

From Exception to Rule: How Error Replaces Truth in the Church

by Todd Wilken

Wittenberg Trail: Stepping Stones to Wittenberg

by Jordan Cooper



Dear Journal Reader,

In this edition of the *Journal* you'll find two articles. In my article, *From Exception to Rule,* I build on the timeless warning of 19th century Lutheran giant Charles Porterfield Krauth regarding how error plants its seeds, sprouts and grows in the Church. Krauth helps us understand how so many congregations and denominations find themselves on the brink of apostasy today. What begins as an exception, becomes the rule.

Stepping Stones to Wittenberg is our "Wittenberg Trail" feature by Jordan Cooper. Jordan describes how the assurance of the Bible's teaching on the Sacraments brought him out of the uncertainty of Reformed theology.

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.

Wir sind alle Bettler,

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



From Exception to Rule: How Error Replaces Truth in the Church

by Todd Wilken

As I write this, the largest
Presbyterian denomination in
America has just officially permitted
non-celibate homosexuals to serve as
pastors.



The Presbyterian Church USA joins three other US Protestant denominations in doing so. The United Church of Christ was the earliest in 1985, declaring itself "open and affirming." The Episcopal Church USA and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America followed suit in 2009. The United Methodist Church will likely be next.

Each of these denominations once held a Biblical view of homosexuality. Each of them now repudiate the Bible's teaching on homosexuality. None of this happened overnight. No denomination suddenly reverses itself on a clear Biblical teaching. It happens gradually, yet intentionally. It is no accident that some of the largest Protestant denominations have replaced a once all-male, celibate or married clergy with non-celibate gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered clergy.

This change didn't happened overnight. This change didn't happened by accident. What began as an exception to the rule, is now the rule.

The Exception-Mentality

The exception-mentality is an intellectual hallmark of postmodern churchmanship. Its reasoning is as simple as it is dangerous: *If some rules*

have an exception, then every rule (even one based on Biblical truth) has an exception.

We even have a saying to this effect: "there is an exception to every rule." And, it is true that many rules in life allow for exceptions. Not every rule applies in every circumstance, not every rule applies to everyone and some rules are mere conventions. But does *every* rule have an exception?

Think about it. "There is an exception to every rule," IS a rule. This rule, if true, must also have an exception. The rule "there is an exception to every rule" has an exception, namely, some rules have no exceptions.

Of course, "there is an exception to every rule" is logically self-refuting, therefore untrue. Some rules have no exceptions. The only question that remains is, which rules have exceptions and which don't? In particular, do Biblical teachings have exceptions? The exception-mentality in the Church assumes they do.

In every denomination that has approved of homosexual clergy, the advocates for this change began by seeking an exception to the existing, Biblical rule against such things. But the exception-mentality is common in conservative Churches too.

Once-In-A-Lifetime

Permit an example from my own denomination's recent history of how this exception-mentality works in the Church.

The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) is a famously conservative denomination. In matters of Church fellowship, the LCMS constitution lays down a rule. It requires the "renunciation of unionism and syncretism of every description." Unionism is the mixing of different Christian confessions; Syncretism is the mixing of different religions. This

constitutional rule is based on the exclusive truth claims of Christianity and the Bible's clear warnings against false teaching.

But there is an exception in the LCMS that actually *permits* unionism or syncretism: The "once-in-a-life-time situation." And, there's a story behind it.

In 2001, in the weeks following the 9-11 terrorist attacks, Dr. David Benke, president of the Atlantic District of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod found himself at the center of a debate over inter-religious prayer. As *Christianity Today* reported the story,

Twelve days after the September 11 attacks, David Benke followed Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu clerics to the podium of a Yankee Stadium event to honor the missing and the dead. Benke asked attendees to join hands and pray with him "on this field of dreams turned into God's house of prayer." He prayed "in the precious name of Jesus" and sat down. That prayer has led to Benke's suspension from the clergy roster of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. (Todd Hertz, "Benke Suspended for 'Syncretism' after 9/11 Event Interfaith prayer exposes divisions in LCMS," Christianity Today, July 2002)

