



**Issues, Etc.**<sup>TM</sup>  
*Christ-Centered Cross-Focused Talk Radio*

## TRANSCRIPT

*Rev. Todd Wilken, Host*

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### **"2015 *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week: Challenges to Lutheranism: Postmodernism"**

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**WILKEN:** All this week, we've been talking about the various challenges to Lutheranism. There have been many, but we've been picking out the big ones during *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week. Here on this Friday we come to the last one. [It's] certainly not the last challenge to Lutheranism that there will ever be, but it's the one that bedevils us today. It's called postmodernism and, my goodness, this is everywhere. It has seeped into every crack

and crevice of our lives. We hear it all around us from people who say, "Well, you have your truth and I have my truth." Or "How do we really know that?" Or "Words don't mean things," or "They mean what every person wants them to mean." These kinds of things become the parlance of the average man, this idea that everyone's truth is relative to them – that you have your truth and I have my truth. That, in a nutshell, is what we're dealing with here, and it's a

huge challenge to Lutheranism because it's a huge challenge to the truth.

Welcome back to *Issues, Etc.* We're coming to you live from the studios of Lutheran Public Radio in Collinsville, Illinois. I'm Todd Wilken. Thanks for tuning us in. Joining us to talk about postmodernism as a challenge to Lutheranism here on this Friday of *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week, Dr. Angus Menuge. He's Professor and Chairman of the Department of Philosophy at Concordia University Wisconsin, and he's President of the Evangelical Philosophical Society. Dr. Menuge, welcome back to *Issues, Etc.*

**MENUGE:** Thanks for having me, Todd.

**WILKEN:** Which is the greater threat to confessional Lutheranism? Rationalism, which still maintains an objective truth, or postmodernism, that believes there's no such thing as objective, absolute truth?

**MENUGE:** Certainly postmodernism is the greater threat, because when we look at the Gospel, what does Paul tell us? "For I delivered to you as a first importance what I also received." And in 2 Timothy, "By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you." He talks about the faith as being something objective which he received. But in postmodernism, we have a variety of language communities that can interpret any language, including the Word of God, in any way that we want. And John Pless, I think, really put his finger on it when he said this, "We're called to faith in Christ, not by a story of our own choosing or a narrative of our own communal construction, but by a Word that comes outside of ourselves. It is not just a word *about* Christ, but the *Word of* Christ." And that's about as plain as one can be about the objectivity of the Gospel: as something that we receive and is not simply up to our cultural construction and interpretation.

**WILKEN:** We need to, at some point here in a minute, put a definition on

postmodernism, because it *is*, in a lot of ways, the ultimate waxed nose. It is whatever one wants it to be. But in the short time that it's been with us as a worldview—a philosophy, for lack of a better term—what has been the effect to this point of postmodernism in the Church?

**MENUGE:** Really, it's undermined the idea of revelation as something where God communicates His Word to us. It couldn't be more fundamental, because it has the idea that we're all trapped within a kind of prison house of language, within our various language communities. Each church is a different language community and may use words differently and interpret them differently. So instead of there being one Gospel as Paul confidently declares in Galatians, there seem to be as many Gospels as there are different language communities. And then we begin to understand why there's this terrible unraveling of churches that choose to reinterpret the Scriptures in so many different ways that really have no credibility from the standpoint of historic Christianity. But they're made possible by this idea that the power is given from God, the author, to human beings in their communities as interpreters. The interpreter is the one who is in the driving seat. So if you see something in Scripture that troubles you, well, you contextualize it. You find a way in which you can interpret it so that that trouble can be passed out and then you can affirm what you want. So we're not really very far away from what Paul says: "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths."

**WILKEN:** How do we define it, postmodernism?

**MENUGE:** Well, it is hard to come up with a definition because it is a negative

philosophy. It's defined negatively by opposition to the modernist ideas of universal reason and the idea that you could come up with a grand story true for everyone. And so, as Jean-François Lyotard has probably the best succinct definition, "Incredulity toward metanarratives." Meaning, "not believing that there are any grand stories which are true for everyone," which on the one hand, means that materialism is rejected—scientific materialism in claiming to capture everything about reality—but it also means that historic Christianity is rejected, because of course it claims to be true for everyone. "Every knee shall bow." It isn't just true in an interior sense for the believer, for the community of believers. It claims to be true for everyone, both the believer and the unbeliever, and so it is one of those despised metanarratives that postmodernism rejects.

