

The Theology of Jesus

by Todd Wilken

Wittenberg Trail: Wayfaring Through the Wilderness to Wittenberg

by Pastor Mason Beecroft



Dear Journal Reader,

This edition of the *Issues, Etc. Journal* has been a long time coming. In working on it over the last year, I have learned the true meaning of procrastination.

In this edition you'll find two articles. In *The Theology of Jesus*, I outline the necessary connection between the Church's confession of Christ and Her confession of the Holy Trinity. This is especially needful today, as many churches are allowing the doctrine of the Trinity to fall by the wayside.

Wayfaring Through the Wilderness to Wittenberg is our "Wittenberg Trail" feature by Pastor Mason Beecroft. From his own experience of evangelicalism's famine of the Gospel, Pastor Beecroft warns fellow Lutherans who are flirting with its false promises.

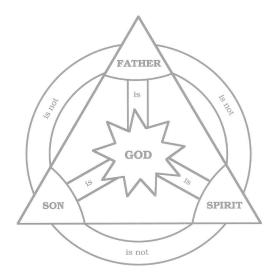
Also, you'll find our growing list of supporting congregations in the Find a Church section at the end of the *Journal*.

Enjoy this edition of the *Journal*. At last!

Wir sind alle Bettler,

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





The Theology of Jesus

by Todd Wilken

President Barak Obama and conservative talk show host Glenn

Beck disagree on a lot of things. But they do agree on one thing: their god.

While running for the U.S. Senate, the then-Illinois Senator Obama told Cathleen Falsani of the *Chicago Sun Times:* "I'm rooted in the Christian tradition. I believe that there are many paths to the same place" ("Obama: I Have a Deep Faith" *Chicago Sun Times,* April 4, 2004) More recently, Glenn Beck told his audience at his 8/28 Restoring Honor rally in Washington D.C., "To restore America, to restore honor, we've got to start at the beginning and look at the patterns, when people came together, of different faiths, in the spirit of God, and the first thing they did was prayed together."

Now, these two men might quibble over what particular faiths should be included, but Obama and Beck agree that people of *different* faiths really do believe in and worship the *same* god. How can this be? One is a social and political liberal; the other is a social and political conservative. One is a professed Christian; the other, a professed Mormon.

More important, why are so many Christians today satisfied with this kind of generic god? Why have many Christian churches imported this "god" into their Sunday morning preaching, teaching and worship?

The answer is simple: Christians have undersold the doctrine of the Trinity.

The earliest Christians were required to confess the doctrine of the Trinity against heretical alternatives and pagan theologies. Christians today, when called to do the same, may not even know what the doctrine of the Trinity is.

How often (outside official statements of faith) do American evangelical churches speak about God in explicitly Trinitarian terms? Apparently, not enough. A survey of the lyrics of the top 25 contemporary Christian songs used by churches reporting to Christian Copyright Licensing International between February and

August 2010 revealed *a solitary* reference to the Triune nature of God. There were numerous references to God, but *only one* to God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It should come as little surprise that 58% of Christians in America have a less-than-Trinitarian view of God. According to a series of recent surveys conducted by The Barna Group:

...most Christians do not believe that the Holy Spirit is a living force, either. Overall, 38% strongly agreed and 20% agreed somewhat that the Holy Spirit is "a symbol of God's power or presence but is not a living entity." Just one-third of Christians disagreed that the Holy Spirit is not a living force (9% disagreed somewhat, 25% disagreed strongly) while 9% were not sure. ("Most American Christians Do Not Believe that Satan or the Holy Spirit Exist," April 10, 2009, www.barna.org)

Another survey, conducted a year later, confirmed these results:

In total, 68% of Mosaic Christians [Christians under the age of 25] said they believe that the third person of the trinity is just "a symbol of God's power or presence, but is not a living entity." This compares to 59% of Busters, 55% of Boomers, and 56% of Elders who believe the Holy Spirit is merely symbolic. ("How Different Generations View and Engage with Charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity," March 29, 2010, www.barna.org)

In other words, roughly 60-70% of self-professed Christians in America do not believe that the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity.

The doctrine of the Trinity appears to be disappearing from the theology of pop-American Christianity. As a result, the god of pop-American Christianity is often indistinguishable from the generic god of Glenn Beck and President Obama.

Jesus, the Trinitarian

Have you ever wondered, if the doctrine of the Trinity is so important for understanding the true God, why didn't Jesus begin His public ministry by revealing God's triune nature? In fact, *He did.* Beginning with Jesus' Baptism, the Trinity was in full evidence:

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3:21-22)

The Father's voice came from heaven as the Spirit descended bodily onto the Son.



