

Trinity Te Deum

The official newsletter for Trinity Lutheran Church

Rev. Paul R. Harris – 512-453-3835 Church; 512-251-4204 Home
Sunday School and Bible Study 9:15 AM – Divine Service 10:30 AM

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August - September 2014

Aids to Faith & Answers for Life

An Advent/Lent Sermon Series on
The 4th, 5th, and 6th Chief Parts of
Luther's Small Catechism
2014-2015

The First Chief Part of the Catechism is the Ten Commandments and that is, of course, all Law. The Second Chief Part is the Apostles' Creed and that is all Gospel dealing with what the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit give to fallen mankind. The Third Chief Part treats the Lord's Prayer where our Lord teaches what to pray so that we don't pray out of the poverty of our own hearts. The Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Chief Parts are our heavenly Father's answers to our prayers. Regardless of what we are praying for, who we are praying for, when we are praying, or where we are praying, our prayers find their ultimate answer in Baptism, Confession, and the Sacrament of the Altar. Hence, these three are *Answers for Life*. But they are also *Aids to Faith*. Luther says in the Large Catechism that faith needs a place to hang its hat.

You can tell people to believe, urge them to believe, make them want to believe but if they have no object upon which faith can rest, you ultimately leave them treading water. I read recently where a couple off the coast of Florida were found treading water after 14 hours.

They were exhausted. Luther says that if you preach salvation by grace through faith for Jesus' sake and don't preach the Sacraments you only preach people into despair.

I've lost track how many times during Advent and Lent we've been through the whole Catechism (I think we're ending our 4th this year.). I always get the feeling I'm not answering some obvious questions people have about what we believe, teach, and confess in these areas. So this sermon series I am trying to focus on questions I think you might have.

Each year in August or September I, usually, I change the Catechism poster in the Fellowship Hall. I would be curious when/if a child first notices it. Since I have a history of rigging children's contests, I won't offer a prize, but there would be legitimate bragging rights for the first child who says the poster has changed.

Aids to Faith & Answers for Life

An Advent/Lent Sermon Series on the 4th, 5th, and 6th Chief Parts of Luther's Small Catechism
2014-2015

Wednesday, Dec. 3, 7:30 PM
What do I get from Baptism?

Wednesday, Dec. 10, 7:30 PM
Why Babies are to be Baptized?

Wednesday, Dec. 17, 7:30 PM
How do you use Baptism?

Ash Wed. Feb. 18, 7:30 PM
Isn't Private Confession Catholic?

Wednesday, Feb. 25, 7:30 PM
If I Don't Have to Why Should I?

Wednesday, Mar. 4, 7:30 PM
Real Presence or Really Absent?

Wednesday, Mar. 11, 7:30 PM
What about Communion in other Churches?

Wednesday, Mar. 18, 7:30 PM
Who is Worthy to Receive Communion?

Wednesday, Mar. 25, 7:30 PM
Why not Commune Everyone who wants to?

From Toleration to Supremacy:

A Review of Recent Supreme Court Decisions (Part II)

**Editor's Note: Mr. Mark Stern, Esq., presented the following paper on January 20, 2014, at the 2014 LCA Conference in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Part I was published in the March 2014 issue of the Clarion.*

The March 2014 Lutheran CLARION contained the first portion of Attorney Mark Stern's presentation on same-sex marriage at the January 20, 2014 LCA Con-

ference. Clarion readers are referred to that issue where at the outset Attorney Stern observed the distinction of Law and Gospel before reviewing recent Supreme Court and lower court decisions on same-sex marriage. Court decisions on the subject continue around the country. Our readers are encouraged to study them.

What Next?

Just one week before this article was written, a U.S. District Judge in Utah issued an opinion striking down part of Utah's law against polygamy, in *Brown v. Buhman*.¹ Basing his decision in part on the cases we've already discussed, Judge Clark Waddoups ruled that Utah may not enforce its laws against what he refers to as "plural families." The opinion finds that anti-polygamy laws had their origin in racism (despite the opinion's observation that anti-polygamy and anti-slavery were linked in the 1856 Republican platform). The court allowed (at least for now) the State of Utah to limit a person to one marriage license at a time, but prohibits the state from banning multiple marriage-like relationships.² This case is only the logical extension of *Windsor*. Once marriage is cut loose from its historic definition, any of its characteristics - one man, one woman, one at a time, age and consanguinity restrictions - are easily depicted as merely arbitrary and relics of "bias," "discrimination" and "hatred."