**WILKEN:** Now, when we use that word "metanarrative," are we really just talking about truth?

**MENUGE:** Yeah, well, a story that is valid for all stories. "Meta" [means] it's above narrative. So normally, we think of universal laws of nature like that. It doesn't matter where somebody is or what their culture is, the law of gravitation is going to apply to them. So it's a story that's valid for all these other stories. And the Gospel also – it's really the idea of a transcendent, trans-cultural truth. And postmodernism rejects this because it thinks that our thinking, to use Richard Rorty's term, is "ethnocentric." They claim that we're all so situated within a particular place and culture and using language in such a particular way that we can't transcend that situation to see anything which is true for all cultures and for all language users.

**WILKEN:** Is it that there isn't a metanarrative or a story that's valid in the universal sense, or is it, in postmodernism,

that we can't access those things if they exist?

**MENUGE:** Yeah, you will see both points of view argued. Richard Rorty is very clear that there is no such thing, because he says that idea is logo-centric. It reflects the Christian idea that the *logos* is inscribed in reality for us to discover, and having a hand in that theistic view of the world, he doesn't think there is any such thing out there. You will see other people who try to adapt postmodernism even to [a] Christian context, and they will say, "Well, there might be such truth, but it's rather pointless because we can never access it." Always what we will do before we acquire any meaning is we'll all relay our own interpretation. And so we simply can't get there. It means that we're trapped. Just as you have within materialism, the worry is that we're trapped inside of our brains and we can't know the world as it is; well, so in postmodernism the worry is that we're just trapped in our particular interpretations and we can't get to the world. We cannot get to the transcendence signified as the ponderous vocabulary that they will use, but we just follow signs and signs that point to other signs, and we can't get to things as they really are.

**WILKEN:** It's a good thing that you bring your expertise in philosophy here, because we're really talking about some very fundamental, basic philosophic ideas that are very old. Not new, certainly not modern, certainly not begun with postmodernism. But I've got to ask: if you're the postmodernist who says, "There is no transcendent truth. There is no metanarrative at all. None are out there. Only what we have here on the ground can we speak of [as] being provisionally true," isn't that a metanarrative itself, the statement that there *aren't* metanarratives?

**MENUGE:** Yeah, this is the problem with most of the postmodernism claims. They exempt themselves from an acid that they

throw upon everybody else. But in fact, it's a universal acid. Of course, if one says that there are no metanarratives, well, that presents itself as a metanarrative because it claims to be true for everybody. And likewise if you say there is no objective truth, that presents itself as an objective truth, and yet of course then it's self-refuting. And if, on the other hand, they say, "Oh, no, this is just a cultural construction," then of course, one realizes that surely then people are allowed to have the cultural construction that says there *are* metanarratives, or there *is* objective truth. So if it becomes merely relativism, then people can simply choose to disagree.

**WILKEN:** Let's talk about probably one of the most important things in the postmodernism way of thinking, whether someone is able to articulate it or not, and that is the role of language. You've talked about language communities, the use of language. What is the role of language, according to postmodernism?

**MENUGE:** Well, the idea, according to many postmodernism thinkers, is that language mediates and limits our thinking. This is actually questionable on psychological grounds. One can wonder if one is actually capable of doing some sort of thinking without language. But it's rather plausible that at least as adults, that when we think, we think in terms of linguistic categories. And then, of course, they will say, "Well, how you use words is somewhat limited by your culture." We've got different languages and different idioms and people speak differently and in different settings. So this might suggest that there are inherent cultural limitations in our thinking. This is what they mean by saying that our thinking is ethnocentric, because our use of language is conditioned by our particular culture's use of words. And so it creates a situation where even if a transcendent word existed, how could it penetrate? It challenges the very idea of revelation, that when God gives sight to the blind, when

He's a light in the darkness. Well, [for] the postmodernist, as soon as that light would appear, it would inherently be interpreted as just more darkness by us, and so how does it do us any good? It's a very disturbing thought. I think, ultimately, it's directly contrary to the idea that God can truly reveal a transcendent Word to us.