There already at the very beginning of his public ministry, the Holy Trinity is revealed.

And, we should note that this revelation took place precisely as Jesus was anointed for the Cross, and where Jesus first publicly associated Himself with sinners.

After His baptism and temptation, Jesus went to his childhood home of Nazareth, where the subject of his first sermon was the Trinity:

And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:16-20)

Anointed in His baptism by the Father, with the Spirit, Jesus told the Nazareth Jews, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And, although they may have been unable to articulate it with all the philosophical precision we use today, those who heard and believed Jesus' word that day grasped by faith the Triune God.

Jesus' theology is thoroughly and blatantly Trinitarian. Throughout his ministry, Jesus could hardly open his mouth without mentioning the Father and the Spirit. The revelation of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit is woven through everything Jesus says and does.

We need to start reading Jesus as the Trinitarian He is. We need to understand every reference to the Father and the Spirit as an unabashed expression and revelation of the holy Trinity. If we do, we will discover the doctrine of the Trinity *literally everywhere* in the life and ministry of Jesus.

Even at the moment of Jesus' death, where His baptism and ministry were brought to completion with His sacrifice at the Cross, Jesus is all about the Trinity. "Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit!' And having said this he breathed his last." (Luke 24:46) Now, if this were any other man speaking these last words, they could only mean, "God,

receive my spirit as I die." But when Jesus said, "Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit," He was again showing us the Triune God.

The Trinity's Why

Philosophically, it is dangerous to assign God a *raisons d'être*, a reason for being. However, if we can suspend our philosophical misgivings and ask, "What is *God's* reason for being?" the answer is found there at the Cross, in the dying breath of Jesus.

The death of Jesus for sinners is what the Trinity is all about. The Cross is not the Trinity's avocation, hobby or emergency plan. There isn't a box hanging on the wall in heaven with a Cross in it, and a sign reading, "In case of sin, break glass." The Cross is the Triune God's overarching purpose from before the foundation of the world. If we could be so bold to say such a thing about God, the Cross is why God is, and why He does what He does.

With His saving work complete, after His resurrection, Jesus revelation of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit became explicit and unmistakeable. On the day of His resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples:

Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." (John 20:19-23)

Here, Jesus was not only revealing the Trinity, but He was also revealing the Trinity's ongoing work in the world through the Church: to deliver the saving work of Jesus through the forgiveness of sins. This ongoing work of the Trinity was

reiterated by Jesus at His ascension, where He commanded the Church to baptize and teach in the name of the Trinity:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20)

Just as Jesus' revelation of the true God began at His baptism, so the Church was going to continue that revelation in exactly the same way.

Contrary to what so many theology textbooks say, Christian theology is not what man says about God; Christian theology is what God says about Himself. This means that if we want to know who God is, we go to Jesus. The Apostle John writes, "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, He has made him known." (John 1:18) Jesus is God's final word. With His saving work complete, Jesus has said all there is to say about God; but the Church still has a lot to say about Jesus.

The Church Confesses Jesus' Theology

The Christian creeds (the Apostles', the Nicene and the Athanasian creeds) are primarily confessions of Jesus and His saving work. This is why all three ecumenical creeds devote so much space to the person and work of the Second Person of the Trinity. This is also why all three ecumenical creeds are Trinitarian. In confessing Christ in his saving work, the Triune God is necessarily confessed as well.

The Athanasian Creed does this best. In particular, this creed states that the confession of Christ is indispensable to the confession of the true God in the world.

Furthermore, the Athanasian Creed clearly connects the confession of the Triune God to salvation. The Athanasian Creed presents the Trinity as the *sine qua non* of the confession of Christ, and therefore, the *sine qua non* of salvation. This is why the Athanasian Creed sounds politically incorrect to our postmodern ears: "We are compelled by the Christian truth to acknowledge..." and, "He, therefore, that will be saved is compelled thus to think of the Trinity." The Athanasian Creed also makes starkly exclusive statements:

Whoever will be saved shall, above all else, hold the catholic faith. Which faith, except everyone keeps whole and undefiled, without doubt he will perish eternally....and, This is the catholic faith which except a man believe faithfully and firmly, he cannot be saved.



