

Issues, Etc.TM

JOURNAL



God In a Box

by Todd Wilken

Wittenberg Trail: The Word Grows

by Michael Schuermann

Winter, 2011



Dear *Journal* Reader,

Greetings in the name of Jesus.

In this edition of the *Journal*, we offer an article for the Christmas and Epiphany seasons, "God In a Box." This article answers the objections of religious relativism with the Good News of the Incarnation. Jesus, God in the flesh, is God with us and for us.

Our Wittenberg Trail feature is from Pastor Michael Schuermann. He tells his story of how the Word of God led him from the vague spirituality of Therapeutic, Moralistic Deism to the rock solid theology and comfort of the Reformation.

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. The signature appears to read "Todd Wilken" in a cursive, flowing script. The letters are connected, and the overall style is informal and personal.

God In A Box

by Todd Wilken

You can't put God in a box! How often have you heard someone say that? Perhaps you have said it yourself.

Usually when we say, "you can't put God in a box," we mean that we can't put a limit on what God can do, that nothing is impossible for God. However, today "you can't put God in a box" has become the creed of religious relativism. Religious relativism teaches that all religious beliefs are a matter of perspective, that all religions are equally valid and that no one religion possesses absolute truth. For example, I once saw a bumper sticker that read, "My God is too big to fit into your religion." The point that the driver was trying to make was that God cannot be known through any one religion, and that every religion (including Christianity) offers, at best, only partial knowledge of God.

At first glance, you might be tempted to agree. After all, we Christians believe that God *is* big—infinite in fact. Perhaps God is like that elephant. Perhaps you *can't* put God in a box. Perhaps He *is* too big to fit into any one religion, even Christianity. Even King Solomon said, "Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heavens cannot contain You."¹



But look again at the familiar account of Jesus' birth. Luke tells us how Joseph and Mary and came to Bethlehem. Then he writes:

So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger.²

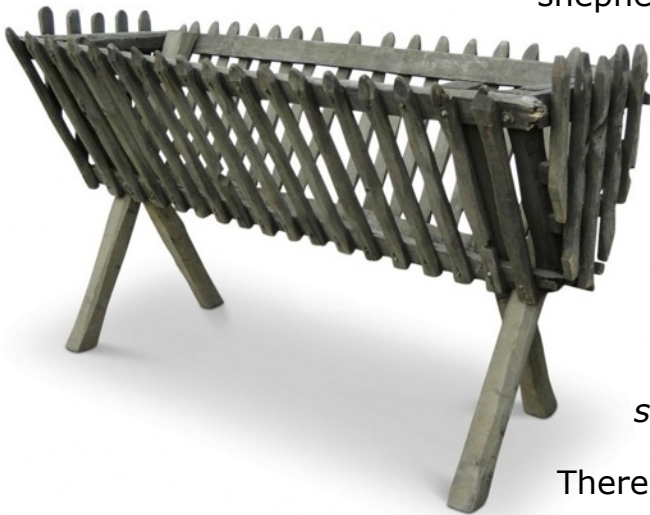
Mary put God in a box.

The mother of our Lord took her newborn son, God in human flesh, and laid him in a box, a feeding trough. Mary put God in a box, literally.

Is this just a clever play on words? No, it isn't. While Mary was laying her baby in the manger, the angel was announcing his birth to the

shepherds. The angel told the shepherds that if they went to Bethlehem and looked into that manger, they would find God in the flesh:

For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, Who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.³



There's more. Before Mary laid God in the manger, Mary held God in her arms. For nine months prior to that, Mary carried God in her womb. Nine months earlier, Mary had heard and believed the angel's words:

Behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end.⁴

Right then and there in Mary's womb, King Solomon's question, "will God indeed dwell on the earth?" was answered. Yes, God will dwell on earth.

The God Whom the heavens and the highest heavens cannot contain will not only dwell on earth, He will take up residence *first* in Mary's womb.

