confessions get this right that “through sin the Law kills” (SA, III, iii, 7).

You may ask, “What difference does it make? When the Law comes, the sinner ends up dead anyway.” The reason it makes a difference is because the Law promises life, and that is not a false promise. The Law’s promise of life is not false; it is conditional. Walther writes:

*What the Law promises is just as great a boon as what the Gospel promises, namely, everlasting life and salvation. But at this point we are confronted with*

*a mighty difference: all promises of the Law are made on certain conditions, namely, on the condition that we fulfill the Law perfectly.*<sup>14</sup>

“Do this and you will live” is not a false promise. But it is a promise conditioned on man’s perfect obedience. You see, the fault doesn’t lie in the Law or its promise; the fault lies in us sinners. Our sin, not God’s Law, is the cause of death.<sup>15</sup> This is Paul’s whole point in Romans chapter 7. We must not confuse the Law’s purpose with its effect. The Law’s aim and promise is to give life and salvation; its effect in sinners is to bring death and condemnation. The Law that truly promises life, nevertheless kills through sin.

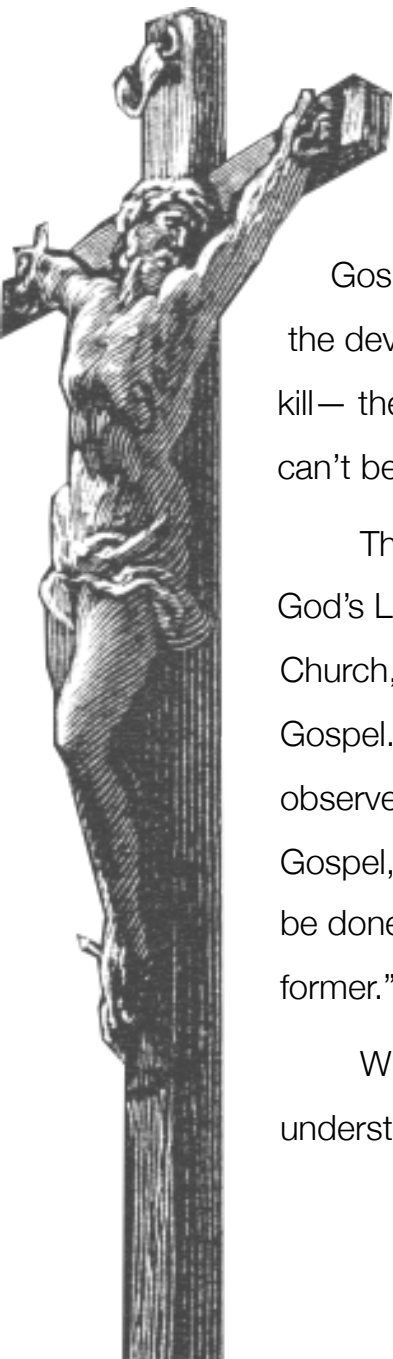
### **The Other Reason the Law Isn’t a Bad Thing**

The Law is no less the Word of God than the Gospel. God’s Word is good. If any or all of these myths about the Law are true — if the Law is just any bad situation, if the Law is the opposite of the

Gospel, if the Law is the same thing as fallen man’s “opinion of the law,” if the devil loves the Law, if the Law is a theology of glory, if the Law’s aim is to kill — then how can the Law be “good, righteous and holy” as Paul says? It can’t be.

These myths have one thing in common, and lead to one conclusion: God’s Law is bad. They perpetuate a false understanding of the Law in the Church, and that can have only one result: a false understanding of the Gospel. The great historian of the Lutheran Confessions, Friedrich Bente observed: “Wherever the Law is despised, disparaged, and corrupted, the Gospel, too, cannot be kept intact. Whenever the Law is assailed, even if this be done in the name of the Gospel, the latter is, in reality, hit harder than the former.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, maligning the Law does not magnify the Gospel.

Without the pure Law, there is no pure Gospel. Without a right understanding of the Law, the Gospel is misunderstood as well. It’s this



simple: You can't have the Gospel without the Law. The Gospel is the Law's condemnation applied to Jesus in your place. Jesus not only perfectly kept God's good and holy Law for you, but He also suffered all the wrath of God, the condemnation, the punishment and the death that the Law brings to sinners. Jesus suffered and died in the place of sinners who could never do what the Law demands.

