

STANDING FIRM

FAITH AND HOPE
ANCHORED IN
CHRIST JESUS

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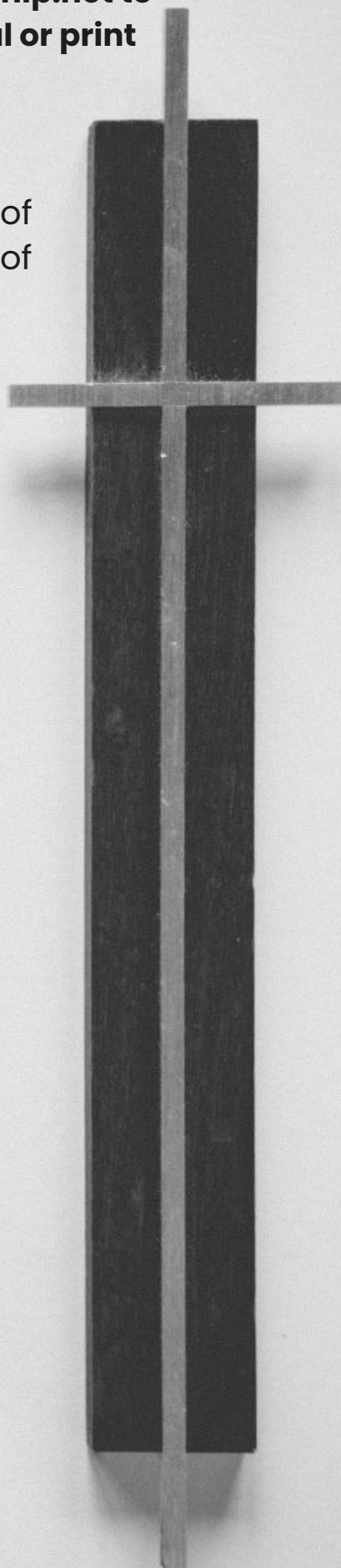
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STANDING FIRM

FAITH AND HOPE ANCHORED IN CHRIST JESUS

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Photos by Hayley Simons and Helen Vonow

Front & rear cover image,
Adoration of the Shepherds-
Caravaggio (1609)

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Letter from the Editor



"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17 ESV)

It comes as a bit of a shock as I reflect on how much has happened in the past 12 months – the events, the conferences, the camps and for some, changes to congregational life. The question might be asked by a stranger, "Does God still speak to us?" – Yes! God speaks to us first and foremost through His Word. And praise Him for also speaking to us through these events, the reminders of the joy and hope found in that Word.

There was Rev. Dr. Kirk Clayton presenting (travelling across Australia!) on Defending the Faith on the truth and reliability of the Scriptures. There was Rev. Dr. Stephen Pietsch, on the importance of the Lutheran Confessions and how they clearly and faithfully teach the Scriptures.



And Rev. Dr. Geoffrey Boyle on the importance of the Psalms and what they continue to tell us today. There were also guest speakers Rehema Kavugha, Rob and Sandra Rhein, Pastor Joshua and Kimberly Pfeiffer, Pastor Jacob Fabich, Pastor Peter Noble... the list goes on, and I'm sure I've missed someone... but faithful, joyful, and devoted servants of the Lord, pointing us back to the Word and the source and reason for what we do, and what we believe. So many events, so many hours of faithful preparation and organisation. We praise God for the work of the Holy Spirit in those whose sleepless nights allow my family to attend the Young Adults & Young Families Retreat or allow me to take a break from work to attend Men Led by God camp, and spend time in the Word, in fellowship, discussion, and encouragement.

In this first year of Standing Firm, we hope and pray that is what we have achieved too. That we can bring together content from faithful Lutherans to point you to the Word and deepen your understanding, your trust, and your joy. Thank you to the team who have invested their time and talents in putting this together. We look to a very fast-approaching Advent and Christmas season, and the New Year ahead of us, helping us to be steadfast and ready to say, "Speak, for your servant hears." (1 Samuel 3:10 ESV)

Karl Jericho
Editor

Letter from the CWF Chairman



Welcome to our third issue of Standing Firm. Thank you to our readers for making this endeavour a success. To be brutally honest, the interest in the magazine has exceeded my expectations. It is a lot of effort from the small team involved to put it all together, but that effort would have been for naught if not for our fantastic contributors. So, a big thank you to all who have spent an inordinate amount of time writing these articles for us.

We are fast approaching Christmas, and it is a great time to remember all the blessings that God has given us this year. It may have been the worst or toughest year that you have ever had, but remember that there are always countless blessings that you have received.



For me personally, we made the decision to leave our church, Bethlehem Adelaide, and start on the adventure of establishing a new church in Adelaide's Northern Suburbs with a few other families. It was tough leaving a church that we had been at for 7 years. We knew a lot of people quite well and enjoyed their company.



We enjoyed worshipping there and enjoyed the fantastic sermons that we heard. But with the LCA abandoning the authority of Scripture, it was time for us to leave. I had expected this time would come, but I didn't think the abandonment would be so sudden. But in the midst of pain was the joy of establishing something new, of trusting in God's abundant provision, and worshipping with people who absolutely share the same faith and convictions. There is always God's blessing and provision when we walk in faith with Him.

I, like many people, woke up one morning to the news of the (then) shooting of Charlie Kirk. Unfortunately, I saw the very raw footage by accident. It is a horrific image that I will never get out of my mind. However, it brought home the reality that life is in the blood. It is why atonement for sin could only be paid for by the blood of an animal, in the Old Testament, and by the blood of Christ Jesus in the New Testament. As we head toward Christmas, we must keep in our minds the reason for Christ's incarnation, to atone for our sins.

“By His death on the cross, He fully endured and appeased (propitiated) the wrath of God toward all people (universal atonement), thereby reconciling us to God.”

Luthers Small Catechism 2017 Pg 179
paragraph 166 B.

He did this by the shedding of His blood; He paid the ransom for our sins with His life. And He started this journey as a baby boy, born of the Virgin Mary. How awesome is our God that He would stoop to our level and become human to atone for our sake, not because we are worthy but because He loves us so much.



Charlie Kirk was an amazing man; he was a great rhetorician, possibly one of the greatest of our times. He brought many people to faith, and he challenged many Christians about their attitude towards others who were not Christian or were not leading a Christian life. But he was just human; he led others to Christ, but he was not the Christ or even a type of Christ. He was a martyr for many causes, and I believe a martyr for the faith, but like any martyr of the faith, they are dead in body on the earth and alive with Christ Jesus in heaven.

This Christmas season and into the coming year, let's all be bold in our faith, let's have the uncomfortable conversations, let us be willing to die for our faith, for He, Christ Jesus, came into the world to give all, for us.

Peter Wittwer
CWF Chairman

Would you like to watch the sessions from the Men Led by God Mens Retreat? You can read about it on page 40.

<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLy5FQBjExypqe0T5kOQgUaoisOu48UHmU&si=8JaK41vozZ3Fp0oG>



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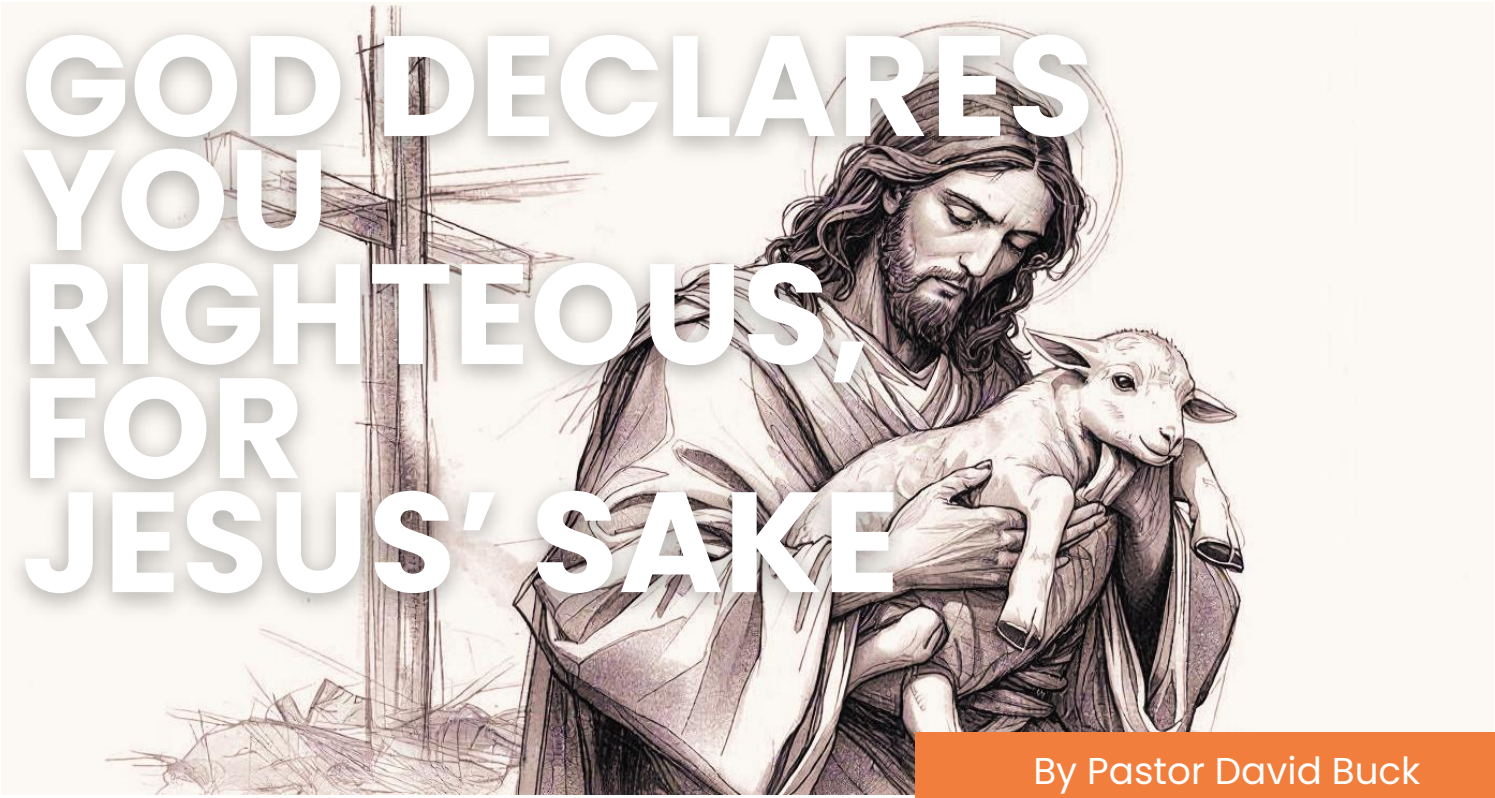
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SERMON ON LUKE 18: 9-14

GOD DECLARES YOU RIGHTEOUS, FOR JESUS' SAKE



By Pastor David Buck
2025

This sermon was preached at Adelaide Central Lutheran Mission, Edwardstown, on 26 October 2025. While based on the Gospel for Proper 25, Series C, the text is also admirably suited for the Festival of the Reformation.

God declares you righteous, for Jesus' sake

A recent *Deutsche Welle* video, "Wittenberg, Germany: Birthplace of the Reformation", tells how in his Ninety-five Theses, Martin Luther criticized abuses by the Church, in particular, the sale of indulgences.¹ It was indeed preached at that time that by buying indulgences, one could buy one's way out of purgatory and into heaven. The money raised then went to pay for the building of St Peter's basilica in Rome. But the Reformation was about much more than Luther speaking out against the sale of indulgences.

The video ends with the statement that the Reformation replaced "Ignorance and oppression" with "education and self-determination". This totally misses the heart of the Reformation.

The heart of the Reformation was Luther's discovery from the Scriptures, that in Christ we have a gracious, forgiving God. As Luther lectured on the Psalms and especially on the letter to the Galatians, he discovered that the angry, All Terrible God is at the same time the loving, All Merciful God. Luther, the sinner with a troubled conscience, had no confidence that his merit could satisfy God's justice, and rightly so. He was troubled by the statement (Rom 1:17), "the just shall live by his faith". Eventually, some two years after he posted the Ninety-five Theses, it dawned on him that the phrase "the justice of God" isn't about the righteousness God expects us to produce. It's about God justifying us, that is, declaring us righteous through faith in Jesus.