**WILKEN:** Dr. Angus Menuge is our guest. We're talking about the challenges to Lutheranism: today, postmodernism, our conclusion of *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week on this Friday afternoon. He's Professor and Chairman of the Department of Philosophy at Concordia University Wisconsin.

When we come back, what about someone who buys into postmodernism but can't explain it? They just believe it with all their heart. We'll talk about that after this.

**[BREAK]**

**WILKEN:** Welcome back to *Issues, Etc.* I'm Todd Wilken. All this *Issues Etc.* Reformation Week, we've been talking about challenges to Lutheranism. Today we're taking up postmodernism. Dr. Angus Menuge is our guest.

Dr. Menuge, let's talk a little bit about the "man on the street" version of this, and that is the person who cannot articulate their postmodernism views in the way that you have been describing it here. They won't talk about how all truth is relative, but they believe all truth is relative. They won't talk about how language somehow mediates all truth, but they really do. They wouldn't put it that way, but they really do believe it. They don't talk about truth arising from language communities, but when it comes down to it, what they really believe is that truth arises from language communities. They're postmodernists but they can't articulate their beliefs. Talk about that.

**MENUGE:** Yeah, this is why a wonderful book by Harry Blamires, *The Post-Christian Mind*, is very helpful, because he talks about how postmodernism plays out in the popular culture. It's a marvelous study there of the way in which, for example, our use of the word family. We've all been bludgeoned into talking about the nuclear family, or the two-parent family. And what that does, he says, is it converts "the family" as an objective thing, as an order of creation. It's simply one variant among many. And then, of course, you can have many other ones. And as he says, the conversion of norms into variants is a means of destroying standards. The norm is no longer recognized as a standard because it just becomes one among many variants. And I see that all over the place. This is how society begins to unravel. The family unravels, the state unravels, because we allow people to constantly redefine words in a humpty-dumpty fashion in any way that we want. And then we lose the moment of standard, we lose objective boundaries and limits that can curb and control our worst impulses, and it's a very dangerous development. As you say, it's entirely unconscious. Most of these people have never studied academic postmodernism.

**WILKEN:** So what does the postmodernist do with, for instance, something like the Lutheran Confessions, which is a long set of statements or propositions of truth that are explicitly described as universal truths, and that says, "We believe, teach, and confess..." and "We reject and condemn..." What does the postmodernist do with that?

**MENUGE:** Well, much the same, I'm afraid, what the postmodernist will do to the Constitution or any other document that tries to set boundaries that exist over time. It will contextually relativize it and say, "Well, you have to understand that the Confessions were written by a particular people at a particular time, but now what we have are the words, and of course we're going to interpret those words differently."

So we'll speak about a living Constitution and the living Confessions. So very important sharp boundaries that the Confessions exist to maintain, declaring some things are true and rejecting other things as errors, can very easily be blurred because we can reinterpret those meanings.

**WILKEN:** So in other words, they're more than willing to read the documents as long as those documents, and the very language, the very words of those documents, are open to new meaning.

**MENUGE:** Yeah, I think so, and I think this is what we're seeing. There's a certain amount of dismay in contemporary Western cultures because boundaries that have existed to maintain truth and to prevent us going in erroneous directions don't seem to be holding anymore. So in the political domain, if the Constitution can, in effect, be overwritten, edited, or rewritten simply according to prevailing thought patterns today, then what's the point of having a Constitution? One could say the same thing about the Lutheran Confessions. They have value only if you have people who are willing to humble themselves to the truth that they contain. But they don't really have significant value if the interpreter is always free to reinterpret and rewrite them according to his preference.

**WILKEN:** Is the same true of the postmodern approach to Holy Scripture?

**MENUGE:** Yes, it is. One thinks about the inerrancy of Scripture – very important and, unfortunately, just as much under attack today as it was in the 1970s. But if one can simply interpret away all problems, even if someone says, "Yes, I do believe it's inerrant," what do they mean by that? Well, it's inerrant spiritually. Or Dr. [John Warwick] Montgomery has talked about the idea of Gospel reductionism. "The Gospel, yes, that's true, but we can't trust the Bible in its secular content." Of course, this is a

contradiction since the Gospel, in fact, depends on historical fact that can be understood from a secular point of view. But in that way, one can say that one supports inerrancy and really do serious damage to the Gospel because one really rejects the whole objective, historical foundation for it.