Saint Paul writes of Jesus, "In Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form."⁵ The baby in Mary's womb, the baby in Mary's arms and the baby lying in the manger is God in the flesh. There at Bethlehem, the fullness of God was found in a box at Mary's feet. Luther wrote: "I know of no God but this One in the manger.."

*The angel does not declare that he is in heaven... 'He points out that he has come to us in our flesh and blood... remain down here and listen, 'Unto you a Savior.' Reason and will would ascend and seek above, but if you will have joy, bend yourself down to this place. There you will find that boy given for you Who is your Creator, lying in a manger. I will stay with that boy as He sucks, is washed, and dies. There is no joy but in this boy. Take Him away and you face the Majesty which terrifies. I know of no God but this One in the manger. Do not let yourself be turned away from this humanity. What wonderful words (Col. 2:9)! He is not only a man and a servant, but that person lying in the manger is both man and God essentially, not separated one from the other, but as born of a virgin. If you separate them, the joy is gone. O You boy, lying in the manger, You are truly the God who has created me, and You will not be wrathful with me because You come to me in this loving way— a more loving way cannot be imagined.*⁶

Religious relativists say, "you can't put God in a box." They mean that God cannot be known through any one religion, they reduce all theology to speculation. As Luther says, "reason and will would ascend and seek above." But the true God cannot be found above, but below. The truth is, God cannot be truly known apart from that God in the flesh, that God in a box, that baby in the manger.

Against the claims of religious relativism, Scripture declares that the Triune God has revealed Himself in all His fullness in bodily form in Jesus Christ --and in no other way. Contrary to all modern religious sensibilities,

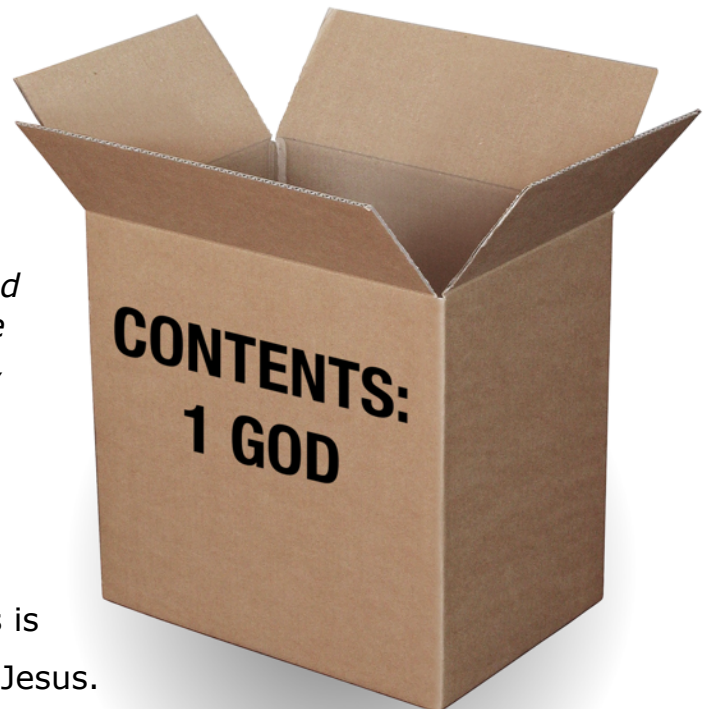
there really is one, and only one way to know God. To know Jesus is to know God, and apart from Jesus God cannot truly be known:

No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also... Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.⁷

Matthew begins the story of Jesus' birth with an angel visiting Joseph. He says of the child in Mary's womb:

...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).

This is how God is with us —in the human flesh of Jesus. More than that, this is how God is for us —in the human flesh of Jesus.



It pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself; by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His Cross.⁸

Jesus traveled the path of the Virgin's womb to the Cross. He came, God and man, so that He might make peace between God and man at the Cross.