Meanwhile, in North Dakota, the attorney general issued an opinion that the state cannot deny a marriage license (for a traditional marriage) to an individual who was already party to same

sex marriage in a state where same sex marriage is legal.³ I think this is a correct decision. From North Dakota's standpoint, the same sex marriage is a legal nullity, so the individual is single and free to enter into a traditional marriage in North Dakota. But the key questions, as yet unanswered, are (1) whether the state in which the individual entered into the same sex marriage would view the North Dakota marriage as "bigamy" and (2) what stance, if any, the federal government could take after *Windsor*. Further chaos will likely ensue as a result of these decisions.

Marriage for All?

Perhaps the best illustration of what is really going on here comes from a billboard. A progressive radio station in Chicago posts various left wing slogans on a billboard along the Kennedy Expressway. Most recently, celebrating Illinois' same sex marriage law, it posted a new one, "Marriage for All!" Think about that - when was the last time the progressive left promoted marriage as a positive good? Remember Murphy Brown? In the 1990s, a sitcom featuring Candice Bergen had the title character choose to bear and raise a child as a single parent. Then Vice-President Dan Quayle was mocked and excoriated for daring to criticize this promotion of bringing children into the world without the benefit of marriage.

There may be well meaning individuals who believe that same sex marriage really is about giving homosexuals "equal sta-

tus." But even many homosexual activists are honest enough to acknowledge that they really don't want same sex marriage, but want to "expand" the meaning of marriage. Some believe even the designation of individuals as "male" or "female" is a "constraint."⁴ Obviously, the goal is to so confuse the definition of marriage as to destroy the institution altogether. The North Dakota "bigamy" opinion is a clear example of this type of mischief.

The social engineering progressives are joined by plain old socialists. The destruction of the institution of marriage brings with it an increase in every type of social pathology, and a corresponding demand for an increase in the role of the state to fill the space where husband and wife once maintained a home, family and sustenance. A recent article in *The Economist*, titled "The marriage gap," noted that in the Virginia governor's race, married women voted Republican by a nine point margin, but unmarried ones backed the Democrats by a staggering 42 points. Obama defeated Romney by 36 points among unmarried women, who are looking for Big Government to meet their needs, wanting not the nanny state, but the "Hubby State."⁵

The Risk to the Church

Same sex marriage proponents also claim that traditional marriage is equivalent to laws prohibiting interracial marriage. Charges of racism are often used today to cut off serious discus-

¹ *Brown, supra*.

² *Id.*

³ Attorney General of North Dakota, Letter Opinion 2013-L-06, available at <http://www.ag.nd.gov/Opinions/2013/Letter/2013-L-06.pdf>.

⁴ See, e.g., <http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/44576.html>

⁵ *The Economist*, "The marriage gap", Lexington, December 14, 2013, p.42.

sion by smearing one's opponents. I reject these claims, and for that reason hesitate to include the next case in this discussion, but need to do so because it provides a road map of what lies ahead.

In 1970, the IRS ruled that it would not grant tax exemption to private schools that practiced racial discrimination. Bob Jones University, arguing that this violated its religious tenets, challenged the IRS in court. Ultimately, in 1983, the U.S. Supreme Court, in an 8 to 1 decision, upheld the IRS restrictions in *Bob Jones University v. U.S.*⁶ Currently, any educational institution seeking tax exempt status must complete a schedule on IRS Form 990 confirming that it does not have racially discriminatory policies, and must regularly publicize its racial nondiscriminatory policies, to maintain its tax exemption.⁷ The IRS could easily add a requirement that institutions must not "discriminate" as to homosexuality. Just as bans on race discrimination have not been limited to admitting and treating everyone equally, but to require "affirmative action," "equal rights" will require that the schools do not brook any criticism of the homosexual lifestyle, and actively promote it.

We have already seen attempts to exclude the Boy Scouts from public benefits. Even the decision of the Boy Scouts to allow homosexual members was

not enough to keep the City of Philadelphia from evicting the Scouts from the downtown offices they occupied for 85 years.⁸ In California, Senate Bill 323, seeking to strip state tax exemptions from any non-profit that "discriminates" and specifically targeting the Boy Scouts, passed 27-9 in the State Senate, but stalled in the State House of Representatives. Can such efforts targeting religious institutions and schools be far behind?

