

My Problem with the Eighth Commandment

by Todd Wilken

Wittenberg Trail: Let Us Go Unto the House of the Lord

by Will Weedon

Summer, 2012



Dear Issues, Etc. Journal Reader,

Greetings in the name of Jesus.

In this edition of the *Journal*, I admit *My Problem with the Eighth Commandment*. When the commandment say, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor," where does that leave us in a world of liars, gossips and slanderers? Read on; by the time you're done, you might have a problem with the eighth commandment too.

Our Wittenberg Trail feature is from Pastor Will Weedon, the new Director of Worship for the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Believe it or not, there was a time when he had to look up "Lutheran" in the encyclopedia.

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

Enjoy this Journal.

Wir sind alle Bettler,

Todd Wilken, host Issues, Etc.



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My Problem with the Eighth Commandment

by Todd Wilken

I have a problem with the eighth commandment. "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."

The eighth commandment violates my freedom of speech. It takes away my right to free expression. It censors me. It tells me that I can't speak my mind, have my say, or toss in my two cents. It is a divine gagorder. I really don't like the eighth commandment.

At first glance, it looks so easy: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." False witness is lying. So, if I don't lie, I have the eight commandment covered, right? If only it were so easy!

Jesus only seems to make my problem with the eighth commandment worse:

Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, "You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn." But I say to you, do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply "Yes" or "No"; anything more than this comes from evil.¹

Jesus says the eighth commandment isn't merely about me lying or telling the truth; it is about *everything* I say. And Jesus is serious! Elsewhere, he has more to say about what I say:

How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.²

My problem with the eighth commandment is that it forces me to hear myself as God hears me. The eighth commandment forces me to listen to myself, and in my own words, hear who and what I really am. Jesus says, "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." According to Jesus, every time I open my mouth I open a siphon on my inward sin. The words I speak are the effluent of a reservoir of unspeakable things.

What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person.³

The eighth commandment forces a showdown between what I say, and what God says. This commandment pits my word against God's. It highlights the utter incompatibility between what comes out of my mouth and what comes out of God's mouth. The eight commandment, like all the commandments, forces a showdown between who I am, and who God is.

Martin Luther explained my problem with the eighth commandment:

We should fear and love God that we may not deceitfully belie, betray, slander, or defame our neighbor, but defend him, [think and] speak well of him, and put the best construction on everything.⁴

But I want to have it both ways. I want to fear love and trust God, but say whatever I want about my neighbor. That's my problem.

Luther takes Jesus' far-reaching approach to the eighth commandment. In his Large Catechism, he presses the necessity of protecting our neighbor's reputation to what sounds like an extreme:

No one is allowed publicly to judge and reprove his neighbor, although he may see him sin, unless he have a command to judge and to reprove. For there is a great difference between these two things, judging sin and knowing sin. You may indeed know it, but you are not to judge it. I can indeed see and hear that my neighbor sins, but I have no command to report it to others. Now, if I rush in, judging and passing sentence, I fall into a sin which is greater than his. But if you know it, do nothing else than turn your ears into a grave and cover it, until you are appointed to be judge and to punish by virtue of your office.⁵

For Luther, the eighth commandment provides protection for my neighbor --even if he is guilty and even if I know he is guilty. Luther says, if I have no command "to judge and to reprove," I have no standing to speak about or against my neighbor --even if he is guilty and I know it.

If you're like me, reading Luther's words sends you on a frantic search for a loophole. I say, "Yes, but what if my neighbor does this? What if my neighbor does that? Am I to remain silent and say absolutely nothing?" But on this point, Luther is clear: between me and my neighbor, the eighth commandment permits no loopholes. "If you know it, do nothing else than turn your ears into a grave and cover it."

In fact, in his Large Catechism, Luther continues for 14 paragraphs in that vein, discussing in detail how the eighth commandment forbids you to judge your brother's sin "until you are appointed to be judge and to punish by virtue of your office." Those, then, are called slanderers who are not content with knowing a thing, but proceed to assume jurisdiction... This is nothing else than meddling with the judgment and office of God.⁶

I don't want to hear this. I don't want to confront, much less admit, how repeatedly and egregiously I have "meddled with the judgment and office of God." Nothing triggers the impulse to excuse and justify myself like a healthy dose of the eighth commandment. But, there's no denying it: between me and my neighbor, the eighth commandment permits no excuses or self-justification.

