Issues, Etc.™
JOURNAL

Vote for the Other Guy

by Todd Wilken

Wittenberg Trail: A Present-Tense Gospel

by Edie Rudder Wadsworth

Winter, 2012

www.issuesetc.org

Dear *Issues, Etc. Journal* Reader,

Greetings in the name of Jesus.

In this edition of the *Journal,* I might make you mad. In my article, *Vote for the Other Guy,* I confront the every-man-for-himself, enlightened self-interest voting strategy that many Christians have adopted. There is a better way: the way of self-sacrifice and putting your neighbor first, even when you vote.

Our Wittenberg Trail feature is from a loyal Tennessee listener Edie Rudder Wadsworth. She tells her story of the long road from the "legalism and the seductive draw of evangelical mysticism" to the "present-tense Gospel" of the Reformation.

You'll also find a list of the many congregations of the **Issues, Etc. 300** 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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Vote for the Other Guy

by Todd Wilken

> *I swear by my life and my love of it that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine.*
>
> -Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*

> *For man does not live for himself alone in this mortal body, in order to work on its account, but also for all men on earth; nay, he lives only for others and not for himself.*
>
> -Martin Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*

I have written dozens of essays and articles on theology. All of them have received criticism of some kind. I predict that this one will receive the most. Why? First, because this is a presidential election year, we are encouraged to suspend our critical thinking and adopt the party line. The party line permits no critique or questions.

Second, and more to point of this essay, some of you will take offense because I will be questioning your ideas about voting, and about yourself as a Christian voter. You may have believed these ideas your entire voting life. You may consider these ideas not only thoroughly American (they are), but also thoroughly Christian (they aren't).

What ideas am I talking about? I think that many Christians have unintentionally adopted a politics of self-interest. Their reasons for voting are more influenced by Voltaire, Adam Smith and Ayn Rand than by a Christian worldview or ethic. Perhaps you are one of these Christians. If you have adopted an every-man-for-himself, enlightened self-interest voting strategy, you most certainly are. I intend to show that these ideas have no place in the mind of a Christian voter.

Who Are You Voting For?

There are two ways to understand that question. Usually, it means which candidate is getting your vote? But, I'm asking something different. I'm asking, who benefits from your vote? Whose interests are you voting to promote and protect?

It should go without saying that a Christian doesn't vote for the same reason the unbeliever votes. A Christian doesn't vote because it is his right. That's why the unbeliever votes. For the Christian, his rights have nothing to do with it. A Christian doesn't vote to get his way. That's also why the unbeliever votes. For the Christian, getting his way has nothing to do with it. A Christian doesn't vote to protect his own interests. That, again, is why the unbeliever votes.

A Christian votes to serve his neighbor —period. This means that a Christian will sometimes vote for, and sometimes against his own interests, but a Christian will always for his neighbor's interests. When the Christian enters the voting booth, the neighbor always comes first.

In other words, the Christian doesn't vote for himself; he votes for the other guy, his neighbor. The Christian doesn't use his vote to serve himself; he uses votes to serve his neighbor.

If you disagree so far, then read on. I'm talking to you.