Salvation is at stake. The Athanasian Creed's ancient
Latin name, *Quicunque Vult*, is taken from the first
sentence of the creed itself, *Quicunque vult salvus esse*,
ante omnia opus est, ut teneat catholicam fidem, that
is, "Whoever will be saved shall, above all else, hold the
catholic faith." In the Athanasian Creed, the Church

clearly states that you cannot have one without the other: to confess Christ is to confess the Triune God, and to confess the Triune God is to confess Christ. This means that if the Church fails to preach Christ crucified for sinners, it denies the true God.

A caller to Issues, Etc. once asked a guest, "When we get to heaven, and we see God, what are we going to see?" Many images come to mind: floating triangles, doves and shining clouds. My guest answered simply, "Jesus." After all, how is the Father known? Only through the Son. How is the Spirit given and received? Only through the Son. How is the Triune God revealed? Only through Jesus. Who is

coming back in glory to raise the dead and judge the world? At the resurrection, who will you see standing at the foot of your grave? When Jesus descends again in glory to judge the living and the dead, we will look upon the unshielded revelation of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the crucified, risen and glorified body of Jesus. That's it. Just as Jesus told Phillip, "Whoever has seen me, has seen the Father." (John 14:8) There's no "getting behind" Jesus to the Father and the Spirit—there is no need to do so. Jesus has revealed the Trinity in his baptism, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension.

Am I a Modalist? No. Am I saying that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one and the same? Not at all.

I am saying that the one Triune God —the coeternal and coequal persons:

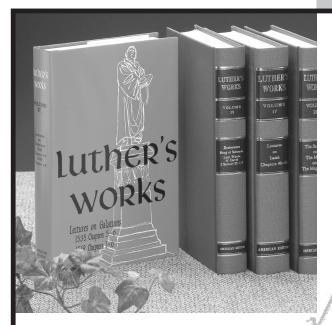
Father, Son and Holy Spirit— is revealed in Jesus, and Jesus alone. Apart from Jesus we cannot know the true God. Jesus said,

I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him (John 14:6-7).

If a church fails to preach Christ and His saving work, it is not preaching the true God. And it works both ways, if a church no longer confesses the true God, it no longer confesses the true Christ. So what is at stake as pop-American Christianity slowly abandons the Trinity for a generic god? What is lost if the Trinity disappears from preaching, praying and singing? A church without the Trinity, is a church without Christ. A church without Christ is no longer the Church.

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Wittenberg Trail

Wayfaring Through the Wilderness to Wittenberg

by Mason Beecroft

In the fall of 1995, I enrolled as a student at Dallas Theological Seminary (DTS), the school of Chuck Swindoll and the home of dispensational evangelicalism. At the time there were over a thousand students enrolled, both men and women, preparing for ministry as pastors, missionaries, teachers, and counselors. The vast majority of students are Baptist or non-denominational, although there are a few Methodists and Presbyterians and other mainline denominations represented. The curriculum focuses heavily on Holy Scripture, and both the New Testament and Old Testament faculties include top scholars in their respective fields.

Initially I had planned to become a youth pastor, but shifted my focus to New Testament. Then, in my second year of studies, I took a course in the History of Christianity, which introduced me to the complexities involved throughout the life of the Church. I was intrigued and began exploring the riches of the Christian tradition. Thankfully, I began to study with a young professor, a scholar in second-century Christianity, taking his seminars on topics such as "The Life and Worship in Early Christianity," "The History of Biblical Interpretation," and "Reformation Theology." He introduced me to primary sources from theologians like Irenaeus, Athanasius, Chrysostom, Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther. These men became my teachers, and I started to question what I was hearing in classes, in chapel, and in pop American evangelicalism.

One thing I heard often in evangelicalism was the full weight of the Law. In evangelical circles, the Gospel is mostly assumed. The proclamation of Christ and Him Crucified for the forgiveness of sins and salvation is reserved for non-believers, sinners who have not yet made a decision for Jesus. Now when a person has walked down the aisle, raised their hand, or signed the card, then they are "saved."

Once saved, then you are always saved. The emphasis of the Christian life is then one of obedience. The evangelical congregation is exhorted, commanded, manipulated and instructed toward more prayer, more giving, more faith, more love, and more holiness. The sermon is intended to convict people and direct them to greater piety. Well, as a student required to attend chapel four days a week and local church on Sunday, I heard on a weekly basis some 15-20 things I should be

doing as a good Christian. This constant preaching of the Law results in either self-righteousness or self-loathing, both problematic to true faith. The self-righteous, in their delusional mind, suppose they are fairly good at keeping God's demands, at least better than most. Thus, there is little need for Christ. This was not my problem. Instead, I was burdened by the weight of my sins and my inability to be faithful. No matter how hard I tried, I could not meet the expectations of God's Law or those rules, regulations, and principles preached from the pulpit. So when I finally kneeled for confession and absolution in a Lutheran Divine Service, I was struck by the proclamation that my sins were forgiven for the sake of Jesus Christ. I was comforted to hear the Gospel applied to me. I began to realize that while I had

been hearing the Law, the Gospel of Christ had been scarcely uttered, and merely presumed.

