

Issues, Etc.™

JOURNAL



*The Not-So-Great Commission
Part Two*

by Todd Wilken

*Wittenberg Trail:
Rest for the Weary*

by Ellie Corrow

Fall, 2011



Dear *Journal* Reader,

In this edition of the *Journal*, I bring you part two of “The Not-So-Great Commission” in which we further explore how little of the Great Commission survives in the hands of its modern day champions. We’ll also find out what really makes the *real* Great Commission great.

Our Wittenberg Trail feature comes from Deaconess-in-training Ellie Corrow. She writes about her journey from a personal testimony of moral improvement to reliance on the external promises of forgiveness and mercy in Jesus Christ.

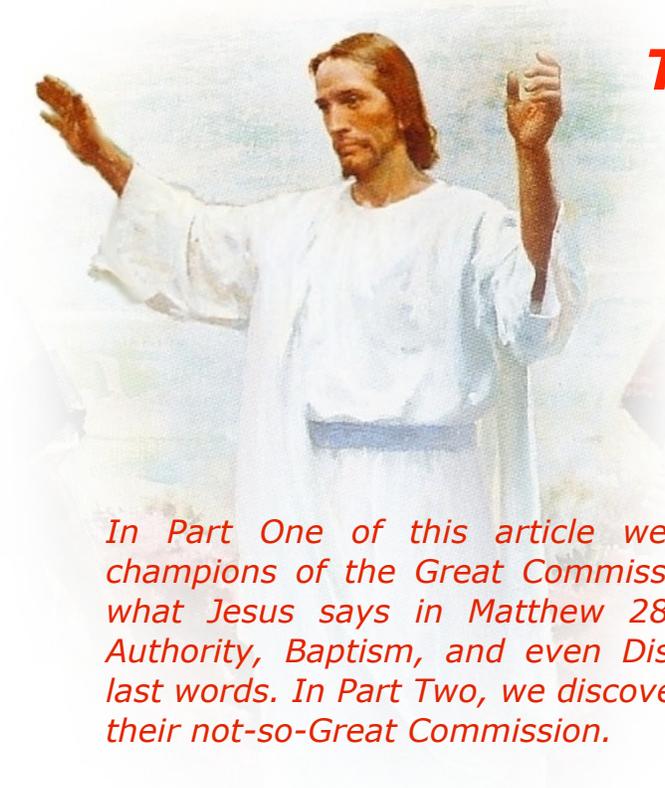
And as usual, you’ll find our list of supporting congregations in the Find a Church section at the end of the *Journal*.

Enjoy the *Journal*.

Wir sind alle Bettler,

Todd Wilken, host
Issues, Etc.

A large, stylized handwritten signature in grey ink that reads "Todd Wilken". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters being larger and more prominent.



The Not-So-Great Commission, Part Two

by Todd Wilken

In Part One of this article we saw that most modern champions of the Great Commission actually deny much of what Jesus says in Matthew 28:18-20. They omit Jesus' Authority, Baptism, and even Disciples from Jesus' famous last words. In Part Two, we discover what else is missing from their not-so-Great Commission.

Not All

The word "all" is an important word in the Bible: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:5); "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23); "all who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved" (Acts 2:21). The word "all" is an important word, especially when Jesus says it. And, Jesus says it often in the Great Commission:

***All** authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, when you go, make disciples of **all** nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and by teaching them to observe **all** that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you **always** [Greek: all the days], to the end of the age.*

Jesus uses the word "all" 4 times in the space of the 51 Greek words in those verses.

Not All Authority: As noted in Part One of this article, the modern champions of the Great Commission ignore Jesus' authority to forgive sins in their reading of Matthew 28:18-20. While, they wouldn't deny that Jesus himself possesses this authority, in their reading of the Great Commission, Jesus didn't confer this authority upon his Church. In their view, Jesus' command for the Church to make disciples is separate from his own authority to forgive sins. So much for "all authority." What about the three other occurrences of "all" in the Great Commission?

Not All Nations: Jesus commanded his Church to make disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching. This command clearly requires making disciples of all, without limits or qualification. From the time of the apostles, the Church has read the Great Commission as a command to baptize, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, sex or age. Two thousand years of the practice of infant Baptism attest to this interpretation. But how do the modern champions of the Great Commission read Jesus words?

