



# Wittenberg Trail

## *From Baptist Minister to Lutheran: My Six-Decade Journey on the Wittenberg Trail*

by Dennis McFadden

On April 8, 2014, I sat before the Pastoral Colloquy Committee of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod to be examined for certification as a minister in the Lutheran Church. What would lead a 60-year-old to walk the Wittenberg Trail? How does one make such a significant journey when he has logged a lifetime as a Baptist, nearly 40 years as a Baptist minister, a current position as the president and CEO of a large Baptist affiliated retirement home ministry, not to mention a son who pastors a large evangelical church and a daughter who teaches Bible in an evangelical high school?

My story does not differ that much from others who have written here. Baptized at age nine upon “profession of faith” in a Baptist church, educated in evangelical institutions such as Westmont and Fuller, published in *Christianity Today* as an undergraduate, serving in pastoral roles in Baptist churches from 1975 onward, with five adult children active in evangelical congregations (two of them seminary graduates), I was an exemplar of the evangelical mindset.

My denomination, American Baptist Churches USA, was one of the mixed multitudes famous for its liberal tilt, yet with a strong evangelical heritage and several pockets of the country where theological conservatism predominated. After spending years on denominational committees at the national level, I knew what was “wrong” with our mainline denomination. It did not take much reflection to side with the conservatives in my regional judicatory when the Southern California/Arizona organization of 270 congregations voted to withdraw from the national ABCUSA over issues of biblical authority in the mid-1990s. After all, we could not support the latitudinarianism and loose views of the Bible that led to the ordination of homosexuals in our mainline body.

More locally, we were all committed evangelicals in every way. My pastorates in small, medium and larger congregations were marked by a strong church growth orientation. Each year, one week would be spent with our junior high students and another with our senior high young people at camp. Each summer, my colleagues and I shared the preaching duties, challenging groups of 300 teens to come forward and “accept Jesus into their hearts.” Using contemporary music, video and the latest means, we saw streams of teary-eyed teens coming forward to decide for Christ and to commit to be baptized when they returned home as their “first act of obedience.” We always shared Communion that final evening of camp where the kids were instructed that this was only a symbol, but one Jesus ordained, as a memorial of His sacrifice and our participation in the Christian family. In 1990, the congregation where I served as senior pastor was an early adopter of contemporary music in worship, featuring a traditional service with about 250 folks and another one with 95 decibel rock music for another 250.

Even after completing further graduate studies in management and leaving local church ministry to become an executive for our Baptist-affiliated retirement home in southern California, my orientation was decidedly “broad evangelical.” For more than three decades, it was my role on a judicatory committee to examine 500 candidates for ordination in the Baptist Church and to certify them ready.

Yet doubts nagged at me and left me disquieted. Evangelicalism seemed so earnest, yet dependent on flimsy human efforts and beset with a thoroughly moralistic orientation; fervent in its desire to experience God, yet stunningly shallow in its theory of how to do it; proclaiming to be “Bible-centered,” yet forced to practice hermeneutical gymnastics in order to reconcile the witness of the biblical record with our teaching, particularly our non-sacramental interpretations.

Evangelicalism as practiced in America suffers from moralism, mysticism and rationalism. This critique appears commonly enough in Lutheran writings. However, it accurately reflects my experience on the ground as an evangelical insider of nearly six decades who served in leadership in numerous evangelical congregations, denominational posts and institutions.

At the congregational level, evangelicals are beset with a *Little Engine that Could* type of moralism. Sermons intended to be “practical” and “applicable” to the real needs of the people often devolve to “Five Ways to Conquer Depression,” “Three Principles for a Happier Marriage” or some such thing. Use of the Bible, a much touted hallmark of evangelicalism, often ignores the Christological theme of Scripture (cf. Luke 24) in favor of moralistic principalizing of biblical narratives. Preachers exhort their listeners to “become a friend” like David with Jonathan or to conquer the Goliaths in our lives. Current preaching even tends to blur with that of motivational speakers and life coaches who dispense “power principles for successful living” and how to experience “your best life now.”

When my wife and I visited a large Bible church a few months back, we heard the preacher begin his sermon with a list of “shoulds,” conclude with more “shoulds” and basically “should” all over the congregation in between. The only mention of Jesus Christ came in the list of a half dozen applications at the end where (you guessed it) we were told that we “should” be Christ-centered. As a preacher, my sermons employed powerful emotive illustrations, supported by evocative music and concluding with stirring appeals to the will. I challenged people to “decide” to surrender to Christ and to “do something” about their faith.