The Gospel is made out of the Law. Jesus' obedience to the Law for sinners *is* the Gospel. The righteousness of Jesus that is reckoned to you in the Gospel is nothing other than His obedience to the Law.<sup>17</sup> Jesus' perfect obedience to the Law is the reason your sins are forgiven. The Law demanded perfect obedience of you; Jesus obeyed perfectly for you. The Law demanded that you die; Jesus died in the your place. The Gospel is the Law's promise, "Do this and you will live," fulfilled by Jesus for you. Jesus did everything the Law requires. Jesus did nothing the Law forbids. He "did this" for you, and so you live.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Jensen, *Thinking in Story: Preaching in a Post-literate Age* (Lima: CSS Publishing 1993), 70.

<sup>2</sup> C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, W.H.T. Dau, trans. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928), 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Steven Paulson, *Lutheran Theology* (New York: T.T. Clark International, 2011), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Bonnie Petroschuk, "The Way Things Should Be," <http://www.christholdfast.org/blog/the-way-things-should-be>

<sup>7</sup> "The Law, moreover, is the word which reproves and condemns sins. Therefore, this voice which says, I have sinned against the Lord, as David says, 2 Sam. 12:13, is the handwriting. And wicked and secure men do not seriously give forth this voice. For they do not see, they do not read the sentence of the Law written in the heart." (Apol. XII, 48)

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<sup>8</sup> Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, Carl Rasmussen, trans. (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1957), 104.

<sup>9</sup> John 8:44.

<sup>10</sup> This myth was first pointed out to me by Rev. Bryan Wolfmueeller.

<sup>11</sup> “The Law is properly a divine doctrine, in which the righteous, immutable will of God is revealed, what is to be the quality of man in his nature, thoughts, words, and works, in order that he may be pleasing and acceptable to God; and it threatens its transgressors with God's wrath and temporal and eternal punishments” (FC SD, V, 17). “For the Law says indeed that it is God's will and command that we should walk in a new life, but it does not give the power and ability to begin and do it; but the Holy Ghost, who is given and received, not through the Law, but through the preaching of the Gospel, Gal. 3:14, renews the heart. Thereafter the Holy Ghost employs the Law so as to teach the regenerate from it, and to point out and show them in the Ten Commandments what is the [good and] acceptable will of God, Rom. 12:2, in what good works God hath before ordained that they should walk, Eph. 2:10” (FC SD, VI, 11).

<sup>12</sup> Walther, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Paul is simply applying to himself what he has said earlier of the whole world in Rom. 5:12-13: “Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned— for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law.”

<sup>14</sup> Walther, 10.

<sup>15</sup> “For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law” (Rom. 2:12). “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the Law” (1 Cor. 15:56). “But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (James 1:14-15). See also Rom. 1:32; 6:21-23; 7:5; 8:7; Gal. 6:8. For a full explanation of the relationship between the Law, sin and death in Romans 7, see Michael Middendorf, *Concordia Commentary: Romans 1-8* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 534-541.

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Bente, “Historical Introductions to Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church,” in *Triglot Concordia* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House 1917), 161.

<sup>17</sup> “We believe, teach, and confess that our righteousness before God is this very thing, that God forgives us our sins out of pure grace, without any work, merit, or worthiness of ours preceding, present, or following, that He presents and imputes to us the righteousness of Christ's obedience, on account of which righteousness we are received into grace by God, and regarded as righteous” (FC Ep. III, 4).



# Youth School

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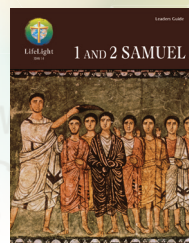
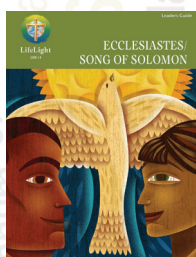
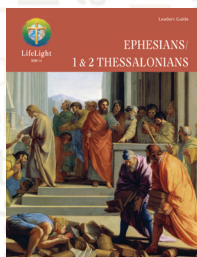


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# Wittenberg Trail: A Journey to Sound Doctrine

by Tim Wood

We arrived at confessional Lutheranism much the same as the Ethiopian eunuch became a Christian: We needed a properly trained theologian to come alongside us and reveal the scriptural truth to which we were blind. Before describing that process, it's necessary to retrace some history.