*...the New Testament records the baptisms of **adult believers only**. In the Bible, we find parents bringing their children to Jesus. He held them, prayed for them, and told us to welcome them. But **He did not baptize them and He did not tell anyone else to baptize them**. Willow Creek believes Baptism is for those who have made a personal decision to trust Christ alone for their salvation, once they have the maturity and ability to understand what that means. As a general rule, Willow Creek's Elders have determined that **a believer must be at least 12 years old to be baptized...** ¹*

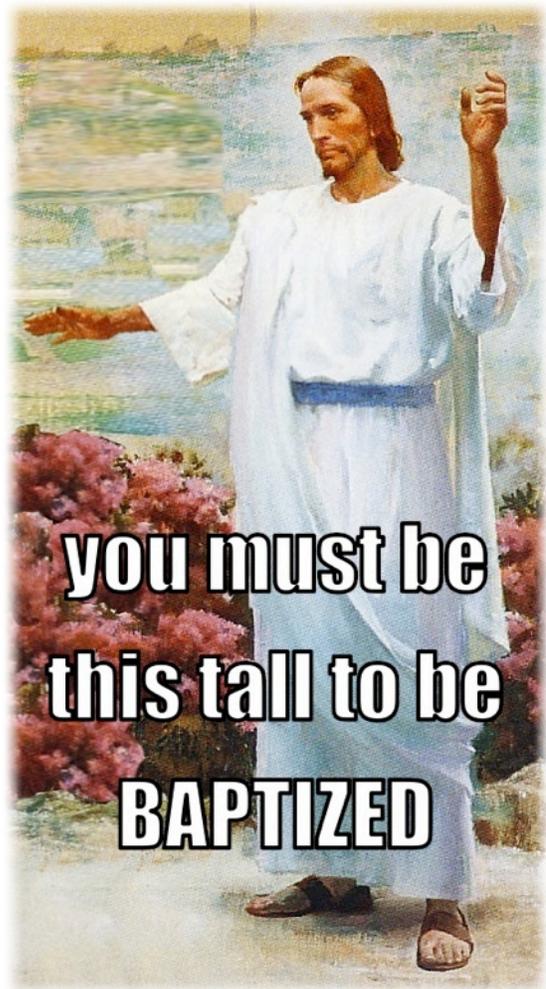
The same is taught at Rick Warren's Saddleback Church, where there is also an age restriction placed on baptism:

*At Saddleback, **we wait until our children are old enough to believe and understand the true meaning of baptism before we baptize them**. Some churches practice a "baptism of confirmation" for children.... This is different from the baptism talked about in the Bible which was **only for those old enough to believe**. The purpose is to publicly confess your personal commitment to Christ.²*

In Part One, we saw that the modern champions of the Great Commission ignore the grammatical relationship between making disciples and baptizing in the text of Matthew 28:19. While the text clearly states that disciples are made "by baptizing and teaching," they view Baptism differently, as a symbolic ordinance observed only *after* disciples have been made by some other means. Now we see that they drive a wedge further between the making of disciples and baptizing by imposing an arbitrary minimum age for Baptism.

What is the result of this age restriction on their reading of the Great Commission? It means that the modern champions of the Great Commission can't take Jesus' words "all nations" at face value. According to them, Jesus said "all" but really meant "some." For them, "all nations" must mean "some people of all nations," or more to the point, it must mean "only those people of all nations who have reached a certain age." The problem is that Jesus does not say that in the Great Commission.

The text of Matthew 28:19 says nothing about the age or maturity of those who are to be baptized, nor does any other text of Scripture that speaks of baptism. It says nothing about a minimum age for baptism. The text clearly states that disciples are to be made "of all nations by baptizing... and by teaching" without any qualification whatsoever.



What has happened here? The modern champions of the Great Commission have allowed their unbiblical view of Baptism to exclude an entire category of people from the "all nations" of the Great Commission: the young.

Not All I Have Commanded You: One of the saddest ironies in American Evangelicalism today is how strongly its leaders profess that the Bible is the very word of God --inspired, inerrant and infallible-- yet how little of the Bible they actually preach or teach. I suspect that a major cause of biblical illiteracy among American Christians is that the Bible has been replaced in America's pulpits with popular topics and church programs. Sometimes it seems that Evangelicals can hear anything but the Bible in church.

In the Greek of the Great Commission, Jesus is emphatic about what is to be taught, he says: πάντα ὅσα, "all whatsoever" or "everything." What is the Church to teach in order to make disciples? Everything. It's what the old theologians used to call "the whole counsel of God."