And, here's something that religious relativism cannot bear to hear: Just as God lay in the manger, so God hung on the Cross. Just as God lay in the manger, so God lay in the tomb. Just as God lay in the manger, so God

came out of the tomb alive to stand among His disciples. Just as God lay in the manger, so God ascended in glory and will return to raise the dead and judge the world.



But Jesus is no longer in the manger. Jesus is no longer on the Cross. Jesus is no longer in the tomb. Where is our God in the flesh to be found today? Solomon's question remains, "Will God indeed dwell on the earth?" And the answer remains the same.

Yes, God will dwell on earth. God is still with us as much as he was when he was in Mary's womb, in Mary's arms and in the manger. God is still with us as much as he was when he was on the Cross, in the tomb, raised from the dead and among His disciples.

Every Sunday Jesus speaks these words at His Supper, "This is my body given for you... This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you." (Luke 22:19-20)

Is this just a clever play on words? No it isn't. The same body that was in Mary's womb, in Mary's arms, in the manger, on the Cross, in the tomb, resurrected among the disciples and is seated at the right hand of God is here in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. Still today, this is how God is with us; this is how God is for us.



Paul tells us: "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes."⁹ This is true. As often as we

receive the Lord's Supper, Jesus' conception, birth, death and resurrection for sinners are proclaimed. And as often as these things are proclaimed, they are delivered. Forgiveness, life and salvation are found nowhere else but in Jesus, God in the flesh. The words of the Christmas hymn we sing is not only for Christmas day, but for every Sunday, every Lord's Supper:

*Veiled in flesh the Godhead see.
Hail th' incarnate deity.
Pleased as man with men to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel.*

The angel told the shepherds that if they went to Bethlehem and looked into the manger, they would find God in the flesh.

The shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.¹⁰

But this Christmas and Epiphany seasons, you won't find Jesus in the manger, or on the Cross or in the tomb. You will only find Jesus where He has promised to be found. You will find Jesus wherever His incarnation, death and resurrection for sinners are purely proclaimed and rightly delivered. You will find Jesus only in His Word and in His Sacraments. And, just like the shepherds, where you find Jesus, you find God —God in the flesh, God with you, God for you.

¹ 1 Kings 8:27

² Luke 2:6-7

³ Luke 2:11-12

⁴ Luke 1:31-33; see also Matthew 1:20-23; Isaiah 9:6-7

⁵ Colossians 2:9

⁶ Luther's Christmas Sermon, 1527, quoted by Norman Nagel, "Martinus: 'Heresy, Doctor Luther, Heresy!' *The Person and Work of Christ*" in *Seven-Headed Luther: Essays in Commemoration of a Quincentenary, 1483-1983*, Peter Brooks, ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 49

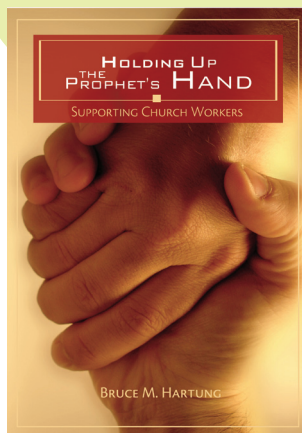
⁷ 1 John 2:23; 2 John 1:9 See also John 1:14,18; 5:37-38; 14:6-9; 15:21-24 and 1 John 4:6

⁸ Colossians 1:19-20

⁹ 1 Corinthians 11:26

¹⁰ Luke 2:15-17

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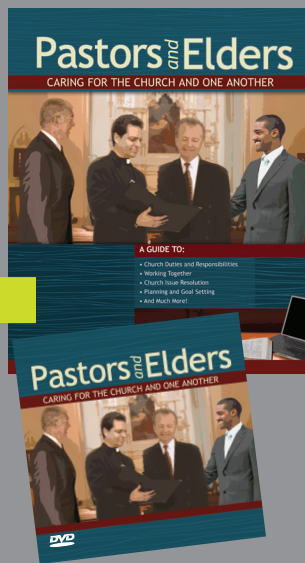
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Wittenberg Trail:

The Word Grows

by Michael Schuermann

Upon reading Psalm 1 in 2001, I wrote these words: "If we all could succeed in not being that chaff in the wind, can you imagine what a world this would be?" At this point in my life, I was just about to begin my fifth and final year of undergraduate study at the University of Missouri - Kansas City. During the summer, I met my future wife Katie. We had learned much about each other, and were in the midst of discovering that we both thought each other pretty "neat". I, only a few days before, had first referred to myself - as I can recall, for the first time in my life - as a Christian. Yet, reading this statement, I was theologically very weak. At this point, I could be described as a Christian Utopianist at best. But since I'm me, I know that more accurately I was, at the time, just getting over the hurdles of the equally incorrect understandings of man's role in the world as either a moralistic or an emotional being. At this point, I had just taken my first step onto the Wittenberg Trail. But my journey just begun was the result of another journey.

I did most of my growing up in Northern Illinois - Sycamore, to be exact. My parents raised my brother and I as what can best be described as moralists. They raised us both to work hard, to be nice to people, to not cheat in school or at sports, to obey them and our teachers, etc. One thing we didn't learn, though, was about going to church. I can recall attending Vacation Bible School at a local Methodist church a time or two. I have some fuzzy, yet reliable, memories of attending a Christmas Eve service or two at that same church. But anything having to do with Christianity in my childhood ends there. I have no recollection of ever wondering whether we

should be in church on Sunday morning. It seemed completely normal to just get up in the morning, eat breakfast while the classical station was on in the background, and have fun. We had some friends who were Roman Catholics, but I remained uninterested in what exactly that meant, beside the fact that they went to a private school while I attended a public one.

By the time I was in high school and living in California, I had "grown up" a bit - now I practiced what could be labeled Moralistic Therapeuticism, with the Deism about to be added. I knew it was important to do all that niceness and obedience stuff, but now I was further enlightened with the

understanding that of equal importance was my happiness. Which to a teenage boy, of course, means that sometimes you can relax a bit on the niceness or good behavior.

At this point I was involved in a community band, which met at a local Presbyterian church. The director of the band was also the Music Minister at this church, and invited me to play drums on some Sunday mornings when they had their more relaxed -

in this case, blues and jazz - service. Moralism and sentimentality ruled the day in the preaching I was exposed to at these services, although it was at least coated in a veneer of the Divine. Deism (literally) also came into my worldview through one of my social studies teachers at the time, who made what I thought was a rather convincing argument for the classical "watchmaker" theory of God.

When it came time for my senior year of high school, my family moved to the St. Louis, Missouri area. There, I met and became friends with a group of classmates who all got together on a Saturday night at a local non-



denominational church for what they labeled "Kids Church". One of my friends' dad was the pastor at this church, and had encouraged his son to begin this gathering and lead it (and, in fact, even preach at it). Many of us were musicians, and they invited me along to play the drums. From this somewhat informal hangout time on Saturday, I was invited to also play on Sunday mornings.

Here is where I can finally recall hearing of Jesus - but He was a lawgiver. He was the Son of God, no doubt, but He wanted us all to obey the commandments, live right lives while avoiding all sorts of vices like certain types of rock music (I specifically recall Motley Crüe being mentioned), drinking, bad movies, etc. He wanted us to give our lives to Him. Yet there was no cross anywhere in the worship space of this church, and there was no cross in the preaching either.

As an aside, it was also on these Sunday mornings where I was introduced to the practice of speaking in tongues. In preparatory prayers before the service, all of us would close our eyes and begin with a prayer in English. Then, everyone would continue praying silently, until several would begin uttering what I can only describe as gibberish. At this point I know that I believed there was a God and that I could come to Him in prayer, but I did not know how He regarded me. Because of this, I felt immense pressure to fit in - the example shown to me was that true believers would speak in this way while in prayer. I must confess that the temptation to begin these utterances was immense, but I never gave in.

