

# What God Cannot Do

by Todd Wilken

# Wittenberg Trail: From Self-Focus to Christ-Focus

by John Fraiser



Dear Issues, Etc. Journal Reader,

Greetings in the name of Jesus.

In this edition of the *Journal*, I respond to an all-too-common misunderstanding about our omnipotent, almighty and all-powerful God. Namely, that He can do anything. The real comfort is not in what God can or might do, but in what He has done in Jesus Christ.

Our Wittenberg Trail feature is from Southern-born Pastor John Fraiser. His story is a common one: one man's journey from the constant, subjective introspection and rededication of decision theology to the "better way" of the objective saving work of Jesus.

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## What God **Cannot** Do

by Todd Wilken

The pastor is retired now, so I really hope he is playing golf and no longer preaching. Here's why. At the time, he served as senior pastor of a large congregation in the my church body, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. He was being interviewed on the radio. The interviewer asked him a simple question.

**Q:** Does God have some other way of salvation, other than Jesus?

**A:** God can do anything. So, he can save people anyway he wants. But Jesus is the only way we know of.

If his answer doesn't shock you, it should.

When asked the question, "Does God have some other way of salvation, other than Jesus?" the pastor answered, in effect, "Maybe. I don't know." That is a really terrible, awful answer. Here's why.

I'm sure the pastor thought that he was being reasonable, openminded and tolerant. I'm sure he thought he was

affirming God's omnipotence. I'm sure he thought he was making God sound very loving. I'm sure he thought he was comforting people with the idea of God's omnipotence.



The pastor isn't alone. His answer is very popular among Christians living in a world full of all kinds of beliefs and religions. It seems to make sense. There are so many different religions. An all powerful God who really wants to save people certainly wouldn't limit Himself to only one religion and

one way of salvation. Surely there is more than one way to be saved. Maybe there are a lot of ways. It is not uncommon to hear well-meaning Christians saying things like,

Who are <u>we</u> to say that God couldn't have some other way of salvation, in addition to Jesus?

<u>For us Christians</u>, Jesus is the way of salvation; there could be other ways for other religions.

We shouldn't put limits on God, maybe He has decided to save <u>different</u> people in <u>different</u> ways.

All these statements sound reasonable, open-minded and tolerant, but they are horribly wrong. These statements sound like they are affirming what God can do, but actually, they are ignoring what God has done. These statements don't sound like they are denying Jesus, but they are.

These statements, like the now-retired pastor's answer, all begin with a false premise: God can do anything. He cannot.



Don't be shocked. Christians do believe that God is omnipotent; but that does not mean that God can do *anything*. It is a common misconception about God, that being almighty means that He can do anything whatsoever. But, that is not what the Bible teaches about our omnipotent, almighty, all-powerful God.

According to the Bible, there are several things God cannot do:

- He cannot deny Himself (2 Timothy 2:13),
- He cannot be tempted to evil, nor tempt man to sin (James 1:13),

- He cannot endure open iniquity (Isaiah 1:13),
- He cannot lie or break a promise (Psalm 89:33-35),
- He cannot fail (Deuteronomy 31:6).

Think about it. If God could deny Himself, how would we know He was telling the truth? If God could be tempted to evil, or tempt man to sin, how would we know He is good? If God could endure sin, how could we be saved? If God could lie or fail to keep a promise, how could we ever trust Him? If God could fail, could we have any hope?

In other words, if God could do any of these things, He would be more like the *devil* than the God we find in the Bible. He would be a terrible, awful, horrible god.

Am I saying that God *could* do any of these things, but doesn't? No. I am saying that God *cannot* do them. Or, put another way, if God could deny Himself, be tempted to evil, endure iniquity, lie, break a promise or fail, then He wouldn't be God, not the God revealed in the Bible.



God is omnipotent, but He is not capricious. God is almighty, but He is not arbitrary. God is all-powerful, but He is not fickle. Theologians would say that God has a discrete, distinct nature. God is something, not anything. God is omnipotent, almighty and all-powerful; but He cannot act against His own nature.

A god who can do anything just might do anything. You never know, he might decide to destroy you for no reason. You never know, he might give you cancer just for fun. You never know, he might send you to hell, just because he can.

This is the god lurking behind those seemingly reasonable, openminded, and tolerant-sounding statements of that retired pastor and far too many Christians. It is a god who can --and might-- do anything. Again, this is not the God revealed in the Bible.