Another thing I heard often were the sentimental banalities offered in pop evangelical worship and culture. Now when I first arrived in Dallas, I was impressed by these large-scale productions at the various mega-churches. They were exciting. They made one feel spiritual. You could feel the presence of God. All you had to do was close your eyes and lose yourself. Then you could sit down and hear a powerful word of law to make you feel guilty. "Wow. God must be at work."

Well, I soon grew tired of running from one show to the next. They began to seem contrived. And, after studying the Second Great Awakening and Charles Finney's New Measures, I wondered how today's emotionally manipulative productions were any different. I suspected there must be something more. Then my studies of Early Christianity opened my eyes to a new world, even the possibility of a liturgical, sacramental faith. St. Cyril of Jerusalem convinced me with his fourth-century *Catechetical Lectures*. I can still remember reading,

Since then He Himself has declared and said of the Bread, 'This is My Body, who shall dare to doubt any longer? And since He has affirmed and said, 'This is My Blood, who shall ever hesitate, saying that it is not His blood?

I asked myself, "Who am I to doubt and hesitate?" Now I had heard all sorts of forgettable songs, prayers, and ponderings in these churches, but I had not heard Christ's last testament. In fact I never once received communion at the Bible Church of which I was a member. Why? Well, they don't believe it does anything. They reject the sacramental confession that the Holy Spirit works through such means. Rather, evangelicals have different means of grace, such as the right music, exciting worship, charismatic leaders, innovative programming, and organizational structure. Even when they do offer Holy Communion, its impact is measured by

how the memory of Jesus' death makes you feel at that moment. In this way they are non-sacramental, denying that God works through His Word joined to visible means such as water, bread and wine. God works through feelings, emotions, responses, or the intellect, all of which are non-material, disembodied. I began to realize that while I had heard all sorts of cutting-edge, creative approaches to "doing" church, I had not been hearing the words of Christ, words that had filled Christian ears through ancient liturgies from the beginning. These only fell out of favor when modern man began to deny sacramental Christianity with his arrogant rational, philosophical assumptions. I began to consider the possibility that the ancient path was the more faithful path.



In the spring of 1998, I walked into Zion

Lutheran Church in Dallas, TX. While I had

contemplated other historic traditions, issues of

biblical fidelity, ecclesial authority, and family

connections to Lutheranism led me to first

investigate the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod.

Now if I had walked into a congregation practicing

non-sacramental, pop evangelical worship in all of its

corny informality and contrived emotionalism, then I

would have kept walking. Thankfully, Zion retained the Mass. I was immediately taken by the reverent beauty of the liturgy and space. Christ was at the center. His Gospel was applied to me. The congregation was catholic and evangelical. I was received into membership in November of 1998. I continued my studies at DTS, planning to pursue further studies in Early Christianity. Yet as I grew in my understanding of Lutheran faith and became involved in parish life, my pastor

encouraged me to consider the pastoral ministry. I graduated from DTS in May 2000, was married in August, and arrived at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis in November so I could take Masters of Sacred Theology classes and interview for colloquy into the Lutheran ministry. After completing the requirements set forth by the colloquy board, I went to Houston for my vicarage in the summer of 2001, and was ordained into the office of Holy Ministry on August 25, 2002.

As I reflect on my journey into the LCMS, I am deeply thankful for the education I received at DTS. I was trained by excellent biblical language scholars and formed in the Holy Scripture. I was also allowed to explore a wide range of thinkers in the Christian tradition. I would not trade my time there for anything. I am proud to still call many professors and classmates friends. Yet there are important reasons why I left the wilderness of modern American evangelicalism for the biblical, sacramental confession contained in the Book of Concord. Well, there it is. My youthful naïveté is revealed. Obviously, I was a tad idealistic when I entered Missouri. I actually assumed LCMS churches would generally look the same because of a shared confession of faith. I assumed congregations would celebrate Communion regularly; preach repentance and faith in Christ; use historic liturgies, rites and ceremonies; sing profound, theologically accurate hymns; and behave as if God Himself were present. I believed the LCMS was evangelical and catholic, in the rich fullness of those terms. I was convinced I was entering the fullest expression of Western Catholicism. Boy, was I ever naïve.