It's about the righteousness that God in His grace gives us because of Jesus' death and resurrection for us.

For Luther it was like the difference between night and day. From then on, he knew that in Christ he had a gracious God. He came to know the fatherly, friendly heart of God. What resolved the conflict for him between the wrath and mercy of God was the cross of Jesus. He realised that God's wrath was poured out on Jesus so that He might justify us.²

In the parable of the pharisee and the tax collector, our Lord teaches that God declares righteous all who trust in Him. Our fallen human nature wants us to focus on what we have done or feel or think. If your life is going well, it wants you to conclude that God must be pleased with you. Or it wants you to think that God will accept you for who you are, whether you repent and believe in Jesus or not. What we need as our guide isn't our fallible reason, but the truth of God's word and Holy Spirit. So, in this sermon we'll look firstly at the Pharisee's failure, then at the tax collector's faith, and lastly at the Saviour's sacrifice. The truth is that because of Jesus, God declares righteous you who trust in Him.

The Pharisee in the parable Jesus told was satisfied with all he thought he was doing for God. Sure, he got two things right. He didn't just pray under his fig tree, or while riding on his donkey. He knew God was present at the temple where the blood of various animal sacrifices was offered for human sin. Possibly, we're to think of him and the tax collector going there at the time of the evening sacrifice. The regular daily burnt offerings were made at around 9 in the morning and 3 in the afternoon. People would gather at the temple for personal prayer especially at those times.

That was appropriate, because along with the sacrifice by which atonement was made for the people, the priest on duty would burn incense on the altar in the holy place and give public prayers. The people who came at those times would also offer up their own private prayers.³

The second thing the Pharisee got right is that he took morality seriously. He didn't want to squeeze money out of people. He wasn't unjust or an adulterer (or so he thought). He would have been as faithful a husband to his wife as one could hope for. He wanted to keep God's laws because he was zealous for God.

The problem of the Pharisees wasn't that they were over-zealous for God. We can never be too zealous for God. The problem was that, for all their sincerity and effort, they still weren't good enough for God. What he should have said was, "Although I've tried hard to do your will, O God, I'm still a miserable sinner. Even if I haven't sinned by what I've done, I've sinned by what I've said and thought, and by the good that I've failed to think, say and do".

Jesus says that *"unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven"* (Mt 5:20). Their righteous deeds just weren't good enough. But who can do even more than they did? What's more, our problem isn't that we overlook a few commandments here and there. Our problem is that we're corrupt at the core of our being. *"Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witnessings, blasphemies,"* Jesus says (Mt 15:19; Mk 7:21-23). As we look at our hearts in the light of God's law, we have to agree. So, the righteousness we need to have in order to enter the kingdom of heaven isn't something less than that produced by scribes and Pharisees.

SERMON ON LUKE 18: 9-14

It's something infinitely greater. If we're honest with ourselves, we have to admit that we can't do it. We have no choice but to say together with St Paul, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom 7:24). The Pharisee's failure was that he was very proud of his good effort that wasn't good enough.

In contrast, the tax collector in Jesus' parable was well aware of his sins. He didn't compare himself with others. The Greek text has the definite article with the word sinner. "The *sinner*", he called himself. Yet he didn't merely bemoan his sinfulness. He trusted God to sort things out and put things right for him. He looked to God's promise of the forgiveness of sins that was connected with the sacrifices offered at the temple (Ex 29:43, Lev 4-6; Ex 25:17-2 'mercy seat/ propitiatory' & Lev 16). His prayer was more specific than "O God, be merciful to me, the sinner". He prayed, "O God, be propitiated to me, the sinner!" (The Greek verb used here isn't *eleēson*, 'have mercy' [Lk 16:24; 17:13; 18:38, 39], but *hilasthēti*.) 'Propitiate' isn't a word we're familiar with, partly because English translations avoid using it. He was praying that the flesh of the lamb that had been given into death and its blood that had been poured out at the altar of burnt offering would satisfy God's anger over his sin and would be life for him. So it was that the tax collector, not the Pharisee, went down to his house "*justified*".

He was justified, or declared righteous, by God. 'Justify' is a legal term. We need to think in terms of a judge declaring a person 'not guilty'. By its sound, the word 'justify' can mislead us. Other words that end in 'fy', describe a process. If you liquify something, or solidify it, it happens in stages. Ice cream can be firmer or sloppier. But when God justifies us, He declares us 'in the right'.

He forgives, that is, releases us from our sins. When God justifies us, He does begin a change for the better within us, but that change is the result of our justification. We begin to live holy lives by the power of the Holy Spirit, because God sets us free. Our holy lives, though, don't contribute to our justification. Your justification doesn't even depend on a supposed decision you've made. It depends on what Jesus has done for you and outside of you. An English bishop [Wm Temple?] was once asked on a street corner, "Are you saved, brother?" "Yes," he replied. "When were you saved?" "About 3 o'clock on a Friday afternoon some 2,000 years ago." That's the answer of faith in Jesus. It looks to what He has done for me, not at any goodness within me.

It's because of our Saviour's sacrifice for us that all who own up to their sinful state and at the same time believe in Him, are declared righteous. The offering of the blood of lambs at the temple was only a temporary measure, pointing to the blood of God's own dear Son. His blood supersedes the blood of animals because it's the blood of God's eternal Son who took on human flesh, though without sin. "In him the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily", Colossians says (2:9). He came to take the sin of the whole world on Himself, give His body into death and pour out His blood on a cross in payment for the world's sin. Only His blood can satisfy God's fierce anger over our sins. He is, as 1 John 2:2 says, "the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world". Because of Him, St Paul not only declared, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" He also immediately added, "Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

SERMON ON LUKE 18: 9-14

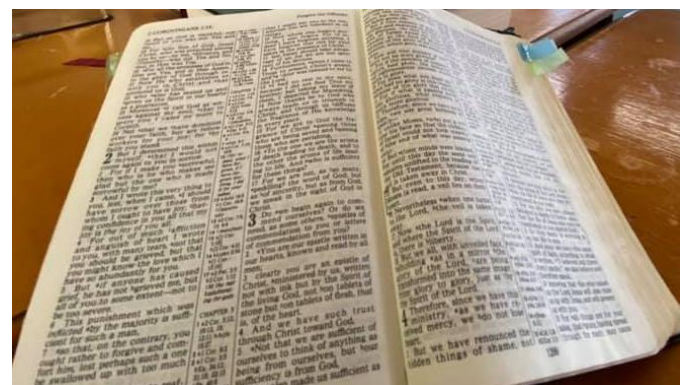
Jesus, God's Son, is the only person who has lived the perfect life. He alone in Himself is the Righteous One (Is 53:11; Acts 3:14). We might think that while the Pharisees were strict, Jesus was easy-going; they fasted, while He feasted. But their fasting, like their tithing of all they received—not just of what they earned—went above and beyond what God had commanded (Mt 15:9). And as Jesus said on another occasion, in the home of a Pharisee who'd invited Him for dinner, "[You Pharisees] tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others" (Lk 11:42). Yet the Lord not only came down on the Pharisees with the full force of God's law. He invited them to believe when He also told them about the amazing grace of God. Think merely of the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son. Jesus told those parables to Pharisees and Bible scholars who grumbled because He received and ate with sinners. Through words of both law and gospel, He wanted to lead even Pharisees to repentance.

Our Lord gave His life into death to save Pharisees; indeed everyone. He ended the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector with the words, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted". Again, it's not your act of humility that saves you. God, though His word and Holy Spirit, brings about in you the humility that receives what He wants to give you. He's the One who exalts and saves. Jesus is the perfect demonstration of humility. Though almighty God, He didn't regard His equality with God as something to be held on to, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, it says in Phil 2 (:5-11). "And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." He willingly suffered an excruciating death so that we might be declared righteous.

How tragic that anyone should reject Jesus by looking to their own so-called goodness to save them!

Because of Jesus, God washed your sins away when you were baptised in His name. He continues to speak His word of forgiveness to you who confess your sinfulness. As well, He feeds you here with the Spirit-filled, sanctifying body and blood of Jesus by which we have been reconciled to God.

How will you go home from this temple today? Trust that because of Jesus, you are pleasing to God. It might sound like St Paul was boasting about himself when he wrote, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim 4:7). In prison, with his martyrdom approaching, he was instead confessing his faith to encourage Pastor Timothy in his work. Like the Pharisee who called himself "the sinner", St Paul in his first letter to Timothy (1:15) wrote that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost". In his second letter he wrote, "I am not ashamed [of suffering for the gospel] for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day [i.e. the Day of judgment] what has been entrusted to me" (1:12). It was because of Jesus that Paul could be so confident he would be brought safely through death into His heavenly kingdom (4:18).



SERMON ON LUKE 18: 9-14

May Jesus also be your confidence! Whether you feel justified, exalted, or poor and miserable, believe God's word that He has made Christ Jesus "our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30). Be confident that Jesus' blood and righteousness covers you and go to your house rejoicing.

Pastor David Buck

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1. <https://www.dw.com/en/wittenberg-germany-birthplace-of-the-protestant-reformation/video-73417563>
2. Roland Bainton *A Life of Martin Luther*, 1963, pp45-50, 60-63
3. Arthur Just, *Luke*, 1997, p682, footnote 9



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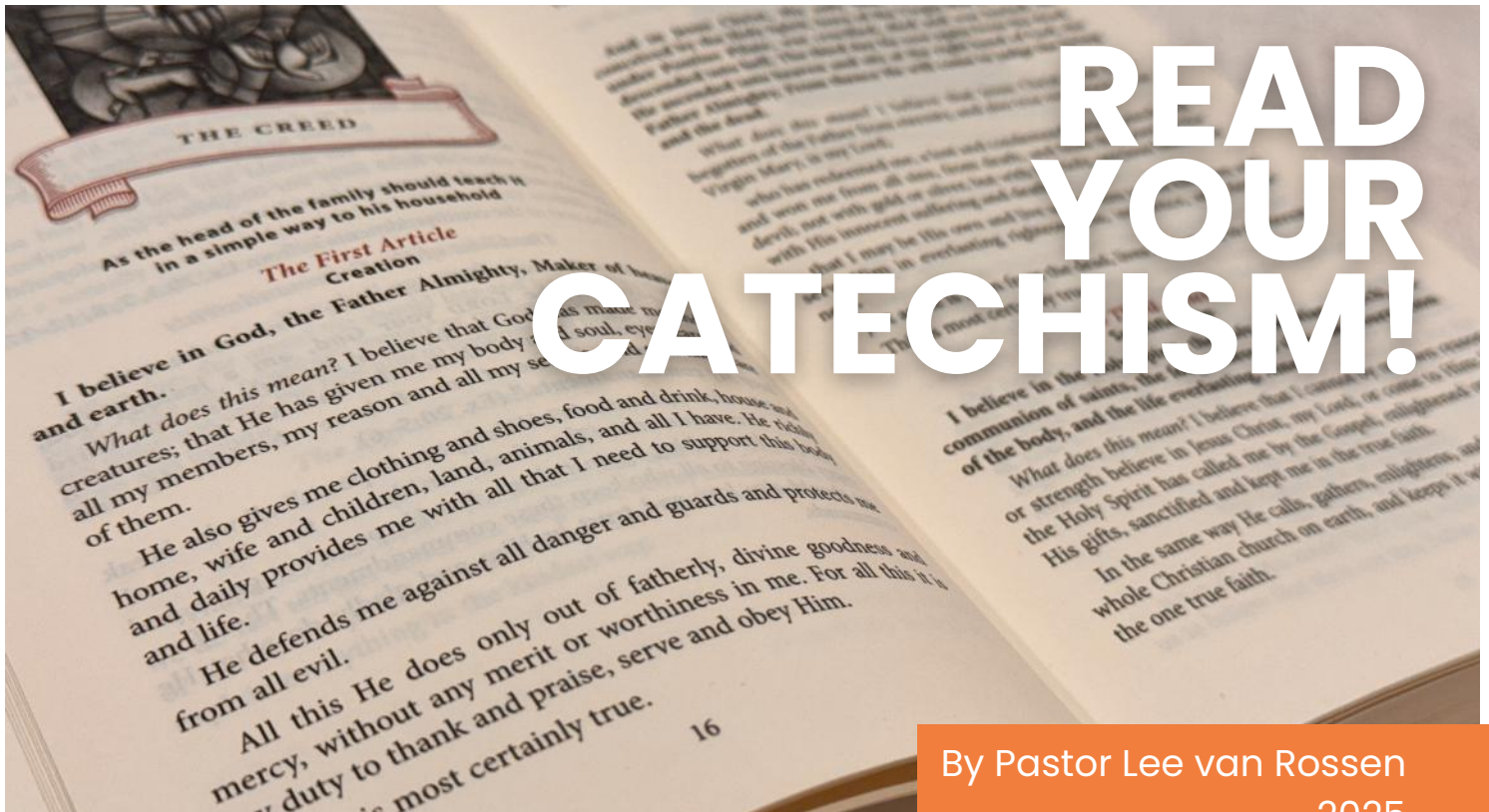
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By Pastor Lee van Rossen
2025

So far, we have discussed the Catechism itself, what it is and why you should read it, and we then had a look through each of the Ten Commandments. Following the order of the Small Catechism, next up is for us to have a look at the Apostles' Creed.