But what about those reasonable, open-minded, and tolerant-sounding statements themselves? How do we respond to them?

Who are we to say that God couldn't have some other way of salvation, in addition to Jesus? It is true; we are in absolutely no position to say how the almighty God saves people --unless God himself has told us how he saves people. And, He has. Jesus Himself has told us that there is no other way of salvation other than faith in Him: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) The Church maintains Jesus' exclusive claim: "...there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

For us Christians, Jesus is the way of salvation; there could be other ways for other religions. This statement is a clever trick. It assumes that Jesus' exclusive claim, "No one comes to the Father except through me" applies only to Christians. But Jesus doesn't say, "no Christian comes to the Father except through me," He says, "No one..."

We shouldn't put limits on God, maybe he has decided to save different people in different ways. This is an appeal to the apparent differences among people. But Scripture recognizes no real differences. In

fact, with regard to sin and alienation from God, Scripture views all people as utterly equal. St. Paul writes, "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." (Romans 3:10-12)

People may be different in many respects, but before God all are equally fallen, sinful and in need of salvation. To speculate about different ways of salvation for different kinds of people denies either that our common problem is sin, or that Jesus sacrifice for sin on the Cross is sufficient for some sinners, but not for others. Neither of the these ideas have any support in Scripture.

# NOT POSSIBLE

The truth is, the real comfort for sinners is not in what God can do or might so, but in what He cannot do. Here's how.

Before His crucifixion, Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will." Could God could have spared Jesus? That would mean condemning us. That would mean breaking all of His promises, going back on His Word, and failing to save sinners. That would be like God denying Himself, being tempted to evil, enduring sin, lying or failing to keep a promise. If He could do any of those things, He simply wouldn't be God. The answer to Jesus' prayer "if it be possible" is clear: No, it is not possible.

This is what God cannot do. God must be who He is, therefore *He cannot spare Jesus*. Jesus must die. There is no other way. No other possibility even exists, even for the omnipotent God.

You might ask, couldn't God have decided not to save fallen mankind in the first place? No, He couldn't have. Here's why.

We tend to be sloppy on this subject. We think that God determined to save man *after* mankind fell into sin. But that is not what the Bible teaches. The Bible teaches that even before the Fall, even before God spoke any promise of salvation, even before creation, even before anything at all, God's purpose was to save man (Ephesians 1:4-12; John 17:24; 1 Peter 1:20; Revelation 13:8). Salvation is not the result of God's decision after the Fall, but of His eternal unchanging nature. If the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus reveals anything about the nature of God, it reveals that is not in the nature of God to leave fallen mankind unsaved.

This means that Jesus isn't just one possible way that God could have saved us. Jesus is the only way. The only possibility. God must save us, and cannot save us any other way.

This means that we can be certain that Jesus' death on the Cross for us really *does* save us. God has fulfilled His eternal purpose to save fallen mankind, He has kept all His promises, He has kept His word, He has not failed. Your sins really are paid for, in the only way they could have been paid for. Death has been conquered for you, in the only way death could have been conquered. Eternal life has been earned for you, in the only way eternal life could have been earned.

Now, there is comfort for sinners like us in what God cannot do.

• He cannot deny Himself. He has saved the world through Jesus.

- He cannot be tempted to evil, nor can he tempt man to sin. His sinless Son Jesus was your substitute on the Cross.
- He cannot endure open iniquity. He punished all of our iniquity by putting Jesus to death on the Cross.
- He cannot lie or break a promise. He has kept all His promises in Jesus.
- He cannot fail. He has not failed. He has accomplished the salvation of the world through the crucified and risen Jesus.

The fact that God is omnipotent, almighty and all-powerful is <u>not</u>, by itself, good news. As sinners who are naturally estranged and hostile toward God, God's omnipotence ought to strike fear in us. Apart from God's mercy in Jesus, God's power is bad news.

# WHAT GOD DID

But now, we can take real comfort knowing that God is all-powerful. We need not fear or doubt His power, but can trust the God who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all (Romans 8:32). Nothing is impossible for Him. There is no sinner He cannot save, no sin He cannot forgive. Nothing is able to separate you from Him (Romans 8:35-39), not even death.