Imagine my surprise when I heard that evangelical forms of worship, which by their nature work against a sacramental confession, were being widely promoted in the LCMS as the key for outreach. Even worse, congregations, districts, and synod were employing evangelical consultants and church-growth gurus, even

people from DTS, to instruct them on pastoral leadership and ministry, on how to be church. By their own theological confession, evangelicals reject our confession that God works through sacramental means, and yet they are the experts on renewing our churches.

Now, after eight years in the ministry, I am no longer so naïve. Sadly, the Missouri Synod is becoming increasingly foreign territory to me as those familiar, non-sacramental evangelical forms infiltrate our confession. Programs like *Ablaze!* and *Transforming Churches Network* promote non-sacramental evangelical means for congregational mission and revitalization. Nearly all LCMS church plants are

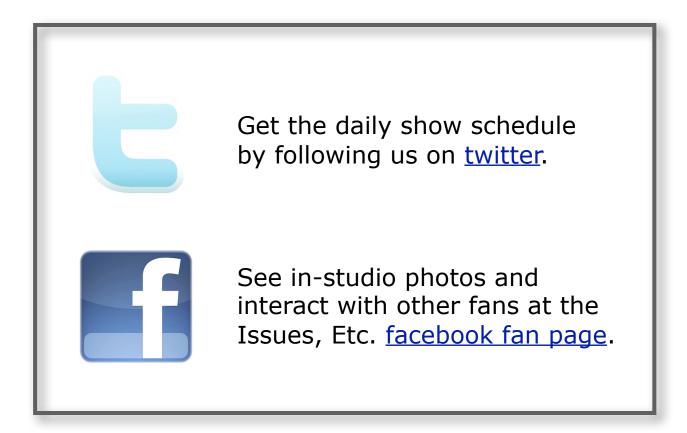
pop-evangelical in their worship and practice. The model LCMS congregations employ the same to various degrees. Evangelicals train our seminary students with their books, and our pastors at



conferences or the *Pastoral Leadership Institute*. Sure, we hear the typical slogans like "Word and Sacrament" and "Pure Doctrine," but they are now old and worn, almost meaningless. We can say whatever we want, but by all appearances, it looks like the LCMS believes the solution to its decline in nickels and noses will be found somewhere in the wilderness of pop American evangelicalism. And, the prevailing assumption that these evangelical forms and methods are somehow neutral is simply not true.

As a refugee from this wilderness, I propose a different way. It is the ancient way of our fathers in the faith. It is the way of Wittenberg, our theological confession. If the LCMS is going to be renewed in faith and life, then it will only

come from our Lord Jesus Christ. This means we are called to repentance. Let us turn to Christ in His sacramental Word and in the redemptive word of His Holy Sacraments. The living, risen and ascended Christ is present and at work in these precious means of grace. Let us then be faithful to what we have received from Christ as evangelical and catholic Christians, also known as Lutherans. Let us proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in the name of Christ. Let us retain the Mass, with all reverence and formality, bearing witness to our belief in Jesus' true bodily presence. The Spirit works through these gifts, creating and sustaining faith in Christ, reconciling sinners to the Father. No pop evangelical program, preacher, change agent or guru possesses anything better than what we have already received from Christ.





Dear **Issues**, **Etc.** Listener:

In the name of Jesus, greetings.

Believe it or not, we are about to begin the second decade of the 21st century. Time flies, but one thing never changes: the Gospel of Jesus for sinners.

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Todd Wilken, Host

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Rev Andrew Currao Rev Daniel Lepley 504 N. Walnut St Seymour IN 47274 812-522-1837