Now, I grew up in mostly Baptist and non-denominational circles, many of which do not confess or teach the Christian creeds, and many of which use phrases like 'no creed but the Bible'. I do believe this comes from a good heart – a desire to uphold the Word of God alone, to put no other writing on par with or above Holy Scripture! However, this did make it jarring and confusing for me when I first began studying the creed. I remember being surprised to hear these strange Lutherans claim that the creeds were simply summaries of the Scriptures, and come from the Scriptures themselves.

I've come to believe that they were right. A creed, fundamentally, is a statement of belief.

We see that Paul states his belief clearly in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8; "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."¹

Our Creeds, like Paul's here, are simply our statements of what we believe. For those of you who don't know, or perhaps don't remember, we have the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed.

I won't go into the finer details of how each of those came to be but suffice to say they each were formed by the early church, each confesses the Triune God, and each confesses faith in Christ Jesus as our incarnate, crucified, resurrected, ascended, and living Lord. Why three different creeds? Well, as the church progressed, so did heresies. New false teachings came up time and time again, so creeds were developed to clearly state true teachings, giving no room for falsehoods.

Now, in putting together the Catechism, Martin Luther was very kind to us. Rather than expect us to learn the 650+ words long Athanasian Creed, or the 220+ words Nicene Creed, he taught the approx. 100 words Apostles' Creed (just 76 words in Latin!). It is short, precise, and succinct. In fact, my confirmation pastor was able to help my wife Sonja and me memorise the entire Apostles' Creed in just under half an hour! If you want to know how, send me a message, and I'll happily pass on his 'memory palace' technique.

The Apostles' Creed can be broken down into three parts that we refer to as 'articles'. Let's have a look at them now.

"I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth."

The First Article is what we believe and confess about God the Father. We confess that He is God, Father, Almighty, and made Heaven and Earth. Already I think that is enough for a minimum of 4 lengthy articles, but we could easily go on for years! We could look into what a 'god' is and should be. We could study the very concept of God being 'Father' to us, and how Jesus was accused of making Himself equal with God for using such a term.

We could study the concept of power and omnipotence, questioning why God has done what He has when He could do literally anything however He wants! We could study the very nature of Heaven, and humanity's relation to it. We could study how God made us from the earth itself, designing us to be earthy beings, tailoring the sacraments for us to receive in earthy ways, and planning for us to live on the new earth with Him forever. We could easily dig into it, doing Bible study after Bible study, as many advanced theologians and learned scholars have done for millennia.

Luther's focus in writing the Catechism, however, was to ensure that everyday people could learn the core of the Christian faith. He wanted them to share in the peace and comfort that comes from knowing God; who He is, what He has done, what help He gives to us here and now. So, Luther didn't include lengthy statements on the nature of omnipotence. Neither did he feel it necessary to focus on our limited understanding of the heavens. Open up your Catechism and have a read, and you'll find that what Luther suggested we need to know about God the Father is that; He made us and all things, He gave us all we are and have, and He continues to care for us because He loves us. Indeed, what more needs to be said? The first article of the creed, our statement of what we believe, is simply that – God is our Father, He made us, and continues to care for us.

Luther would not have gone to the effort of including this if it were not deeply practical. It applies to us as individuals here and now. "He has given me my body and soul..." We confess that God made our bodies – so even when they grow weak or fail us, we give Him thanks for each and every body part as gifts from Him. When we despair of a broken world, we can still thank Him for the many good things He made that give us joy and comfort.

When we are hurting, when we are scared, when we are hungry or thirsty or sick or homeless – our statement of belief is that God does care, and He will care for us. Likewise, when we enter into temptation and sin, when we despair of ourselves and our sinful natures, we confess that God does not withhold His love and care, just as we do not earn it when we follow His way to the best of our ability. God our Almighty Father loves us, made us, cares about us, and cares for us. That's what Luther believed we need to know, that is what we confess in the Creed, and that is something worth being reminded of regularly.

“And [I believe] in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord...”

It pleases the logical part of my brain that, following our confession regarding God the Father, the second petition is our confession regarding God the Son. The Apostles' Creed succinctly summarises in much the same way Paul did in 1 Corinthians, while including a few extra details from the scriptures. Once again, we could do Bible studies until His second coming and not come close to exhausting what the scriptures say regarding Jesus! And, once again, Martin Luther focused on that which a Christian needs to know most of all – the core of our faith; the answer to the biggest question in all of history; who is Jesus?

The answer: Jesus is our Lord who saved us from our sins.

For a guy who could never seem to stop talking about Jesus (which is a good thing!), Luther really didn't labour the point in the Small Catechism.

As we read, he asserts the simple truths; Jesus is God, Jesus became man, Jesus willingly suffered and died to save sinners (you and me) who were otherwise utterly helpless and hopeless, Jesus rose from the dead, Jesus ascended, Jesus reigns, and He did all of that because He loves us and wants us to be with Him forever. Now, Luther's wording in the Catechism, as well as my poor excuse for a summary here, are both probably better than 99% of the sermons I've ever preached. It is the most important, and most practical, part of the entire Catechism. It is the core message of Christianity! It crushes pride and lifts from despair! In it, there is no room for self-righteousness, for as Luther writes we are 'lost and condemned'. In it, there is no room for despair, for as Luther writes we are 'purchased and won from all sins... that we may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom'!

A person who reads their catechism regularly benefits from reading these words every time. Human beings have such terrible memories, and we are always tempted to fall away from focusing on Christ. Even pastors and church workers can become so focused on doing the work that we lose sight of Christ Himself, let alone those who live and work in a world that rejects Christ entirely. The Catechism, through the Creed, points us back to Him. It reminds us that He is Lord, not us, so we never make the mistake of thinking we are in charge of ourselves or our lives. It also reminds us that He is Lord, so that we turn to Him for help in all we need. It reminds us that we are lost and condemned, sinful to the core, so pride cannot take root in our hearts. It reminds us that He died and rose for us, so guilt and shame cannot take root either. It reminds us that the suffering of this life is only temporary – that as His suffering for us was only temporary, so too will we rise with Him and suffer no more.

It is the most basic and core part of our faith, and therefore the part we must focus on the most, no matter how well we think we know it. It is the source of our hope, our comfort, our help! No wonder Luther saw fit to put it in the Catechism – it is something for us to read every day!

“I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints...”

The Third Article then follows the same pattern. Many (myself included) make the mistake of separating the Third Article into one line about the next member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, and then an assorted list of ‘christian-y’ things. Those who have (and read) the Small Catechism know this not to be the case – just as the First Article is what we believe about the Father and the Second Article is what we believe about the Son, the entire Third Article is what we believe about the Holy Spirit.

Now, this one has been tricky for a lot of people, and it is understandable. We call the Holy Spirit the ‘shy’ member of the Trinity. This is because the Holy Spirit doesn’t put Himself at centre stage – He simply proclaims Jesus. When we focus on Him, He points us to Christ, so to push past that and focus on Him is to disregard His will – never a good idea! Yet, the result is that we find Him and His works mysterious, leading many people to be curious, while also not giving Him credit for the many things He does for us daily!

So, Luther laid it out clearly – the Spirit gives us... everything!

We like to think that we play some part in receiving Jesus. Many Christians go down the rabbit hole of trying to establish and prove that they somehow chose Jesus, or earned His favour somehow, or did enough good works to be a little bit better than everyone else. Unfortunately for our pride and ego, scripture teaches clearly that we are all utterly sinful and incapable of doing anything but rejecting God. Even our best efforts at good works are nothing but filthy rags before a perfect and Holy God. So, even with Jesus coming to us, dying and rising again to pay for our sins, we are still incapable of getting the benefits He earned for us without help.

The Holy Spirit is our helper. As the Small Catechism states, “I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.” The Holy Spirit brings us to Jesus, gives us the forgiveness Jesus earned, and gives us Jesus’ body and blood. He teaches us, guides us, and makes us holy. He uses Jesus’ body, the church, to deliver all these benefits to us, and He will be the one to raise us to new life in Jesus! He points us to Christ!

Again, it is practical for us every day! Again, our pride is crushed when we see that all of our learning, experience, and good works as followers of Christ are only the result of the Holy Spirit’s work. Again, any guilt or shame we have is washed away when the Holy Spirit delivers forgiveness to us. The one who reads these words regularly is led to rely on the Holy Spirit’s work in them, thanking Him, and following His leading to focus on Christ alone!

CATECHETICAL STUDIES

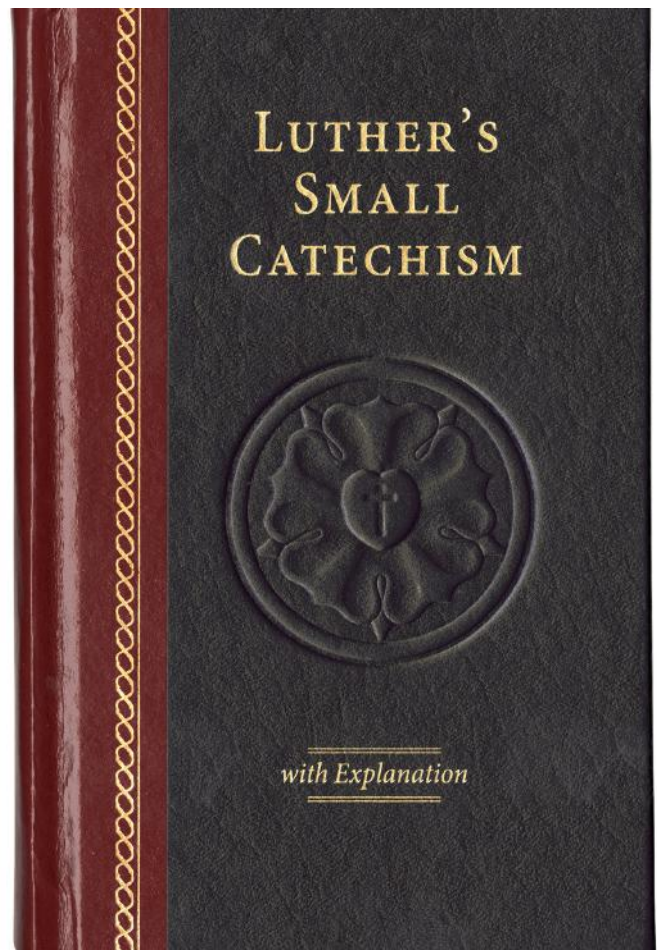
So, I encourage you, I exhort you, for your own sake I tell you; read your catechism! It is full of practical teaching to help you daily. Read the Apostles' Creed and be reminded of who your God is, what He has done, and what help He offers and gives to you. If you don't, you are the one who misses out.