**WILKEN:** So I can see why you said at the beginning that rationalism, which is kind of where the old historical critical approach to Scripture was, at least ostensibly, rooted in this notion that we can actually deconstruct a text and look at it in terms of what we think is historical. They were still dealing with – they believed something actually happened, that these texts were recorded for a reason and that they were not simply malleable in our hands today. They had, I guess you could say, rational reasons for rejecting the text. It sounds as though postmodernism, whether these things happened or not, really is not the relevant question at all. For the rationalist, it certainly is. But not for the postmodernist.

**MENUGE:** Yeah, the rationalist, of course, brought a tendentious assumption that was hostile to miracles and was ready to find legendary material and triggered the Scripture as if it was just a human document. There one could point out that their problem was that they weren't really faithful to reason itself. They should have been driven by the evidence and not their presuppositions. But now, of course, the evidence really is not an important point because your interpretation is much more significant than what the data is. At least the rationalist believed there was some data; it's just that rationalists often would misinterpret the data. Now, though, what is a misinterpretation? If interpretation is really what defines what we're going to call truth, then anything goes. That, I think, is a far more deadly condition.

**WILKEN:** You say that one of the ways we can actually examine in real time the effect of postmodernism in the Church is to look at

the so-called emergent church. What is it and why is that a good test case for what postmodernism does – [as] they would say, in the life of these particular faith communities?

**MENUGE:** There are a number of people here, Doug Pagitt and Rob Bell and so on, and Brian McLaren, and they had the idea that somehow, the church has made itself irrelevant to the culture and that we really have to have an authentic community, and the idea is that you witness by the church – many of them would argue that the way you find out whether Christianity is true is only by trying it out, by internally becoming a member of this language community. And of course, that's relativistic. One might find that one happens to like speaking with and about certain issues with certain people, but that doesn't tell you that what they're saying actually contacts objective reality. It could be that again, you've gathered around those people who want to say what your itching ears want to hear. So you lose that contact that you need with objective reality, that touchstone. How do you touch the Spirit? How do you know you haven't just put yourself in a community where they're saying what you want to hear?

**WILKEN:** Dr. Angus Menuge is our guest. We're talking about postmodernism as a challenge to Lutheranism, concluding *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week. Another half-hour with him on that subject right after this.

**[BREAK]**

**WILKEN:** Welcome back to *Issues, Etc.* I'm Todd Wilken. On this Friday afternoon, it's the challenge to Lutheranism in postmodernism, part of *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week. Dr. Angus Menuge is our guest, Professor and Chairman of the Department of Philosophy at Concordia University Wisconsin and President of the Evangelical Philosophical Society.

I want to stick with the subject a little bit of postmodernism as it manifests itself in the emergent church. Now, the emergent church, as you well know, Dr. Menuge, began as a very modest proposal. "Let's just sit down and have a conversation. Let's open a few questions that had previously been closed in theology." It is now, I think we could fairly say, aggressively anti-Christian. Is that the course of postmodernism in the church?

**MENUGE:** Well, one sees that transition over time, because it will begin by making statements which we see some church bodies use where they say, "Don't place a period where God intends a comma. We're saying we'd like to talk some more about these issues." This seems, initially, not so bad because you think, "Well, this is just a way of people expressing what they truly feel, and no doubt there has to be a place for that. But over time, it turns out that they're not neutral and they do have a particular agenda. When you track the teachings of many of these leaders of the emergent church, they really are, in fact, undercutting the Gospel. They'll tell you things like, "Well, we haven't really figured out the Gospel yet." And they will disagree with many of the church's moral teachings because they don't think that they fit people as they are today. And so over time, they'll come up with an agenda which they may still call Christian but which rejects many of the church's central teachings. For example, it may be close to certain kinds of miracles or open to process theology – all sorts of beliefs which one would have thought were heretical and directly opposite to the Christian faith. But once you open up the conversation to, "Well, where do people feel more comfortable today?" then you start to see this eclectic gathering of beliefs that one likes. Some of them may still be Christian, but many of them are not. And incoherence has never been a problem for postmodernists. They don't mind having contradictory sets of beliefs because they're

based on what people are willing to live with and what they like. And of course we're very good at liking things which are contradictory.

