

# New Thing Theology

by Todd Wilken

# *Wittenberg Trail:* A Long, Strange Trip

by Bob Liichow

Spring, 2014

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Dear Issues, Etc. Journal Reader,

Greetings in the name of Jesus.

In this edition of the *Journal* you will find my short essay on "New Thing Theology," a theology driven by boredom with the faith once for all delivered to the saints. It can turn you into a heretic, a contextualizer, or just waste your time.

Our Wittenberg Trail feature is from long-time **Issues, Etc.** guest Bob Liichow. He tells about his circuitous route from the strangeness of the Word-Faith movement to the Lutheran confessions.

You'll also find a list of the congregations in the **Issues, Etc. 300** at the end of the *Journal*.

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Wir sind alle Bettler,

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# **New Thing Theology**

by Todd Wilken

One of the strongest feelings you can get in life, one of the most rewarding feelings is the feeling of an "Aha! I finally understand." —Penn Jillette

I have listened to my pastor preach for over seven years. I can count on one hand the times he has given me one of those "aha!" moments. He is a great, faithful preacher. But he is mostly unoriginal. And, that's just fine. He seldom delivers that new insight, that fresh understanding, that "aha!" moment. And, that's just the way it should be.

There are few things more dangerous in the Church than a bored theologian. I call them New Thing Theologians. Be it a pastor, Bible teacher, seminary professor, author —bored theologians have the potential to do as much damage as bad theologians. I know. I have been one for the better part of 25 years.

My pastor's preaching has cured me. For most of my pastoral career, I have lived for that "aha!" moment. The old, run-of-the-mill theology was fine, but it didn't give me the theological buzz that I craved. I lived on the edge of boredom, always looking for something to stave it off. I tended toward the pastors, professors and authors who I thought could help me do so.

As a New Thing Theologian, I read the Bible always on the lookout for something I had never seen before. I preached, always trying to find the new spin on the old text. I taught Bible class, always exploring some new angle on an old passage.

Now, not every new thing I came up with was a bad idea. Some of them were good ideas. None of them were *truly* original. I eventually realized that most my new ideas were really the old ideas of better theologians than me. Some of these new insights and ideas were just interesting for the sake of being interesting, and new for the sake of being new. Looking back, I realize that I was aiming for freshness, not faithfulness. Then, I started listening to my pastor preach. It was great preaching. It was consistently textual, consistently clear Law and Gospel, consistently centered on the death and resurrection of Jesus for sinners. I wasn't bored with his preaching, but I was a little conflicted. Where were my precious "aha!" moments? One, maybe two times a year, he would give me one. But most of the time, there were no surprises to speak of.

What are the dangers of New Thing Theology? Where does boredom with old theology, old doctrines, old theological categories and expressions lead?

# Heresy

I always wanted to become famous. And, then it occurred to me that to become famous in theology means to present something new and different. But, if I present something new and different, after 2,000 years of Christian theology, it is bound to be heresy. And therefore, I have decided not to become famous. —T. A. Kantonen

The most obvious form of New Thing Theology is, of course, heresy. "New and different" may be good thing when it comes to technology, business and advertising, but "new and different" can be a very bad thing when it comes to Christian teaching and practice. The heretic is all about the new and the different. But, the heretic rarely presents his false teachings as new or different. The heretic almost always presents his new and different teachings straight from the Bible. "All heretics quote the Bible" is the old saying. And, that is usually true. But, already in the second century, the church father Irenaeus observed the heretic's trick: The heretic presents his teaching "under a pretense of superior knowledge, ... as if, forsooth, they had something more excellent and sublime to reveal than God."

The heretics's new and different teaching is new precisely because it really isn't found in the Bible. It is different because it differs from the clear teaching of Bible. Misusing the Bible, the heretic teaches something better, "more excellent and sublime" than what the Bible teaches. The heretic promises you that new thing under the guise of the old thing. He promises that "aha!" moment, something original, fresh, a new spin on the old text, a new angle on an old passage. Of course, some heretics don't even bother to cite the Bible, claiming new revelation altogether. Islam started this way, even though we consider it an old religion. Muhammed may have lived 1,400 years ago, but at the time his revelations were new, fresh and different. Islam, Mormonism, The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society —these heresies are easy to spot today, but in their day, they were the newest thing around. And, the claim to new revelation continues today.