Pastor Lee van Rossen

References:

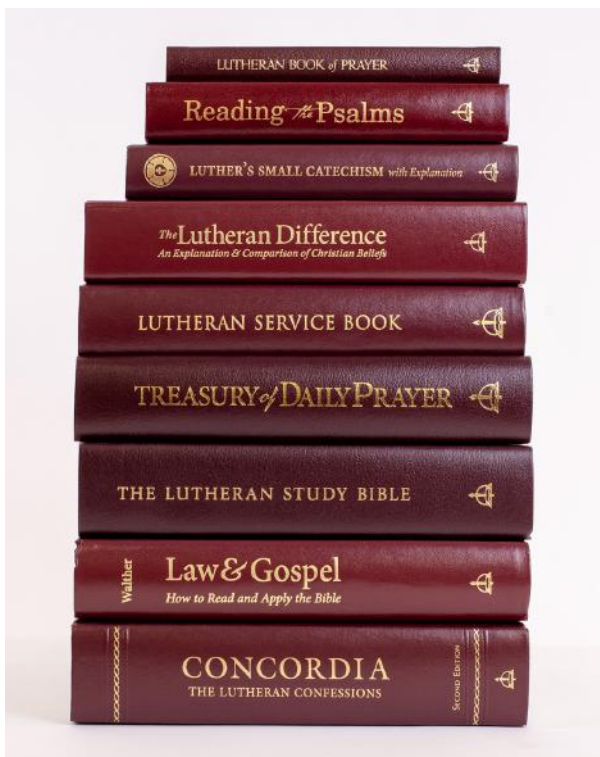
1. 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 ESV

Looking to add Luther's Small Catechism to your personal library? Order your copy with Creative Word Fellowship!



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YOUNG ADULTS BIBLE STUDY RETREAT



Photo by Pastor Joshua Muller

By Pastor Joshua Muller
2025

At the time of publication, the Creative Word Fellowship (CWF) team are busy preparing for the 2026 Young Adults & Young Families camp under the theme “Jesus: prophet, priest, & king”. This will be our eighth young adults camp, after a small beginning in April 2017, and a few challenges along the way, including bushfires and global pandemics.

The very first CWF Young Adults Bible Study Retreat (YABSR) was born out of conversations among various bible study groups and pastors in South Australia who noticed there were many camps aimed at high school age or below, but very little available for young adults outside of leading on a junior camp. This led to a passionate group of people coming together under the CWF banner to provide an opportunity for young adults to have their faith nurtured and enjoy fellowship with one another.

What emerged was a fully catered, three-day bible study retreat held at Tandara Lutheran Camp in the scenic Grampians. The retreat is aimed at 18 to 40 year olds, and in line with CWF’s ethos of teaching, the retreat is focused on teaching God’s Word faithfully in its truth and purity. The main objective is to provide young adults with an opportunity to gather and receive solid biblical teaching so that they may be equipped to serve others back in their home congregations and bible study groups. The planning team deliberately chose a fully catered campsite so that all attendees could participate in each study session, without having to worry about meal preparation or clean up.

Over the years, the camp topics have included the Reformation, Vocation, the book of Galatians, Christ in the Old Testament, Sacred Song, and more.

YOUNG ADULTS BIBLE STUDY RETREAT

We have been ably led by ordained pastors with additional input from deaconesses and music educators. We've made a few timetable tweaks along the way but have settled into a schedule that best serves the purposes of the retreat. It starts on Thursday evening to allow two full days of teaching and fellowship, before concluding with Divine Service and lunch on Sunday. Friday and Saturday mornings start with Matins and Bible Study sessions, then the afternoons are a dedicated leisure time with options including walks, swimming, ice cream in town, or even taking a nap! Evenings include dinner, Vespers, more scripture teaching, and then some social time, concluding with Compline for those who stay up late.

From the very first retreat, we have welcomed accompanied children and enjoyed the blessings God gives through them. Some of our original group of young adults are now not so young, and many are married with young families and still desire the good teaching and good fellowship that is found on camp. For growing families and students on a limited income, attending the retreat does present a considerable financial challenge, and so CWF is always grateful to receive donations towards this ministry to enable us to subsidise registrations. Your prayers for this ministry are also deeply appreciated.

The 2026 camp begins on Thursday, 15th January, once again at Tandara Lutheran Camp, Halls Gap. As we explore the theme "Jesus: prophet, priest, & king", we will see in the Gospels that Christ is revealed as our Prophet who proclaims God's Word, our Priest who offers Himself as the once-for-all sacrifice upon the cross, and our King who reigns with grace and truth.

Pastor Joshua Muller



Photos by Peter Wittwer and Isaac Falkenberg



By Thomas Krahling
2025

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Colossians 1:16-17)

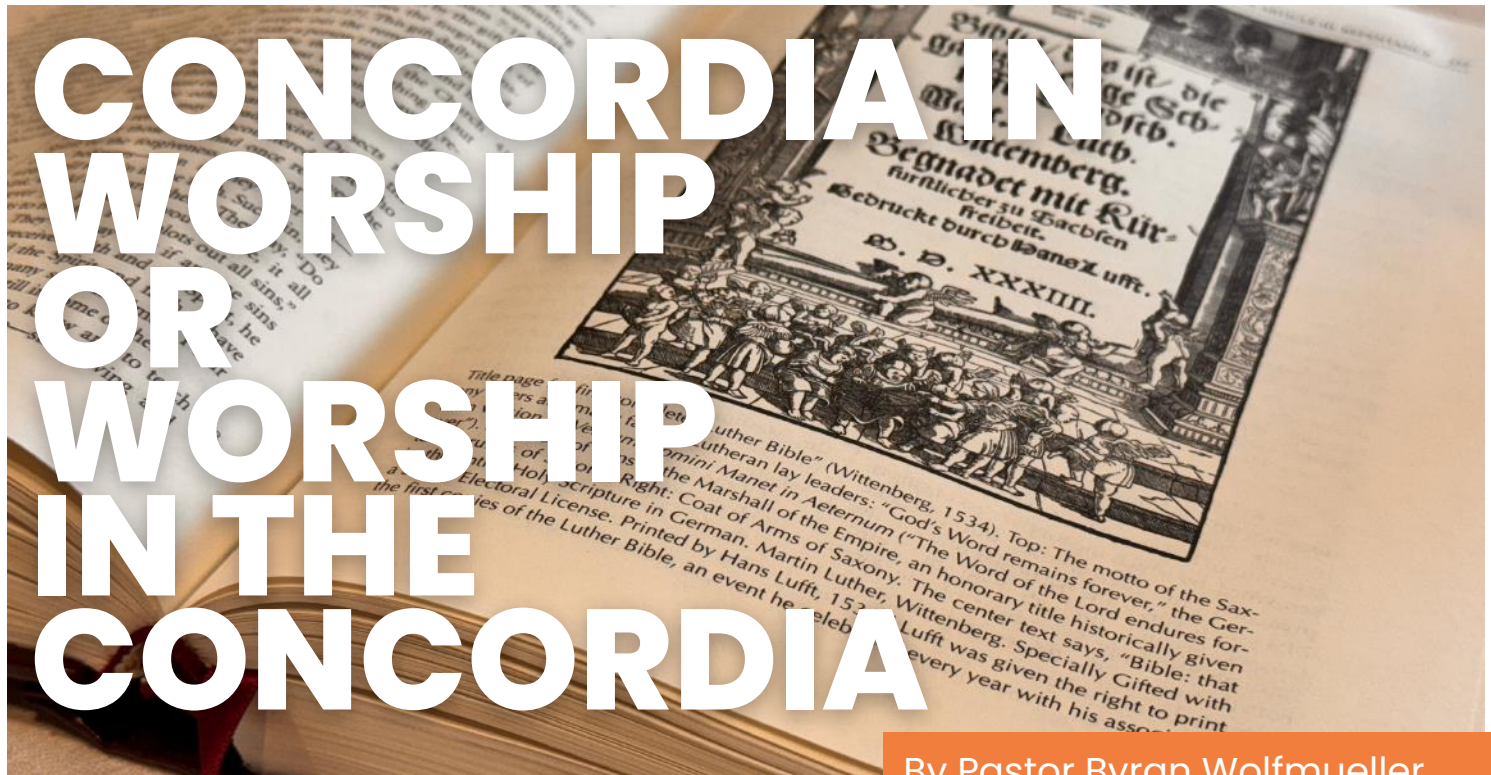
The eternal and wise Word of God, through whom all things were made, after making all things well, sent his angel to the blessed virgin. In her womb, the master Craftsman would create a human nature to unite to his own person.

This human nature would be received into the Second Person of the Trinity and united to his divine nature. From now on, everything the Son would do, he would do as both God and human. Through the united natures of Christ, all of creation would live and move and have its being. And as both God and man, Jesus would save his people from their sins.

But when we talk about Jesus' human nature, what does this mean? How is Jesus like us, and how is he different? What does Jesus' human nature mean for our own human nature? We learn these areas of dogmatics, not for mere knowledge, but that in knowing Jesus better, we may also better know his love for us.

Human Nature: What does this mean?

When we talk about Jesus having a human nature, we simply mean that Jesus is a human. He doesn't just look like a human or shape-shift into a human for a time – he is a human.



By Pastor Byran Wolfmueller
July 2025

A Word of Introduction

Worship is at the heart of the church of Jesus, and this is because worship is being served by Jesus. Our Savior brings us His saving gifts, His promises, the benefit of His death and resurrection, and we take hold of them by faith, rejoicing at the surprise and delight of this divine kindness.

Worship belongs to Jesus. He has instituted it, and he has done so for a specific purpose, with a specific end in mind, and that is that we sinners would be forgiven, absolved, comforted by His forgiving, absolving, and comforting Word. The Holy Spirit, then, through the means of the external Word, comforts our conscience. And we can say a bit more.

I would like, in this essay, to put forth the thesis that the divine service is instituted by Jesus so that the Holy Spirit, through the Word, would create in our conscience a reflection of the heavenly council.

This forensic understanding is found in the Scriptures and Confessions, and it is helpful as we consider the words and forms of the liturgy.

A Strange Definition

I suspect that the question "What is worship?" would have as many answers as there are people in this room, but I also suspect that none of us would offer the definition that Philip Melanchthon does in our Lutheran Confessions.

Melanchthon is writing this appendix to the Smalcald Articles because Luther did not offer a detailed defense of the assertion that the pope is the antichrist. Melanchthon picks up the slack, arguing from Scripture and history against the pope's three claims: (1) that he has primacy in the church by divine right, that (2) he possesses both swords, that is both political and spiritual power on earth, and (3) that it is necessary to believe these things to be saved.

About halfway through the treatise Melanchthon has about had enough, and says, "Look, the pope teaches false doctrine, the worst of which is denying the Gospel." In the midst of this, we find Melanchthon's strange definition of worship.

The doctrine of repentance has been utterly corrupted by the Pope and his adherents.

For they teach that sins are remitted because of the worth of our works. Then they bid us doubt whether the remission takes place. They nowhere teach that sins are remitted freely for Christ's sake, and that by this faith we obtain remission of sins. Thus they obscure the glory of Christ, and deprive consciences of firm consolation, and abolish true divine services, namely, the exercises of faith struggling with [unbelief and] despair [concerning the promise of the Gospel]. (Treatise, 44. Triglott, from which the Confessions, unless noted, are quoted.)

Worship, here, is "faith struggling against despair" (Tappert). This is a surprising and perhaps unexpected definition of divine service, but even more surprising that Melanchthon would drop this definition without further explanation. This definition is not a strain, but right at home in the midst of the Lutheran Confessions.

Comfort for Terrified Consciences

Unlike any other confessional texts, the Lutheran Confessions are pastoral, that is, they have as their explicit goal the comfort of terrified consciences.

On the contrary, by the favor of God, the priests among us attend to the ministry of the Word, teach the Gospel concerning the blessings of Christ, and show that the remission of sins occurs freely for Christ's sake. This doctrine brings sure consolation to consciences. (Ap XXIV. 48)

But since in this controversy the chief topic of Christian doctrine is treated, which, understood aright, illumines and amplifies the honor of Christ [which is of especial service for the clear, correct understanding of the entire Holy Scriptures, and alone shows the way to the unspeakable treasure and right knowledge of Christ, and alone opens the door to the entire Bible], and brings necessary and most abundant consolation to devout consciences, we ask His Imperial Majesty to hear us with forbearance in regard to matters of such importance. (Ap IV. 2)

Quotations could be multiplied. The pages of the Confessions are filled with comfort. The true doctrine gives all glory to Christ and all comfort to Christians. The false doctrine does the opposite, obscuring Christ's glory and robbing consciences of comfort. This is why it is bad, and this is why the Lutherans are causing a fuss, even as the Turks threaten the eastern borders of the empire and the Emperor himself is calling for unity.

For since the adversaries understand neither what the remission of sins, nor what faith, nor what grace, nor what righteousness is, they sadly corrupt this topic, and obscure the glory and benefits of Christ, and rob devout consciences of the consolations offered in Christ. (Ap IV. 3)

But, to comfort a terrified conscience you have to find a terrified conscience. Luther and his fellow confessors would often lament that their opponents didn't care about sin, were not troubled before God, and didn't care "if God smiled or frowned."¹ This indifference was lamented even in pastors of the Gospel who had "mastered the fine art of abusing their Christian freedom."