When Illinois passed its same sex marriage bill in 2013, a so-called "religious exemption" was added. But the "exemption" actually made the bill worse, by stating specifically that the exemption for "religious facilities" means only "sanctuaries, parish halls, fellowship halls, and similar facilities" and "does not include facilities such as businesses, health care facilities, educational facilities, or social service agencies."⁹ Essentially, we will be free to exercise our religious beliefs only within the four walls of our sanctuary, for now. Separately incorporated Lutheran day schools or high schools; colleges and universities such as our Concordias; Lutheran social service agencies; religiously affiliated hospitals; and even Sunday School classrooms (they are educational facilities, after all) are all threatened with lawsuits for maintaining their confessions. Soon Church-affiliated institutions will face profound choices. Once the Supreme Court declares

that opposition to same-sex marriage constitutes "intolerance" or "hate", it follows that no institution advancing such beliefs can have tax exempt status.

Schools that are integrally part of an individual congregation will be better positioned to resist, but institutions that are not directly attached to a congregation, such as high schools and the Concordia system, will be out of luck. Time will tell if we will hold to our confessions even if the "price" is to pay taxes to Caesar. We give thanks that our Synod in convention recently adopted Resolution 2-07A, "To Emphasize Biblical Teaching of Sexuality, Marriage, and Family" by a vote of 901 to 40.¹⁰ What the will of God is for the future of our nation is unknown to us. But God's will for each of us is sure and certain; we are saved by Christ.

Mark O. Stern, Esq.

Burke, Warren, MacKay & Serritella, P.C.

Mark O. Stern is an attorney in private practice in Chicago, Illinois. He served as a delegate to the 2013 LCMS Convention and was re-elected by the Convention to serve as a Regent of Concordia University Chicago. His affiliations are listed for identification purposes only, and any views expressed herein are his and not necessarily those of his firm or of Concordia University.

Note from Mr. Stern: Readers should be aware that this area of law continues to change with incredible rapidity. The Utah case that partially invalidated Utah's polygamy ban was decided on December 13, 2013. After this article was originally prepared for publication in mid-

⁶ *Bob Jones University v. U.S.*, 461 U.S. 574 (1983), available at http://www.oyez.org/cases/1980-1989/1982_81_3.

⁷ See Schedule E to IRS Form 990 (available at <http://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/f990se.pdf>).

⁸ See, e.g., <http://news.yahoo.com/boy-scouts-vacate-philly-home-under-settlement-192828976.html>.

⁹ Public Act 98-0597, available at <http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/publicacts/fulltext.asp?Name=098-0597>.

¹⁰ See <http://www.lcms.org/convention/overtures#>.

December 2013, several other federal judges have ruled on marriage redefinition. On December 20, 2013, a different federal judge in Utah held unconstitutional Utah's definition of marriage as between one man and one woman, in *Kitchen v. Herbert* (Case No. 2:11-cv-00217-RJS (D. Utah)), available at http://www.utd.uscourts.gov/documents/213cv217_memdec.pdf. ; On December 23, 2013, a judge ordered Ohio to recognize out-of-state same sex marriage in connection with the issuance of death certificates, in *Obergefell v. Wymyslo* 1:13-cv-501, 2013WL 6726688 (S.D. Ohio)). On January 14, 2014, a judge invalidated Oklahoma's constitutional and statutory definition of marriage as one man and one woman, in *Bishop v. U.S. ex rel. Holder* (Case No. 04-CV-848-TCK-TLW, 2014 WL 116013 (N.D. Okla.)). This list is current as of January 31, 2014. All of the cases listed above are trial court decisions and are currently being appealed to higher courts by the state authorities.

The Lutheran Clarion
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A Non-Compete Clause

Posted on March 17, 2014
by Rev. Paul R. Harris

We don't have non-compete clauses among pastors, but perhaps we should in our own heads because there ain't no way I'm competing with this Missouri Synod church.