I went off to college to study music. I was now an artist, and my every moment was now devoted to combining the skill of making music which comes from hard work, with the emotional movement that is ultimately the goal of the artist. At this point in my life I fell away from attending any

church and began worshipping exclusively at the altar of humanism. I was still moralistic, but now also very heavy on the sentimentality.

And so we arrive back at the summer of 2001. Various events in my life had caused me to begin seeking help from God again. I had remained a believer in God throughout college, but was now convinced that many paths led to Him. I was convinced that God's desire was for all people to be happy, and in turn to be kind to one another. During this summer I contemplated Zen Buddhism, which I'd been exposed to by my percussion professor (and the Beastie Boys). I did some reading about Judaism. And finally, towards the end of the summer and after meeting and conversing with Katie, I also began to consider Christianity. She recommended (and I read) C.S. Lewis' writings which make up the book *Mere Christianity*. And at this point, the Word of God which had been planted earlier in my life, and the Word of God which Lewis wrote, sprouted. I realized I should begin attending church again. There was still a lot to overcome, as I remained firmly grounded in an emotional approach to religion. As I wrote, "Every day is another day to learn about myself and God and to feel that incredible surge inside that couldn't be anything but God's love..."

Katie had let slip that she was Lutheran, so I decided to find a Lutheran church to attend. I went through a couple before settling on Hope Lutheran Church in Shawnee, KS. Here, thanks to Pastors Hoppe and Penikis, I heard the Gospel. Thanks to *The Lutheran Hymnal*, I sang the Gospel at the same time that it was sung to me. And the Word sprouted like a fast-growing shoot. Within a month of writing the above, I was now speaking about faith in a much different way. I had read Luther's Small Catechism. I was attending church each week and listening. The liturgy was profoundly affecting me. I identified myself as a Christian. I continued to hear the Word and as I studied the Small Catechism, I realized I needed to be baptized. I went through adult instruction at Hope Lutheran, and was

baptized on March 20, 2002, at the age of 23. Now it was without-a-doubt official: I was a Christian, and I was Lutheran.

The beauty of the Wittenberg Trail is that it doesn't stop there. The end is at the Last Day or when the Lord calls us to Himself in death. And until then the journey continues, as we continue to hear and study the Word and be built up in the Faith. Martin Luther's words in the Large Catechism about this are very comforting, I think.

But for myself I say this: I am also a doctor and preacher, yea, as learned and experienced as all those may be who have such presumption and security; yet I do as a child who is being taught the Catechism, and every morning, and whenever I have time, I read and say, word for word, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Psalms, etc. And I must still read and study daily, and yet I cannot master it as I wish, but must remain a child and pupil of the Catechism, and am glad so to remain.

And so a student I remain. After a few years in the Lutheran Church, Katie and I decided that I'd apply to seminary. I was accepted, studied, completed my vicarage, was assigned, ordained, and now am a Lutheran pastor. As I've looked back on the journey to and through Lutheranism, I behold a wonderful thing. "Oh who am I That for my sake My Lord should take Frail flesh and die?" And yet He did, and has given me faith in that blessed gift. What a tremendous joy it is to be forgiven in Him.



Michael Schuermann was born in 1979, in Grand Island, NE. He grew up in northern Illinois, majored in music (percussion) at the University of Missouri - Kansas City, and played professionally in the Kansas City area before moving to central Illinois with his wife, Katie. He attended Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, IN and graduated with a Master of Divinity degree in 2010. He was ordained at Our Redeemer Lutheran Church, Dallas, TX and he presently serves there as Assistant Pastor. He is an avid hobbyist photographer, enjoys reading, is a bit of a gadget geek, and loves spending time outdoors with his wife.



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