CONCORDIA IN WORSHIP

The point of this is that a terrified conscience is a rare find, in fact, it is something worked by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the law. Here it is helpful to consider the difference between a troubled conscience and a terrified conscience. A troubled conscience knows that it has done something wrong. A terrified conscience knows that God is angry with that something wrong. A troubled conscience knows that it has messed up; a terrified conscience knows that it deserved God's wrath. A troubled conscience confesses that it has sinned. A terrified conscience confesses that it has deserved God's temporal and eternal punishment. A terrified conscience, then, is a conscience in which our sin is put in the context of God's holiness.

This terror is the result of God's law. A conscience might be naturally troubled, but it must be supernaturally terrified. A troubled conscience might flee for refuge to its own works, its own efforts, or some other help (and in this flight we see the origin of every false religion, from the fig leaves of Adam and Eve to the Islamic Haj to the Environmentalist chaining himself to the trees). Terror, on the other hand, leaves nothing to be done because the real problem is not my sin but God's anger at my sin. There is nowhere to run. If the trouble I have is with God, then the solution will only be with God.

The cross, then, is the only hope for fallen mankind. God has to do something with His wrath, and on the cross He does. The profound suffering of Jesus on the cross is not the physical suffering, and not even the shame that He despises (see Hebrews 12:1-2, and Luther's Introduction to Psalm 22²), but the spiritual affliction to which He is handed over by God, which takes both passive ("My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

Psalm 22, Matthew 27:46) and active ("Smitten by God..." "It pleased the Lord to bruise Him." Isaiah 53:4,10) forms. This is the "first and chief article, that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, died for our sins, and was raised again for our justification" (Smalcald II.1).

Any downplaying of sin has the result of downplaying the cross. But the cross, as an event, is not yet the Gospel. On the cross Jesus wins the forgiveness of sins, but it is now the work of the Holy Spirit to deliver this forgiveness to us.³ "For neither you nor I could ever know anything of Christ, or believe on Him, and obtain Him for our Lord, unless it were offered to us and granted to our hearts by the Holy Ghost through the preaching of the Gospel" (Large Catechism, II.38).

God brings the benefit of the cross to us in the promise of the Gospel, the forgiveness of our sins. This is the article of justification by faith.

Justification in Action (or in Suffering): When God is Fighting Against His Own Promises

The faith that justifies is always in opposition to two things (which are really the same thing): works and sight. "We walk by faith and not by sight," says Paul (2 Corinthians 5:7). The promises of God always run contrary to sight, and so faith is always in the midst of suffering. This accounts for the rather troubling tendency of the Scriptures to describe our Christian life in terms of suffering.⁴

For the Lord's people, though, this suffering takes acute form when God Himself fights against His own promises.

Consider Abraham. God's troubling instruction to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac is compounded because God is asking Abraham to sin not only against the law ("You shall not murder.") but also against the Gospel ("So shall your descendants be," Genesis 15:5, "Sarah, your wife, shall have a son," Genesis 18:10.). Isaac is the child of promise. Isaac is God keeping His promise, not only to Abraham, but also to Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:15), and now the Lord is commanding Isaac to bring the promise to an end. By all accounts, God is fighting against His own promise, but Abraham knows this is impossible, that God can only keep His promises, that through Isaac all the nations of the earth will be blessed, that Isaac could not stay dead (see Hebrews 11:17-19). So Abraham with "hope contrary to hope" (Romans 4:18), raised the knife to "worship" (Genesis 22:5, "the lad and I will go up yonder and worship..."), and became the father and brother of every Christian (Galatians 3:6-9).

The New Testament brings this to us in another account, three times quoting the preaching of Habakkuk. Habakkuk stood in Jerusalem in 635, as the Lord was preparing the Chaldeans to roll through the Promised Land and destroy Jerusalem. But Jerusalem, like Isaac, was a place of promise. This was the place where the Messiah was to be born. This was the city from which His rule was to go forth. It was this place that the Lord had prepared so that He might fulfill His promises. And it is this place that the Lord was about to destroy. "For indeed I am raising up the Chaldeans" (Habakkuk 1:6). God, again, is working against His own promises. So Habakkuk preaches, "The righteous shall live by faith" (Habakkuk 2:4).

Justifying faith stands, then, not only against the righteousness of works, but also against the "promises" or "threats" of sight. This was not lost on the apostles. When "God's wrath is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness," (Romans 1:18) the "righteous shall live by faith," (Romans 1:17, see also Galatians 3:11 and Hebrews 10:37-38). When it looks as if God Himself is hell-bent on destroying His own promises, faith sticks to the promise. We look around and see trouble, but we hear, by faith, that "all things work together for the good of those who love God..." (Romans 8:28). We look around and see sin, but we hear, by faith, the forgiveness of sins. We look around and see death, but we hear, by faith, that we will not die (John 3:16).

The "Where" of the Promise

Justification is bound up to faith, and faith is bound up to hearing. "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing the word of God" (Romans 10:17).

This is captured beautifully in the unfolding of the Augsburg Confession. Justification is introduced in Article IV:

Also they teach⁵ that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight (Romans 3 and 4).

This is the "what" of justification. Article V, then, gives us the "how" of justification:

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That we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith; where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel, to wit, that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ's sake, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ's sake. They condemn the Anabaptists and others who think that the Holy Ghost comes to men without the external Word, through their own preparations and works.

God delivers the promise in Word and Sacrament, and the Holy Spirit works through the means of the external word. Article VI, on Good Works, tries to talk about the result of Justification, Good Works, but ends up talking about the forgiveness of sins even more. Now, article VII of the Confession will talk about the "where" of Justification:

Also they teach that one holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered. And to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike. As Paul says: One faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, etc. (Ephesians 4:5-6).

It has been noted that this is the first dogmatic definition of the church⁶, and more, that this is a liturgical definition of the church.⁷ Where there is right preaching of the Gospel and right administration of the Sacraments there is the Church.

There are holy people where there is the holy Word and holy things because the Holy Spirit is busy there holifying sinners.

When the Lutheran Confessors link up the forensic language of justification⁸ to the public worship of the church they bring courtroom procedures into the temple. Lutheran worship, then, has a distinctively forensic character.

Hell in Heaven on Earth: Job

Have you considered the Lord's servant Job? The book of Job opens with the declaration of Job's righteousness. "There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job, and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (Job 1:1). This is not a description of Job. Job was a sinner, as the rest of the book he wrote will plainly demonstrate. The blamelessness of Job was an alien blameless; his uprightness an external uprightness, spoken of Job by God in heaven. We, in fact, get a glimpse into the heavenly council to hear the Lord declare Job righteous: "And the Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?'" (Job 1:8). It is troubling that Satan is standing there in front of the Lord, but this courtroom has an accuser. Still, Job is righteous because the Lord declared him righteous. Job was justified. But how does Job know this? The sacrifice.



"His sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each one on his day, and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. And when the days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and consecrate them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, 'It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts.' Thus Job did continually" (Job 1:4-5).

The Lord makes known the declaration of righteousness through the sacrifice, through the liturgy. This is how we are to understand the tabernacle and the temple and everything that accompanied it: the priesthood, the altars and sacrifices, the feasts and festivals, all of these are shadows of the heavenly reality, a delivering of the verdict pronounced in the heavenly council.

Now the remainder of the text of Job shows the prophet fighting to believe what he knows from the altar when everything around him testifies to the opposite. Job loses everything but his life, and now he sits on a pile of ashes, scraping his sores with a scrap of pottery, and the devil gathers a cloud of witnesses around him to testify: "Job, you are a sinner. God must hate you." All that is left for Job is the altar, the quiet testimony that flies in the face of everything he sees. "No," Job is left to say, by faith, "I am righteous. The blood is shed in my place. God loves me. I am justified."

Job gives us a glimpse of the competing councils, the heavenly council where sinners are declared righteous, and the earthly council where sinners are judged apart from the sacrifice. Job, then, is the picture of faith struggling against despair, clinging to the echo of the heavenly verdict he hears in the divine service.

And, in the end, Job's friends are brought out of Satan's council into the heavenly council, as Job includes them in the sacrifice. Now they, too, are declared forgiven and innocent (see Job 42:7-9)!

Here, though, we see clearly that the divine service delivers the heavenly verdict of righteousness.

Lutheran Exceptionalism: The External Word: Why No One Worships Like a Lutheran

Luther (in what I consider the most profound theological insight outside the Scriptures) reduces every false doctrine down to one word: enthusiasm. That is a rejection of the external Word (and normally replacing it with the internal Word).

And in those things which concern the spoken, outward Word, we must firmly hold that God grants His Spirit or grace to no one, except through or with the preceding outward Word, in order that we may [thus] be protected against the enthusiasts, i.e., spirits who boast that they have the Spirit without and before the Word, and accordingly judge Scripture or the spoken Word, and explain and stretch it at their pleasure, as Muenzer did, and many still do at the present day, who wish to be acute judges between the Spirit and the letter, and yet know not what they say or declare. For [indeed] the Papacy also is nothing but sheer enthusiasm, by which the Pope boasts that all rights exist in the shrine of his heart, and whatever he decides and commands with [in] his church is spirit and right, even though it is above and contrary to Scripture and the spoken Word.

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All this is the old devil and old serpent, who also converted Adam and Eve into enthusiasts, and led them from the outward Word of God to spiritualizing and self-conceit, and nevertheless he accomplished this through other outward words. Just as also our enthusiasts [at the present day] condemn the outward Word, and nevertheless they themselves are not silent, but they fill the world with their pratings and writings, as though, indeed, the Spirit could not come through the writings and spoken word of the apostles, but [first] through their writings and words he must come. Why [then] do not they also omit their own sermons and writings, until the Spirit Himself come to men, without their writings and before them, as they boast that He has come into them without the preaching of the Scriptures? (Smalcald III. VIII. 3-6)

Then:

In a word, enthusiasm inheres in Adam and his children from the beginning [from the first fall] to the end of the world, [its poison] having been implanted and infused into them by the old dragon, and is the origin, power [life], and strength of all heresy, especially of that of the Papacy and Mahomet. Therefore we ought and must constantly maintain this point, that God does not wish to deal with us otherwise than through the spoken Word and the Sacraments. It is the devil himself whatsoever is extolled as Spirit without the Word and Sacraments. (Smalcald III. VIII. 9-11)

This is Luther's most emphatic *sola*, *Sola Verba*, and it is not the Bible as the only rule and norm, more: it is that the external Word is the only way God deals salvifically with us.

It is only in the external Word that a reliable account of the heavenly verdict is heard. Only by the external Word does the Holy Spirit work faith in the sinful heart of man.

And because this is true, that the means of the Lord's working are singular, that there is really only one means of grace⁹, we know that the devil's attacks will all find their unity here. The devil attacks the external Word to such an extent that only the Lutheran church teaches this. We stand alone, among all the various confessions, confessing that the Holy Spirit works only through the Word, the Gospel rightly preached and the Sacraments rightly administered.

The external Word is God's verdict. The Law is the verdict passed on our sin, and the Gospel is the verdict passed because of Jesus' death. The external Word is an operative Word, an Absolving Word, a living and active Word, that is: a Word of promise from God, a blood-saturated promise of forgiveness, and nothing else will do. In fact, everything else that claims to be from the Spirit apart from the external Word finds as its source the devil.

"The Word, the word, the word,"¹⁰ cries Luther and the Lutheran church to souls wrecked on works righteousness and mystical subjectivism and whatever else disconnects the Spirit from the Word. But this singular cry is also for us. There is a beautiful simplicity to our Lutheran understanding of the Scriptures, our understanding of the Church, our understanding of worship.

Consider the First Lutheran Church of Some Deserted Island. They have a terrible website. A band of Christians who know nothing of church history, nothing of the various denominations, nothing of the ACELC conference in Austin, Texas; they have never heard of Luther.

They are sitting on the beach eating coconuts and reading the Bible. How would they worship? First, they would see that the Son of God has suffered and died, and that He did this for sinners. They, then, must be these sinners, and sinners need forgiveness. This would send them to the Bible looking for those places where the Lord has promised forgiveness. They would find baptism¹¹, and the Lord's Supper¹², the Absolution and the preaching of the word¹³. They would conclude that what they need is the Gospel is rightly preached and the Sacraments are rightly administered. This is where you end when you start by looking for the promise of forgiveness. The Word hands you over to the Word.