I'm sure that the retired pastor on the radio I mentioned earlier thought that he was being reasonable, open-minded and tolerant. He wasn't. He was undermining the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I'm sure he thought he was affirming God's omnipotence. He wasn't. He was speculating about a god that can and might do anything, not the God of the Bible. I'm sure he

thought he was making God sound very loving. He wasn't. He was pointing away from the only source of God's love there is. I'm sure he thought he was comforting people with the idea of God's omnipotence. He wasn't. He was robbing everyone who heard him of the only true comfort for sinners when faced with God's omnipotence.

Rather than speculate about what an omnipotent, almighty and all-powerful God can or might do, Scripture points us to what our God *has done in Jesus Christ.* Scripture teaches us that God is all-powerful, yes. But Scripture tells us that this all-powerful God saves sinners through the weakness of the Cross. We are saved, not because God can do anything, but because He has done the only thing that could ever save us. The only thing is Jesus.

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# Wittenberg Trail:

From Self-Focus to Christ-Focus Why I Left Decision-Making and Introspection for a Better Way by John Fraiser

I didn't grow up a Lutheran, but, by God's grace, I got here as quickly as I could. There's nothing particularly unique about my journey to the Lutheran faith. It's all standard boilerplate. I grew up as a Baptist in Montgomery, Alabama, which is nearly a redundancy. There's little chance of making it out of the deep South as anything but

a Baptist. You might make it to Methodist.

As foreign as Baptist theology seems to me now, at the time, it was the air that I breathed. It was as normal and given as the rising sun. Baptism was my con-fession, an outward sign of an inward reality. At my baptism, the pastor said, "Upon your con-fession and in obedience to God's command, I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." The worship service was fifteen minutes of singing followed by a forty-five minute sermon, and often a fifteen minute altar call asking people to come down and make a decision for Jesus. I had made many "decisions for Jesus", lots of us did. Even after you made a profession

My decision today. D Rededicate my life to Ohrist ☐ Follow Christ like information about: Decision Card DECISION Decision Card of faith, it was common to walk the aisle to the altar

(which, for Baptists is simply the steps of the platform) to make the separate decision to dedicate your life to Christ. There were those who were saved, and then there were those who were the committed. Several unbiblical phrases were used to describe this group. You were "on fire for God" or "sold"

out for Jesus". But even for this group, it was a matter

of time before you backslid in the moral performance of your Christian walk, and so you would walk the aisle again to "rededicate" your life. You might rededicate your life again and again. Rededication was done to regain assurance of your salvation, and in the logic of the received decision-theology, it seemed to make perfect sense.

Through my theology studies in a Christian college and especially in seminary, I moved away from this model to a more Reformed model, where there was

far less emphasis on making decisions. Unequivocally, salvation was by grace alone through faith alone, but now salvation's assurance was worked out through a system of self-examination in which you look for good works as the evidence of conversion. Any certainty that I belonged to Christ had to be worked out through my performance on the treadmill of the law. How did I know Jesus was for *me*? That question had to be answered by looking for "evidence of grace" in my life. If I found something in my behavior that could only be explained by God's supernatural work, then I could know that Jesus was *mine*. Some days I felt satisfied upon self-examination, but most days, the evidence wasn't convincing. Even worse, it was often damning. What I saw in my behavior was all too natural from where I sat.

In the end, under both frameworks, I was looking for an objective work of God (Jesus died for me) in something subjective about myself (my decisions or my transformed life).

By the time I began to seek out the Lutheran faith, I was aware of the flaws of finding the grace of God through my efforts, but I didn't know what should take its place.

Fresh out of a Baptist seminary, I finally had time on my hands to read what I wanted to read. A close friend of mine (then a Baptist, now a Lutheran) who, like me, had an admiration for Luther the Reformer made a curious comment. He said that despite his appreciation for Luther, he could never buy some of the bizarre parts of Luther's theology such as infant faith and bodily presence of Christ in the Supper. This comment opened a new path for me. While I had read Luther, I had not read him on those issues. With my newly open reading schedule, I plunged into Luther's writings. At first, some things struck me as bizarre. Later, I realized that these teachings explained the biblical texts far better than my Baptist theology. What I encountered there was the objective work of God's external Word. Rather than depending upon my power to discerning my transformed behavior, I found that the external Word had all the power.