Coupled with the moralism, evangelical practice eschews the biblical means of grace in favor of immediacy in the experience of the divine. Revivalism and the Second Great Awakening helped create the modern American mind; and yet the American mind, with its voluntarism and individualism, powerfully defined and shaped the modern religious experience of Americans as well. The resulting direction is one of a faith turned inward and inveterately individualistic.

Rather than expecting to meet God in the objectivity of the Word and the Sacraments, evangelicals seek an audience that takes place in the subjectivity and inner recesses of the human heart. In place of a mediated means of grace, evangelicals crave an immediacy of a mystical sort. In charismatic and Pentecostal circles, this type of connection with God can come with experiences ranging from “words of knowledge” and prophetic visions to the ever-present evidence of speaking in tongues. For non-charismatic evangelicals, the pattern may involve more Keswickian, or holiness style, spirituality or simply the individualized

decisional theology of revivalism. To facilitate these immediate divine encounters, worship leaders skillfully move the participant through the flow of the service with music designed to evoke and produce a strong emotional response in the listener, often concluding (as one parody of evangelical worship puts it) with “strings that will make you cry.” Arms raised high and tears streaming down cheeks “prove” that it all “works.”

When one turns from the congregation to the academy, evangelicalism suffers from a pervasive and destructive rationalism. One of my seminary alma maters was founded on the premise of a non-legalistic fundamentalism (first dubbed “neo evangelicalism” before becoming known by the shorthand “evangelicalism”). Yet within two decades of its startup, inerrancy was dropped from the statement of beliefs and soon afterward numerous other doctrines came in for scrutiny too. Schooled in higher critical methodologies, yet proudly clinging to the badge of evangelical identity due to being “born again,” such scholarship often affects the mien of a white-coated scientist treating God as a frozen section sample to be put under the microscope and subjected to objective scrutiny.

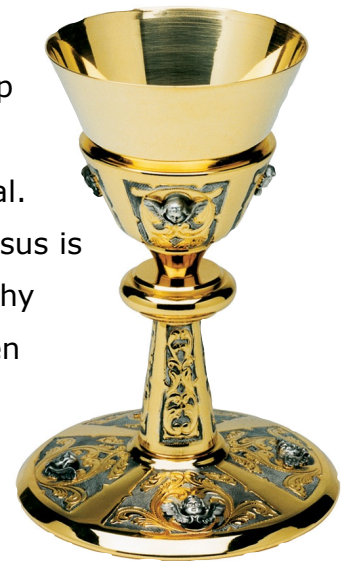
The rationalism of the academy may be partly blamed on the characteristic way in which the Bible and Christian faith are addressed without confessional boundaries and ecclesiastical controls. In order to be transdenominational, doctrinal distinctives were shed, reducing the required core beliefs to a mere handful. Historian David Bebbington observes that evangelical priorities may be properly described by a quadrilateral of distinctive traits: conversionism, biblicism, crucicentrism and activism. So narrow a foundation can hardly bear the accumulated weight of a robust superstructure. Recent examples of evangelical leaders denying the existence of hell, a vicarious atonement, justification by faith alone and embracing universalism make sense in a world without confessions or with only a reductionist doctrinal core.

Another reason for evangelical rationalism probably comes from the more pernicious effects of revivalism and pietism. The shift from the objective means of grace, such as Word and Sacrament, to the interior life of the believer leaves little basis for judgment beyond omnipotent autonomous reason.

Finally, the history of contemporary evangelicalism traces to the Reformed side of the Reformation. Luther's commitments led him to "believe, teach and confess" whatever the Bible said, sometimes permitting elements of paradox and open issues to remain without a complete and final resolution. Calvin and his successors were rigorous in insisting upon a tighter system of logical consistency and coherence. Once one privileges the sovereignty of God as a first principle, the full system of Dordtian Calvinism follows rather logically and self-evidently with an almost "Q.E.D." mathematical elegance. Difficult doctrines such as double predestination, irresistible grace and limited atonement come almost naturally by rationalistic deduction.



In addition to these problems, decades of pastoral ministry left me dissatisfied with my doctrine of the "real absence of Jesus" from the Lord's Supper and the merely symbolic meaning of Baptism. Obviously nobody expects George Washington or Benjamin Franklin to show up for a July Fourth fireworks display. That patriotic commemoration is clearly a memorial. But unless we believe, teach and confess that Jesus is truly "in, with and under" the bread and the cup, why even bother with it? And turning to Baptism, even Baptists seem to sense that something is horribly amiss in their practice, inventing baby dedication (a "dry Baptism"?), a practice unmentioned by the Bible.