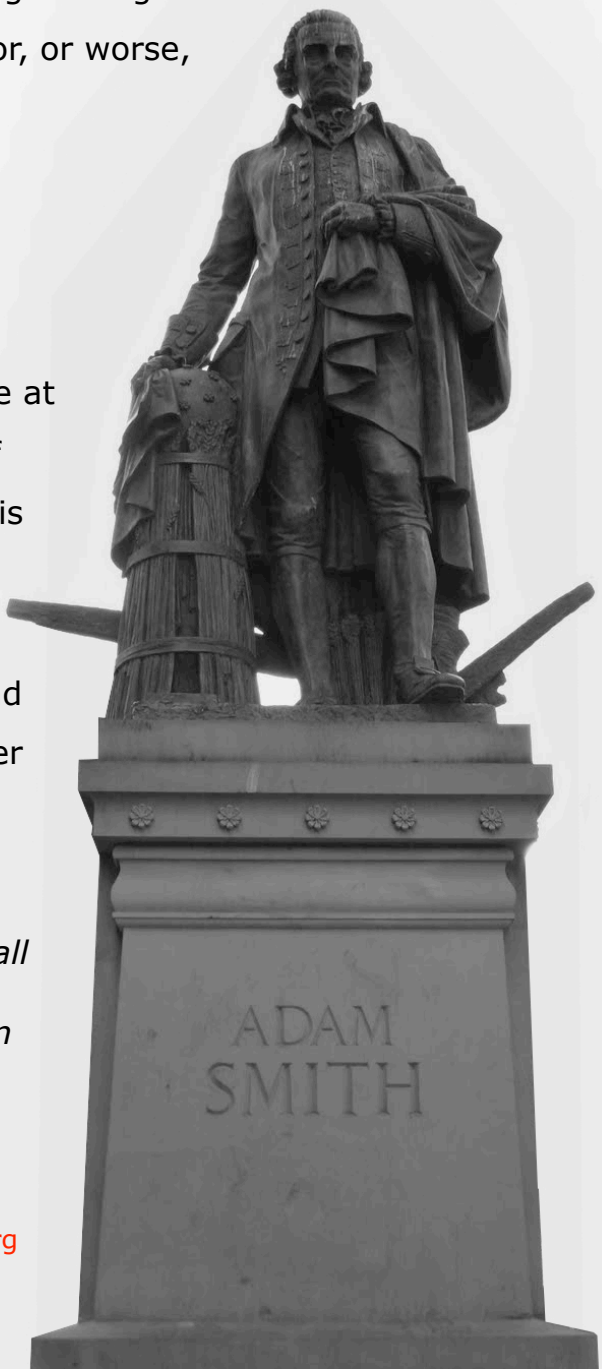
Your Neighbor Isn't an Idea

Now, when I say that a Christian votes to serve his neighbor, I'm not talking about "the greater good." The greater good is an abstraction. Your neighbor isn't an abstraction. I'm talking about real people. When I say that

a Christian votes to serve his neighbor, I'm not talking about a cause either. Causes are ideas. Your neighbor isn't an idea.

The late Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Tip O'Neill was famous for saying, "All politics is local." He was right, especially in the case of the Christian voter. A Christian citizen doesn't have to go looking for a the greater good or a cause; his reason for voting is right there in front of him everyday, in the person of his neighbor.

Is there anything wrong with the greater good or political causes? Not necessarily. But your idea of the greater good or my political cause can obscure our neighbor, or worse, become a substitute for him.



Your Neighbor Isn't You

You might ask, "Can't I vote my own interests and serve my neighbor with my vote at the same time?" I know that it is an axiom of American politics that individual self-interest is the engine of progress. Most Americans believe that the purpose of voting is to promote and preserve one's self-interests, and that doing so collectively promotes the greater interests of society. In his famous book, *The Wealth of Nations,* Adam Smith wrote:

> *Give me that which I want, and you shall have this which you want, is the meaning of every such offer; and it is in this manner that we obtain from one another the far greater part of those good offices which we stand in need of.*

> *It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self love, and never talk to them of our necessities but of their advantages... By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he intends to promote it.*[1]

Sadly, this idea owes more to 18th century philosophy than to Holy Scripture. In fact, there is no teaching like this in the entire Bible. In contrast, the Bible requires you to subordinate, and sometimes even sacrifice your interests in favor of your neighbor's:

> *Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.*[2]

You say that voting your own interests often results in promoting your neighbor's interests. True, it very often does. The greater interests of society are often served by voters concerned only with their own self-interests. Pragmatically, self-interest voting often works. But Christians aren't pragmatists. Christians cannot allow the end to justify the means.

You say that we should consider the broader consequences of our votes. Of course we should. But don't rationalize your self-interested voting by appealing to the broader benefit it may (or may not) have to your neighbor.

I say, start with your neighbor; not with yourself. If you start with yourself, your first concern isn't your neighbor, but you. If you start with yourself, then you will always be trying to justify your self-interested vote with some peripheral benefit it may (or may not) have for your neighbor.

Start with your neighbor, and leave your self-interests out of the equation. If (as you rationalize) your neighbor's interests are bond together with your interests, what do you have to worry about?

The politics of self-interest have no place in the Christian's voting practice. Any attempt to justify self-interest is self-justification.

The Art of the Possible

I know what you're thinking: "Wilken, you're an idealist; you're not being practical!" Yes and no. Yes, Scripture itself presents the picture of the Christian life as one of selfless service of the neighbor. Of course, this ideal is impossible for any of us to attain. But no, just because it is impossible is no reason to abandon the ideal. In fact, the ideal of selfless service is eminently practical. Nothing serves your neighbor's interests better than putting his interests first.

"Politics is the art of the possible," Otto von Bismarck said. He was right. Every political effort is an effort in compromise, even voting. The goal is to achieve the best possible outcome, not the best imaginable outcome. In politics, the perfect often is the enemy of the good. Does this mean that the Christian voter abandons the ideal of selfless service to his neighbor in order to get the job done? Far from it. This means that a Christian voter must hold to the ideal all the more --especially when that service proves inevitably incomplete, and when the results are far from perfect.

Your Neighbor, from the Ground Up

If the Christian is supposed to vote to serve his neighbor, then you ask, who is your neighbor? Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan to answer that very question.