All judgment is left to the proper authorities. And, Luther names them: "the civil government, preachers, father and mother excepted, on the understanding that this commandment does not allow evil to go unpunished."⁷ So, the magistrate may judge the cases brought before him, the preacher may address the sins of his hearers, and parents may deal with the sins in the family.⁸ Apart from these exceptions, Luther says, "Thus you see that it is summarily forbidden to speak any evil of our neighbor." No loopholes. But, if you're like me, you're still looking for one.

Luther's genius here is his willingness to present the eighth commandment as is, with all of its accusing force focused squarely on my utter failure to keep it. Luther understood that the eighth commandment finds me guilty by catching me in my own web of words. Literally, my own mouth accuses me. I testify against myself. Under the eighth commandment there is no right to remain silent; my crime is that I *haven't* remained silent.

"All this has been said regarding secret sins." Luther continues,

But where the sin is quite public so that the judge and everybody know it, you can without any sin avoid him and let him go, because he has brought himself into disgrace, and you may also publicly testify concerning him. For when a matter is public in the light of day, there can be no slandering or false judging or testifying; as, when we now reprove the Pope with his doctrine, which is publicly set forth in books and proclaimed in all the world. For where the sin is public, the reproof also must be public, that every one may learn to guard against it.⁹

Is this perhaps the loophole I have been looking for? Is this a way that I can have the eighth commandment and still keep my freedom of speech, my right to free expression, speak my mind, have my say, or toss in my two cents? No, it isn't.

> Here Luther distinguishes between my neighbor's private sin and his public sin, that is, my neighbor's sin that I alone know, and his sin that everyone knows. But, isn't a public sin just a private sin that someone has made public, and now everyone knows? No.

Luther's example is the Pope and his false doctrine. Luther isn't talking about the Pope's private sins that have somehow ended up on the cover of the *National Enquirer*. Luther is talking about the Pope's sin which he himself has "publicly set forth in books and proclaimed in all the world." The Pope's false doctrine is public

because the Pope himself has made it public.

The failure to distinguish between private sin and public sin leads to two common misuses of the eighth commandment. The first attempts to treat private sins like public sins; the second attempts to treat public sins like private sins.

Misuse One: "Well, now that it's public we can all talk about it."

Here's the scenario: My neighbor has sinned. At first it is private. That is, it is known by only one or several other people, who say nothing. But

then, someone spills the beans. Then before you know it, everyone knows. My neighbor's private sin has become public.

Let's call that what it is: Gossip. Gossip is when I take my neighbor's private sin public without proper authority to do so. It doesn't matter how many people may already know; it is still gossip. It doesn't matter if I read it in the newspaper or on the Internet; it is still gossip. It doesn't matter if is it a celebrity, politician, sports star, my best friend or worst enemy; it is still gossip. If I hear it and repeat it, I'm guilty.

Luther points to Matthew 18:15, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone." Luther says,

Here you have a precious and excellent teaching for governing well the tongue, which is to be carefully observed against this detestable misuse. Let this, then, be your rule, that you do not too readily spread evil concerning your neighbor and slander him to others, but admonish him privately that he may amend [his life].¹⁰

But I object, I can't go privately to every celebrity, politician or sports star I hear about. That's true. That's all the more reason for me to keep my mouth shut.

<u>Misuse Two</u>: "You should never publicly rebuke anyone for anything unless you first go to him privately."

This misapplication of the eighth commandment is a favorite of those who would want to cover up public sins. Here is the scenario: My neighbor has sinned, and it is public because he has publicized his own sin (e.g., the Pope publishing his false teaching). But, when publicly rebuked for his sin, my neighbor cries foul, he plays the victim of gossip and slander, he invokes the eighth commandment, he cites Matthew 18.

Someone guilty of a truly public sin cannot use the eighth commandment or Matthew 18 to deflect public judgment and rebuke. The

"best construction" that can be put on public sin is public reproof. Just as the eighth commandment requires that I cover up my neighbor's private sin with my silence and best construction, so the commandment requires that public sin not be covered up. In this case, "where the sin is public, the reproof also must be public, that every one may learn to guard against it."