# God Is Doing a New Thing

Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? —Isaiah 43:19-19

"God is doing a new thing" has become the Creed of many New Thing Theologians, from the charismatic televangelist to the liberal mainline protestant. This is another form of New Thing Theology. You name it, God is doing it. On the one hand God is bringing about new revivals, signs, miracles, anointings, moves-ofthe-spirit. On the other hand, God is affirming new alternative lifestyles, sexual orientations, genders, and definitions of marriage. Depending on whom you ask, God is doing all these new things.

These New Thing Theologians have a "Bible plus" theology. The Bible is great, as far as it goes, but *now* God is doing something new. This is a very convenient claim. If God is doing something new, something not found in the Bible, something even contrary to what is in the Bible, then anything goes. Who is to say what God can do? Who is to say what God will do next? The New Thing Theologian, that's who.

This kind of New Thing Theology, like heresy, is the enemy of Christian theology. But in a way, this version of New Thing Theology is even more dangerous than heresy. The heretic introduces a new teaching and usually stops there. The "God is doing a new thing" theologian doesn't. He can't, really. God's ongoing revelation is never the final word on any doctrine or subject. It is always a rough draft, never the final version. It is always open to future changes and revisions. The most this kind of theologian can say is, "This is what God is saying to us today; this is what God is doing today; tomorrow it may change." The heretic misinterprets the Bible; the "God is doing a new thing" theologian is rewriting it.

# Contextualizing

*Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.* —Acts 17:21

The most subtle form of New Thing Theology is the contextualizer. Contextualizers are suspicious of old theology. Established doctrinal categories, formulae and expressions are dismissed in favor of new ones, better suited to our current context. The old theology was good, for its time and context, but it simply doesn't apply to us today.

The contextualizer suffers from a kind of historical hubris. The theologians of the past were "men of their time," limited by less knowledge, poorer scholarship, fewer resources —not to mention their primitive worldviews. And, who could blame them? After all, they didn't even have the Internet! The theologians of the past were unwittingly influenced by this or that school of thought or movement. The theologians of the past did the best they could with what they had at the time, but this is the 21st century, and the contextualizer believes he can do better. The irony should be obvious. While asserting that the theologians of the past couldn't possibly have imagined our current context, the contextualizer claims to completely understand both theirs and his.

So, the contextualizer looks for new, better doctrinal categories, formulae and expressions. Maybe he attempts to reconcile or harmonize the new with the old, maybe he doesn't. In any case, the contextualizer succumbs to "the tyranny of the now" and therefore of the new.

The contextualizer's problem is similar to that of the "God is doing a new thing" theologian. There really isn't any stopping point. Contexts are always changing. This means that no doctrinal category, formula or expression can be universal over time. And, even at the same time in history, no two contexts are really the same. The world is a big place, full of different cultures, languages, civilizations. This means that no doctrinal category, formula or expression can be universal at any given time. The contextualizer has to redefine the catholicity of the Christian faith (that the Christian faith is the same for all, at all times and places), if not reject it altogether.

The contextualizer fails to see that the theologians of the past were not contextualizers themselves. They were categorizing and formulating not just for themselves or for their time, but for posterity. They were expressing truths that do not depend upon an ever-changing context, but upon the unchanging Word of God.

# Not Edgy, But True

*I would say that I began with a very edgy, very driven personality and after a sufficient amount of therapy over many, many years, I managed to become rather relaxed and happy.* —John Cleese

Looking back on my years as a New Thing Theologian, I realize that most of the time, my desire for the new and different was just my attempt to be edgy, different, original. As I said, I was aiming for freshness, not faithfulness.

But, the more I have listened to my pastor's preaching, the more I have realized that, while I still missed my precious "aha!" moments, I don't need them. I don't need the new thing. I don't need the original idea. I don't need to hear something I have never heard before. I need to hear the same old things I have been hearing from faithful preachers my whole life.