Benke's suspension and what followed in the LCMS made history, literally. Philip and Carol Zaleski cited the Benke case as one raising "important issues about interfaith prayer" in their 2005 book, *Prayer: a History*. They report the conclusion of the case in this way:

On April 11, 2003, the panel dismissed all charges against Benke, citing an obscure LCMS regulation that allowed ministers to participate in a "once in a lifetime" event such as the Yankee Stadium affair. (Philip & Carol Zaleski, Prayer: A History, Houghton Mifflin: 2005, p. 305)

What was this "obscure LCMS regulation"? It began as a 2001 report summarizing church-wide responses to a 2000 study document titled, "The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship." The study materials and the report had been prepared by the office of the

LCMS President and LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations. Both the study materials and the report had been commended by the 2001 LCMS Convention (Resolution 3-07A) a few months before Benke's participation in the inter-religious prayer service.



Then, just prior to the April 2003 panel hearing on Benke's case, both the study materials and the report were ruled to be doctrinally binding on "all members of synod" by the LCMS Commission on Constitutional Matters. The relevant section of the original document read, regarding interfaith and inter-religious prayer and worship:

There are also 'once-in-a-life-time' situations. It is virtually impossible to anticipate all such situations or to establish rules in advance. Specific answers cannot be given to cover every type of situation pastors and congregations face. These situations can be evaluated only on a case-by-case basis and may evoke different responses from different pastors who may be equally committed to LCMS fellowship principles. The LCMS has always recognized this. ("The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship: A Report on Synodical Discussions," CTCR, February 16, 2001)

Here's the point. The charges of syncretism and unionism against Benke were dismissed --not because he didn't engage in syncretism and unionism-- but because his participation at Yankee Stadium was ruled to be a "once-in-a-life-time" situation, an exception.

Of course, this exception raises more questions than it answers: *Is the* "once-in-a-life-time" exception a freebee for pastors and church leaders who

find themselves in an awkward ecumenical spot? Does everyone get only one, or can you have more than one "once-in-a-life-time" exception? For that matter, whose lifetime are we talking about? For the attentive reader, this exception should raise more substantive concerns.

First, the "once-in-a-life-time" exception is not rooted in any Scriptural teaching, but in pragmatism. Scripture provides no permission for, or example of a "once-in-a-life-time" exception in matters of Church Fellowship.

Second, the logic of the "once-in-a-life-time" exception is unclear at best. Why would a once in a lifetime situation require or permit an exception in ordinary Church fellowship practice? Would any once in a lifetime situation permit an exception, or only a certain kind of once in a lifetime situation (like a massive terrorist attack on the US)?

Third, strictly speaking, *any situation* can be said to occur only "once-in-a-life-time." Even similar situations are only similar; not identical. So there is quite literally no end of situations where the "once-in-a-life-time" exception could apply.

Fourth, ethically the "once-in-a-life-time" exception is Situational Ethics. Joseph Fletcher, the father of this dubious ethical theory wrote:

The situationist enters into every decision-making situation fully armed with the ethical maxims of his community and its heritage, and he treats them with respect as illuminators of his problems. **Just the same he is prepared in any situation to compromise them or set them aside in the situation if love seems better served by doing so.** (Joseph Fletcher, Situation Ethics: The New Morality, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), p. 26)

Situation ethics says that what would otherwise be wrong, is right, depending on the situation. This is exactly what the "once-in-a-life-time" exception says as well.

Finally, one must ask, why would the "once-in-a-life-time" exception apply only to matters of Church fellowship, unionism and syncretism? Why couldn't it apply to other matters of faith and morals as well? Why couldn't a missionary, threatened with his life unless he deny Christ, be permitted a "once-in-a-life-time" exception? Why couldn't a Christian mother, under familial and financial pressure to abort her unborn child, be permitted a "once-in-a-life-time" exception?

The LCMS constitution (not to mention the Bible) forbids unionism and syncretism of every description. The LCMS "once-in-a-life-time" exception permits it. And, please note the irony that the "once-in-a-life-time" exception is now "binding" LCMS doctrine. The exception is now a rule.