Now, in one sense, I had been hearing people talk about the external Word my whole life. Evangelicals talk all the time about our need for the external Word of the Gospel. But that external Word fails to save unless you believe, and so there was no subjective confidence that could be built on the external, objective Word of the Gospel. As I read Luther, I began to see that the range of the meaning of the external Word for Baptists was too narrow, and this narrowness was why one could not build his confidence of Christ-for-me on it. I had tried to build my confidence that Christ had delivered me from sin and death on the grounds that I had objectively heard a Gospel message, but in quiet moments I found myself thinking, "Maybe I didn't believe just right. My faith certainly isn't what should be. Maybe it's not enough." My faith was no foundation on which to build the surety of Christ's work for me. As Luther says about the fluctuation of faith,

When next day the devil comes, [the doubter's] heart is filled with scruples and he says, Ah, now for the first time I feel I have the right faith, yesterday I don't think I truly believed.... You think the devil can't do such things? You had better get to know him better. He can do worse than that, dear friend. He can go on and cast doubt on the third, and the fourth and so on incessantly (as he indeed has in mind to do), just as he has done with me and many in the matter of confession." 1

fluctuation between doubt and faith because faith was no longer its own object. Faith found its rightful place in the manifold objective Word from God that could not be doubted. I could doubt my faith, but I could not doubt that I was baptized. I could doubt my own self-examination, but I couldn't doubt that I was forgiven because I heard the word of forgiveness pronounced by the called and ordained servant of Christ. Rather than rooting the objective Word for me in subjective experience, any subjective experience was rooted solely

in the objective Word.

The Lutheran faith offered freedom from this

As I moved into the Lutheran church, I found, for the first time, a full encounter with the Gospel. Hearing the Gospel before, was to hear it in mono, but this was stereo. In the best of Reformed evangelical worship I might hear the Gospel in a sermon, but now in the Lutheran liturgy suddenly Jesus with his Gospel was all around me. I heard it, saw it, and tasted it. The historically-distant work of Jesus wasn't just described to me, it was given to me here and now. The church became a reliable place for me, a sinner, to receive the mercy of God in Jesus. Every time I walked through the doors of the church, I knew that this was a place where Jesus was present with saving gifts.

What other theologies had promised me --assurance, certainty of salvation for me-- Jesus himself gives me. Much more than just replacing one theological system with another one, I now have Jesus himself --and not just at some moment of decision, but regularly. For as Luther says in the Small Catechism, "In this Church, he daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers." Thanks be to God.



Pr. John Fraiser is pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran-La Grange, Kentucky. He received his M.Div. from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. After joining the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, he went on for graduate philosophy studies, while also taking post-graduate courses at Concordia Seminary. He also applied as a candidate for ordination through the Synod's colloquy program. Pr. Fraiser is married to Emily, and they have a four-year-old daughter named Jillian.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> "Concerning Rebaptism," *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*. 2005 (T. F. Lull & W. R. Russell, Ed.). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

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#### **Trinity Lutheran Church**

Rev Geoffrey Boyle Rev Terry Wiechman 611 S Erie St Wichita KS 67211 316-685-1571

#### 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 20th St SE Rochester MN 55904 507-289-0271

#### St Johns Lutheran

Rev Christopher Horton 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 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

#### **Immanuel Lutheran**

Rev Thomas Handrick Rev Matthew Marks 453 N West St Perryville MO 63775 573-547-8317

#### **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

#### **Trinity Lutheran**

Rev Jonathan Rathjan 34 Alden Dr Auburn NE 68305 402-274-4210

#### 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 Hampshire**

#### **Immanuel Lutheran**

Rev Donald Colageo 673 Weston Rd Manchester NH 03103 603-622-1514

#### **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

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

#### **Gethsemane Lutheran**

Rev Brett Cornelius 219 E Church St Marion OH 43302 740-375-0599

#### St. John Lutheran

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

#### 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

#### Oklahoma

#### St Mark Lutheran

Rev Mark Erler 1501 N Bryant Edmond OK 73034 405-340-0192

#### **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

#### Prince of Peace Lutheran Rev Michael Podeszwa

Rev Michael Podeszwa 60 Rochester Rd Freedom PA 15042 724-728-3881

#### **St John Lutheran**

Rev Robert Kieselowsky 25 E Scenic Rd Springfield PA 19064 610-543-3100

#### **Grace Lutheran**

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

#### **South Carolina**

#### **Holy Trinity Lutheran**

Rev Christopher Burger 2215 Devine St Columbia SC 29205 803-799-7224

#### 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 Rev Sherman Stenson 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

#### **Grace Lutheran**

Rev Carl Roth 801 W 11th St Elgin TX 78621 512-281-3367

#### **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 920-485-668

#### 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 POT 1W0 807-473-9164

#### **Bethel Lutheran**

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