I didn't go looking for River Pointe Church. I went looking to find out who Adam Countryman was. He is listed as the worship leader for the March 2014 Texas Church Extension Fund confer-

ence. He works for River Pointe Church, Richmond, Texas. Although he is not an ordained clergyman of the LCMS or any other church body, his being the designated worship leader at this year's conference is a step up from last year. Last year it was the district president's wife. By the by, she isn't ordained either.

As I said, I didn't go looking for River Pointe Church (Isn't it amazing how putting an 'e' on Point or Court or just about any other word doodads it up. It's like tail fins on a car.). But I found it and what I can't compete against. I quote from their website. "The way someone becomes a member at River Pointe is to attend a Meet and Greet, as well as turning in a membership card. River Pointe's Meet and Greet is an opportunity to meet the staff, hear about the history and mission of the church, and process your commitment to become a member. There is no pressure to join if you are just trying to find information about the church. **The next Meet and Greet will be held on Wednesday, January 15th, 2014 at 6:30pm. Come enjoy a complimentary dinner! Childcare is provided**"(Emphasis original, www.riverpointe.org/richmond/membership accessed 12-9-2013). Attend a meet and greet, eat a free dinner, and turn in a card and you're a member! There's no way I can compete with that. How do they preach or teach Law and Gospel? Is the Law using your salad fork for the main course? Is the Gospel ice cream with your pie?

I'm being too harsh. I have no idea the points River Pointe is making. I just don't believe the points that must be made can be done over a dinner one evening. The first constitution of the Missouri Synod said, "Where possible, a hundred hours should be used to instruct confirmands" (Walther, *Pastoral Theology*, 188). I have that much for kids but for adults I barely make 25 hours. Would adults sit still for more? Not for 75 more hours but perhaps for more than one free dinner.

So, why don't we amend our present constitution to say something like what the first one said? Because we're busy changing circuit *counselors* to circuit *visitors*, which is about as significant as changing point to pointe. One cannot compete with form that offers no substance. Everyone knows the Blob is unstoppable. Watch the 1958 movie.

We Need to Learn from History

On February 19, 1974, a little over 40 years ago, most of the faculty and students of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis took a short trip down the driveway leading to a small park. There they gathered in protest to a decision that was made by the Board of Regents of their institution. It was not a long trip, maybe a couple of hundred yards, nor did it really last all that long. Most will admit that the gesture was at best symbolic. The faculty and students believed that

this was the only way that they could be heard by the leadership of the seminary. By not only walking off campus but also placing a moratorium on classes, faculty and students wanted to force the Board of Regents to reinstate the faculty along with Dr. John Tietgen, President of the seminary. Which the Board of Regents later did.

I am sure that most have forgotten this event or have never learned about these, supposed, dark days in the history of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Well, I can tell you that these days affected a 17 year old senior in high school who had decided to devote his life to God by becoming a pastor. Which institution should I attend – Concordia Seminary, St. Louis or Seminex? My pastor, who had graduated in 1960 and was trained by many of the men who walked out, was confused, no, torn between love for his Synod and love for a faculty. I remember him telling me that if what the Synod leadership had been saying was true concerning the faculty then he would have to reassess his own theology and practice. Sadly he did not believe that he had been taught falsely.

As I said, those were dark days in our Synod's history but the fight which ensued was very necessary. The LCMS needed to come to grips with what she believed; she needed to come to grips with what was coming out of our seminary; she needed to come to terms with the preaching that she was hearing. Was the Bible true? Was it inerrant? Did it contain errors? Did it only contain the Word of God, or did it also contain the words and opinions of men? Were all the stories true? Everything seemed to be

turned upside down and trust was at a very low level.

Thank God there were bold confessors of the truth who stood up to be counted and placed the issue before the Church so that the entire Synod could finally see what was really going on. JAO Preus, the newly elected president, believed it was in the best interest of our Synod to deal with the direction of the Seminary and its faculty. Commissions were appointed; task forces were organized; and many got down on their knees and prayed peace would be restored. But at what cost? Peace for the sake of peace is no peace at all. Error can never co-exist with truth, for the error will prevail in the hearts of the hearers. The error that existed needed to be eradicated from our beloved Church body. But how?