> *And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live." But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"* [3]

By the end of the parable, Jesus has turned the question around, literally: "Which of these three, do you think, *proved to be a neighbor* to the man who fell among the robbers?"

Even the lawyer knows the right answer; but he doesn't know why that answer is right. The Samaritan "proved to be a neighbor" by recognizing that the man who fell among the robbers was his neighbor and by sacrificing his interests for him.

What about that man in the roadside ditch looked like a neighbor? Nothing, by our definition. By our definition, the man in the ditch is probably in the country illegally, doesn't speak the language, and doesn't have health insurance. In any case, he should have known better than to wander out on that road. Now, he's just another member of society who is dependent upon government, who believes that he is a victim, who

believes the government should take care of him, who believes that he is entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you-name-it.

Like the lawyer, we want to define our neighbor from the top down. "Can he take care of himself?" "What can he do for me?" "What is in this relationship for me?" "How much is this neighbor going to cost me?" But our definition is very different from Jesus' definition. In this parable, Jesus defines the neighbor from the ground up.

The Samaritan gets nothing out of his roadside neighbor. In fact, the Samaritan pays dearly for stopping to help him. No good deed goes unpunished in this parable. He finds himself obligated to this man in an open-ended way. This is going to be financially risky and potentially expensive. And, in this way, the Samaritan proves to be a neighbor to his neighbor.

Jesus doesn't define the neighbor from the top down, but from the ground up. For Jesus, basic qualification for "neighbor" is the fact that he can do nothing for me. There's no possibility of reciprocity or payback. This isn't going to be a mutually beneficial relationship.

> *If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful*.[4]

These words fly in the face of an every-man-for-himself, enlightened self-interest voting strategy, don't they?

Too Risky?

I can hear it. Some of you, if you've continued reading this far, are saying: "I don't care what you say, Wilken. This election is simply too important for me to take chances. Too many of my rights, too many of my freedoms, too many of my interests are at stake this time around. Your pollyannish ideals of voting for my neighbor's interests sound good, but I can't risk it."

Repent. You have no higher priority, no higher calling and no higher duty than your neighbor. Love of neighbor is most necessary when it is most inconvenient, most costly and most risky. Stop trusting your vote to safeguard your interests and trust God to do so.

The every-man-for-himself, self-interest voting strategy says, "I have to vote my own interests. If I don't, no one will." But, the truth that the Christian knows is radically different. In his famous treatise, *On the Freedom of the Christian,* Luther writes:

> *In all his works he* [the Christian] *ought to entertain this view, and look only to this object, that he may serve and be useful to others in all that he does; having nothing before his eyes but the necessities and the advantage of his neighbor.*
>
> *All our works should be directed to the advantage of others; since every Christian has such abundance through his faith, that all his other works and his whole life remain over and above, wherewith to serve and benefit his neighbor of spontaneous good will.*
>
> *Lo! my God, without merit on my part, of His pure and free mercy, has given to me, an unworthy, condemned, and contemptible creature, all the riches of justification and salvation in Christ, so that I no longer am in want of anything... I will therefore give myself, as a sort of Christ, to my neighbor, as Christ has given Himself to me; and will do nothing in this life, except what I see will be needful, advantageous, and wholesome for my neighbor, since by faith I abound in all good things in Christ.*[5]

You may be one of those every-man-for-himself, enlightened self-interest voters. You don't have to be. You have none other than Jesus Christ looking out for your interests. You can now afford to put your neighbor's interests first, even when you vote. So, from now on, don't vote for yourself. Vote for the other guy. Vote for your neighbor.

Ayn Rand on Jesus

There is a great, basic contradiction in the teachings of Jesus. Jesus was one of the first great teachers to proclaim the basic principle of individualism --the inviolate sanctity of man's soul, and the salvation of one's soul as one's first concern and highest goal; this means- one's ego and the integrity of one's ego. But when it came to the next question, a code of ethics ...Jesus (or perhaps His interpreters) gave men a code of altruism, that is, a code which told them that in order to save one's soul, one must love or help or live for others. This means, the subordination of one's soul (or ego) to the wishes, desires or needs of others, which means the subordination of one's soul to the souls of others. This is a contradiction that cannot be resolved. This is why men have never succeeded in applying Christianity in practice, while they have preached it in theory for two thousand years. The reason of their failure was not men's natural depravity or hypocrisy, which is the superficial (and vicious) explanation usually given. The reason is that a contradiction cannot be made to work.

-Ayn Rand, *Letters of Ayn Rand*

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[1] Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations,* Blacksburg, VA: Thrifty Books, 2009, pp. 15, 319.