Advent Lutheran

Rev John Fiene 11250 N Michigan Rd Zionsville IN 46077 317-873-6318

Iowa

Our Redeemer Lutheran

Rev Michael Knox 904 Bluff St Cedar Falls IA 50613 319-266-2509

St Paul Lutheran

Rev Nathan Dudley 2463 State Hwy 2 Clarinda IA 51632 712-542-1505

St Mary Evangelical Lutheran

Rev Jeff Siegel 505 Euclid Ave Des Moines IA 50313 515-244-4018

Immanuel Lutheran

Rev J.R. Wheeler 101 E View Pl Osceola IA 50213 641-342-3121

Kansas

Our Redeemer Lutheran

Rev Troy Slater 802 E Trapp St Herington KS 67449 785-258-3122

Grace Lutheran

Rev Dale Dumperth 800 E 1St St McPherson KS 67460-3614 620-241-1627

Augsburg Lutheran

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St John's Lutheran

Rev Peter Lange 901 SW Fillmore St Topeka KS 66606 785-354-7132

Kentucky

Our Redeemer Lutheran

Rev Matthew Vesey 2255 Eastland Pkwy Lexington KY 40505 859-299-9615

Maryland

Zion Lutheran

Rev Keith Clow 209 N Main St Accident MD 21520 301-746-8170

St. Paul Lutheran

Rev William Stottlemyer 3738 Resley Rd Hancock MD 21750 301-678-7180

St. James Lutheran

Rev J Thomas Foelber 8 W Overlea Ave Overlea MD 21206 410-668-0158

Michigan

Peace Lutheran

Rev Thomas Messer 325 E Warwick Dr Alma MI 48801 989-463-5754

Grace Lutheran

Rev David Reed 303 Ruth St Auburn MI 48611 989-662-6161

Emmanuel Lutheran

Rev Rod Zwonitzer Rev Joel Baseley 800 S Military St Dearborn MI 48124 313-565-4002

Resurrection Lutheran

Rev Scott Benjamin 20531 Kelly Rd Detroit MI 48225 313-372-4902

Zion Lutheran

Rev Mark Braden 4305 North Military Avenue Detroit MI 48210 313-894-7450

Our Savior Lutheran

Rev David Fleming Rev North Sherrill, Jr. 2900 Burton St SE Grand Rapids MI 49546 616-949-0710

Zion Lutheran

Rev Roger James 135 W Green St Marshall MI 49068 269-781-8982

St. John Lutheran

Rev Edward Steeh 62657 North Ave Ray MI 48096 586-749-5286

<u>Lutheran Church of the</u> Incarnate Word

c/o Lutheran High Northwest Rev Allen Lunneberg 1000 Bagley Ave Rochester Hills MI 48309 248-930-0173

Minnesota

St. Paul Lutheran

Rev Preston Paul 128 Filmore St SE Chatfield MN 55923 507-867-4604

St. John's Evangelical Lutheran

Rev Steven C. Briel Rev Matthew P. Johnson 9141 County Rd 101 Corcoran MN 55340 763-420-2426

Mt. Olive Lutheran

Rev Robert Franck 2012 E Superior St Duluth MN 55812 218-724-2500

Trinity Lutheran

Rev Brian Thorson 47334 132nd St Lewisville MN 56060 507-435-2201

<u>Shepherd of the Lake</u> Lutheran

Rev Matthew Ruesch 10583 US Hwy 169 Garrison MN 56450 320-692-4581

Glory of Christ Lutheran

Rev John Fehrmann Rev Klemet Preus 4040 Hwy 101 N Plymouth MN 55446 763-478-6031

St Johns Lutheran

Rev John Moe 14385 Blaine Ave E Rosemount MN 55068-5929 651-423-2149

Trinity Lutheran

Rev Jeffrey Kuddes 29972 570th Ave Waltham MN 55982 507-567-2272

Our Savior's Lutheran

Rev Paul Sajban 1157 3rd Ave Windom MN 56101 507-831-3522

Mississippi

Christ Lutheran

Rev Dr James Holowach 4423 I-55 North Jackson MS 39206 601-366-2055

Missouri

Good Shepherd Lutheran

Rev Warren Woerth 2211 Tenbrook Rd Arnold MO 63010 636-296-1292

St Matthew Lutheran

Rev Charles Henrickson 340 Summit Bonne Terre MO 63628 573-358-3105

Beautiful Savior Lutheran

Rev David Bretscher 12397 Natural Bridge Rd Bridgeton MO 63044 314-291-2395

Trinity Lutheran

Rev Keith Ellerbrock 3765 Mc Kelvey Rd Bridgeton MO 63044 314-739-0022

Lord of Life Lutheran

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St Paul Lutheran

Rev David Smith Rev Tim Seban 12345 Manchester Rd Des Peres MO 63131 314-822-0447

Mount Calvary Lutheran

Rev James Gier 1215 Baldwin St Excelsior Springs MO 64024 816-637-9800

Trinity Lutheran

Rev Rick Pettey 601 Kingsbury Blvd Fredericktown MO 63645 573-783-2405

Zion Lutheran

Rev Rick Pettey 601 Kingsbury Blvd Gravelton MO 63645 573-783-2405

Christ Lutheran

Rev Tyler Arnold Rev Brandon Froiland 6700 NW 72nd St Kansas City MO 64151 816-741-0483