Many other recent changes in the LCMS began as exceptions: entertainment worship, open communion, lay ministry and an unordained "clergy," academic freedom permitting advocacy of evolution, homosexuality, etc. The exception-mentality provides a fertile seedbed for error to begin its progress and eventual domination in the Church.

Toleration, Equality, Supremacy

Nineteenth century Lutheran theologian Charles Porterfield Krauth describes error's plea for an exception as only the beginning of a three stage advance. Krauth writes:

...it works in one unvarying way. When error is admitted into the Church, it will be found that the stages of its progress are always three. It begins by asking toleration. Its friends say to the majority: "You need not be afraid of us; we are few, and weak; only let us alone; we shall not disturb the faith of others. The church has her standards of doctrine; of course we shall never interfere with them; we ask only for ourselves to be spared interference with our private opinions."

Again, my own denomination provides another example of this first stage, error's plea for tolerance. Very recently, the liberal group "Daystar" resurfaced in the LCMS, lamenting the election of Pastor Matt Harrison as the denomination's president. Under previous administrations, Daystar had privately and publicly promoted the teaching of evolution, open communion, the ordination of women and the affirmation of homosexuality. In an editorial for their *Daystar Journal*, Dr. Robert Schmidt begins: "The election of Matt Harrison and his conservative comrades have left LCMS moderates concerned about the future of the Synod and their place in it." He continues,

What is a moderate to do? The Bible is full of stories how God's good servants are on the losing side of conflicts. Under threat of his life Elijah flees to Mt. Horeb in the wilderness, Discouraged he wonders of he is the only one left to care about God and God's covenant with his people. Yes, 7000 are left but what are they against the royal house, the bureaucracy, and the army? ...Like Elijah, God's good servants are a diminishing minority in the public sphere. Of course, like always, there are the sycophantic religious voices of support for the powers that be. Those, however, seeking economic justice for the poor, for immigrants, and for the victims of war are vastly outnumbered... Moderates in the LCMS are part of that first remnant. (Robert Schmidt, "The Remnant," Daystar Journal, Spring 2011)

Daystar's plea for tolerance follows Krauth's description of error's first stage exactly. "Moderate" is a term preferred by liberal groups in and outside the Church. It gives the impression that Daystar's positions are reasonable and mainstream --certainly not a challenge to the Truth. Daystar presents itself as "on the losing side," "a diminishing minority," and "vastly outnumbered." This also fits Krauth's description of error's initial plea for toleration.

Error first asks only for toleration as a beleaguered minority. But, it doesn't stop there. Krauth continues:

Indulged in this for a time, error goes on to assert equal rights. Truth and error are two balancing forces. The Church shall do nothing which

looks like deciding between them; that would be partiality. It is bigotry to assert any superior right for the truth. We are to agree to differ, and any favoring of the truth, because it is truth, is partisanship. What the friends of truth and error hold in common is fundamental. Anything on which they differ is ipso facto non-essential. Anybody who makes account of such a thing is a disturber of the peace of the church. Truth and error are two coordinate powers and the great secret of church-statesmanship is to preserve the balance between them.

This stage of error's progress may sound very familiar. That's because this is where much of mainline Protestantism finds itself today. Be it a congregation or an entire church body, the rule today is: "Don't rock the boat! Agree to disagree.Live and let live." I have called it *laissez-faire* Christianity.

This second stage of error's progress is often characterized by denial. The advocates of error deny that any real disagreement exists. These denials range from the outright: "Our differences are political, practical or personal; not doctrinal," to the more subtle, "We



have unity *within* our diversity." For their part, the advocates of Truth find it easier to keep their heads down and their mouths shut. They retreat to their own corner where they can, for a time, deny error's progress in the Church.

Krauth rightly observes that at this stage in error's progress, doctrinal minimalism replaces doctrinal agreement. "What the friends of truth and error hold in common is fundamental. Anything on which they differ is ipso facto non-essential."