## **Growing Up African**

Our backgrounds in South Africa resemble a gathering of the World Council of Churches. My parents are Baptist and come from lineages that were pietistic Lutheran, Seventh Day Adventist, Anglican, Salvation Army and Apostolic.

Growing up, the Baptist Church delivered a combination of Spurgeon and Moody but mostly Moody. Involvement in the life of the church was taken seriously and with great reverence for Scripture and legalism. For high school, I attended a nominally Baptist boarding school that practiced YWAM-style evangelicalism. School was followed by conscription to the South African army where I was in a minority that was identified in church parades as “Englishmen, soccer players and Methodists.” Indeed, Methodism was the only option provided until we deployed to operational areas where the chaplains who attended us were uniformly Dutch Reformed with crippled English.

My wife, Wanita, was born into a lapsed Baptist and Dutch Reformed household that dabbled with the Jehovah's Witnesses, and Rosicrucianism. Her

upbringing was primarily pagan until her middle school years when her mother fell headlong into the Word of Faith movement thanks to a Rhema import from Oklahoma. It was hardly an ideal place to discover Christianity, and yet she came away from it with a remarkable knowledge of Scripture but not doctrine.

On graduation from the university, we married and only drifted back to church after our first child was born, giving the prior years of Sundays to leisure. We found a Baptist-influenced, non-denominational church. It was a clear indication that we didn't have a clue about the purpose and function of church, only that there was an amorphous need for it. We never got the chance to settle in after receiving the opportunity to emigrate to the United States in 2000.

### **Pew Itinerancy**

The trans-Atlantic hop produced substantial culture shock, especially in searching for a church. Our reflex was to find something "Baptist" only to discover that there were several dozen strains of Baptist just in central New Jersey. Since it was impossible to reliably sort out which was which, we tried a Christian and Missionary Alliance church on the recommendation of acquaintances. It was on the leading edge of the seeker-friendly mega-church wave, and it repulsed us with its shallowness and relentless merchandising.

Eventually, exhausted after months of pew itinerancy and hungry for assimilation, we took up space at an Assemblies of God church in a beautiful building across from Princeton University. As Assemblies of God churches go, it was remarkably tame with few of the charismatic eccentricities for which the denomination is known. But we never settled, despite making dear friends.

When our eldest daughter needed to start school, we selected a local Christian school affiliated with a "Bible" church, our first exposure to narrow Fundamentalism. Inevitably, we left the Assemblies of God church for the Bible

church where there was no praise band to grind our teeth against and the preaching was more sound.

With the benefit of hindsight, we now understand that we were being dosed with Law-Gospel-Law. The Gospel proclamation was clear and regular, but it would subsequently be smothered with relentless exhortations to live transformed lives. Ironically, the pastors urged the congregation's members to be certain of their salvation in Christ alone, only to undermine that assurance with stories of failed sanctification that proved that the culprit had made a false confession of faith to begin with.

A job offer took us from New Jersey to St. Louis where the church search drama began all over again. We ran through a seemingly endless number of churches before giving up and choosing a Bible church with a “quiet” style that inclined to hymns rather than happy-clappy enthusiasm.

Although we had enrolled our son at a local LCMS early learning center, our reaction to attending services there was, “This is Roman Catholicism.” We had been conditioned all our lives to regard any liturgical display as the spawn of Rome.

Despite the variety of churches we cycled through over the years, they all had a core mashup heterodox theology:

A. Decision theology with four chief parts

1. Choosing Jesus as Lord following remorse about sin. Radical conversion from deviancy is somewhat prized since it provides a the narrative for a “personal testimony.” Testimonies are leveraged as an irresistible means of evangelism and an irrefutable apologetics tool.



2. Full immersion Baptism accompanied by saccharine sentiment to advertise the sincerity of the individual's commitment to be a Jesus follower.
  3. Cultivating "relationship with Jesus" through spiritual disciplines, mission trips and doing nice things for others. Those are used as mile markers, which must be visible, for sanctification,.
  4. Periodic revitalizations to balance the despair at being unable to keep the Law. This can involve repeated Baptisms in case the prior ones did not take for an unrecognized lack of sincerity.
- B. A rejection of the Sacraments in favor public and private acts of obedience.
- C. Reading Scripture eisegetically and analogously in search of personal applications.
- D. Dispensational eschatology with a heavy influence on supporting Israel in order to fulfill end-times prophecy.
- E. Continuationism that produces prideful demonstrations of piety and proof of relationship.