But today's champions of the Great Commission have decided that teaching has its limits. Several years ago, Willow Creek Community Church did an extensive survey of its membership, asking them if the church was meeting their needs. Head pastor Bill Hybels was surprised and upset by the results, especially the responses of members classified highest on Willow Creek's spiritual growth continuum: the "Christ-centered, fully devoted Christ followers." Hybels described it this way:

A lot of people in this category, they're saying they're not being fed, that they want more meat of the Word of God, that they want more serious-minded Scripture taught to them, that they want to be challenged more.... And I started getting a little irritated. I was like, "I'll feed those people. I'll hire some old seminary prof. I'll feed them till they barf!"

That's exactly what he said. To make matters worse, Hybels' audience, made up of pastors and church leaders from all over the world, broke into laughter and applause. What does it say when a Christian pastor responds in this way to his congregation's cry to be taught the Bible? Hybels considered his members' desire to be taught God's Word by the church *unreasonable*.

Hybels continued:

We should have started telling people and teaching people that they have to take responsibility to become "self feeders." We should have gotten people, taught people, how to read their bible between service, how to do the spiritual practices much more aggressively on their own. Because what's happening to these people, the older they get, the more they're expecting the Church to feed them, when in fact, the more mature a Christian becomes, the more a Christian should become more of a self-feeder.³

Hybels was saying that the Church may be responsible for teaching all Christ has commanded --but only to a point; after that you're on your own.

Rick Warren agrees, and he goes even further. He says the problem in the church is "too much teaching." Speaking via video at the *Desiring God* conference in 2010, he said, "another weakness of the church today, when it comes to learning, is that we're not teaching people to be self-feeders. We're doing all the feeding, instead of teaching them to feed themselves."⁴ He also complained about his Southern Baptist upbringing and the amount of Bible teaching he had to endure; he sounded like a man at the end of his rope:

First on Sunday morning I would got to Sunday school, and I was supposed to get an application that was supposed to change my life. Then I would go to morning service, and I get another application that was supposed to change my life. Then I would come back Sunday night to a thing called Church training, and I was supposed to have another application to change my life. And then evening service, with another application to change my life. That's four on one day. Then I was supposed to come back for midweek prayer and Bible study, where I was to get another application. Then maybe a Thursday morning study, in which I was to have another application. And then I

was to have a quiet time seven days a week. That's about fourteen applications a week. Friend, your life can't change that much.

Of course, Warren's view of the Bible as a how-to manual, and his assumption that every encounter with the Bible should produce a life-changing moral application are the real problem here. If you think that Scripture is essentially a rule book, you'll consider this amount Bible teaching too much. If you think that the purpose of Bible teaching is to apply those rules to your life, you'll consider this much teaching unreasonable. But rather than rethink his misconceptions about the Bible, Warren concludes:

We're teaching them too much. We're teaching them so much, that they can't apply it.... There's a wide gap between knowing and doing in American Christianity. And it's caused by too much teaching. Before people actually apply what it is, they actually go to the next thing. And they can't handle it, they can't change that much.⁵

Notice that neither Hybels or Warren offer any biblical basis for the idea that Christians should eventually graduate from the Church's teaching and become "self-feeders." Neither Hybels nor Warren gives any biblical reason for his refusal to feed Christians on the Word of God. Why? Because the Bible's instruction to pastors is clear. St. Paul wrote:

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.... Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.⁶

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.⁷

Church leaders who refuse to be held responsible for teaching can hardly claim to be following the Great Commission. And remarkably, these self-proclaimed champions of the Great Commission interpret Jesus' command to teach as a command *not* to teach.

It gets worse. When it comes to the *content* of teaching, today's champions of the Great Commission believe that the audience, not the message, is sovereign. Jesus says that the Church should teach everything he has commanded, but they disagree. They say that the Church's message must be tailored to match the interests of the market. Christian pollster and church-growth guru George Barna describes and prescribes the teaching and preaching of the Church in terms of the marketplace:

*To successfully market your product, you have to identify its prospective market... By matching the appeal of your product to the interests and needs of specific population segments, you can concentrate on getting your product to your best prospects without wasting resources on people who have no need or interest in your product... the product itself can be developed to address the special needs of that segment.*⁸

Again, and not surprisingly, Warren agrees. The customer is always right, whether the customer is ordering coffee or going to church. Offer customers whatever they want:

*You go into Starbucks, do you realize how many different thousands of ways you can get a cup of coffee at Starbucks? You know, half and half, no milk, quarter milk, soy milk, fake milk, put in the mocha, hold out the cappuccino, put in the frappe, take out that, you know, it's all these different ways. You go into any fast food, you get a choice between small, medium and large or big gulp. Same is true in churches. Which by the way, when I go into a Starbucks and I order a different kind of coffee, which one's best? The one that's best for me.*⁹

Again, Church leaders who refuse to teach all that Christ has commanded, but allow the market to dictate what is taught, can hardly claim to be following the Great Commission. And again, these champions of the Great Commission interpret Jesus' command to teach *all whatsoever* he has commanded as a command to teach *whatever* the customer wants.