**WILKEN:** Explain that here. It's not just a fascination with contradictory statements, but just a disregard for things that are contradictory. How does postmodernism frame that particular aspect of itself?

**MENUGE:** Well, I think that ultimately, it's because if you are the interpreter and you are constructing your narrative, you begin then to become, in effect, a consumer. This is the way I would try to understand it. There's this remarkable account from a few years back from Seattle, the Rev. Ann Holmes Redding, an Episcopal priestess who said that she was a Christian Muslim. And one thought, "Well, how can that be? How can you affirm a belief system that declares the Trinity, the incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection, as Christianity does, but also affirm a belief system that denies all of those things? It's logically absurd. There cannot be such a thing." Well, one discovers that this individual simply liked certain practices. So the interpretation was based on solely electing practices that one liked and weaving a narrative that included those elements that one liked. One simply doesn't have to pay attention, if preference is what drives it, to contradictions or halls or floors of that kind.

**WILKEN:** That seems to be not just a principled, philosophical approach to truth. That seems to be the height of triviality, really, of trivializing one's own beliefs.

**MENUGE:** Yeah, it really is. It shows, I think, a kind of lost-ness. It, of course, at a deep level, is a kind of rebellion, right? It's based on rejecting there being external boundaries, whether they be vocational ones or orders of creation, or the objective difference between true and false, contradictions versus consistent statements,

and all the rest of it. All of these boundaries get in the way of what Harry Blamires famously calls “the imperious self.” He says, “If no meaning can be found in the objective scheme of things, then it must be sought in the experiencing subject. Having turned its back on all notions of the supernatural, it can look for authentication of its judgments only in the individual self.” And the problem is that when we turn to ourselves, we’re not consistent. We’re receiving massive contradictions. Plato, in fact, compared our desires long ago in *The Republic* to a multifarious beast. We want things and their opposite. We’d all like to lose weight by fine dining. We want respect but we also want to be self-indulgent. We want to be smart but not to work hard, to achieve all our work goals and yet also keep our family and friendships together. In other words, we really don’t make sense. We’re just a nest of desires, but what’s supposed to constrain those things? Reason. But also, what Plato called the “chest,” which enabled us to identify with goals higher than ourselves so that we would be willing to make a sacrifice for our family, for our country, for God. That we’re willing to do something for something greater than ourselves. It seems to me the abandonment of all of those objective characteristics – now you’ve got the self left. And the self is really rather lost, floundering around, going from one desire to the next. Our desires are at war with each other and they don’t make sense. So this is really very destructive at the individual level, at the level of the state, and also it works its way into the church. As you can see very clearly when you look at the few American religious landscape surveys, for example, and you find out that people who call themselves Christians nonetheless construct and pick and mix their own religious system.

**WILKEN:** So what becomes of the life of the church under postmodernism? What is its purpose? What means does it employ to get to that end?

**MENUGE:** Well, on a positive side, you’ll get people like Stanley Hauerwas, who will talk about the idea of collective witness. The church stands together as a community and gives a witness of its beliefs. Well, in and of itself, there’s nothing wrong with that. In fact, that’s rather impressive. The problem, though, is if you then conclude that the church’s teachings are simply relative to whatever a particular group of people is doing. And so what this does is it disconnects the Church from the great, invisible Church of all believers in this Gospel once received. That idea is replaced simply by lots of different groups who are following their own preferred agendas and living in their own communities. So it really does, I think, threaten the objectivity of the Gospel.

**WILKEN:** So what does the Gospel become under postmodernism?

**MENUGE:** Well, the Gospel is translated into many gospels. And this is where, of course, what Paul says in Galatians 1, is so profoundly anti-postmodern, because he says there is no other Gospel. We may from time to time claim that there is, but he says there isn’t. This is the thing that God gave us. This is how God acted in history to save us. It’s always described as an objective deposit. As I said at the beginning, where Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, “I delivered to you what I also received.” Not, “Well, I heard this account, but on the other hand, here’s my gospel. Here’s Gospel 2.0. And in time, brothers, you may want to develop Gospel 3.0 or 4.0, depending on the local variations in your church and culture.” No. He says, “I delivered to you what I also received.” And that’s really the critical element. We have to recover this idea of humility to what God has done and what God has given to us. Fundamentally, by privileging the interpreter, what lies behind that is really arrogance. Because instead of being reception of God’s Word, it becomes us developing our own Word because that’s what we’d rather listen to. And this, when

we think it through, I think is a crazy idea. If we're sick, as the Lutheran Confessions say, [in] Article II on original sin, if that is our condition, we will be saved by The Doctor and His medicine, not my preferred beliefs and lifestyles. Not how I would prefer to think about my illness. If we have an objective problem, only an objective solution can give us any hope.