It is precisely the external Word that delivers the heavenly verdict of our external righteousness. And it is precisely this that defines what uniquely Lutheran Worship is.

Revelation 12, and How this Fight ended up in My Conscience

Jesus had been ascended for 58 years when John was exiled by Domitian to the pleasant but lonely Patmos. Jesus' promise that "in this world you will have trouble" had proven true, but the "be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" was not as obvious. In fact, the temptation the devil brings to the persecuted church is doubting the ascension of Jesus. The devil orders things so that it looks as if he is seated on the throne.

In the Revelation Jesus brings this comfort to His church: He pulls back the curtain and gives John a glimpse of heaven, and sure enough, He is on the throne. "And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain" (Revelation 5:6).

Jesus will also show John the full horror of the things on this earth, but when we'd had our fill of beasts and dragons and whores, Jesus will give John another peek into heaven, and sure enough, Jesus is there, surrounded by saints and angels.

Right in the heart of these comforting visions the Lord gives John a glimpse into the heavenly court proceedings. John sees the woman pregnant with the Son of the promise, and a dragon waiting to devour this Child (Revelation 12:1-4). This Child is Jesus, who in verse five is born, lives, is crucified, died and was buried, and on the third day rose from the grave, and ascended into heaven. Now Jesus enters the heavenly council with His blood. Like in Job, Satan is there, the "accuser of our brothers ...who accuses them day and night before our God" (Revelation 12:10). But when Jesus comes into this courtroom with His blood, a war breaks out, and Satan and his angels are removed from before the Lord, "there was no longer any place for them in heaven" (Revelation 12:8). The death of Jesus on the cross means that the devil has no grounds to stand on; he has nothing left of which he might accuse you. The evidence of the blood of Jesus makes the evidence of your sin inadmissible in this court. The verdict has been passed, your sins are forgiven in heaven. But this joy is followed with a woe.



CONCORDIA IN WORSHIP

"Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!"

The devil's voice is no longer heard in heaven, so he brings his accusations down to earth, down to you. The devil now is doing his satanizing in your conscience. The verdict of your righteousness has been spoken in heaven, it is left for it to be heard in your heart, and the devil has now mustered all his forces to oppose this hearing of faith, to snatch up the Word before it takes root.

Two Divine Defense Attorneys and the Courtroom of Your Conscience

The Biblical counterpart to Satan, the Accuser, is the Paraklete. Jesus is our Paraklete (Advocate) with the Father (1 John 2:1), where He stands interceding for sinners, presenting His blood as evidence on our behalf. And from this heavenly council, Jesus sends forth the Holy Spirit to be our Paraklete on earth (see John 16:7-11). The Holy Spirit, then, speaks the heavenly verdict on earth. He stands in the courtroom of our conscience and testifies on our behalf, and the Holy Spirit accomplishes this through the Word, the Absolution (another forensic word).

It is in the Divine Service, where the Word is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered, that the Holy Spirit delivers the heavenly verdict to our conscience.

It is where the heavenly declaration of righteousness is heard on the earth. It is where our conscience is made good, that is, it becomes a reflection of the heavenly council, the devil removed, his accusations silenced, and the blood and word of Jesus winning the day. It is for this purpose that Jesus has established His church, and has instituted worship, so that he might deliver to us His righteousness.

Consider Romans 8 in this light:

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ...

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The devil presumes to be against us, to bring a charge against us, to condemn us, to separate us from the love of God in Christ, but Jesus has triumphed over the devil. Because Jesus has prevailed over sin, death, and the devil in His death and resurrection, so the Word of Jesus prevails over our sin, death, and the devil, both before the Father in heaven and also in our own conscience.

In this way, the divine service is delivering the external Word of promise, and in this way, terrified consciences are comforted with the Lord's promise. It is our great joy to extoll the external Word and the work that Holy Spirit accomplishes through it.

Public (Word) Enemy #1: Calvin's Two Species of Calling

It is also left to the pastors of the church the difficult task of identifying the enemies of the external Word. We find one such enemy in the teaching of John Calvin, especially his "two species of calling." Calvin separates the work of the Holy Spirit for the preaching of the external Word:

The expression of our Savior, "Many are called, but few are chosen," (Mt. 22:14), is also very improperly interpreted (see 3.2.11, 12). There will be no ambiguity in it, if we attend to what our former remarks ought to have made clear—viz. that there are two species of calling: for there is an universal call, by which God, through the external preaching of the word, invites all men alike, even those for whom he designs the call to be a savor of death, and the ground of a severer condemnation. Besides this there is a special call which, for the most part, God bestows on believers only, when by the internal illumination of the Spirit he causes the word preached to take deep root in their hearts. (Calvin's Institutes, 3.24.8, emphasis added.)

This distinction is the fount of all Protestant errors, namely, that the external preaching of the Word is not to be trusted, and the real spiritual activity is found internally. The fruit of Calvin's "two species" is the separation of baptism and salvation, the separation of the Lord's Supper and forgiveness, and the rejection of the Absolution. The Bible is reduced to information that takes effect only when acted upon. Salvation is a possibility to be accepted, and so forth. The external Word is not a Word of promise, after all, this Word might not be for you.

Imagine the difference this makes in worship and in preaching. There is not Absolution, only the "Assurance of Pardon." Preaching is turned into teaching. The Christians are directed to themselves for assurance, to their faith, or their works, or their feelings, or something else subjective. And, when Calvinism meets the revivalists, the work of the Holy Spirit is completely internalized. The Altar Call is for those who "feel the Holy Spirit tugging on their hearts." The music is shaped to create an experience of the presence of God, and so forth.

Calvin's "two species" create a void of comfort and objectivity that is filled with other new measures, and this "two species" distinction is the reason the Lutheran worship, liturgy, and hymnody has historically been distinct from the Protestant denominations. Calvin makes the external Word unsure, and the Christian is left to find sureness elsewhere.

Public (Word) Enemy #2: The Ex Operator

The other great enemy of the external Word is the Romanist doctrine of *ex opera operato*, that is, "From the working of the work."¹⁴

CONCORDIA IN WORSHIP

This dogma developed in the middle ages, presumably against a Donatism that wanted to find the efficacy of the sacraments bound up to the piety or holiness of a priest. It is good to know that my baptism is a true baptism even if it is administered by a scoundrel. The teaching, though, developed into a teaching that the sacraments conferred grace apart from faith, and apart from the external Word of promise to which faith clings.

Calvin ends up extolling faith without the Word. Rome extolls the work without faith. Here are a few of the Confessional objections to this teaching:

The adversaries nowhere can say how the Holy Ghost is given. They imagine that the sacraments confer the Holy Ghost *ex opere operato*, without a good emotion in the recipient, as though indeed, the gift of the Holy Ghost were an idle matter. (Ap. IV. 63)

Likewise, what need will there be of faith if the Sacraments justify *ex opere operato*, without a good disposition on the part of the one using them, without faith? Now, a person that does not regard faith as necessary has already lost Christ. (Ap VII & VIII. 22)

It is still more needful to understand how the Sacraments are to be used. Here we condemn the whole crowd of scholastic doctors, who teach that the Sacraments confer grace ex opere operato, without a good disposition on the part of the one using them, provided he do not place hindrance in the way. This is absolutely a Jewish opinion, to hold that we are justified by a ceremony, without a good disposition of the heart, i.e., without faith.

And yet this impious and pernicious opinion is taught with great authority throughout the entire realm of the Pope. Paul contradicts this, and denies, Rom. 4:9, that Abraham was justified by circumcision, but asserts that circumcision was a sign presented for exercising faith. Thus we teach that in the use of the Sacraments faith ought to be added, which should believe these promises, and receive the promised things, there offered in the Sacrament. (Ap. XIII. 18-19)

It is by faith that the promises of God make their way into our conscience. It is by faith that the promises have their saving effect. It is faith that fights against despair. It is by faith in the promise that we are accounted righteousness.

Rome would present our operations as evidence of our righteousness, and this is idolatry, and this is why Lutheran worship, liturgy, hymnody, and preaching have historically been distinct from Rome. The end is a conscience comforted by the faith that holds forth the sacrifice of Jesus, His blood, as our only hope in life.

Calvin attacks the promise. Rome attacks faith. The church extolls both faith and the promise, and true worship is both, bound up by Jesus, given to us for our justification and our peace.

The Liturgy of the Gospel

In the midst of the Apology to the Augsburg Confession's great argument on Justification, Melancthon breaks off into a consideration of worship. It is here, in the divine service, that the distinction between the law and the Gospel finds its most important home.

And the difference between this faith and the righteousness of the Law can be easily discerned. Faith is the latreia [divine service], which receives the benefits offered by God; the righteousness of the Law is the latreia [divine service] which offers to God our merits. By faith God wishes to be worshiped in this way, that we receive from Him those things which He promises and offers. (Ap. IV. 49)

Jesus speaks. We listen. He promises. We believe. The voice of Jesus which is now heard before the Father in heaven is heard in our churches, and heard in our consciences. And in this promising and believing faith is fighting against the devil, faith is struggling against despair. And by the Holy Spirit, faith wins. And this is true worship. Amen.

Pastor Bryan Wolfmueller

Originally presented as a paper at the ACELC conference (17 April 2013 in Austin, TX), posted on <https://wolfmueller.co/concordia-in-worship-or-worship-in-the-concordia/> on August 4, 2021. Used by permission.

Pastor Bryan Wolfmueller is pastor of [St. Paul Lutheran Church](#) and [Jesus Deaf Lutheran Church](#) in Austin, Texas. He presented at our 2023 Speak Lord Conference on Hope. Recordings from this conference can be found on our YouTube channel, @creativewordfellowship or the playlist for the event: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLY5FQBjExypgfosj-Yq4ZLET5sIVslg2I>

References:

1. See LC I.31. In opposition to Krister Stendhal and the so-called "New School" of Paul which flowed forth from him, which asserts that Luther's interpretation of Paul grew out of a medieval piety obsessed with sin. See Krister Stendhal, "Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West" *Harvard Theological Review*, 56:3 (1963) 199-215.
2. Luther's Introduction to Psalm 22 may be found online here: <http://www.hope-aurora.org/docs/Psalm22LutherIntro.pdf>
3. You cannot find a more wonderful explanation than this: "So that our readers may the better perceive our teaching I shall clearly and broadly describe it. We treat of the forgiveness of sins in two ways. First, how it is achieved and won. Second, how it is distributed and given to us. Christ has achieved it on the cross, it is true. But he has not distributed or given it on the cross. He has not won it in the supper or sacrament. There he has distributed and given it through the Word, as also in the gospel, where it is preached. He has won it once for all on the cross. But the distribution takes place continuously, before and after, from the beginning to the end of the world. For inasmuch as he had determined once to achieve it, it made no difference to him whether he distributed it before or after, through his Word, as can easily be proved from Scripture. But now there is neither need nor time to do so. "If now I seek the forgiveness of sins, I do not run to the cross, for I will not find it given there. Nor must I hold to the suffering of Christ, as Dr. Karlstadt trifles, in knowledge or remembrance, for I will not find it there either. But I will find in the sacrament or gospel the word which distributes, presents, offers, and gives to me that forgiveness which was won on the cross."

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3, cont. Therefore, Luther has rightly taught that whoever has a bad conscience from his sins should go to the sacrament and obtain comfort, not because of the bread and wine, not because of the body and blood of Christ, but because of the word which in the sacrament offers, presents, and gives the body and blood of Christ, given and shed for me. Is that not clear enough?" (Martin Luther, "Against the Heavenly Prophets" Luther's Works, vol. 40: Church and Ministry II, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 213–214.

4. See Psalm 119:50, 67, 71; Matthew 5:10–12; Luke 9:23; 2 Corinthians 4:7–11, 16–18; Philippians 1:29 and 1 Peter 1:7, 4:13–16.

5. The "they" is the Lutheran theologians. The Augsburg was being read by the princes to the emperor. This accounts for the use of the third person.

6, Kurt Marquart, *The Church and Her Fellowship, Ministry and Governance* (Ft Wayne, IN: The International Foundation for Lutheran Confessional Research, 1995), 9.