[2] Philippians 2:3-4.

[3] Luke 10:25-29

[4] Luke 6:32-36.

[5] Henry Wace and C. A. Buchheim, *First Principles of the Reformation,* London: John Murray, 1883. pp. 125, 126, 127.

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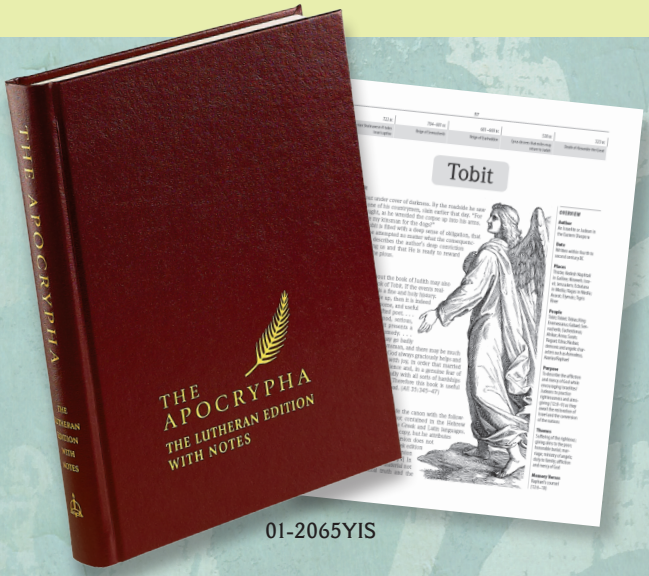

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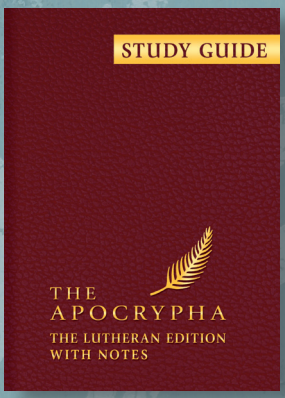

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Wittenberg Trail:
A Present-Tense Gospel

by Edie Rudder Wadsworth

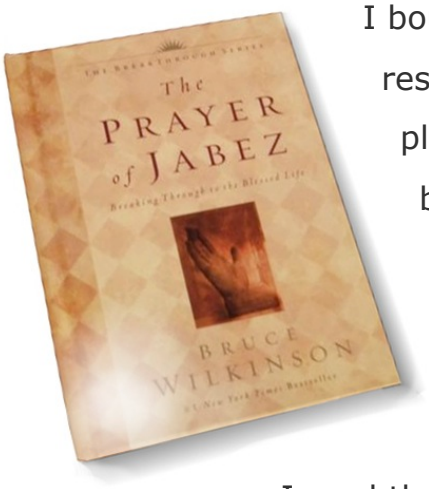
I grew up at the table of American evangelicalism.

I was the poster child for 'sold out Christian.' I memorized the Scriptures, wrote in my high school journal that I wanted to be a missionary, and was a member of all the right parachurch organizations from the Fellowship of Christian Athletes to Young Life to Campus Crusade for Christ. I listened to all the right Christian music, avoided the worldly temptations of alcohol, drugs, bad movies and rock 'n roll and took my role of personal evangelism to new heights of bravery. I was a pro at sharing my personal testimony.

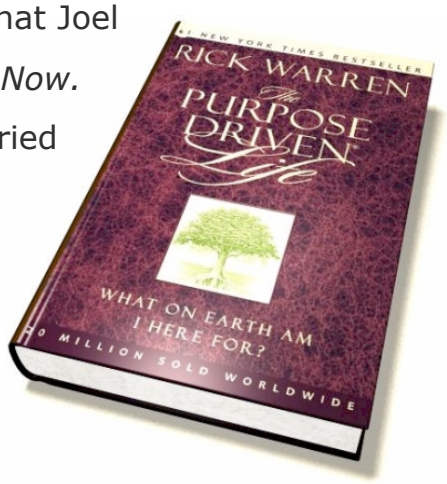
But still there was an ache in the depth of my soul that could not be satisfied by clean living or personal witnessing or by a stellar quiet time. And sadly, I couldn't even sustain those for very long.

My tender conscious was so pricked by the law-dominant sermons of the various churches I attended that I was baptized at least eight times and could rarely stay in my pew when the "I Surrender All" altar call was given. I was always in tears. Always crushed by my sin. Always starving for something. I sat at the table of faith and was taught the important tenets of Christianity like the inerrancy of the Scriptures and the urgency of sharing the Gospel with the world. Apparently, there was a rich feast to be enjoyed in Christ, but it never seemed to be *for me.* It was for all the people we had

yet to bring into God's family. The gospel was 'feast food' for all those people who needed to get saved. I should be well past the point of needing that by now. I should be getting on with things. But it's hard to leave the table hungry.



