

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.

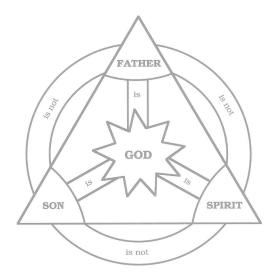
Also, you'll find our growing list of supporting congregations in the Find a Church section at the end of the *Journal*.

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:

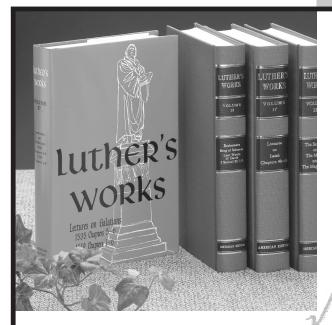
Father, Son and Holy Spirit— is revealed in Jesus, and Jesus alone. Apart from Jesus we cannot know the true God. Jesus said,

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

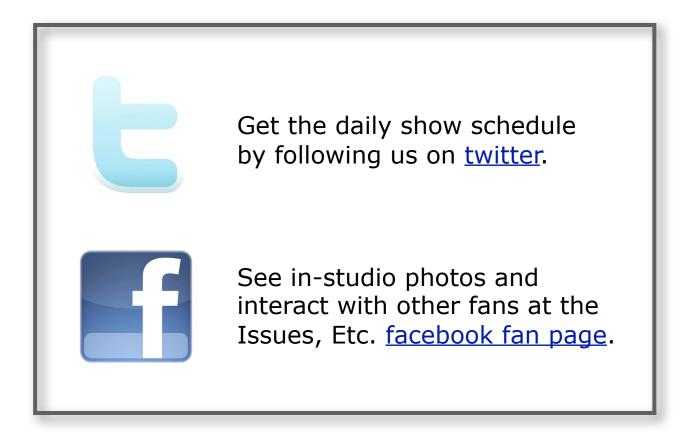
pop-evangelical in their worship and practice. The model LCMS congregations employ the same to various degrees. Evangelicals train our seminary students with their books, and our pastors at



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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