Still, public reproof of public sin doesn't mean that it is open season on my neighbor's reputation. Again, Luther's example of the Pope and his false teaching serves us well. The Pope should be publicly rebuked for his false teaching, but that's where the rebuke should stop. The public rebuke should be limited to the sin committed, everything else gets the best construction.

Even in the case of public sin, the goal of public admonishment is our neighbor's repentance. That is, while public sin requires public reproof, it doesn't rule out the private reproof of Matthew 18. In fact, if I publicly reprove someone for a public sin, I should at the same time approach him privately, if possible.

You can see why I have a problem with the eighth commandment, can't you? It goes against every impulse I have. It doesn't let me say what I want to say. It demands that I care more about my neighbor than my freedom of speech, my right to free expression, to speak my mind, to have my say, or to toss in my two cents.

The eighth commandment forces me to hear myself as God hears me. The eighth commandment forces me to listen to myself, and in my own words, hear who and what I really am.

The eighth commandment demands that I love my neighbor under the most difficult circumstances. It demands that I love my neighbor when my neighbor's reputation is at stake. It demands that I have mercy on him. It demands that I love him.

Now, you can command mercy, but that won't produce mercy. You can require love, but that won't produce love. The only thing that produces mercy is Mercy. The only thing that produces love is Love.

It is no coincidence that Jesus himself was the victim of false witness, not only during his ministry, but especially at the end of his ministry. Mark's Gospel describes the trial of Jesus as a parade of false witnesses:

Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none. For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree. And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'" Yet even about this their testimony did not agree. And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, "Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?" But he remained silent and made no answer.¹¹

That day, everyone knew that the accusations against Jesus were

false, the witnesses, the judge, and Jesus himself.

Nevertheless, it was false testimony that carried the day.

This is my real problem with the eighth commandment. It puts me among the false witnesses that day. When I "deceitfully belie, betray, slander, or defame" my neighbor, I prove to be the very kind of false witness who accused Jesus. When I fail to "defend him, speak well of him, and put the best construction on everything," I take my place among Jesus' accusers.

My problem with the eighth commandment is that

it is right and I am wrong, it is true and I am false. I pray that this is your problem with the eighth commandment too.

Only then can we hear from the One, only, true witness. By his silence in the face of false witnesses, Jesus speaks in my defense. By allowing the false testimony against him to carry the day, Jesus testifies for me. To counter the true, right and just accusations of the eighth commandment against me and my sin, Jesus presents the witness and testimony of his sinless life. To counter the penalty required by the eighth commandment against me, Jesus presents his death as the penalty for all sin. This is the Mercy and Love that produces what the eighth commandment demands, but cannot produce. This is the Mercy and Love that produces mercy and love for my neighbor.

"Let God be true though every man were a liar."¹² God *is* true. Every man *is* a liar, except one. Jesus is true. He alone is true in a world of liars. He alone is my hope in the face of my problem with the eighth commandment.

- ⁴ Small Catechism, I
- ⁵ Large Catechism, 265-266.
- ⁶ LC, 267-268.
- ⁷ LC, 274.

⁹ LC, 284.

¹⁰ LC, 276.

¹² Romans 3:4.

¹ Matthew 5:33-37.

² Matthew 12:33-37; see also James 3:5-12.

³ Matthew 15:18-20.

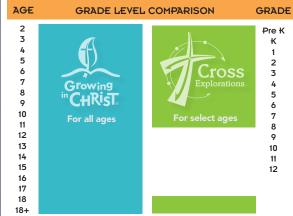
⁸ Luther slightly expands the exceptions later, saying: "Just so governments, father and mother, brothers and sisters, and other good friends, are under obligation to each other to reprove evil wherever it is needful and profitable." (LC, 275)

¹¹ Mark 14:55-61; see also 15:3-5; Luke 23:2.

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Wittenberg Trail: Let Us Go Unto the House of the Lord

by Will Weedon

Sports. I've never cared for them. But when John asked me to tag along to a game he was going to, I went. And there I sat, an eleven year-old youngster, bored out of my gourd, just waiting for it to be OVER. Something happened that day, though, that changed my life. Two other youngsters were sitting beside me, talking to each other, and one finally got up the nerve to talk to me: "Do you know what you need to know to be saved?" I hadn't the foggiest clue what they were talking about. They were two young Roman Catholics, and they begin reciting to me the Apostles' Creed. When I got home from the ballgame that day, I asked my mom:

"We're not Catholic, right?"