I bought into the lie that since I couldn't find relief or rescue at church, surely I'd find it in the growing plethora of Christian (self-help) books. The Christian bookstore was bursting at the seams with them. I bought every one I could get my hands on. I prayed *The Prayer of Jabez.* I did Warren's *40 Days of Purpose.* And I longed for what Joel Osteen called *Your Best Life Now.* I read them with passion and dutifully tried to follow all the advice (i.e. more law) they touted. I'd be on a *high* for a while but only long enough to leave me *'jonesing'* until the next new book came out. I was a Christian addicted to self-improvement. Addictions usually don't end well.

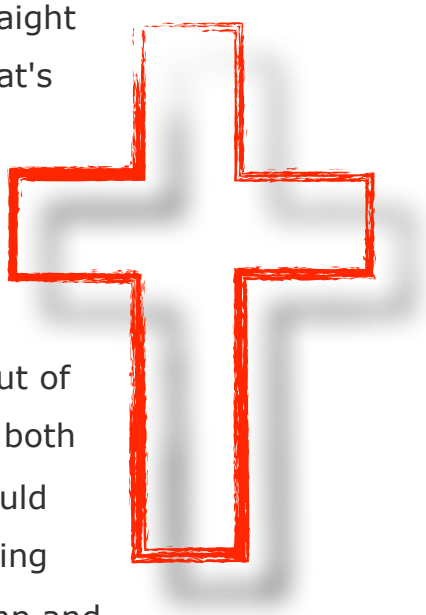


Fast forward a few years when I found myself married to a cradle Lutheran who had become agnostic during the heavy science years of his medical training. He was my new personal mission. Besides marrying him, I felt quite confident that I could evangelize him too. Only, he had been raised in an atmosphere of grace and he could smell legalism a mile away, even in his current state of post-modern agnosticism. I dragged him to evangelical church after evangelical church. He would sweat profusely during the meet and greet portion of the service (hard core Lutherans seldom like the 'passing of the peace') and then critique the sermon for its lack of gospel.

Who was *he* to be telling *me* what ought to be in a sermon? *I'm the spiritual one here, mister.* And why did he seem to be so singularly focused on the Gospel? What about the music and the kids' programs and the small groups?

But he had been raised at the gospel feast. And he knew that what we were being served was severely lacking.

We never went to a church during that period that passed his test. We went to an evangelical church in our town for 14 weeks straight without hearing the Gospel. Yes, we were counting. And that's when he put his foot down. If I was gonna drag him to yet another church, it would have to be Lutheran. Apparently, he believed that if you didn't have the Gospel, you didn't have church. He wasn't all that crazy about going to the Lutheran church either but we were running out of options and I wanted our girls to be raised in the faith. We both went reluctantly, 'kicking and screaming', as C.S. Lewis would say. In retrospect, I was so arrogant and critical of everything back then. I criticized the formality of the worship, the pomp and circumstance, the pastor's vestments, the stodgy hymns, and all the old people.



I wanted something hip and relevant and alive! (Notice, my criteria didn't involve 'Jesus'.)

But I stayed. And I took the pastor's adult bible class. Oh, the patience of that precious man. His kindness toward me and lack of defensiveness as I shot rapid fire questions at him about infant baptism and the real presence in the Lord's Supper was utterly astounding. He was a brilliant man, fluent in

German, Latin and Greek. He was never impatient. He never got rattled. He had a deep abiding peace in the power of God's grace and he knew that he didn't need to coerce me into anything. He trusted the Word to do its work. He wasn't trying to manipulate me in the least. I didn't feel any pressure at all to agree with him and **he was so generous with the Gospel.** I would dismiss him at first and say, "Well, yes I know Jesus died for me, but....."

He was so singularly focused on God's grace and Jesus finished work on the cross that I got frustrated sometimes.

I KNOW THAT BUT WHAT ABOUT NOW? HE DIED. I GET IT. ***BUT WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO NOW***?

I was so well trained to rush right past the Gospel. I belittled it, dismissed it, wanted something more tangible, more doable. Give me 10 steps. A new book. A better devotional. Anything, I beg you.

Finally, after months of struggling, of truly 'working out my salvation', it began to sink in: **Jesus died *for me,* a sinner.**

It is finished.

It is finished.

It is finished.

Τετέλεσται

It hit me like a ton of bricks. That's what I had been missing all this time. A present-tense Gospel. The very Gospel that I'm supposed to be sharing with others is also *for me,* now, and everyday.