So, I'm tired of being a New Thing Theologian. That "aha!" moment is no substitute for the good, old Gospel. And, my pastor's preaching has been my therapy: Simple, straightforward, strong, and often completely unoriginal preaching of Law and Gospel, Sin and Grace. It isn't new. But it is the crucified and risen Jesus for a sinner like me, every Sunday, every sermon.

As I write these words, I have just listened to one of the last of those sermons my pastor will preach at our little church. He is leaving to shepherd another congregation. There were no surprises. And, I have learned something from the last seven years of his sermons. I was listening for something new; I should have been listening for something final, God's final word. And, that is exactly what his preaching has given me. In fact, that is how my pastor ended almost every one of his sermons over the last seven years: "In Jesus Christ, you are forgiven of all your sins." It wasn't new, it wasn't original, it wasn't edgy. It was the Gospel. It was true. It was God's final word.

After 50 years as a Christian and almost 25 years as a pastor, that Gospel seldom comes as a surprise. And that's okay. It doesn't have to. The Gospel isn't there to surprise me or alleviate my boredom. It's there to forgive me. Even if I've heard it a million times, it is still the Gospel. It still does what it says. It still gives me Jesus.

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# Wittenberg Trail: A Long, Strange Trip

by Bob Liichow

My journey to becoming a Lutheran was (and still is) an adventure that I never anticipated embarking on and yet here I am, a confessional liturgical evangelical catholic aka a member of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. My sister and I were raised by godly parents and no matter where the Army sent my father (we moved over 12 times in 16 years) we attended church, preferably a United Presbyterian congregation.

Growing up in the zeitgeist of late 1960's through the 70's I became fascinated in mysticism and pursuing the "Divine within." All manner of guru's were coming over to the states peddling their softer version of Hinduism which was repackaged later as "New Age" concepts. Drs. Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert and others were mixing eastern beliefs with mind altering chemicals touting their route to self-realization as a quicker and more fun approach than sitting in a cave in the Himalayas. The 1970's was a period of intense interest in transcendent spirituality. Groups like, Erhard Seminars Training Inc. (EST), various communal groups formed, some Christian-based, many others founded on capricious belief systems.

Within the Church realm, American Pentecostalism, 70+ years old then, began to transform into a distinct movement and was gathering strength and respectability called the charismatic renewal.

I was a student at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor MI. when I came in contact with my first sign-gift enthusiasts. I still attended the First Presbyterian Church not far from my dorm, but was also practicing Kundalini yoga at one of Swami Muktananda Paramahansa's ashrams in town and expanding my mind using any of the various means at my disposal. During my second years at U of M several of my dorm friends began to attend religious gatherings of Christians held by a group called "The Word of God Community." In these meetings, there would be Bible study and a lot of singing *in the spirit*, that is, in other tongues. Considering myself to be the perennial spiritual "seeker" I asked if I could come along to their next meeting. I was informed that these meetings were closed to non-members and that if I wanted to come I would have to go through a 6 weeks seminar entitled "Life in the Spirit."

At first when I heard this I was highly offended. After all, when Jesus died on the cross, the curtain was torn in two, and now everybody had access to the presence of God. That was about the deepest extent of their theological beliefs. So I did not participate immediately, but I did watch my friends. I noticed their lives had changed. They seemed to have something from *God* that I did not. I did not like being left out of mystical experiences and was always open to new ones. So, the next time the seminar series was offered, I went. Each session was geared towards the blessings of speaking in other tongues and pretty much stayed within the confines of Acts and First Corinthians. The last lesson was when the leaders would lay hands on the participants in order to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in other tongues. Hands were laid on me, and I began to gibber forth something that was not coming from my conscious mind, as I look back it felt quite liberating at the time.

The Word of God Community (WOG) was started as an offshoot from the Roman Catholic Charismatic Renewal that began in Steubenville, OH and on the Notre Dame campus in the late 1960s. From there it spread too many places, U of M being the main branch. Now that I was initiated into the life in the Spirit, I could make an "underway" commitment to become a member of the WOG. One of their requirements was that each person had to be a member of a church body; the WOG was an ecumenical Christian <u>community</u> not a church. Now being Spirit-filled I needed to worship with *power people* not the frozen chosen Presbyterians, so I ended up joining the Pentecostal Church of God, a congregation of less than 20 people all from the coal mines of Appalachia. I worked very closely with the Associate Pastor Tim Ward, and it was through Timmy that I was introduced to the Word of Faith movement.