7. Pr. John Pless suspects he got this insight from Dr. John Kleinig.

8. On the insistence of "justification" being forensic, see Ap. 131, and especially Chemnitz extended and masterful discussion in his *Loci* under the title "The Vocabulary of Justification." Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, trans. J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1989), II.475–485

9. Understanding that baptism and the Lord's Supper are means of grace (or better "means of the Spirit") precisely because the Lord has joined His Word to the Water, and to His Body and Blood.

10. "The Word, the Word, the Word. Listen, lying spirit, the Word avails. Even if Christ were given for us and crucified a thousand times, it would all be in vain if the Word of God were absent and were not distributed and given to me with the bidding, this is for you, take what is yours." Martin Luther, "Against the Heavenly Prophets" Luther's Works, vol. 40: Church and Ministry II, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 212–213.

11. I.e. Acts 2:38, "Be baptized for the remission of your sins."

12. I.e. Matthew 26:28, "...this is My blood of the testament, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

13. i.e. John 20:22 and Romans 1:16–17.

14. "ex opera operato" became official Roman dogma at Trent.





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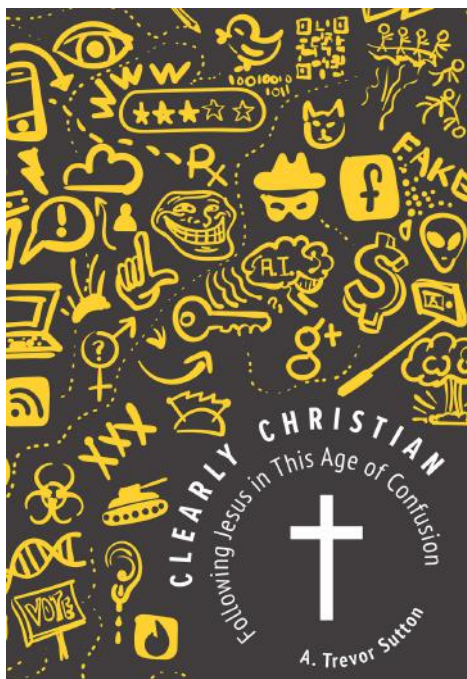
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In *Clearly Christian*, author A. Trevor Sutton dispels one falsehood about Christianity after another.

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MEN LED BY GOD WITH DR. BOYLE



By Isaac Falkenberg
2025

In August 2025, the Lutheran Men of Victoria held their annual Men Led by God camp. This year, the camp had the theme Following Our Fathers Along Ancient Paths. This 4-day camp gathered around fifty Lutheran men from across Australia to come together in fellowship, be uplifted by each other, and hear the Word of God explained through clear, Christ-focused teaching.

This camp was scheduled with study sessions in the morning and evening, allowing for the afternoon, late evening, and night to be spent on fellowship and building the bonds of brotherhood through the men who were there. Rev. Dr. Geoffrey Boyle from the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod was flown in to be the study leader for this camp. Dr. Boyle specialises in the Old Testament, and throughout the weekend led us through the Psalter and the books of the prophets. The first day of the camp this year was a Thursday, with people arriving just before dinner.

There was some time to meet the others who had arrived earlier to help set up before heading into a shared BBQ dinner, followed by an introduction to the weekend. Dr. Boyle gave everyone an overview of the planned material for the weekend and some question-and-answer time. After this, we went into an evening Vespers service led by Pastor Carl Thiele – who led all of the services apart from compline throughout the weekend – followed by breaking up for the evening to allow some further fellowship time with drinks around the fire. For those spry enough to stay up until midnight, there was a Compline service held to close out the night.

Friday morning began early, starting the day with a morning Matins service at 6am, before getting stuck into the study sessions on the Psalms. Dr. Boyle expertly gave an introduction to the Psalms, what they are, and how we can read them. He guided us through the different types of Psalms¹ and encouraged us to memorise the Psalms so that we can go into our daily lives and use them to pray in any and all circumstances.

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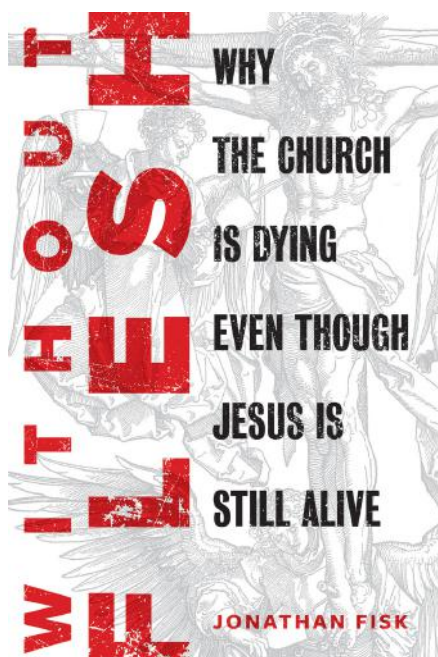
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The front lines of the battle waged against the present darkness have experienced retreat after retreat, each time wagging heads saying, "If only we can rethink our strategies for mission, we can turn this tide and win the lost for Jesus."

But for all our "rethinking," we haven't "rethought" nearly so much as it might seem. Perhaps, the real out-of-the-box thinking we need is not out-of-the-box at all, but inside it.

In *Without Flesh*, author Jonathan Fisk proposes that it isn't that we need something new, but something we lost, something very, very old. Like... the most important words Jesus ever said.

Fisk's solution is simpler than we may think. Maybe the only problem is that we just don't want to believe that it's true.

"Do this," He said. Email booshop@cwfellowship.net to order.

DARING TO BE LUTHERAN:



By Peter Wittwer, Rose
Graham and Hayley Simons
2025

Reflections from Higher Things Youth Conference.

Peter:

Over a year ago, I was leading a group of young adults — some of whom had never even been overseas — on a conference tour generously funded by the LCMS through a grant applied for by Creative Word Fellowship via the LCMS Asia Mission. For those who haven't heard the details of the trip before, I'll elaborate briefly.

We were from different states, and all met at Melbourne Airport to board the international flight to our first destination, Concordia University in Seward, Nebraska. There, we attended the LCMS Institute of Liturgy and Psalms conference — you can read more about that in Darcee Anker's article in Issue 2 of Standing Firm. We learned to sing the liturgy and chanted psalms and attended fantastic plenary and breakout sessions throughout the week on many different

topics related to aspects of worship, the psalms and Scripture.

From there, we travelled to the Higher Things conference — a conference for high school-aged youth that I had long wanted to experience ever since Pastor Carl Thiele told me about his time at one during a 'Research for Ministry trip' to Canada and the US. Within our group, half weren't keen on the worship conference, and half weren't keen on Higher Things. My rule was simple: it was all conferences or nothing. Perhaps I'm too tough, but I don't think a single participant regrets it.

The Theme for Higher Things 2024 was "Who am I" and was focused on Identity. "Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands" Isaiah 49:16a. *"Identity. More than what you want to be when you grow up. More than what's expected of you. What do you see when you look in the mirror? What gives you value? What makes you 'you'?"*



By Rev. Harrison Goodman
2025

Jesus and Mental Health

In the country of the Gerasenes, Jesus is confronted by a demon-possessed man as His feet touch the sand.¹ The man surrounds himself with death. The night is just as much a friend to him as the day. He cries out and takes sharp stones to his flesh with the same unholy strength that breaks apart chains and shackles. He has lost his identity to it all. “My name is Legion, for we are many.” And he is alone.

Mark 5 outlines a shocking and heartbreaking situation. It’s a place to grab onto mental health narratives of today, like self-harm, and even changing pronouns, if you stretch the story. Any way you look at it, the man’s mental health is, at best, under duress. The man is possessed by so many demons that they called themselves “Legion.” Enter Jesus. He casts out the demons, drowning that which is unclean, that a New Man may emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness.

The man is found in his right mind. It would appear, at least on the surface, that there is a connection between spiritual and mental health.

Jesus cares for this man. All of him. The soul is freed from demonic possession. The mind and body follow. He’s found clothed and in his right mind. He’s returned to his friends. The narrative of self-harm is replaced by one of restoration. All of it through a great reversal. It was Christ who would be cut off from his friends, apart from His apostles who fled at His arrest. It was Christ who bears the anguish that produces tears of blood in Gethsemane. Christ, who ultimately goes forth to confront the demons and proclaim the victory to the spirits in prison. Christ does not just redeem your soul. He redeems your body to the resurrection. And He redeems your mind. He assumes not just your sins, but their wages.



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What: A time of fellowship, support and
encouragement, meet new people, and enjoy a
good drink and a toasted sandwich

Ephesians 1:15-23



SHE PRAYS RETREAT



Photo by Helen Vonow

Compiled by Melanie Wittwer
2025

This year, Creative Word Fellowship and Here She Stands Podcast partnered together for the first time to host two retreats for Lutheran women in Australia on the topic of prayer. 'She Prays' was developed as an intergenerational event for all women aged 16 and up with participants travelling from across Australia.

The Victorian retreat was held at Araluen Lutheran Camp in Anglesea from 17th-19th October and attended by 64 women. The South Australian retreat took place the following weekend at Nunyara Conference Centre in Belair with 58 participants. A retreat at Lutheran Heights Youth Camp in Coolumb, Queensland is planned for mid-November and will use recordings from the SA retreat.

The idea for these retreats began in 2023. After a few false starts and lots of work behind the scenes the dream finally became reality.

While the weekends were designed to equip and teach, they also gave women space - space to breathe, rest, pray, learn, and reconnect with God and one another. The heart behind She Prays was simple but deeply needed: to invite women into patterns of prayer grounded in Scripture, the liturgy, and the Psalms, so they can carry those rhythms back into daily life.

Presenters

Deaconess Sandra Rhein and Kimberly Pfeiffer led the sessions across both retreats. Sandra is called by the LCMS Office of International Mission to serve as a Sacred Music Educator in Asia. Her planned work for 2025 included a retreat for women in Australia and we were blessed to have her travel expenses covered as part of that budget. Sandra drew on her extensive experience to deliver three sessions which covered using the hymnal as a prayer book, praying the Lord's Prayer, and praying the psalms.

Kimberly Pfeiffer is an experienced Lutheran church worker and writer and the current Here She Stands Blog editor. She presented two sessions that covered liturgical prayer in worship and private prayer, drawing on wisdom from Luther and learning from examples of prayer in the Scriptures.

Retreat highlights

The atmosphere was warm and welcoming from the very start. There was a good mix of ages – from teenagers and young mothers to grandmothers and everything in between. Shared meals in the dining hall created wonderful opportunities to connect; whether seated with friends or new faces, conversation flowed easily and new friendships formed naturally.

The program was beautifully balanced with precious opportunities to pause, reflect, and deepen connection with God through prayer. As Psalm 46:10 reminds us, “Be still, and know that I am God.” In the quiet of the afternoon, we embraced moments of rest—whether through a peaceful walk, reading, crafting, prayer, or even a refreshing nap.

Sandra showed us how to deepen our understanding of the Lord’s Prayer by praying through each of the catechism explanations. Father God, we are so grateful that we can call you, “Father”. You are perfect and set apart, and yet You chose us to know us and be called Your children. When we consider what that means, we are overwhelmed and humbled. You are so good to us. Our Father God is so worthy to be praised.

During Kimberly’s session on Private Prayer, she reflected on the teachings of Luther, introducing a powerful analogy of the ‘mercy sack.’ She reminded us that when we come before God—especially in the sacred space of church—we are invited to listen, learn, and be spiritually filled.

From that place of renewal, we are then called to go out and serve our neighbours, families, and friends with grace and compassion.

A panel session featured a range of women of different ages and backgrounds. It was very relatable and made the content of the retreat more meaningful to real life.

Acknowledgements

We warmly thank all those who have helped behind the scenes, especially in planning and promoting this retreat. We sincerely thank our hosts at Araluen and Nunyara and those who have donated gifts, whether financial, time, or other, for the encouragement of our retreatants. We thank Pastor David Wear and Dr Greg Lockwood for leading worship and for their pastoral care, and our retreat counsellors, Deaconess Kathleen Mills and Dr Christine Lockwood for their time and prayers. We are grateful to Tara Modra, Robin Wittwer, and Meg Pearce for leading the music as well as all the other musicians who joined in and added a beautiful dimension to worship. Finally, deep appreciation to our speakers, Sandra Rhein and Kimberley Pfeiffer, for sharing their wisdom and inspiration.