Doctrinal minimalism is a juggernaut of circular reasoning: *Christians* are united on all the important things, therefore if Christians disagree about

something, it must be unimportant. This doctrinal minimalism allows both sides to maintain the illusion of unity, even while error continues to replace Truth, point by point, doctrine by doctrine. Taken to its illogical conclusion, doctrinal minimalism reduces every point of Christian doctrine to a non-essential. This obviously perpetuates error's progress, first pleading for toleration, then later for equality.

Krauth also says that at this stage in error's progress "peace" is maintained by avoiding any discussion of error's progress. Elsewhere, Krauth observes that at this stage the Church will be attracted to leaders who are skilled as impartial referees between the error and Truth. They are put into place to keep the peace. The progress of error thrives on this false "peace" and on church leaders who are uncommitted to either side. So, Krauth concludes:

From this point error soon goes on to its natural end, which is to assert supremacy. Truth started with tolerating, it comes to be merely tolerated, and that, only for a time. Error claims a preference for its judgments on all disputed points. (C.P. Krauth, The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology, Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1872, pp. 195-96)

Four mainline Protestant denominations in America now officially approve of non-celibate gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people serving as pastors. How did it happen? How did this error replace the Truth in these churches? Toleration, equality, supremacy. In every denomination that has approved of homosexual clergy, the advocates for this change began by seeking an exception to the existing rule. Once the exception was made, they began to question the rule itself. Finally, they abolish the rule altogether. For now in these denominations, Christians who still believe in the rule are still tolerated --merely tolerated-- "and that, only for a time."

Of course, we really don't need C.P. Krauth to explain this to us, do we? St. Paul said the same thing 2,000 years ago: "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?" (1 Corinthians 5:6; Galatians 5:9)

Not Even a Little

The late Father Richard John Neuhaus famously said, "Wherever orthodoxy is optional, it sooner or later will be proscribed." The exception-mentality in the Church has made orthodoxy optional. Sooner or later, if error's progress goes unchecked, orthodoxy won't even be an option. Truth and error cannot peacefully coexist in the life of the Church. One or the other will always prevail. And, what have we learned? If error is tolerated in the Church, it will eventually replace the Truth in the Church. If error is tolerated, the exception inevitably becomes the rule.

We have watched exception-minded churches and denominations "exception" their way into apostasy. The exception-mentality in the Church must be replaced with a Truth-mentality.

How? Intolerance --patient, careful, loving but *total intolerance of* error in the Church. **There is no exception to the Truth.** In the Church, Truth should make *no exception* for error.

Really?! Am I saying that absolutely nothing contrary to God's Word should be tolerated in the Church? Yes, absolutely nothing, no exceptions. Again, St. Paul says, "a little leaven leavens the whole lump." Tolerating a little error in the Church is like tolerating a little infidelity in a marriage, a little child abuse in a family, or a little terrorism in society.

You might object, "Didn't Jesus Himself make many exceptions to the Biblical Sabbath and other ceremonial laws?" No, He didn't, not at all. What He did do was refute and correct His opponents' misconceptions about the nature of the Sabbath and ritual cleanliness.

You might say, "But there's no such thing as a perfect Church, without error of any kind." I agree. But even so, that isn't an argument for tolerating even a little error in the Church. Paul doesn't say, "A lot of yeast leavens the whole lump, but a little is just fine." No. Even a little is enough to leaven everything; even a little is dangerous.

You might worry, "You're calling for theological witch hunts and a purge of the Church." Not at all. I'm calling for repentance from those who teach and practice contrary to God's Word. Is that too much to ask?

I'm calling for us to stop creating exceptions to God's Word under the pretense of obeying the Great Commission, and actually *obey* Jesus when he says there, "teaching them to observe *all* that I have commanded you."

I'm calling for us to stop creating exceptions to God's Word under the pretense of being "loving." Instead, I'm calling for us to so love God's Word, that we would never want to see it ignored in favor of exceptions or compromise. I'm calling for us to so love one another, that we would never want to see a Christian brother or sister believe, teach or practice anything contrary to God's Word. I'm calling for us to so love the lost, that we would never want to present them with anything but the pure, saving Gospel and Word of Jesus Christ.