But because He knows that I will continue to struggle with doubt, He invites me every week to a feast, where He himself is the passover Lamb

and His body and blood are served for the forgiveness of sins. And like a baby, I learn to listen closely to my Father's voice, to hear His words, "You are forgiven. I forgive you all your sins. It is finished."

Communion is his present tense love for me on display. It is relevant and alive, just not in the way I was expecting.

And to this very day, I seldom go to the rail without deep emotion -- that this Gospel feast is free and it's FOR ME.

In a nutshell, here's what I've learned: I don't crave the next new book of christian living because I have the very body and blood of the Savior and His very own words of forgiveness.

I don't worry that I'm not getting better and better. Christ died for *sinners*, "of whom I am chief." I stand in good company with Paul when I stand as saint and sinner and trust in the perfect life of Christ.

I don't live with guilt because I'm not a missionary in Africa. The Lutheran teaching of vocation has freed me to serve my family and community right here in the good ole South.

When I doubt, I have learned to say with Luther, "Lord, I believe. Help thou my unbelief."

I live life to the fullest, in the beautiful tension and joy of the broken but baptized life, without the constraints of legalism and the seductive draw of evangelical mysticism.

I am in chains. But only to Christ.

Lutherans have taught me to feast! Christ is the Lamb of God, the bread and elixir of life, whose body and blood are broken and shed for me.

It took me awhile to see it but there is a genius of evangelicalism too. They are masters at getting people to the table and making them feel welcome. And we would do well to see the beauty of their gifts. Despite the fact that there was a Lutheran church 2 miles from my house growing up, the evangelical church 10 miles away knocked on my door and invited me to come. Not only that, they picked me up on a bus and took me to church. And for a little while, they fed me the feast of Christ's forgiveness. I will be forever grateful for that.

But Lutheranism has offered a deep well, a cistern of the best that Christianity has to offer. Lutheranism offers Christ and him alone, for you and for me.

To God be the glory that my latest attempt at personal evangelism was a complete failure.

And I'm perfectly okay with that.

Edie Wadsworth is a mother of 4, homeschooler, blogger and former evangelical who has that contagious enthusiasm that only a new Lutheran can have. She writes about a multitude of topics, including her faith journey, at her blog LifeinGrace. Besides homeschooling her two daughters in the classical tradition, she loves cooking, decorating and design, cowboy boots, C.S. Lewis and banjo music. She and her husband Steve recently rebuilt their home in Tennessee after a devastating house fire. She and Steve and have been long-time listeners and supporters of Issues, Etc.

Dear **Issues, Etc.** Listener:

In the name of Jesus, greetings.

I was recently thinking about my last 14 years as host of **Issues, Etc.** Much has changed, the technology, the landscape of radio and the way you listen to the show. One thing has not changed --not even a little bit. The one constant has been **Issues, Etc.'s** *Christ-Centered, Cross-Focused* message.

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Rev Gregory Young
4672 North Cedar Ave
Fresno CA 93726
559-222-2320

The Good Shepherd Lutheran
Rev Bruce von Hindenburg
902 Maple St
Inglewood CA 90301
310-671-7644

St. Paul's Lutheran
Rev Brandon Jones
2283 Palo Verde Ave
Long Beach CA 90815
562-596-4409

Our Savior's Lutheran
Rev Dan Kistler
4400 Cabrillo Hwy
Pacifica CA 94044
650-359-1550

Our Savior Lutheran
Rev Mark Stenbeck
6404 Pentz Rd
Paradise CA 95969
530-877-7321

Our Savior's Lutheran
Rev William Lindemeyer
725 N Fairview St
Ridgecrest CA 93555
706-375-7921

The Lutheran Church of Our Savior
Rev Scott Klemsz
1230 Luther Way
Salinas CA 93901
831-422-6352

Prince of Peace Lutheran
Rev Paul Willweber
6801 Easton Ct
San Diego CA 92120
619-583-1436

Grace Lutheran
Rev Charles Froh
2825 Alameda De Las Pulgas
San Mateo CA 94403
650-345-9068

Pilgrim Lutheran
Rev Nathan Kilian
1730 Wilshire Blvd
Santa Monica CA 90403
310-829-4113

Colorado

Redeemer Lutheran
Rev Donal Widger
2221 North Wahsatch Ave
Colorado Springs CO 80907
719- 633-7661

University Hills Lutheran
4949 E. Eastman Ave
Denver CO 80222
303-759-0161

Christ Our Savior Lutheran
Rev Geoffrey Wagner
4022 Park Ln
Elizabeth CO 80107
303-646-1378

Peace with Christ Lutheran
Rev Ralph Patrick
1424 West Swallow Rd
Fort Collins CO 80526
970-226-4721