## **Theological Logjam**

A confluence of events broke the theological logjam. It started with a sermon where the pastor preached from a text that included a reference to Baptism. He paused to tell us that the text did not mean what it plainly said but had another meaning that preserved Baptism as merely an ordinance. It was shocking and unsettling to hear.

At the same time, I was developing serious objections to Dispensationalism following a sermon series on Revelation that was off-kilter.

The disagreement was mostly rational rather than theological, but researching the theology surfaced Calvinists of the Young, Restless and Reformed variety. Lutherans did not pop up, because Lutherans tend to say rather little about eschatology.

That initial contact started to bring us deeper into the five-point Calvinist orbit. That network was serious about doctrine in a way that we had never heard before, which resulted in us starting to track toward monergism. In turn, that was unlocking door after door in our understanding and application of Scripture.

As this was developing, I was asked to become involved in “children’s ministries.” In searching for a curriculum for a new school year, it became obvious that there was nothing salutary from the usual publishers the church relied upon. All the material was focused on developing obedience and upholding Jesus as a moral example.

To test my suspicions, I conducted an informal survey of church kids who were regulars on Sundays, at Vacation Bible School, summer camps and Wednesday night clubs, those deeply immersed in the life and teaching of the congregation. The question was simple: “Why did Jesus have to die on a cross?” The answers were disheartening in their near uniformity: “Because He loves me.” It was Veggie Tales theology. When the survey was extended to adults, the responses were hardly different. The church had a very weak soteriology and a deformed Christology. It celebrated God’s grace without any notion of the means of grace.

It so happened that in the search for a new curriculum I came across Concordia Publishing House’s *Growing with Christ* materials. It was exactly what we needed, but it was Lutheran. That was a problem because it kept referencing the Sacraments. We could not teach the material because Baptism was

something you performed as a faith proof and Communion was to test sincerity. In both instances, they were undertaken at the instigation of parents.

Compelled to undertake some research on the Sacraments, we were flooded with Lutheran resources. We came into contact with the White Horse Inn and *Modern Reformation*, Pirate Christian Radio, Table Talk Radio, Issues Etc. and a host of blogs. The tide had turned, and our resistance was ebbing away for lack of reasonable objections.

Ironically, at much the same time, our pastor went on sabbatical, and during his absence, the adult Sunday School used a Reformed study of Law and Gospel. That resulted in yet more research and study where the best answers again came from confessional Lutherans.

We had to confront the Sacraments more directly when our then 10-year old daughter asked to be baptized before we moved to Denver for a new job. The church asked her to prepare a testimony. We asked her to study Scripture with us. The result was an alert to the church that she would have no testimony, only a statement of the benefits of Baptism per Scripture based on Lutheran doctrine. To their credit, the pastors did not object and baptized her. It certainly brought home the issue for us when the person who came after her gave his testimony that this was his third Baptism, because the other two didn't "take."

As we prepared to relocate to Denver, it was clear that we were no longer evangelicals in any sense. We were going to have to find a Lutheran church. Providentially, we rented a home across the street from a family that attended a confessional LCMS church in south Denver. They invited us to worship with them, and we accepted.

The actions of the pastor amazed us. We were contacted immediately after our first visit, and he set up a time to meet with us and plan our catechesis.

For some 12 weeks thereafter, he showed up at our home every Thursday evening in his clerical collar to instruct us patiently, while suffering the unwanted attention of an exuberant dog and the distractions of a busy household. We had never come across a sole pastor that invested so much time into one family without any expectation of a return. It was also clear that the pastor was exceptionally well-trained. He was able to clarify doctrine from Scripture and the Confessions without hesitation, and it was wholly consistent with what he preached every Sunday and supported by the liturgy that was also catechizing us.

We finally found peace and joy in Christ because a faithful remnant were unwilling to compromise sound doctrine. Long may they be preserved in, by and for the sake of Christ.



Tim Wood lives with his family in Denver where he works full time in an extractive industry. Tim and his family are members of a Confessional LCMS congregation in south Denver, and sheep to a wonderful shepherd who patiently guided them into the one true faith. Tim and his wife, Wanita, are immigrants from South Africa and are the owners of [Ad Crucem](#), an online Confessional Lutheran greeting card, art and gift company.

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