Stepping Stones to Wittenberg

by Jordan Cooper

My Christian life began when I was baptized as an infant in a Presbyterian church. However, I was not raised Presbyterian, but Evangelical. Being brought up in the faith, I cared about the things of God ever since I can remember, but had a short rebellious phase, as so many teenagers do, at the beginning of high school. After this I had what one would consider a "conversion experience." In Evangelical lingo, this is when I became born again.

At this point I became fully entrenched in the Evangelical culture. My spiritual life was something of a roller coaster ride. My status with God was dependent upon how emotional I felt during worship time and how many tracts I had passed out that week. I remember not raising my hands while I was singing one week at youth group and being asked why I was not "in the Spirit." Extensive in-context Bible reading was discouraged because it was "simply too much for one person to handle." One or two verses, or a chapter if one was daring, were to be read at a time; the Spirit would then interpret the meaning of the passage to the reader specifically.

I couldn't handle the ups and downs. I was often left wondering if I was truly saved. I felt like I didn't feel God's presence as much as I should. I caught myself sinning too much. I wasn't sure if I was sincere enough when I was "born again." I found myself praying the "sinner's prayer" quite often just to make sure I really said the right words to be saved.

I knew there had to be something more.

This is when my search began. I had a Calvinist teacher in my $11^{
m th}$ grade Bible class at my Christian high school. What he taught countered the

experiences I had in churches up to that point. It was from him that I began to understand that the clear words of scripture were so much more important than what ever I felt God was telling me in the murmurs of my heart. What I learned from this teacher, more importantly, was that the faith I had in Christ was not my own, it was a gift of God. The anxiety I had previously felt began to fade. I now understood that it is not the quality of my faith that saved me, nor was it the sincerity of my prayer, but the work of the Holy Spirit.

With this newfound belief system and a growing passion for Holy Scripture, I began college. I attended a small Christian college in Boston and majored in Religion. Hoping to get good Biblical education, I was shocked to find that liberalism had overtaken the Bible department. Day after day our Bible professor systematically explored the Old Testament to point out several supposed "contradictions" between books. This caused me to study scripture more intensely than ever before and force me to give a defense of what I believed and why. After being asked to drop this Bible class due to my frequent debates with me Professor, I realized that I needed to find a more Biblical education.

I then attended a Reformed Presbyterian college in Western Pennsylvania. As a Reformed Christian, I knew that I would get an education more in-line with my beliefs than the previous college I had attended. I quickly became involved with a group of friends with a mutual interest in studying theology. I was introduced to several Calvinistic writers, and spent many long nights reading the works of R.C. Sproul, G.C. Berkouwer, Jonathan Edwards, Lorraine Boettner, Abraham Kuyper, Meredith Kline, and various other Reformed theologians accompanied by frequent late night trips to a local 24 hour restaurant spent challenging each other on Biblical issues.

Though these times were often uplifting and edifying, arrogance began to manifest itself in me. The conversations began to shift from the beauty of Christ's work on the cross to the logical order of God's eternal decrees. My young college mind imagined that it had the capacity to understand the mind



of God. Though this was largely due to my own sinful nature, there are aspects of Reformed theology that breed a sort of intellectual arrogance: everything has to be characterized, everything has to be logical, everything about God must be figured out.

Another issue I faced in Calvinistic

Christianity was that it had still not taken me
beyond the subjectivism of my evangelical days.

Though I understood that salvation was all of
grace, there always seemed to be an element of
works in the equation. My faith had to constantly
be tested so that I would know if it was genuine.

Since Christ's death was seen to be done only on behalf of the elect, I had to find out if I was elect-- how did I know if I was among the elect? It could not be through my faith, because so many have false faith. I had to examine my works to see if my faith was indeed genuine. It was not outward works, however, because hypocrites also performed outwardly good acts. Thus the only way to gain certainty of my position before God was through examining my motivations. Were they truly to please God or to please myself? Knowing the evil in my heart as I do, this type of examination always left me in despair.