I Am Not with You, Not Really

Matthew's Gospel and the Great Commission end with this remarkable promise from Jesus, "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Matthew's Gospel begins with a very similar promise, spoken by the angel to Joseph:

"Do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).¹⁰

That Old Testament name "Immanuel" is a direct reference to Jesus' bodily incarnation. Matthew is telling us that the conception and birth of Jesus is nothing less than the bodily, physical, incarnate presence of God on earth. And so it is no coincidence that Matthew ends his Gospel with Jesus' promise: "I am with you always, to the end of the age." And again, Jesus' words are emphatic:

ἴδοὺ	ἐγὼ	μεθ'	ὕμῶν	εἰμι
behold	I	with	you	I am

In Greek, the first person pronoun "I, ἐγὼ" is grammatically unnecessary in this sentence; the verb "I am, εἰμι" is already clear as to its subject.¹¹ Jesus is emphasizing something, namely, that *he personally* will be with us until the end of the age.

Despite Jesus' emphasis on his on-going, personal presence with with the Church, many modern champions of the Great Commission make a very common mistake regarding his words. They believe that after his ascension, Jesus occupies a specific location (the right hand of God), and that he cannot be bodily present here on earth. They reason: "Jesus has ascended into

heaven. Therefore, when he says, 'I am with you...' he must mean that he is with us *spiritually, not physically or bodily.*" Rick Warren recently sent a message to his many Twitter followers confirming Jesus' absence, "The one thing Jesus left behind in this world is his Church. But he will be back to get it." ¹² Elsewhere he writes in a similar vein:

*The mission that Jesus had while on earth is now our mission since we are the Body of Christ. What he did in his physical body, we are to continue as his spiritual body - the church.*¹³

It is a misconception also shared by George Barna:

*The big difference between the plan outlined above and Jesus' experience are that **He is not here in the flesh to jump-start the process**, and I'm proposing that we start with a hundred thousand people instead of twelve. Neither of those conditions should be a deal breaker, though. **Jesus is present with us spiritually**, and the process is the same regardless of the numbers.*¹⁴

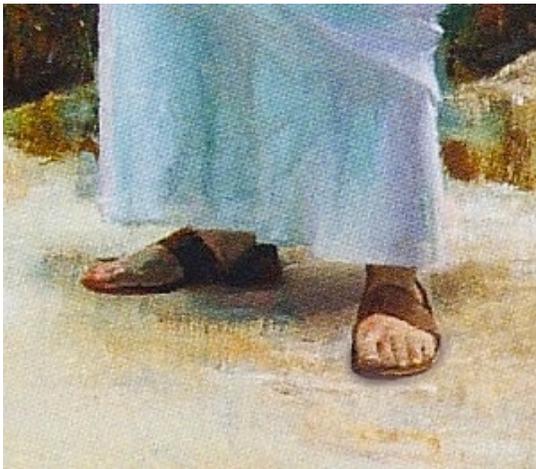
In this way of thinking, Jesus cannot be *both* at the right hand of God *and* here on earth. So then, at his ascension, Jesus withdrew his bodily presence and left only his *spiritual* presence. That idea might sound reasonable, but it is evidence of a serious misunderstanding of the Incarnation, one that separates the two natures in Christ --and further empties the Great Commission of its meaning.

Am I about to deny that Jesus ascended? Not at all. Jesus has ascended into heaven and is now seated at the right hand of God. But that doesn't mean he isn't still present here bodily (albeit invisibly) in his

incarnation. There are two reasons to maintain his ongoing presence. First, the right hand of God is not a particular physical location inside or outside the universe. Second, we cannot separate Jesus' spiritual presence from his bodily presence.