Holy Cross Lutheran

Rev Richard Bolland Rev Mark Stridivant 2003 NE Englewood Rd Kansas City MO 64118 816-452-9113

Immanuel Lutheran

Rev James Dunn 4203 Tracy Ave Kansas City MO 64110 816-561-0561

Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran

Rev Richard Futrell 103 Kimberling Boulevard Kimberling City MO 65686 417-739-2512

Village Lutheran

Rev Kevin Golden 9237 Clayton Rd Ladue MO 63124 314-993-1834

Trinity Lutheran

Rev David Oberdieck 1300 Kent Dr Lebanon MO 65536 417-532-2717

Zion Lutheran

Dr Ken Schurb 1075 E Urbandale Dr Moberly MO 65270 660-263-3256

Christ Lutheran

Rev Tyler Arnold Rev Brandon Froiland 6700 NW 72nd St Platte Woods MO 64151 816-741-0483

Trinity Lutheran

Rev Doug Gaunt 4795 N Hwy 94 Saint Charles MO 63301 636-250-3350

Holy Cross Evangelical Lutheran

Rev Lawrence Bradt 200 Market St Saint Genevieve MO 63670 573-883-5361

Peace Lutheran

Dr Dennis A. Kastens Rev Jon C. Furgeson 737 Barracksview Rd Saint Louis MO 63125 314-892-5610

Prince of Peace

Dr Mark Smith 8646 New Sappington Rd Saint Louis MO 63126 314-843-8448

Hope Lutheran

Rev Randy Asburry Rev Daniel Preus 5218 Neosho St Saint Louis MO 63109 314-352-0014

Concordia Lutheran

Rev Alan Wollenburg 836 Park Ave Sikeston MO 63801 573-471-5842

Montana

Christ The King Lutheran

Rev Ryan Wendt 759 Newman Ln Billings MT 59101-4742 406-252-9250

Nebraska

St. Paul's Lutheran

Rev Allen K. Strawn 506 Main St Bridgeport NE 69336 308-262-0424

Zion Lutheran

Rev David Kahle 1305 Broadway Imperial NE 69033 308-882-5655

Good Shepherd Lutheran

Rev Lance Berndt Rev Clint Poppe 3825 Wildbriar Ln Lincoln NE 68516 402-423-7639

Redeemer Lutheran

Rev Mark Ebert 510 S 33rd St Lincoln NE 68501 402-477-1710

New York

Trinity Lutheran

Rev Wade Miller 9020 3rd Ave Brooklyn, NY 11209 718-745-0130

North Carolina

All Saints Lutheran

Rev Kent Schaaf 17030 Lancaster Hwy Charlotte NC 28277 704-752-4287

Our Savior Lutheran

Rev Kevin Martin 1500 Glenwood Ave Raleigh NC 27608 919-832-8822

Trinity Lutheran

Rev Thomas Olson 3353 US 176 North Tyron NC 28782 828-859-0379

Ohio

St. Paul Lutheran

Rev Paul Schlueter 7960 State Route 38 Milford Center OH 43045 937-349-2405

Bethlehem Lutheran

Rev Robert Green 7500 State Rd Parma OH 44134 440-845-2230

St. John Lutheran

Rev Stephen Niermann 16035 County Rd U Napoleon OH 43505 419-598-8961

Oklahoma

Grace Lutheran

Rev Mason Beecroft Rev Christian Tiews 2331 E 5th Pl Tulsa OK 74104 918-592-2999

Oregon

Holy Cross Lutheran

Rev Bruce Ley 2515 Queen Ave SE Albany OR 97322 541-928-0214

Pennsylvania

St. John Evangelical Lutheran

Rev Jonathan Fisk 307 Madison Road Springfield PA 19064 610-543-3100

South Carolina

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd

Rev Steven Saxe 1601 N. Pleasantburg Dr Greenville SC 29609 864-244-5825

Tennessee

Redeemer Lutheran

Rev Philip Young 800 Bellevue Rd Nashville TN 37221-2702 615-646-3150

Texas

Trinity Lutheran

Rev Paul Harris 1207 W 45th Austin TX 78756 512-453-3835

St Paul Lutheran

Rev Mark Nuckols 3501 Red River St Austin TX 78705 512-472-8301

Bethel Lutheran

Rev Thomas Baden 1701 N Broadway Ballinger TX 76821 325-942-9275

Our Redeemer Lutheran

Rev Brent McGuire 7611 Park Lane Dallas TX 75225 214-368-1371

Mount Calvary Lutheran

Rev Thomas Baden 12358 Country Rd 5500 Eola TX 76937 325-942-9275

Redeemer Lutheran

Rev David Grassley 4513 Williams Rd Fort Worth TX 76116 817-560-0030

Memorial Lutheran

Dr Scott Murray Rev J Bart Day Rev Charles St-Onge 5800 Westheimer Rd Houston TX 77057 713-782-6079