"#?@!% no, we're not Catholic. We're Protestant."

Off to my trusted friend, the encyclopedia. Protestant soon led me to Lutheran. And, the more I read, the more intrigued I was.

"Mom, what do you know about these Lutherans?"

"Our neighbors, the Olivers, are Lutherans. They go to that church up on Georgia Avenue."

So off I ventured one Sunday morning to check out the Lutherans.

My parents were nominally Methodist, but only went to church when we were back in Richardsville Virginia visiting family. They hadn't even bothered to have me baptized. So my exposure to church did not prepare me for what I encountered at the Lutheran Church of St. Andrew in Silver Spring, Maryland. It was culture shock all the way around: beautiful vestments, beautiful organ music, beautiful choir music, beautiful congregational singing, beautiful sanctuary. You might be noticing a pattern: beautiful. And, it truly was, from start to finish.

I was totally lost trying to page around in the hymnal and figuring out what they were doing, but I was also totally intrigued. I asked about Sunday School, and they asked how old I was and put in the capable hands of Mrs. Blakely. Almost her first question was: "Have you been baptized?" When I told her I had not, she marched me off after class to the pastor and told him: "This young man needs Baptism." It was only a few weeks later that I was baptized into Christ. The month was June, and I still remember them

Lu•ther•an \'looTH(ə)rən \

pouring the water into the font before the service, and my brother leaning over to whisper: "That's for you, dude." That day I was embraced in the saving flood, my sins washed away, God's holy name named upon me, and I was henceforth HIS problem child.

Then it was on into Confirmation, with instruction on Sunday mornings and on Wednesday evenings. There were several lay catechists who worked with the seventh graders, and the pastors focused on teaching the eighth graders. The more I learned, the more I loved it. I learned from the Catechism to make the sign of the cross (and I noticed that there were some folks in the church who did, but not many) --I figured I ought to do what was in the Catechism! I remember sharing all I was learning with my cousin, George, a member of that Methodist Church in Virginia. From all I was learning, what intrigued me most of all was the liturgy, the time together singing, praying, receiving God's gifts. There was a reverence there, and also a palpable joy. We were in the presence of God, and we knew it. It shaped everything about what happened when we walked through those doors, and written above them were these words from Psalm 122: "I was glad when they said to me, Let us go into the house of the Lord."

I continued quite happily a Lutheran teen, but toward the end of my teen years I became quite involved with the Charismatic movement (there were some Charismatic folks at St. Andrew), and gradually drifted from the Lutheran Church. Then my dad came down with cancer. It was bad. He was diagnosed in August, and dead by January. It was a horrific fall. And, all that time, the worship life at so many of those other churches I was visiting began to ring so empty to me. I couldn't pretend being up and happy. It hit me, though, that I knew where I could go and pray: "Lamb of God, have

Gos•pel \'gäspəl\

mercy...grant peace." I knew where I could kneel and receive the Body and Blood of Him who defeated this horrible enemy of death. I knew where I could hear again and again the message of forgiveness --a message I needed so much as I doubted and was uncertain of God's goodness in the face of what was happening to my dad.

I returned to the Lutheran Church then, and even began to wonder if perhaps I might not become a pastor of this Church, if I might not be privileged to bring to others that same Gospel that brought a bruised teen's heart such comfort in the midst of heaviness and sorrow. And well, here I am! My love of the liturgy and appreciation for the way it enables us to face hardship, doubt, fear, suffering --not to mention celebration, thanksgiving, and joy-- has only grown. The beauty of our Church's liturgy, hymnody but above all of her preaching is what drew me to the Lutheran Church at the beginning and it is still one of my heart's joys. I still hate sports, by the way. Yawn. But now when I'm stuck in a situation where I have to endure such, I can secretly in my heart sing the liturgy and hymns that hold out to me the Gospel I have come to love so dearly --and no one is the wiser. And, thanks be to God for two Roman Catholic lads who long ago set me on this journey and brought me home to Wittenberg.