This is actually very old debate, dating to the Reformation. Regarding the right hand of God, the Reformers were clear. It is:

...no fixed place in heaven, as the Sacramentarians assert without any ground in the Holy Scriptures, but nothing else than the almighty power of God, which fills heaven and earth, in [possession of] which Christ is installed according to His humanity... this is possible to no other man, because no man is in such a way united with the divine nature, and installed in such divine almighty majesty and power through and in the personal union of the two natures in Christ, as Jesus, the Son of Mary.¹⁵



At the same time, Martin Luther himself was adamant that the one Person of Christ cannot be divided into a spiritual and physical presence:

Wherever you place God, there you must also place with him his human nature; they [his two natures] do not permit themselves to be separated or divided from each other. They have become one Person, and he does not lay aside the human nature, as a peasant takes off his garment and lays it aside when he goes to bed... Christ's human nature is more closely united with God than is our skin with our flesh, yes, closer than are body and soul.... you cannot peel the deity from the humanity and put it where there is no humanity; for by that you would separate the Person and make the humanity a mere shell, a coat, which the deity could put on or off according to place or space in which He happens to be.¹⁶

In other words, when Jesus says, "I am with you always," he means it. He means that he is completely with us --according to both natures, divine and human.

As shocking as this may sound to pious Christian ears, Scripture's clear teaching of Jesus' incarnation simply doesn't permit us to think of Jesus as spiritually, but not bodily, present. Even more shocking may be *the means* by which the Reformers thought Jesus exercises this presence with the Church:

*...according to His assumed human nature and with the same, He can be, and also is, present where He will, and especially that in His Church and congregation on earth He is present as Mediator, Head, King, and High Priest, not in part, or one-half of Him only, but the entire person of Christ is present, to which both natures belong, the divine and the human; not only according to His divinity, but also according to, and with, His assumed human nature, according to which He is our Brother, and we are flesh of His flesh and bone of His bone. **Even as He has instituted His Holy Supper for the certain assurance and confirmation of this, that also according to that nature according to which He has flesh and blood He will be with us, and dwell, work, and be efficacious in us.***¹⁷

The Reformers taught that when Jesus says, "I am with you always," he also means his real, bodily presence in the Lord's Supper. Modern champions of the Great Commission would reject this possibility because they also reject Jesus' words, "This is my body...This cup is the new covenant in my blood." For them, Jesus doesn't mean what he says there either:

*Communion, or the Lord's Supper, is an ordinance given to all believers by Jesus Christ to **remember** his sacrifice for us and to **symbolize** the new covenant. The elements of bread and wine or juice are **symbols** of Christ's broken body and shed blood. Communion is not a means of salvation. Rather, it is **a testament of a believer's faith** in the atoning work of the cross.*¹⁸

*Communion is "the believer's meal," a sacrament intended for Jesus' followers, by which they **acknowledge and remember** His work on the cross—the ultimate sacrifice made on our behalf for the forgiveness of the sins of humankind.¹⁹*

When Jesus says "this is my body," they say he means "this *symbolizes and reminds you of* my body." When Jesus says "I am with you always," they say he means "I am *not* with you, not really."

On the other hand, how much greater is the Great Commission when we simply take Jesus at his word, "I am with you always"? We use the term, "Jesus' earthly ministry." I've used it myself thousands of times. We use it to describe the time from Jesus' conception to his ascension. But perhaps that term says something we don't want it to say --that Jesus ended his ministry here on earth at his ascension. He didn't. Jesus' earthly ministry continues. He is still exercising his divine authority; he is still making disciples by baptizing and teaching; he is still with us --*really with us*-- to the end of the age.

Look at it this way: Who made the first disciples? Jesus did. This is what today's champions of the Great Commission fail to realize: **Jesus made the first disciples, and Jesus has made every disciple since.** Marketing, programs and processes never made a single disciple. While today's champions of the Great Commission give lip-service to "Christ's Mission," they really believe it is *their* mission. The proof is that they misinterpret, explain away or ignore most of what Jesus actually says in the Great Commission.

Didn't Jesus tell *us* to make disciples? Yes, but he also told us how disciples will be made, by his authority, by baptizing and teaching, by

him. As St. Paul would say, "we are God's fellow workers... we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us."²⁰

Do you see how it all either stands or falls together? Once you deny the "I am with you" of the Great Commission, then baptism, teaching, and disciple-making all become our work, not Jesus' work. Jesus is reduced to nothing more than a spiritual spectator, a heaven-bound bystander, watching us make disciples. Other than giving us the original command, he really isn't even necessary, is he?