I had often read Martin Luther as a Calvinist. Many claimed that Luther was identical to Calvin theologically (except for Luther's view of the

Eucharist; that wasn't his fault though, just a vestige of the Romanism he hadn't yet gotten rid of). He quickly became my favorite writer, and eventually I decided to give his views on the sacraments a more serious look, and eventually ended up a Lutheran.

So what caused me to move from Calvinism to Lutheranism? There are three main factors.

First and primarily, I came to see that Scripture did not support many of the doctrines I had believed as a Reformed Christian. In Calvinism, as with most of Protestantism, baptism is seen as a symbol of grace.

It gives one entrance into the visible covenant community of the Church, but does not give regeneration or the forgiveness of sins. However, after studying passages such as 1 Peter 3:21, Acts 2:38, John 3:5 and Titus 3:5, I came to realize that in the New Testament baptism does forgive sins and cause one to be "born again." At first I assumed that there would be easy answers for these verses from the Reformed side; however, after reading many books and commentaries on the subject I found no adequate response. Many of the arguments boil down to: "well we know that the verse *can't* mean this."

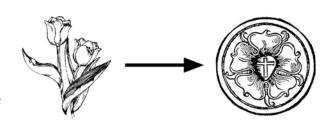


Upon studying the issue of the Holy Eucharist, I found the same pattern. The Lutheran explanation of the words of institution and Paul's language in 1 Corinthians 10 about participating in Christ's body and blood was so straight forward and clear. The Reformed responses, as few as there were, were insufficient and more often than not misrepresented the other position.

I also came to see that the doctrine of a Limited Atonement is arrived at, not by careful exegesis of Scripture, but by the construction of a logical system. The texts referring to the universal nature of the atonement (1 John 2:2, 1 Timothy 2:4, etc.) are just that; the atonement of Christ truly is for every man woman and child.

Second, as a student of early church history, I came to see that many Calvinistic views were not held by the early church. For example, it is simply a given in early church writings that it is possible for a true Christian to

depart from the faith. The doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints is absent for 1500 years of Church history. The same could be said of the Reformed doctrine of Baptism; it was



accepted that God forgives sins through Baptism in the early church. The doctrine of Double Predestination, a common way of referring to the doctrine of predestination in Reformed theology, was also condemned by the church at the Council of Orange in 521.

While Church tradition is not an infallible authority as are the Scriptures, its testimony should be taken seriously. If something I believed had been missed by every major theologian for 1500 years, I needed to seriously examine that belief. Has the Holy Spirit allowed the whole Church to miss these major points of doctrine for so long?

Finally, Lutheran doctrine answered the problems I had struggled with for many years. I no longer need to look inward for the assurance of my salvation. It is not necessary for me to examine my inner motivations and the sincerity of my faith. I only need to look at the objective and universal work of Christ on the cross and in His resurrection. I can know for sure that this work was done for me. This assurance is given to me weekly as I feed

on Christ's true body and blood and hear the pastor's words declare "this is the blood of Christ shed for your sins." It is also given as I receive forgiveness through the words of absolution pronounced by the Pastor. The proclamation does not serve only to remind me of what Christ has done for me in the past but gives in the present exactly what it proclaims: forgiveness and life, and does so in a concrete and audible manner.

In many ways I am grateful for my Reformed past; it gave me a love for God's word, an awareness of my sin, and an understanding of God's grace. However, it became only a stepping stone on a path toward the road I now walk on. A passion for God's word is a wonderful quality. However, it is only half of what God desires to give. God meant for us to receive his grace and forgiveness in a more concrete way; through the waters of baptism, through the proclamation of forgiveness, and from truly partaking of Christ's very body and blood.

Jordan Cooper is a convert from Reformed Christianity to Confessional Lutheranism. He spends his time studying the differences between the two confessions, and frequently dialogs with Reformed Christians from around the country. He holds a B.A. in Biblical Studies from Geneva College and is currently a Masters student writing a thesis on Martin Luther, the early Church, and the New Perspective on Paul. He is the author of the Just and Sinner blog.





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Todd Wilken, Host

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