Pastor Will Weedon is the Director of Worship and Chaplain of the International Center for the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.



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

St. John Lutheran

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

Lutheran Church of the Incarnate Word

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

St. Paul Lutheran

Rev Michael Allen 6356 Center Street Unionville MI 48767 989-674-8681

Minnesota

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

St. John's Evangelical Lutheran

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

Mt. Olive Lutheran Rev Robert Franck

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

Shepherd of the Lake Lutheran

Rev Jonathan Rusnak 10583 US Hwy 169 Garrison MN 56450 320-692-4581

www.issuesetc.org

Immanuel Lutheran Rev Donald Klatt 510 Olivia St Holloway MN 56249 302-394-2452

Trinity Lutheran Rev Donald Klatt 1746 30th St NW Holloway MN 56249 302-394-2308

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

Our Saviour's Lutheran Rev Jon Olson

1102 7th Ave SW Pipestone MN 56164 507-825-4124

Glory of Christ Lutheran Rev John Fehrmann

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

Real Lutheran Fellowship Rev Kevin Buchs

4207 Sapphire Ln NW Rochester MN 55901 507-289-6438

St Johns Lutheran

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

Trinity Lutheran

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

Our Savior's Lutheran

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

Mississippi

Christ Lutheran Rev Dr James Holowach 4423 I-55 North

Jackson MS 39206 601-366-2055

Missouri

Good Shepherd Lutheran

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

Beautiful Savior Lutheran

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

Trinity Lutheran

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

Lord of Life Lutheran

Rev Mark Below 15750 Baxter Rd Chesterfield MO 63017 636-532-0400

St Paul Lutheran Rev David Smith

Rev Kevin Armbrust 12345 Manchester Rd Des Peres MO 63131 314-822-0447

Mount Calvary Lutheran

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

Trinity Lutheran

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

Zion Lutheran Rev Rick Pettey

601 Kingsbury Blvd Gravelton MO 63645 573-783-2405

Christ Lutheran

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

Holy Cross Lutheran

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

Immanuel Lutheran

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

Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran

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

Village Lutheran

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

Trinity Lutheran

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

Zion Lutheran

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

Christ Lutheran

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

Trinity Lutheran

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

Holy Cross Evangelical

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

Emmaus Lutheran Rev John Hellwege, Jr. 2241 S Jefferson Ave Saint Louis MO 63104 314-776-1274

Peace Lutheran

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

Prince of Peace

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

Hope Lutheran

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

Concordia Lutheran

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

Montana

Christ The King Lutheran Rev Ryan Wendt 759 Newman Ln

Billings MT 59101-4742 406-252-9250

Nebraska

St. Paul's Lutheran Rev Allen K. Strawn

506 Main St Bridgeport NE 69336 308-262-0424

Zion Lutheran

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

Good Shepherd Lutheran

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

Redeemer Lutheran

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

Immanuel Lutheran

Rev Jon Sollberger 36712 Church Rd Louisville NE 68037 402-234-5980

New Jersey

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church Rev Ronald Stephens 340 Palisade Ave Garfield NJ 07026 973-478-7434

New York

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

St. John's Lutheran Rev Brian Noack 48 Greene Ave Sayville, NY 11782 631-589-3202

North Carolina

All Saints Lutheran

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

Our Savior Lutheran

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

Trinity Lutheran

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

Ohio

St. Paul Lutheran Rev Paul Schlueter

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

Bethlehem Lutheran

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

Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran

Rev John Rutz 13101 Five Point Rd Perrysburg OH 43551 419-874-6939

St. John Lutheran

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

Oklahoma

Grace Lutheran Rev Christian Tiews 2331 E 5th Pl Tulsa OK 74104 918-592-2999

Oregon

Holy Cross Lutheran **Rev Bruce Lev** 2515 Queen Ave SE Albany OR 97322 541-928-0214

Pennsylvania

St. John Evangelical Lutheran Rev Jonathan Fisk 307 Madison Road Springfield PA 19064 610-543-3100