Gloria Christi Lutheran
Rev John Frahm
1322 31st Ave
Greeley CO 80634-6328
970-353-2554

St John's Lutheran
Rev Terrence Buethe
405 S Albany St
Yuma CO 80759
970-848-2210

Florida

Grace Lutheran Church
Rev Keith Lingsch
860 Banyan Blvd
Naples FL 34102
239-261-7421

Immanuel Lutheran Church
Rev Randy Blankschaen
24 W Wright St
Pensacola FL 32501
850-438-8138

Idaho

Good Shepherd Lutheran
Rev Tim Pauls
Rev David Hrachovina
5009 Cassia St
Boise ID 83705
208-343-7212

Illinois

St Paul Lutheran
Rev Ben Ball
Rev Joel Brondos
Rev Walter Otten
9035 Grant
Brookfield IL 60513
708-485-6987

St. John Lutheran
Rev Richard Heinz
4939 West Montrose Ave
Chicago IL 60641
773-736-1112

Good Shepherd Lutheran
Rev Michael Walther
Rev Paul Hemenway
1300 Belt Line Rd
Collinsville IL 62234
618-344-3151

Zion Lutheran
Rev Gary Wright
17618 Hubbard Road
East Moline IL 61244
309-496-2186

Calvary Lutheran
Rev Mark Bestul
535 N McLean Blvd
Elgin IL 60123
847-741-5433

Christ Our Savior Lutheran
Rev Bruce Keseman
612 N State St
Freeburg IL 62243
618-539-5664

Hope Lutheran
Rev David Fielding
3715 Wabash Ave
Granite City IL 62040
(618) 876-7568

St. Paul Lutheran
6969 W. Frontage Rd
Worden IL 62097
P.O. Box 247
Hamel IL 62046
618-633-2209

Messiah Lutheran
Rev Brian Holle
801 N Madison St
Lebanon IL 62254
618-537-2300

St Pauls Lutheran
Rev Mark Hein
1500 S Briggs St
Lockport IL 60441
815-838-1832

Zion Lutheran
Rev Kirk Clayton
101 South Railway
Mascoutah IL 62258
618 566-7345

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Apostles
Rev Ralph Tausz
10429 W Fullerton Ave
Melrose Park IL 60164
847-455-0903

Trinity Lutheran
Rev Michael Kumm
Rev Todd Wilken
503 E Washington St
Millstadt IL 62260
618-476-3101

Bethany Lutheran
Rev Timothy Rossow
Rev Stephen Schumacher
Rev Jonathan Fisk
1550 Modaff Rd
Naperville IL 60565
630-355-2198

Christ Lutheran
Rev Robert Niehus
607 Harvard St
Oak Park IL 60304
708-386-3306

Zion Lutheran
Rev Donald Pritchard
525 N. Cartwright
Pleasant Plains IL 62677
217-626-1282

St. John Lutheran
Rev Mark Brockhoff
1800 S Rodenburg Rd
Schaumburg IL 60193
847-524-9746

Immanuel Lutheran
Rev Craig Meissner
12 West 34th Place
Steger IL 60417
708-754-2345

Trinity Lutheran
Rev David Balla
331 George Street
West Chicago IL 60185
630-231-1175

Indiana

Faith Lutheran
Rev Todd Riordan
6000 W State Rd 46
Columbus IN 47201
812-342-3587

Grace Lutheran
Rev John Armstrong
3201 Central Ave
Columbus IN 47203
812-372-4859

St John Lutheran
Rev Michael Mueller
12308 E CR 1160 N
Evanston IN 47531
812-547-2007

St Paul's Lutheran
Rev David Shadday
3932 Mi Casa Ave
Indianapolis IN 46237
317-787-4464

St Peter Lutheran
Rev Seth Mierow
2525 E 11th St
Indianapolis IN 46201
317-638-7245

Redeemer Lutheran
Rev David Peterson
202 West Rudisill Blvd
Fort Wayne IN 46807
260-744-2585

St. James Lutheran
Rev KC Denning
430 Ninth St
Logansport IN 46947
574-753-4227

Christ Lutheran
Rev Adrian Piazza
10055 E 186th St
Noblesville IN 46060
317-773-3669

Redeemer Lutheran
Rev Andrew Currao
Rev Daniel Lepley
504 N. Walnut St
Seymour IN 47274
812-522-1837

Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran
Rev Jacob Sutton
645 Poplar St
Terre Haute IN 47807
812-232-4972

Trinity Lutheran
Rev Eric Ahlemeyer
4413 South State Rd 135
Vallonia, IN 47281
812-358-3225