Technically speaking the WOG was part of "The Discipleship Movement." This movement was started by the Florida "Five," namely, Bob Mumford, Derek Prince, Ern Baxter, Charles Simpson and Don Basham. This was a top-down, authoritarian movement where the people were to do what their "spiritual" head told them. This led to a great deal of spiritual abuse by many leaders, so much so that some years later Derek Prince publicly repented for the harm done by the Discipleship movement.

Tim Ward wanted me to leave the WOG because there were too many "Roman Catholics" and community members drank alcohol and smoked. These were deemed as two sure signs of carnality to any self-respecting Pentecostal, and he did not want me to be shipwrecked due to their loose living. Also, I quickly learned that the Discipleship camp did not subscribe to the teachings of the Word of Faith Movement, which I was growing very enamored with. Something had to give. I could not remain faithful to two divergent groups. I stopped my underway commitment to the WOG, and dived headfirst into the deep end of deception.

Kenneth Copeland and Ken Hagin proclaimed that God's power was available to any believer who could use their faith properly. What is more, they told me that it was the will of God that I never be sick. Divine health, never getting sick at all was God's will for <u>all</u> His children and that we could grow to the place spiritually of "Divine life" where even death could not touch us. But wait... That's not all! I was taught that God wanted me to be financially wealthy. Imagine walking in the power of God, healing the sick, casting out devils, raising the dead AND being rich at the same time! Nobody else was proclaiming this message. Not in the community gatherings, not from the pulpit in my Pentecostal church, in fact I had never knew such things were even in the Bible!

Timmy and I did a lot of preaching on the streets around the campus and during one of these forays I met some other students who were attending a new church that had just started. The pastors were graduates of Rhema Bible School, Ken Hagin's school, the "Harvard" of WOF. I left the Pentecostal Church of God and joined Greater Faith Christian Center (GFCC) where I met my wife of 30 years, Tracy and later where I was called and ordained. While at GFCC I was able to attend Robert Tilton's Satellite Bible School, where I was fed a steady diet of WOF heresy. I matriculated with a 4.0 GPA. After a few years at GFCC the church went through a bad split and we ended up moving to Detroit. We joined another WOF church in Detroit, pastored by another Rhema graduate Ellis Smith. I served as one of the primary preachers and teachers at Jubilee Christian Church. Ellis wanted to be on the cutting edge of whatever God was "doing" and this appealed to me. He told Jubilee that the WOF movement was "over" and that God was now restoring the *Prophetic* back to the Church. Suddenly, the men and women I had seen years back as "evangelists" morphed into pastors and now were paraded to us as restored *prophets*. It got worse, within a couple of years we were told that God was restoring the office of the Apostle back to the church. I remember the evening service when Ellis was elevated to the office of apostle, and Tracy and I began to grow increasingly concerned about the direction the entire sign-gift movement was taking.

For many years my wife and I had been faithfully following and teaching others all the rules, laws, principles and precepts that supposedly would result in miracles, signs, wonders, healings and personal prosperity. We had made sure to receive impartations from the hands of every recognized leader we could find. We attended all the seminars, revivals, shut-ins, fasted sometimes as long as a month (only liquids) and prayed for <u>hours</u> each day in other tongues. Our lives were lived in strict discipline. We were exceedingly careful about every word we spoke, tithed off of every dollar and tried never to miss a service, but deep inside of us we knew there was something very wrong.

Things simply did not add up. We were fed a continuous diet of teachings on how to hear from God, how to flow in His power and do mighty works in Jesus name. Where were the results of these teachings in anyone's lives? People we knew and loved got divorced, and yet we knew "faith works by love." Prophesies given by internationally revered men and women were blatantly false in content and unfulfilled in time, and yet no one brought correction. Immorality and extremely lavish living among those proclaimed as "highly anointed" was rampant and explained away when exposed.