Grace Lutheran

Rev David Young 1169 W Street Rd Warminster PA 18974 215-672-8181

South Carolina

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd

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

South Dakota

Peace Lutheran Church

Rev David Lindenberg 219 E Saint Anne St Rapid City SD 57701 605-721-6480

Christ Lutheran 4801 E 6th St

Sioux Falls SD 57110 605-338-3769

Tennessee

Redeemer Lutheran Rev Philip Young 800 Bellevue Rd Nashville TN 37221-2702

Texas

Trinity Lutheran

615-646-3150

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

St Paul Lutheran

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

Bethel Lutheran

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

Our Redeemer Lutheran

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

Mount Calvary Lutheran Rev Thomas Baden

12358 Country Rd 5500 Eola TX 76937 325-942-9275

Redeemer Lutheran

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

Memorial Lutheran

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

Our Savior Lutheran

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

Messiah Lutheran

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

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

Faith Lutheran

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

Faith Lutheran Rev James Woelmer

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

Lord of Life Lutheran

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

Trinity Lutheran

Rev Robert Budewig Rev Randall Wehmeyer 3536 YMCA Dr San Angelo TX 76904 325-944-8660

Mount Calvary Lutheran

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

Hope Lutheran

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

Living Word Lutheran Church

Rev Daniel Quinn Rev Jeffrey Ware 9500 North Panther Creek Dr The Woodlands TX 77381 281-363-4860

Virginia

Immanuel Lutheran

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

St. Athanasius Lutheran

Rev James Douthwaite 114 Kingsley Rd SW Vienna VA 22180 703-455-4003

Washington

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

Messiah Lutheran

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

Messiah Lutheran

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

Wisconsin

St. John's Lutheran

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

Elm Grove Lutheran

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

Mount Zion Lutheran

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

Saint Stephen Lutheran

Rev Daniel Seehafer Rev Jonathan Szczesny 505 N Palmatory St Horicon WI 53032 920-485-6687

Peace Lutheran

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

St. John Lutheran

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

Grace Lutheran Rev Thomas Chryst

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

St Jakobi Lutheran

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

Luther Memorial Chapel Dr Ken Wieting

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

Peace Lutheran Rev Peter Bender

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

Pilgrim Lutheran

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

Our Savior Lutheran

Rev Michael Henrichs 6021 N Santa Monica Blvd Whitefish Bay WI 53217 414-332-4458

Wyoming

Trinity Lutheran

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

Zion Lutheran

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

Trinity Lutheran

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

Redeemer Lutheran

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

Zion Lutheran

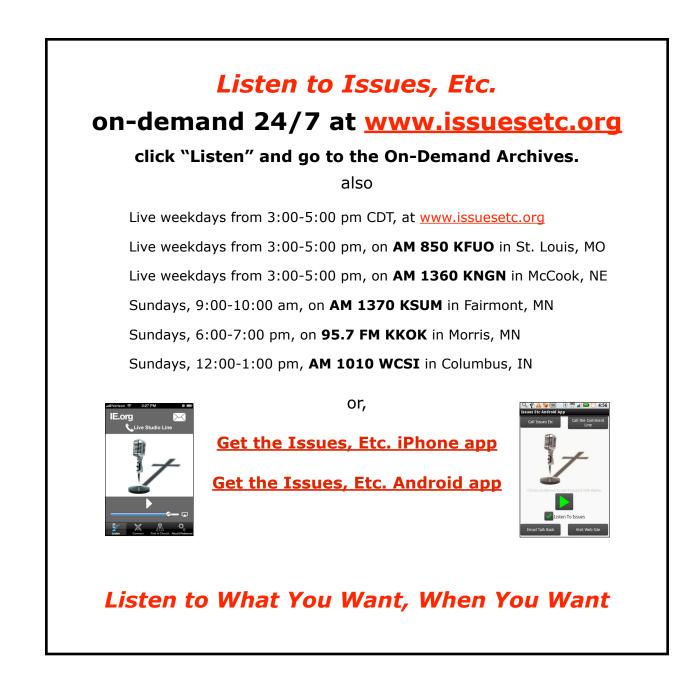
Rev Shawn Kumm 406 S. 19th St Laramie WY 82070 307-745-9262

CANADA

Redeemer Lutheran

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

Bethel Lutheran Rev Jamie Bosma 264 Wilson St Thunder Bay ON P7B1M9 807-344-8322



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