To this day I remember those who stood up for the truth. I remember JAO Preus; I remember his brother, Robert, who refused to be a part of the walkout. I also remember Dr. Martin Scharlemann who tried, almost single-handedly, to keep what was left of the seminary intact. And there were others. Those men will forever be etched in my mind as great men of faith who stood up for what they knew to be the truth because of the Word they believed – who were willing to stand firm against the error our Synod faced. And they did so, at least in Dr. Scharlemann's case, to the point of becoming mentally and physically ill.

Dear people of God in the LCMS, the days now before us are not dissimilar to those in the year 1974. Error has become entrenched in our Church body, and it needs to be eradicated. Most assuredly it cannot exist alongside the truth – not if we want to remain an orthodox Synod... if

we still are an orthodox Synod. Many would argue the latter.

Former synodical Vice-President Roland Wiederaenders made a statement to our District Presidents and the Seminary faculties on December 2, 1963 which I believe holds true even today. He said, "Despite repeated efforts we have not dealt honestly with our pastors and people. We have refused to state our changing theological position in open, honest, forthright, simple and clear words. Over and over again we have said that nothing was changing when all the while we were aware of changes taking place. Either we should have informed our pastors and people that changes were taking place and, if possible, convinced them from Scripture that these changes were in full harmony with "Thus saith the Lord!" or we should have stopped playing games as we gave assurance that no changes were taking place. With increasing measure the synodical trumpet has been giving an uncertain sound." (LCMS Public Relations Department news release, January 24, 1974.)

Those words ring true today just as they did in 1963 and, again, in 1974. Our Synod needs to deal with the errors that have made their home in our churches, at our altars and in our pulpits. And they need to be dealt with clarity and truthfulness. Whether it's errors associated with pure doctrine, the Lord's Supper, the Office of the Holy Ministry or the seven other errors which have been pointed out in the ACELC documents, we must honestly, truthfully, take the task that has been laid before us and devote ourselves once again to the truth of God's Word and the Lutheran Confessions. For the sake of the Gospel; for the sake of our Syn-

od; for the sake of our orthodoxy; for the sake of all the people in our congregations who gather Sunday after Sunday and hear mixed messages concerning what we believe, teach and confess, we can no longer afford to sit idly by and watch our Synod go the way of the ELCA and other synods which have deserted the truth.

In our Admonition Letter, the ACELC wrote something that bears repeating: “Error is sin, and the very ministry and mission of the Church is to address sin through the public proclamation of repentance and forgiveness in Christ’s name (Luke 24:46-48). Correction of error is at the very core of the Gospel’s proclamation – error against both God’s divine Law and His holy Gospel, the very means through which God saves and applies His salvation to lost sinners” (Admonition Letter, July 15, 2010). We go on to say, “Because of this, in the spirit of Luther, Walther, and other Church fathers and grandfathers, we can “do no other” but stand to correct the errors that undermine the orthodox faith entrusted to us, and through which God has so abundantly blessed our Synod. If we do not, then we too shall be complicit in the doctrinal indifference that has plagued so many church bodies to their ruin” (Admonition Letter, July 15, 2010, ACELC.net).

So.....this is a call for our leadership, our pastors, our laity...well, our entire Synod, that the time has come for all of us, together, to say enough is enough. If error exists, which most would agree it does, (we in the ACELC certainly believe it does) then it must be openly and honestly discussed, and debated according to and under God’s Word our Lutheran Confessions so that it can hopefully be re-

moved from our Synod. May God’s will be done for Jesus’ sake.

Rev. Daniel Bremer
ACELC Speaker’s Bureau Chairman

Not Locking the Barn Door at All

Posted on October 28, 2013
by Rev. Paul R. Harris

It’s considered foolish to lock a barn door *after* the horse has gotten out, but it’s more foolish still not to lock it even after the horse has fled. There may be other animals still in the barn, other important things that need to be protected. Failing to lock the barn door even after the horse has escaped is what the NALC is doing.

The NALC is a group of pastors and churches attempting to flee from the fast sinking Evangelical Lutheran Church in America being scuttled by its own theology. NALC stands for North American Lutheran Church. (Please note how the liberal Lutherans have always felt bold to make unqualified claims to the title “Lutheran Church” – think Lutheran Church in America, American Lutheran Church, Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, and the granddaddy of them all THE Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The conservative Lutherans have not dared to make the unqualified claim witness Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Synod, and Evangelical Lutheran Diocese of North America. You might also note that the one closest to the

liberals (the LCMS) is the only one tiptoeing around the fringes of the word church. As theology is found in words, concentrated theology is found in names.)