Heritage Lutheran
Rev Joseph Ostafinski
308 Washington St
Valparaiso IN 46383
219-464-2810

Advent Lutheran
Rev John Fiene
11250 N Michigan Rd
Zionsville IN 46077
317-873-6318

Iowa

Holy Cross Lutheran
Rev Kevin Johnson
1100 Market St
Carlisle IA 50047
515-989-3841

Our Redeemer Lutheran
Rev Michael Knox
904 Bluff St
Cedar Falls IA 50613
319-266-2509

St Paul Lutheran
Rev Nathan Dudley
2463 State Hwy 2
Clarinda IA 51632
712-542-1505

St Mary Evangelical Lutheran
Rev Jeff Siegel
505 Euclid Ave
Des Moines IA 50313
515-244-4018

Immanuel Lutheran
Rev J.R. Wheeler
101 E View Pl
Osceola IA 50213
641-342-3121

St John Lutheran
Rev David Klinge
1956 Durham Ave
State Center IA 50247
641-483-2578

Kansas

Our Redeemer Lutheran
Rev Troy Slater
802 E Trapp St
Herington KS 67449
785-258-3122

Grace Lutheran
Rev Dale Dumperth
800 E 1St St
McPherson KS 67460-3614
620-241-1627

Augsburg Lutheran
Rev J W Watson
13902 W 67th St
Shawnee KS 66216
785-331-3890

St John's Lutheran
Rev Peter Lange
901 SW Fillmore St
Topeka KS 66606
785-354-7132

Kentucky

Our Redeemer Lutheran
Rev Matthew Vesey
2255 Eastland Pkwy
Lexington KY 40505
859-299-9615

Louisiana

Redeemer Lutheran Church
Rev Aaron Stinnett
1905 Highway 59
Mandeville LA 70448
985-674-0377

Maryland

Zion Lutheran
Rev Robert Riebau
209 N Main St
Accident MD 21520
301-746-8170

St. Paul Lutheran
Rev William Stottlemyer
3738 Resley Rd
Hancock MD 21750
301-678-7180

St. James Lutheran
Rev J Thomas Foelber
8 W Overlea Ave
Overlea MD 21206
410-668-0158

Michigan

Peace Lutheran
Rev Thomas Messer
325 E Warwick Dr
Alma MI 48801
989-463-5754

Grace Lutheran
Rev David Reed
303 Ruth St
Auburn MI 48611
989-662-6161

Emmanuel Lutheran
Rev Joel Baseley
800 S Military St
Dearborn MI 48124
313-565-4002

Resurrection Lutheran
Rev Scott Benjamin
20531 Kelly Rd
Detroit MI 48225
313-372-4902

Zion Lutheran
Rev Mark Braden
4305 North Military Avenue
Detroit MI 48210
313-894-7450

Epiphany Lutheran
Rev Jonathon Krenz
4219 Park Ln
Dorr MI 49323
616-681-0791

Our Savior Lutheran
Rev David Fleming
Rev North Sherrill, Jr.
2900 Burton St SE
Grand Rapids MI 49546
616-949-0710

Zion Lutheran
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
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

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

Christ Lutheran
Rev Scott Schilbe
2904 2oth St SE
Rochester MN 55904
507-289-0271

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 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
Rev Matthew Harrison
9237 Clayton Rd
Ladue MO 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

Holy Cross Lutheran
Rev Keith Wachter
8945 Veterans Memorial Pkwy
O'Fallon MO 63366
636-272-4505

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

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

Grace Lutheran
Rev Luke Wolters
528 W Hudson St
Wellsville MO 63384
573-684-2106

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

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 Ley
2515 Queen Ave SE
Albany OR 97322
541-928-0214

Pennsylvania

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
Rev Matthew Nix
4801 E 6th St
Sioux Falls SD 57110
605-338-3769

Tennessee

Redeemer Lutheran
Rev Philip Young
800 Bellevue Rd
Nashville TN 37221-2702
615-646-3150

Texas

Trinity Lutheran
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
Rev Michael Schuermann
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 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
Rev Trevor Mankin
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
Rev Daniel Torkelson
312 N Main St
North Prairie WI 53153
262-392-2170

Grace Lutheran
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
3833 N Maryland Ave
Shorewood WI 53211
414-332-5732

Peace Lutheran
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 P0T 1W0
807-473-9164

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

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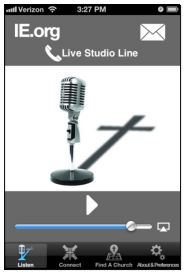

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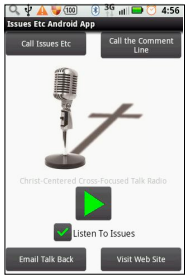

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