**WILKEN:** We're talking about postmodernism as a challenge to Lutheranism. Dr. Angus Menuge is our guest, Professor and Chairman of the Department of Philosophy at Concordia University Wisconsin, President of the Evangelical Philosophical Society.

When we come back, is there any principle in postmodernism that would stop it from becoming radically individualistic, that every man is his own language community, his own interpreter, his own truth? We'll be right back.

**[BREAK]**

**WILKEN:** Dr. Angus Menuge is our guest. We're talking about the challenges to Lutheranism on this *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week Friday.

I'm wondering, Dr. Menuge, is there any principle in postmodernism that would stop someone from going the next step? That is, to start with "Truth arises from individual language communities" to saying, "Look, we can't even have communities because each man is his own language community, his own frame of reference, his own measure of the truth. In fact, each man is his own truth."

**MENUGE:** Yeah, that's the worry. That's a very insightful point. This is analogous to the worry about cultural relativism where you say, "Well, moral truth is defined by each culture." Observation: cultures consist of subcultures, and in the end, each individual can define a culture for himself or herself. The culture consisting of people

who agree with me. And then at that point the culture has really unraveled into a series of islands. So then perhaps the only reason for people to gather together in worship is because they broadly agree on a number of issues. So then we have the crazy idea that there are as many gospels as individuals, and we lose the whole idea of the body of Christ. The body of Christ is always described as a plurality of individuals with many functions, yes, but they all share this one life developed in the head, Christ. It's not that there are many heads; there is just one head. So the unity of the faith, that it's defined by Christ and it's the same Christ for all, completely starts to unravel. I like to juxtapose these two passages: W.B. Yeats liked to say that in the modern world, because of our individualism, things fall apart. The center cannot hold. And notice how that is the opposite of what we read in Colossians, where it tells us that in Christ, all things hold together. So really, it's fundamentally rejecting the idea that there is one Christ in whom all things [are] together. And when you do that, there's an aggressive unraveling, first into cultures and language communities, and then as you suggest, into individuals, and perhaps worse still, since individuals are not even consistent internally, then now what happens? The self begins even to lose its integrity.

**WILKEN:** So is it, in the end, if consistently followed, is it both nihilistic and narcissistic?

**MENUGE:** Yeah, I think it is. The paradox of narcissism, where you seek yourself, is that in the end, you lose even yourself. The reason is because internally, our desires are so inconsistent. What holds us together is just the opposite force, where we continually respect authorities. It seems to me postmodernism is fundamentally a creaturely rebellion. It wants to reject those limitations put in place by the orders of creation and God's law and the nature of us as a creature, and when we do that, not only do we lose access to God and His

transcendent Word as we should receive them, but in the end we also really lose ourselves. What am I except just a bundle of desires? And why say that any one of those is more “me” than another?

**WILKEN:** How does the church arm herself and defend herself against postmodernism?

**MENUGE:** I think one thing to do is, of course, to show that postmodernism is fundamentally illogical. People discover this, though, not by taking classes in logic, but by discovering boundaries in the most horrible way. They think that they can redefine their roles in the family, and then they discover that relationships are broken. Where they thought they would be happy by redefining themselves, they constantly discover that they are unhappy, and they begin to see that there are some objective boundaries that define who we are. So I think what the church needs to do is to really show an understanding of that brokenness, this loss, and explain it in terms of us walking away from these boundaries, so that then it can present Christ as a source of wholeness and healing. That’s what I think people need. Sinners need it all the time, but I think especially in our age, they need a map because they’re lost. They need something that will show them this big hole that is in them. I think that Pascal, when he talks about the infinite abyss that is in the heart of man, was really a very appropriate thinker. Though a 17<sup>th</sup> century thinker, he fits very well the stage that we are at. Or Kierkegaard, as well, where he talks about us wallowing in the aesthetic stage, where we’re simply consumers of various experiences, and yet we’re never happy. We’re restless, we’re always longing for something more. And to show people that actually what they’re longing for is something which is eternal, something which is holy, and that they can never get there from where they are. It’s impossible. Only Christ can bridge that gap. That is the kind of approach I think that we need. We need to reveal the bankruptcy of this idea