Not So Great

If you look at how Matthew 28:18-20 is read today, you have to conclude that the Great Commission isn't so great after all. Today's champions of the Great Commission do not believe that the Church has been given authority to forgive sins on earth. They teach that disciples are made by our effort, powers of persuasion, salesmanship and ingenuity. They think that Baptism is a mere symbol, that does nothing, much less make disciples. They minimize the importance of doctrine, refuse to teach those crying out for God's Word. All of this, in the name of a Jesus who is absent, or at best, only "spiritually" present. It's evident that Lutherans who attempt to adopt and adapt the methodologies of Hybels, Warren and other Evangelicals have set themselves a monumental, even impossible, task.

If you deny the efficacy of the Word and Baptism as Means of Grace, if you deny the Church's authority to forgive sins, if you downplay doctrine, if you deny the on-going bodily presence of Jesus in His Church, what's left of Jesus' words in Matthew 28:18-20?

How does the Great Commission read in many churches today?

I'm in charge. Therefore, go and make fully devoted Christ-followers by a process that moves people along a spiritual growth continuum.

After they have started on the continuum, but only when they are old enough, baptize them as a symbol of their commitment and obedience. Teach them, matching your message to their interests. But after they reach the level of fully-devoted Christ-follower, they should be "self-feeders." And behold, I'll be with you in spirit, but I am leaving. The rest is up to you.

That isn't the Great Commission, is it? That doesn't sound anything like Jesus' words in Matthew 28:18-20, does it? But that's what passes for the Great Commission today. What has happened? The Great Commission has been replaced by a Not-So-Great Commission.

It doesn't have to be this way. Nothing about the Matthew 28:18-20 has changed. Despite what today's champions of the Great Commission say, Jesus is still with his Church, he is still exercising his divine authority to forgive sins through his Church, he is still making disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching. The only people who don't seem to know it are today's champions of the not-so-great Commission. They think that Jesus retired from disciple-making 2000 years ago. He didn't. The reason they have a not-so-great Commission, is that they have a not-so-great Jesus.

Jesus' Great Commission --the *real* Great Commission-- is still great. It is great because Jesus himself is great. It is great because it is all about what Jesus has done, and what Jesus continues to do. Did Jesus come to develop a process for moving customers along a spiritual growth continuum until they become fully devoted Christ-followers and self-feeders? No. He came to live, die and rise again as the substitute for a world of sinners. Did he leave his Church to find its own way to make disciples for him? Not at all. He has ascended to fill all things, to be and remain with us as both God and man, in a way even greater than his "earthly ministry." He is with us even now, and will be until the end of the age, forgiving sins, making disciples for himself by the washing and regeneration of Baptism and by teaching his powerful saving Word.

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- ¹ "Does Willow Baptize Infants?" <http://www.willowcreek.org/childdedication>
- ² "Who Should be Baptized?" <http://saddleback.com/lakeforest/aboutus/whatwebelieve/baptism/>
- ³ Bill Hybels, speaking at The Global Leadership Summit 2007, August 9-11, 2007.
- ⁴ Rick Warren, speaking via video at *The Desiring God Conference for Pastors*, February 1-3, 2010.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ 1 Timothy 4:13-16
- ⁷ 2 Timothy 4:1-2
- ⁸ George Barna, *Marketing the Church: What They Never Taught You About Church Growth*, Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1998, p. 42-43.
- ⁹ "Rick Warren's Challenge to the SBC Pastors' Conference" *Aspire, 2011 Pastors' Conference*, June 12-13, Phoenix, AZ, Session 4, June 13, 2011, <http://blog.pastors.com/blogs/pcom/rick-warrens-challenge-to-the-sbc-pastors-conference-transcript--mp3/>
- ¹⁰ Matthew 1:18-25.
- ¹¹ Jesus uses the construction μεθ' ὑμῶν εἶμι, without the emphatic "ἐγὼ" in Matthew 17:7 (future tense of the verb), and John 7:33; 13:33; 14:9 and 16:4 (past tense of the verb).
- ¹² <http://twitter.com/#!/RickWarren/status/10621690897>
- ¹³ Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2002, p. 282.
- ¹⁴ George Barna, *Futurecast: What Today's Trends Mean for Tomorrow's World*, BarnaBooks, 2011, p. 226.
- ¹⁵ *Solid Declaration VIII*, 27-28 ff.
- ¹⁶ *St. Louis Edition of Luther's Works*, Vol. XX: pp. 951f. Also, "Though Christ, also according to his human nature, is even now present with his Church on earth, during the entire period between his ascension and Judgment Day, in accord with his promise: "I am with you always," he can, nevertheless, without self-contradiction, return on Judgment Day, since he is now present with his Church according to his invisible mode, with his return will take place according to the visible mode of his substance. So our opponents must discard their canon: "The human nature of Christ has no other mode of subsistence than that which is visible, local and circumscribed." Ibid., p. 965.
- ¹⁷ *Solid Declaration VIII*, 78-79.
- ¹⁸ "About Communion," <http://saddleback.com/aboutsaddleback/whatwebelieve/>
- ¹⁹ "Who Can Take Communion," <http://www.willowcreek.org/southbarrington/go-deeper/baptism-a-communion/>
- ²⁰ 1 Corinthians 3:9; 2 Corinthians 5:20