We pray the rhythm of prayer begun (or renewed) on these weekends continues to bless homes, families, congregations, and communities.

Hebrews 12:28 ESV “28 Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe...”

Compiled by Melanie Wittwer with reflections by Ann Eden and Sue Jericho.



Photo by TrueCreatives

By Pastor Shaun Manning
2025

The “Overton Window” describes the range of ideas that a society considers acceptable at a given time. Developed for political commentary by Joseph Overton in the 1990s, I only recently discovered what this was in a conversation with a well-informed friend. During this discourse and much more afterward, I began thinking of its implication for modern Western Christianity.

This secular ‘Overton Window’ can tell us which teachings, practices, and expressions are currently tolerable currently even amongst Christians. The ‘Window’ also influences the church’s doctrinal conversations, which, even unwittingly, causes the Church to form its own akin ‘Window’. Thus, what is culturally acceptable in Christendom today often bears little relation to biblical faithfulness, and those who challenge prevailing norms are too easily deemed extreme or abrasive, like in the political realm.

Today, voices like the late-great Charlie Kirk could (sadly) occupy the far-right edge of the Christian Overton Window. He confronted secular culture, defending biblical morality and emphasising traditional family structures. He was obviously extreme to the left-secularists, but also viewed as such by parts of the Christian church, namely, by more self-proclaimed Christian ‘moderates’.

Yet Christian moderates (those who consider themselves the safe middle) often spent, and now spend, more energy policing, or distancing themselves from, voices like his, than addressing the underlying cultural and ideological threats he was pointing to. It is almost like addressing the sound and volume of the smoke alarm rather than the threat it is alerting us to.

For me, Kirk and like-minded constituents from the Daily-Wire (for example) and other public Christian conservatives, are too often criticised as “too harsh,” “too abrasive,” “too political.”

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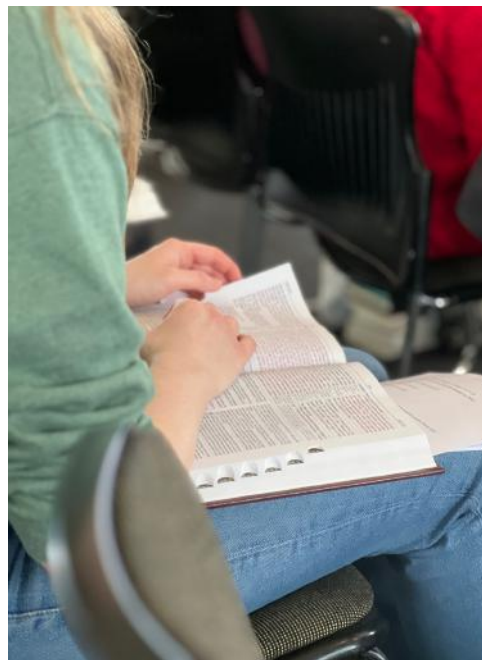
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Photos: She Prays retreat South Australia and Victoria 2025.



By Peter Wittwer
2025

I want to publicly thank all the Pastors and Laypeople who have willingly and graciously given of their time to serve Creative Word Fellowship (CWF) in so many ways. From writing articles for Standing Firm, leading worship services, playing instruments, helping with the bookshop, doing the catering, billeting people, and pastors leading conference sessions for us. None of our conferences or these magazines would be possible or as successful without the tremendous effort and dedication of God's willing servants and their congregations supporting what we do.

Something we at CWF haven't always prioritised is acknowledging, as we should, the effort that pastors put into presenting and leading worship at our conferences and writing articles for this magazine. These men give of their personal time to prepare presentations and articles.

This is something I am acutely aware of and something that I deal with on a practical level almost every week now with CWF. When I ask pastors to serve and present at our conferences or to write articles, it is a big ask. I know they are taking time out from their personal life and their parish to do so.

In this article, I will explore the commitment of both the pastor and the congregation when a pastor is asked to serve in some capacity alongside the responsibility of his call to the congregation.

***"For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another."
(Romans 12:4-5 ESV)***

SERMON FOR ALL SAINTS



By Pastor Michael Prenzler
2025

This sermon was preached at Adelaide Northern Suburbs Lutheran Mission on 2 November 2025 for the festival of All Saints.

Introduction

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This week a video was recommended in my YouTube feed called "Famous Atheists [sic] Chilling Last Words Before Dying...", with a clickbaity thumbnail of someone in hell screaming "I am in flames". Given Halloween and All Saints were coming up I was curious to see what the point of the video was, and so I watched it. To the presenter's credit, the video wasn't just clickbait (although I wouldn't necessarily suggest we use the same approach to get people to come to church). He didn't just sensationally talk about hell, but he talked about heaven as well, pointing viewers to Jesus as the way to eternal life with God.

And that's really the purpose of commemorating All Saints every year, and the point St Paul was getting at in the reading from Ephesians.

Yes, hell is a reality and we shouldn't shy away from warning those who reject Christ about the consequences of their actions. But, for those who are already Christians, we should focus on assuring them that "you belong to God - guaranteed".

To unpack this topic further today, I'd like to focus on our Epistle reading from Ephesians 1, starting from verse 3 to give some extra context.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.
(Ephesians 1:3–14; ESV)

Before we continue, let's pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditation of hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Halloween and the Reformation

It's no coincidence that All Saints, Halloween and the Reformation are all commemorated at the same time of year. All Saints originated in the church as a day to remember the martyrs (Christians who had died for their faith). The timing of All Saints on November 1st probably came about as a counter to pagan festivals held at this time of year. For example, the Celtic festival "Samhain" included rituals to placate the souls of the dead and stop them from haunting the living.

Such fears of death or the dead continue to express themselves in secular society through folk festivals such as Halloween or the Mexican so-called "Day of the Dead".

Christians, on the other hand, believe that those who have died in the faith are now safe in God's care and cannot haunt the living. And so, the early church encouraged its members to remember all Christians who have departed this life (not just martyrs) on All Saints and All Souls (commemorated on November 2nd). Unfortunately, as the cult of the saints developed in the medieval church, All Saints became a day to not only commemorate those who had died, but to venerate them. In places like Wittenberg in Germany, Christians would call on the Saints to intercede for the living and the dead, and believed that by viewing sacred relics on All Saints they would reduce their time in Purgatory. In case you aren't familiar with Purgatory, the Catechism of the Catholic church still teaches:

All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.

The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned.

These misunderstandings of the role of the Saints lead to the Reformation, with reformers like Luther arguing that there's no basis for Purgatory in Scripture and that, even if there were such a thing, praying to the Saints wouldn't help. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians:

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In him [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, (Eph 1:7)

This means that no other person, no matter how good in this life, can save us from sin. Only Jesus is the mediator between God and human beings (1 Tim 2:5). And so, 500 years ago, Luther wrote a letter of protest against abuses in the church, including the veneration of saints and relics, and sent it to his Archbishop on October 31st, the evening of All Saints. (This, by the way, is how we get the name “Halloween”. All Saints is also known as “All Hallows” in English, and so Oct 31st is “All Hallows Evening” or “Hallow e’en”).

Of course, Halloween has nothing to do with the Reformation or All Saints, properly understood. Thanks to Luther and the other Reformers, our church at least is back to teaching Christ crucified and Him alone as our Saviour, and so we have no need of Halloween or other superstitions.

So what?

So what does all this historical trivia have to do with All Saints and our reading for today? Well, knowing how pagans fear the dead, and knowing how even Christians can misunderstand what happens after death, shows us how important it is to commemorate All Saints according to the Scriptures. Because the Scriptures don’t teach fear or uncertainty over where we go when we die or how to get there; rather they teach certainty and comfort.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the purpose of All Saints, and indeed the purpose of being Christian, is to point people to Jesus; Jesus whom God raised from the dead and seated in the heavenly places (Ephesians 1:21) “far above all rule and authority and

power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.” Because Jesus lives, all those who trust in Him will also live eternally.

And because Jesus rules, we too will rule with Him. That’s part of the “inheritance” that Paul refers to in this passage (see also our Old Testament reading from Daniel 7:18; 2 Tim 2:12).

The problem is that so many people, the atheists in the video and even some Christians, struggle to trust this promise. How do we know God really means what He says? Why don’t we need saints or relics or Halloween to save us from death or hell?

That’s why Paul spends so much time at the start of his letter to the Ephesians (many of whom were pagan before they became Christian) talking about the blessings that they already have, as well as the further blessings they can expect in the life to come. He almost gushes out his words in his excitement to communicate how wonderful this all is. As we heard in our readings for Reformation, Paul wants us to know that all Christians (male and female) are adopted “sons” of God, and therefore heirs of everything that God the Father has given His only-begotten Son. Christians belong to God; we are members of His family forever.

What’s more, we can be assured that this is true, that this real, because it wasn’t a snap decision of God’s. He didn’t wake up one morning thinking “I’ll adopt some people today” and then, equally capriciously, decide to get rid of them. Rather, Paul says in our reading:

... he chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, (Ephesians 1:4–5)

This means that if God chose us as His children before the foundation of the world, we can be assured that we will remain His children when the world no longer exists. Even so, many people still doubt, and so Paul adds this:

***In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.
(Ephesians 1:13–14)***

In other words: God has put His seal of ownership on you, so that no one; not you, not the devil, least of all God, can deny that you belong to Him. It's guaranteed! It's guaranteed by God's Holy Spirit who was given to you at your baptism and helps you to trust in God's promises.

All Saints

So what does all this mean for today, for All Saints? It means that today is a day of comfort for Christians. We can be assured that our loved ones who have preceded us into glory are safe with God. They belonged to Him in this life, and so that familial connection simply continues in the next.

It doesn't mean that we aren't sad about our separation; it's OK for the Saints Militant (those of us still on earth) to miss the Saints Triumphant (those already in heaven). But we don't need to fear them, or fear *for* them, or seek to find ways to shorten their time in Purgatory.

Instead, as our Confessions recommend, we should remember them. We should remember them with love, and with thankfulness to God that He gave us time with them on earth. What's more, as the Augsburg Confession explains, all the saints:

should be kept in remembrance so that our faith may be strengthened when we see what grace they received and how they were sustained by faith. (AC XXI:1; Tappert)

This reminds us that our focus shouldn't be primarily on the saints themselves, but on God's goodness to them. We derive comfort from their memory by recognising that just as God cared for them, so He cares for us. What's more, if God has cared for both them and for us in this life, then we can look forward to His ongoing care in the life to come too.

Heaven, not hell

In light of the example I gave at the start of the sermon I want to draw one final conclusion from today's topic. The saddest thing I found about the examples of atheists in terror at their deaths was not that they finally recognised that there was a God and He was angry with them. It was that none of them repented of their unbelief (or, at least, the presenter didn't share that in his quotes).

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The examples given in the video showed those atheists were finally convicted by God's Law on their deathbed, but they still failed to grasp the Gospel. While rightly terrified because of their sins, they missed God's gracious offer of a Saviour.

And that highlights the final importance of All Saints. All Saints is not just to raise awareness of the eternal consequences of sin – it's not simply to point out that we will all die one day and face God's judgement. All Saints is not even just meant to comfort people with the knowledge that their loved ones who have died believing in Jesus are safe eternally; that God has judged them "not guilty" for Jesus' sake. Rather, the most important point of today is to remind people who don't yet belong to God that they can belong to His family too.

God wants all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. He wants all people to belong to Him, and He assures them that He has done everything necessary for that to happen. All they need to "do" is receive His free gift in faith. Conversely, the only thing that will remove God's seal of ownership from a person is if they refuse to receive it; if they reject His gracious offer of adoption.



Wall in Basilica of Saint Paul, Rome, Italy.
By Glen Mc Call from Pexels

Conclusion

So, that's why we commemorate All Saints today. Not because we're terrified and feel we need to placate God, but because we are comforted knowing "we belong to God – guaranteed!"

Today, we remember our loved ones who have died in the faith, and encourage one another as we wait to join them. But, most importantly, we share the Gospel. We share the Good News of Jesus Christ so that those who don't yet share in our adoption may hear of it and, God willing, receive an inheritance of eternal life along with us and all the Saints Triumphant. Amen.

And the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus, Amen.

Pastor Michael Prenzler



Above: Mural above 95 Thesis Church door in Wittenberg
Germany.

Below: Mural above entrance to the Berliner Dom.
Photos By Peter Wittwer



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May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

Romans 15:13

How You Can Help?

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

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