that we can fix ourselves through a therapeutic approach, where we’re consuming desires and going on to something else, really without rest. We’re just diverting ourselves from our predicament. And [...] the only solution that can help us is if God bridges this gap and heals us and gives us the wholeness we need. We need the Great Physician. We don’t need a preferred doctor.

**WILKEN:** Does our postmodern culture help explain the popularity of what people have called the “big box” megachurch movement, where the doctrinal beliefs of these faith communities can be found on an 8½x11-inch piece of paper, sometimes even less than that, usually articulating the things they believe, usually very little about the things they condemn?

**MENUGE:** Yeah, I think that has a lot to do with it, because that model, of course, is a consumer-driven model and you’re going to turn people away if you have too many divisive doctrines. So it inevitably leads to a lowest common denominator statement in the hopes that you can get the most people in, and of course then they can disagree in a thoroughly incoherent manner about everything else. And that doesn’t create a good environment if what one is hoping to do is to teach people sound doctrine, which is always Paul’s emphasis. And of course Jesus says in the Great Commission, “and teaching them everything I have commanded you.” But apparently not everything. Teach just a few things that He has commanded you, because those are the ones that most people can live with. So it does lead to, at best, a very muted Christianity, and to Christianity having much less influence on a person’s life than it could and it should.

**WILKEN:** Finally, then, Dr. Menuge, how is confessional Lutheranism...in what ways, briefly, is it antithetical to what we’ve been talking about here, postmodernism?

**MENUGE:** Well, because it sets forth so clearly the boundaries of the Christian life. Who is God? What is He like? What is the condition of original sin? How are we justified? What's required in our vocation? It's just very clear. It says that certain things are true and it excludes others. It's a highly coherent, thoroughly Biblical framework for all of Christian life. So what it's trying to do, precisely, is teach everything that Christ commanded us. And that's quite opposed to the consumer-driven postmodern model, which would allow individuals to consume those portions of Christianity that fit their preferred narrative. And I think it's the medicine that we need. As C.S. Lewis says, "We have to convince people of the unwelcome diagnosis." Well, that means we've got to get the nature of sin right. And the nature of sin certainly is not right in postmodern Christianity because it allows people to redefine the moral law in lots of different ways. And because it doesn't diagnose our problem correctly, it cannot present the true Gospel either. Those two go together. Articles Two and Four of the Augsburg Confession really stand or fall together.

**WILKEN:** Dr. Angus Menuge is Professor and Chairman of the Department of Philosophy at Concordia University Wisconsin. He's President of the Evangelical Philosophical Society. Dr. Menuge, thank you very much for being our guest.

**MENUGE:** Thanks very much for having me, Todd.

**WILKEN:** All of these things: pietism, rationalism, unionism, misisonalism, postmodernism, they all have one thing in common. They all say, in one form or another, that God's Word isn't enough. That God's Word isn't sufficient. Pietism says it's not sufficient for your certainty of salvation. Rationalism says that God's Word isn't sufficient as a source of truth. Unionism says that God's Word isn't what creates true unity in the church. Missionalism says that God's Word is insufficient to create and grow the church. And postmodernism, well, it just finally replaces God's Word altogether. That's what they have in common. That is what strikes at the heart of the truth of the Reformation in each one of these challenges to Lutheranism.

So what do we have to respond to it? Do we have to come up with a particular response to all five of these things and all of the other "-isms" that challenge the truth of God's Word? No, we hold fast to the truth of God's Word. We simply continue to do what the church has always done. We find our truth there, we find Jesus Christ there, and we proclaim that Jesus Christ and the whole truth of His Word to the whole world, whether they listen or not. And whatever "-ism" comes along, God's Word is sufficient to meet that challenge.

I'm Todd Wilken. Thanks for listening to *Issues, Etc.*