THE REAL LUTHER

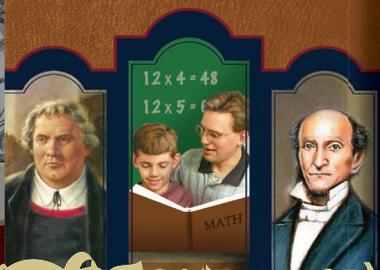


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Rest for the Weary

by Ellie Corrow

I was initially raised on a sparse Christian upbringing, though my parents faithfully brought me to the baptismal font as an infant, matters of faith did not take root in our household until both of my parents retired from the Air Force and we settled in Vermont. I was fourteen years old when we began to attend church regularly and by then, somewhat predictably, I had little use for it. My subtle resistance to church attendance in high school developed into full-fledged rebellion in college --I eventually dropped out a semester shy of completing my degree in American Literature because I was in the middle of a crisis pregnancy. My parents showed a great deal of grace, mercy, and forgiveness as they took me into their home, supporting me through pregnancy and parenting. When I moved back in with my parents I also began to attend church with them, and by this time the church to which they were heavily committed was affiliated with the Assemblies of God.

The Assemblies of God is a Pentecostal denomination, and there I was taught that if you were simply committed enough to God, and was receptive enough to the Holy Spirit, you would have obvious victory over all manner of sin.

I was asked to serve as a youth leader in that church and to share my testimony widely: after all, I was a single woman who was pregnant, had various misadventures in college, and was now a firmly committed Christian. I was told how to interpret my experiences in relation to God, and my narrative became, "I was a rotten sinner [insert list of sins here] then Jesus saved me, and now I'm a much better person [list proof of improvement here]." I was expected to divulge the personal details of my life, and

measure the certainty of my salvation according to the obvious deliverance from those choices.

Eventually my parents left that church for a variety of reasons and we moved on to a Southern Baptist congregation. While we were in that congregation, I began to entertain the idea of going to seminary because of my profound interest in theology. I entered Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary in the Fall of 2006 as a Southern Baptist, and graduated three years later as a convinced Lutheran.

My first year at Gordon Conwell was a tumultuous one, and soon the assurance that my supposedly dramatic conversion story had granted me began to slip through my fingers. As I studied I began to realize that I could not determine with any certainty that I had achieved any moral progress in my Christian life. For Lutherans

this may seem fairly obvious, but for one who has been nurtured almost exclusively on a diet of pop-

Evangelicalism this is a very devastating realization.

The point of Christianity, I had been taught, is to improve. Jesus died and rose so we could be better people. Most Evangelical preachers will not articulate exactly that point, but their teaching effectively reaches that conclusion: the Gospel is for the unsaved, the mature Christian needs to be committed to growth in victory. In this way of thinking, spiritual struggle is considered an indication that one has attained neither victory nor deliverance, and that is probably harboring some unconfessed sin. So even amid my struggle I only felt shame at my waning faith.

When the Christian life is not measured on the basis of God's Word of promise to sinners, but rather on the sinner's progress in her Christian walk,



there is little recourse for someone who sees the gravity of her sins. As all internal evidence that I was a forgiven sinner became more vacuous, I was left questioning my salvation. My testimony no longer provided assurance because I knew I was the same sinner I had always been—I just made different choices. Unable to conjure any evidence of my faith, and totally unable to distinguish Christ from Moses, how was I to know that He, who had so obviously saved so many others, had in fact saved me as well?