In any event, the following is from an ELCA church that is contemplating leaving that organization over their acceptance of homosexuality. In a FAQ section on their church website, question 11 explains why they should join the NALC. “Additionally, the NALC is desired over the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod and Wisconsin Synod in that it will ordain women and practice open Holy Communion” (<http://www.lvilc.org/>).

How do you think all the aberrations that afflict the ELCA got into her in the first place? Through the door of open Communion. Why do you think while it took over 450 years to ordain women it took less than 40 years to ordain homosexuals after that? Once you lose the God-ordained distinction between stallions and mares you have no defense against homosexuality in your barn.

I saw this same sort of idiocy, and I can think of no more charitable term, with the Episcopalians in the 90s. That was when they ordained homosexuals, and for many lay people that was the straw that brought the hayloft down. But when they talked to me about joining the LCMS they were defensive about open Communion, abortion, and women priestesses. They could accept having no doctrinal stance, killing babies, and changing the divinely instituted office of the holy ministry, but homosexuality was a bridge too far.

I have had visitors from NALC churches and other ELCA breakaway groups. They know they aren’t ELCA; they know

they are closer to LCMS, so they see no reason they should not be communed by me. They are quite offended when I won't. And in deference to all you promoters of winsomeness I begin with, "Yes, I would like to commune you, but there are some things we have to talk about first." But there is no more talking for them. They don't even stay for Divine Service. So entitled are they to the choice of communing they act as if I have violated their civil rights.

Here's my prediction. As the LCMS has entered into fellowship with national church bodies who practice open Communion, who have ordained women, and who are members of the Lutheran World Federation under the rubric that we have to reach out and rescue them because they are moving in the right direction, so we are going to be counseled to meet the NALC where they are that. And thus our barn door will be wide open not so a horse can get out but so a Trojan Horse can get it. Beware of Greeks bearing gifts especially when they are horses loaded with thousands of perspective members. Perspective being the operative word.

Wittenberg Trail: Lutheranism, Christianity's Best-Kept Secret

by Pastor Ross Johnson

Growing up in a conservative Christian home was a tremendous blessing for me. I grew up knowing who Christ is and had a saving faith in Him. I grew up going to church every Sunday and went to a Christian day school as well. My sophomore year in high

school was a turning point for me. Many of my friends had begun to drive. We now had freedoms that we had only dreamt of—freedoms that my friends abused by partying, drinking too much or breaking just about every commandment there is. It seemed as though they were having a lot more fun than I was. So I began a journey, a small spiritual quest that would eventually lead me to where I am today. I decided to study the Christian faith. I figured if Christianity was true, then I would wholeheartedly follow the Commandments and the Scriptures; but if it was not true, then I might as well walk away; stop wasting my time at church, and start enjoying my time with my friends. As I began my spiritual quest to reaffirm my Christian beliefs, I read many Christian resources and compared them to other faiths. I compared Christianity to the Mormon religion, the Muslim faith, the New Age movement, and many other religions, cults, and sects. Through this time of searching, the Scriptures made one thing clear: Christianity is the only true faith. I was one hundred percent convinced of the truthfulness of Christianity and one hundred percent convinced that all other religions are a lie. Thus, I made a commitment to follow Christ and His Word wholeheartedly.

At this time of renewed joy in my faith, a good friend invited me to attend his church, Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, California. Calvary Chapel is a large fellowship of conservative evangelical churches, started by Chuck Smith during the "Jesus Movement" of the 1960s and 1970s. In one of the sermons I heard there, Pastor Chuck Smith said, "Now some Bible scholars

disagree with me on this point..." I remember thinking naively, "How could anyone disagree with this Pastor? He is obviously preaching right out of the Bible, how could anyone disagree with him?" Well, that sparked something in my mind; I wanted to know what other conservative Christians taught and believed.

During my last two years of high school, I started buying theology books with every paycheck I made. I read Millard Erickson's *Christian Theology*, Louis Berkoff's *Systematic Theology*, John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and many other seminary textbooks. I soon realized that there is a diverse range of theological opinions on just about every theological topic. I was becoming a theological salad bar, picking and choosing from different theological systems. On the one hand I believed what the Presbyterian Church taught regarding the end times; but, on the other hand, I did not agree with them regarding their view on salvation. I agreed with the Baptists on their view regarding the Christian life; but, at the same time I strongly disagreed with their view concerning baptism.