Our Savior Lutheran

Dr Laurence White Rev Thomas Glammeyer Rev Paul Williams 5000 West Tidwell Rd Houston TX 77091 713-290-9087

Messiah Lutheran

Rev Glenn Huebel Rev Dennis Kitzmann 1308 Whitley Rd Keller, TX 76248 817-431-2345

First Lutheran

Rev Michael Monterastelli 1001 Atkinson Dr Lufkin TX 75901 936-634-7468

Faith Lutheran

Rev Thomas Baden 801 1st St Ozona TX 76943 325-942-9275

Faith Lutheran

Rev James Woelmer Rev Robert Hill Rev Jacob Sutton 1701 E Park Blvd Plano TX 75074 972-423-7447

Lord of Life Lutheran

Rev John Lindner 3601 W. 15th St Plano TX 75075 972-867-5588

Mount Calvary Lutheran

Rev Kim De Vries 308 Mount Calvary Dr San Antonio TX 78209 210-824-8748

Hope Lutheran

Rev Thomas Baden 417 E 2nd St Sonora, TX 76950 325-942-9275

Virginia

Immanuel Lutheran

Rev Christopher Esget 1801 Russell Rd Alexandria VA 22301 703-549-0155

Washington

Peace Lutheran

Rev Daniel Freeman 2071 Bishop Rd Chehalis WA 98532 360-748-4108

Messiah Lutheran

Rev Kurt Onken 9209 State Ave Marysville WA 98270 360-659-4112

Messiah Lutheran

Rev. Ernie Lassman 7050 35th Ave NE Seattle WA 98115-5917 206-524-0024

Wisconsin

St. John's Lutheran

Rev John Neugebauer E 5221 Church Rd Algoma WI 54201 920-487-2335

Elm Grove Lutheran

Rev Larry Myers Rev Eric Skovgaard 945 N Terrace Dr Elm Grove WI 53122 262-797-2970

Mount Zion Lutheran

Rev Aaron Koch 3820 W Layton Ave Greenfield WI 53221 414-282-4900

St Johns Lutheran

Rev James Mallmann Rev Matthew Shive 450 Bridge St Mayville WI 53050 920-387-3568

Peace Lutheran

Rev Terry Ahlemeyer 1228 S Park Ave Neenah WI 54956 920-725-0510

St. John Lutheran

312 N Main St North Prairie WI 53153 262-392-2170

Grace Lutheran

Rev Thomas Chryst Rev Randal Poppe 3700 Washington Ave Racine WI 53405 262-633-4831

St Jakobi Lutheran

Rev Travis Kleinschmidt W 8089 County Rd A Shawano WI 54166 715-524-4347

Luther Memorial Chapel

Dr Ken Wieting 3833 N Maryland Ave Shorewood WI 53211 414-332-5732

Peace Lutheran

Rev Peter Bender W240 N6145 Maple Ave Sussex WI 53089 262-246-3200

Pilgrim Lutheran

Rev Joseph Fisher Rev Christopher Raffa 462 Meadowbrook Dr West Bend WI 53090 262-334-0375

Wyoming

Trinity Lutheran

Rev Daniel Holthus 1240 S Missouri Ave Casper WY 82609 307-234-0568

Zion Lutheran

Rev Paul Rosberg 601 S 9th St Douglas WY 82633-2704 307-358-2810

Trinity Lutheran

Rev Scott Firminhac Rev Jared Tucher 1001 E 9th St Gillette WY 82717 307-682-4886

Redeemer Lutheran

Rev David Bott 175 N. Willow St Jackson WY 83001 307-733-3409

Zion Lutheran

Rev Shawn Kumm 406 S. 19th St Laramie WY 82070 307-745-9262

CANADA

Redeemer Lutheran

Rev Garry Heintz 13 Marion St Kakabeka Falls, ON, POT 1W0 807-473-9164

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1600 Golfview Dr, Suite 230
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Studio Line (877) 623-MYIE
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Comment Line (618) 223-8384
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