I say all this not to be melodramatic, but to show the danger of a theology that grounds everything in the sentiments of one's heart rather than in the external promises of Christ given to us in His Word. I had nothing to fall back on in

these moments of despair —there was nothing I could point to outside of myself, outside of the inclinations of my own evil heart, to show me that God

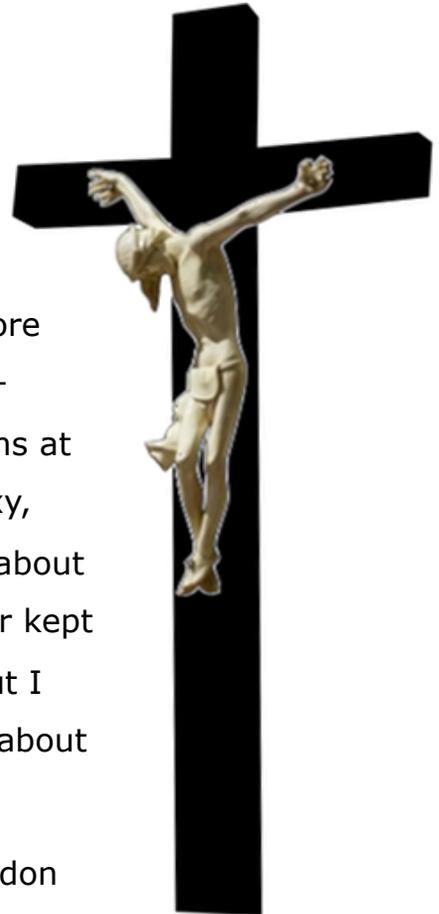
loved me and had saved me, a lost and condemned sinner. (Sound theology will not ward off these dark days completely, but it does give you the weapons with which to wage war when doubt assails—I still have many days where all I can say is I am baptized, and I have received our Lord's body and blood for the full forgiveness of my sins.)

In the midst of my turmoil I was introduced to the works of Martin Luther while taking a church history class at the seminary. The professor for this class, Dr. Gordon Isaac is the resident Luther scholar, and as such took great joy in lecturing on Luther, complementing these lectures with sizeable assigned readings. I knew who Luther was, of course, but beyond that had not really encountered him. I remember reading Luther's arguments at the

Marburg Colloquy as well as other writings on the Supper and concluding that he appealed to Scripture whereas others appealed to reason and experience. Though I still didn't realize how monumental this was, I began to think through how Christ comes to us in grace, mercy, and forgiveness, and that all of these things exist outside of ourselves. These gifts are brought to us by Him, through the Word and sacraments, because He knows we live in a world filled with devils, and are all too frequently led astray by our own sinful flesh.

These seeds of agreement with Luther grew into a fascination with his writings and with Lutheran-ism in general. I ordered a copy of the Book of Concord because I was intent on learning more about Lutheranism, not because I was particularly interested in becoming one. I didn't know any Lutherans at all--Vermont is hardly a bastion of Lutheran orthodoxy, and frankly, from the outside looking in there's a lot about Lutheranism which is just strange. I loved that Luther kept pointing me to Christ, here I found much comfort, but I struggled with the notion that my faith wasn't really about me at all.

At home the summer after my first year at Gordon Conwell, I decided I'd take the chance to visit a Lutheran church. Thankfully we happened to have a Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod congregation in my hometown, a town so tiny it does not even boast a traffic light. I was unsure of what to expect and was, admittedly, totally lost: I didn't understand the liturgy, I didn't know how to use the hymnal, and I was certain I looked ridiculous. Despite how self-conscious I felt, I knew that I had found something very different from



anything I received previously. I heard and spoke the Word of God throughout the liturgy, my sins were forgiven, and I received preaching which stood in stark contrast to all the Evangelical sermons I had heard. Pastor Kemp gave me no principles for my Christian life but instead, from the text of Scripture, called my sin what it was, unabashedly, but proceeded to pour Jesus into my ears. Week after week I heard the law which left no avenue for escape, and was brought a Savior who had died for sinners such as myself.

I finally began to understand why I was not finding answers to my questions—I had not been fed a theology informed by Christ, but rather one that was formed by the Christian's experience. Experience is fleeting, and even deceptive, and as such cannot be the basis for anyone's assurance. Similarly, preaching which had confused law and gospel, sought to use the law as a vehicle to cajole good works, left one either assuaged with his own deluded self-righteousness, as he imagines his own success, or led to doubt and despair. Instead, Lutheranism, in its insistence upon the law preached in all its sternness, the gospel preached in its pure sweetness, and the sacraments administered to sinners for the forgiveness of their sins, provides no refuge for the self-righteous, but an oasis for the sinner. It is indeed as our Lord has said, "come to me all who are weary and heavy-laden, I will give you rest."



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