In this state of confusion, I started to become disenchanted and disillusioned with my church. I realized that I didn't quite fit any mold. I didn't speak the right Christianese, I wasn't overly wordy with my prayers, I didn't soften my tone of voice when I spoke—to many Christians this meant that I was spiritually immature. I was reminded time and time again that I didn't measure up as a Christian—I just wasn't good enough to be a leader or a pastor.

In the midst of my struggle, a friend of mine encouraged me to

read some great Lutheran doctrine. Frankly, I was extremely skeptical of Lutheranism, because the only Lutheranism I was aware of was extremely liberal. The Lutheran churches that I had encountered allowed women to be pastors, didn't believe in the inerrancy of scripture, and didn't hold to many other essential doctrines of the Christian faith.

As I began to delve into conservative Lutheran doctrine, I realized that Lutheranism was what I had been seeking, although I had not known that it existed. I read about the two natures of Christ, the Lord's Supper, the end times, and much more. I began to realize that there was a church out there that had a doctrine that clearly articulated what I believed. The more I read, the more I found that Lutheranism put my theological puzzle pieces together.

When I read amazing Lutheran theologians, such as Chemnitz, Pieper and Walther, I recognized that—even though the different churches that I attended were conservative—I was extremely spiritually sick. I knew that Christ had died for me, and that He was the atoning sacrifice for me, but there was an underlying current that continually told me that somehow I was responsible for keeping my salvation. Christ had given me a free gift, but now it was up to me to remain in the faith. This awesome responsibility, and a lot of other bad theology, left me in a horrible state. I constantly doubted my salvation. I continually checked to make sure that the fruits of the Spirit were apparent in my life. When I heard the pastor's sermon on Sunday morning, I always left depressed, because I knew that I was completely incapable of living up to the standard that he had

set for me. I feared God. I feared death. I was spiritually frustrated. I was afraid that my spirituality just wasn't good enough, and that if I died I would wind up in hell. Whenever I would get down, I was told that I needed to evangelize, pray, read and memorize the Bible more. Unfortunately, although these things in and of themselves are good things to do, they did not bring me comfort, nor did they clarify the doctrinal questions that I had. I was miserable. I rarely heard a word about forgiveness, and I had no comfort as God's Child. God had become a cosmic killjoy who robbed me of all hope. I believed the perfection He demanded of me was cruel, since there was no way that I could measure up to His high standards.

God in his mercy heard my cry. I went to the website of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and looked up churches in my area. The closest church was Faith Lutheran in Capistrano Beach, California. The church had a weekly evening service where Dr. Rod Rosenblatt, from Concordia University, Irvine, was preaching through the book of Ephesians. The liturgy was simple yet reverent. Only about ten people were in the sanctuary. There was no organist, only a CD of organ music to accompany our singing. This church was doing everything that would seem wrong in the eyes of the church growth movement: it had no praise band, nothing was "contemporary," and there were no multimedia. Because it was free from gimmicks, I loved it. In fact, I found it a welcomed relief from the show that I was getting every Sunday at the evangelical church. If the worship included a praise band and a PowerPoint display, I would have gone back

to my evangelical church, and I wouldn't be a Lutheran today. Since the Lutheran church offered a unique spirituality and hymns of theological substance, I sat down in the pew. At the end of the service I knew I was home. Although I was still very ignorant of Lutheranism, I knew I was where I needed to be.

About three months after I first stepped into the Lutheran church, I was able to talk my wife Mireya into visiting a Lutheran church. I took her to St. Paul's Lutheran church in Laguna Beach, California. At first Mireya hated the Lutheran church. By our second visit she was ready to leave and never come back. However, a small but bold move from Pastor Alfonso Espinosa was what made the difference.

As Mireya and I were leaving the church with smiles on our faces (even though she hated the liturgy, the organ, and the sermon), Pastor Espinosa walked after us and said, "Well, Johnson's, now that you have come twice in a row, I would like to invite you next week after service to a catechism class to answer any questions that you have about Lutheranism." Before my wife could respond, I said, "Sure, we would love for you to answer our questions after church next Sunday." When we got to the car Mireya was frustrated with me. She didn't want anything to do with this dead and boring Lutheran church. Still, she felt bad rejecting the pastor's kind invitation.