Tracy and I, unknowingly at the time, had been literally "surfing" the charismatic wave being carried along from Discipleship to Word of Faith then into the Prophetic and onto the Apostolic. We moved from one spiritual high to the next rebuking the "down" times. Frankly, I was like a shark, ever moving forward, not resting, working the principles hungrily seeking the next key that would finally unlock God's power. He could then use me like He did William Branham. Nothing we did worked; and work we did. It wasn't working in anyone else's ministry either, and we knew it. We were highly dissatisfied and really did not know where to turn. There is a saying that goes "*when the student is ready the teacher will appear*" and Tracy and I were hungry now, not for the power of God, but for the <u>truth</u> of God.

Our Lord opened a way for Tracy and I to attend Michigan Theological Seminary (MTS). It had just opened in Ann Arbor, and so we began to attend classes. Our first class in seminary was Hermeneutics taught by Dr. Gene Mayhew. Through this class our eyes were opened to how to properly interpret and thus understand what the Bible is actually saying. While at MTS we were mentored by Dr. H. Wayne House (Wayne earned his first degree from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis and little did we know then that several years later I would attend Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne) who connected us with a friend of his, pastor Don Matzat. I began to do interviews on Issues, Etc. with Don on a wide variety of charismatic topics. It was through his influence and that of my parents, who had become very active LCMS members that Tracy and I were challenged to consider the claims of Martin Luther.

We graduated from MTS, and I went on to provide pulpit supply in Detroit and begin an apologetics and counter-cult ministry called Discernment Ministries International. On occasion we would visit my folks and attend their Lutheran church, we'd hear Issues, Etc. and we visited some local congregations and prayerfully decided to become members of the LCMS.

Tracy and I joined St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Roseville, MI. We <u>soaked</u> up the sermons delivered by pastor Roth and Hemme on the marvelous grace of God poured out so freely in Jesus Christ. For the first time in our Christian lives, we began to learn about the distinction between Law and Gospel and what Jesus has done <u>for us</u>. We jumped off the tread mill of our works, and began to embrace the gift of the perfect work of Jesus. Our search for God's presence was <u>over</u>. Jesus was here in Person from beginning to end in the Divine Service. It is His voice that forgives our sins, His glories we sing, His Word we hear and yes, His very body and blood we eat and drink. Finally, our search is over. Jesus was where He always said He would be, and He did exactly what He promised He would do —forgive sins, grant peace and life.

Prior to becoming a genuine evangelical, my life was about striving and working. Now my life is about resting in His works for me. Since He has provided everything I will need in this life and the next, I am truly free to seek out the needs of my neighbors. Through Luther and other reformers Tracy and I began to see ourselves correctly, as "poor miserable sinners" versus the "highly anointed and appointed." The reality of being both sinner and saint makes perfect sense to us now, and it certainly explains the many morals failures of the sign-gift leaders.

We are so thankful to our Lord for delivering us from the morass of doctrinal darkness, spiritual abuse and spiritual pride. I dedicated my life seventeen years ago to combatting the heretical teachers, their teachings and practices that put God's children in bondage. We are determined to "Teach Truth and Expose Error" in every available platform.



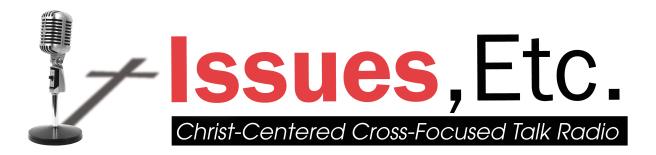
Bob Liichow and his wife Tracy are members of Hope Lutheran Church in De Witt, Michigan, and are the co-founders of Discernment Ministries International.

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Dear Issues, Etc. Listeners,

The book of Hebrews pictures Jesus as a priest at the sacrificial altar:

*Every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God.* (Hebrews 10:11-12)

Jesus was the priest. His altar was the Cross. His sacrifice was His own body. Jesus did not make this sacrifice for Himself but for us sinners. When Jesus cried out from the Cross, "It is finished" He was saying that this one, final sacrifice had been made.

Talking this way about what Jesus did for us might seem gruesome. Many in the Church today are trying to tone-down the message of the Cross. But not us. **Issues, Etc.** still proclaims this one, final sacrifice for sins —Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

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