I asked her to give the Lutheran church a year. And if, after a year, she still hated it, we would leave the church and never come back. I was giving the Lutheran church a fair chance to

teach us what they believed and why they believed it.

Every week for eight months, Mireya and I peppered Pastor Espinosa with every conceivable question we had: “Why does baptism save?” “Do Lutherans listen to secular music?” “Why do you wear that ‘Catholic’ outfit?” Pastor Espinosa always kindly addressed all of our misconceptions, and he never made us feel foolish or dumb. He helped us decode a lot of Lutheran vocabulary that only Lutherans understand. We were both very impressed by the amount of individual attention that Lutherans give their members because neither of us had ever even met the pastor of the mega church that we had attended for years.

After much time and study, Mireya and I realized that Lutheranism is Christianity’s best-kept secret. We love being Lutheran. Out of our love for others, we want to tell everyone about the beauty of our church. We want others to be in a healthy place spiritually. In the Lutheran faith, both of us found spiritual peace and rest. We found forgiveness. We could now live a life that was free in Christ. When we became Lutheran, we felt as

though we were new converts to Christianity.

Before I was a Lutheran I had literally read thousands of theology books and I had never heard of a conservative Lutheran church theologian or pastor, nor did my local Christian bookstore sell any Lutheran books. Mireya and I constantly tell our friends the wonderful depths of Lutheran Spirituality. After we were confirmed in 1998, my pastor knew that I felt called to be a pastor, and he encouraged me to attend seminary. In 2000, I began attending Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, and my wife began her studies in the MA program at the seminary. Seminary was the best thing that we could ever have done; we grew in our love and appreciation of our Lutheran theology and spirituality.

There is nothing I can do or say to express my gratitude to the people who lovingly nurtured me back to spiritual health in the Lutheran faith. Mireya and I will always be grateful to Pastor Espinosa and Pastor Ron Hodel for taking the time to catechize us and for being faithful to God’s word. Their patience and kindness allowed us to slowly change our paradigm from an Evangeli-

cal perspective to a Biblical one. Now she and I live in peace and forgiveness. We rest solely on the work of Christ. We understand that in our Baptism Christ rescued us from sin, death, and the devil and truly gave us eternal life. It amazes me to see how faithful the Lord was in all of this. He saw our struggle and pain. I know that we were Christians before becoming Lutheran. But, just because we were Christians, does not mean that we were spiritually healthy. This is the same as if you choose to live off of fast food all your life, you won’t die, but you’ll be sick all of the time. Mireya and I were eating spiritual junk food; eating a lot of fluff with just enough nutrition to keep us alive. Being Lutheran has changed all of this. The old Adam still pops up and wants to rob us of our salvation, but the Lord faithfully reminds us that we are His through our Baptism and He will never let us go.

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August 2014

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THURS	FRI	SAT
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Adult Class: 12:15 PM		Trustees' Meeting: 6:30 PM	Bible Stories: 10 AM Colossians: 7:15 PM			
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Adult Class: 12:15 PM			Bible Stories: 10 AM Colossians: 7:15 PM			
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
Adult Class: 12:15 PM			Bible Stories: 10 AM Colossians: 7:15 PM			
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
Adult Class: 12:15 PM			Bible Stories: 10 AM Colossians: 7:15 PM			
31						
Adult Class: 12:15 PM						

September 2014

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THURS	FRI	SAT
	1	2	3	4	5	6
		Trustees' Meeting: 6:30 PM	Bible Stories: 10 AM Colossians: 7:15 PM			
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
	Jr. Confirmation: 5 PM	Voters' Meeting: 7 PM	Bible Stories: 10 AM Colossians: 7:15 PM			
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
	Jr. Confirmation: 5 PM	Elders' Meeting: 6:30 PM	Bible Stories: 10 AM Colossians: 7:15 PM			
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
Wine Tasting 5 PM	Jr. Confirmation: 5 PM		Bible Stories: 10 AM Colossians: 7:15 PM			
28	29	30				
	Jr. Confirmation: 5 PM					