The lack of sacramentology and the tendency toward moralism, mysticism and rationalism led me to begin a quest to re-examine our Reformational roots. As a Baptist, it was not too difficult to read Calvin. Even in its most non-Calvinistic instantiation, the theological architecture of Baptist theology follows closely the forms and patterns of the great Reformer of Geneva. And with the growing interest in Reformed theology among evangelicals, Baptists like John Piper, Wayne Grudem and Al Mohler were not much different from more Presbyterian R.C. Sproul, Michael Horton or other five-point Calvinists.

Luther, however, was a tougher read. He sounded more medieval, less modern; more bombastic, less moderate; more radical, less incremental. Yet Luther's stubborn insistence on being Christ-centered, cross-centered, catholic and always delivering forgiveness to comfort troubled consciences won me over. His doctrine of vocation, theology of the cross and hammering away at God's use of Word and Sacraments as the means of grace were transformational. Both my wife and I yearned to participate in a church that fit our theology.

Finding such a home did not take long. When Jeanette and I moved to Fort Wayne in 2011 so that she might become a stay-at-home grandma, we discovered it to be a LCMS Valhalla, a place where Lutheran theology was not merely an academic curiosity, but openly professed and practiced outside the classroom lecture hall. Decades ago in our evangelical college, we had enjoyed Lutheran theology professor Rod Rosenblatt, and my long-time administrative assistant in California was the wife of a LCMS pastor. So it did not seem too unusual to visit a Lutheran church in Fort Wayne.

Pastors from the church challenged us to read Luther's *Small Catechism with Explanations* and offered to discuss it with us. After devouring the book in one sitting, soon it was followed by *The Lutheran Difference*, *Lutheranism 101* and *Why I Am a Lutheran* over the next couple of weeks. Recognizing that he had me hooked, my pastor reeled in his Baptist fish with a suggestion to read Walther's *Law and Gospel*. Finally! All of the disquiet and nagging doubts formed over more than five decades, emerging concerns with the internal problems and contradictions of evangelicalism, and fears about the future of a Christianity more in tune with the American mind than the biblical Gospel came to a head when we took our confirmation vows before our congregation in Fort Wayne the first weekend in March 2012. It was only after finishing the liturgy that it hit me: This was the 34th anniversary of my original ordination as a Baptist! *Soli Deo Gloria* indeed!

The last two years as a Lutheran have been dramatic. The Law and Gospel structure of the Bible has been obscured in much evangelical teaching. In place of the freedom of the Gospel, evangelicalism offers a confusing mixture of the two that leads either to despair or to Pharisaical smugness. Walther correctly argued that when you mix Law and Gospel, you end up overthrowing Christianity

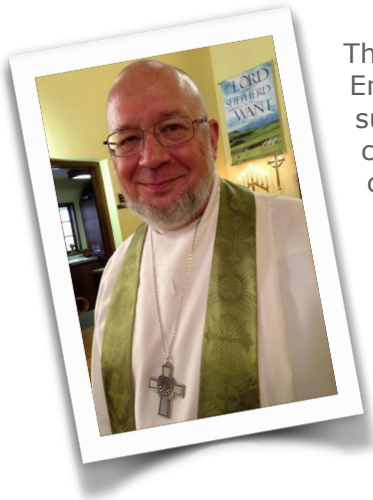
altogether. In place of the never-ending busyness of the program of evangelical moralism, we have appreciated the corrective of the Lutheran doctrine of vocation. While God does not need our good works, our neighbor does. Doing everything “as unto the Lord” frees the Christian from the artificial (and theologically incorrect) notion that some works are more spiritually important than others. In place of neomonasticism and neoclericalism (cf. the implications of “every member a minister” teaching), we have Luther’s wholesome and psychologically superior corrective of vocation.

The objectivity of the Sacraments introduced an epiphany for both my wife and me. Lutheran spirituality does not retreat into the subjectivity of the human heart with its inconstancy and fickleness. Rather, like the direction of the incarnation toward, not away from creation, it moves to the Word spoken and heard, the water, the bread and the wine. Lutheran piety begins with that which passes through the “eye hole, ear hole and pie hole,” as one wag put it.

Finally, the Lutheran insistence that we “believe, teach and confess” what the Bible says has released me from the hermeneutical gymnastics required by rationalism. Lutheran theologian Francis Pieper rightly observed that rationalism is not only futile, but injurious to faith. The studied effort to “get around” the plain teachings of Scripture in favor of a Calvinist, Arminian, Pentecostal, feminist or dispensational form of evangelicalism requires the exegete to privilege some teachings of the Bible while relativizing or outright disregarding others. It rarely succeeds, at least not for long. To the extent that one actually becomes proficient at this art, it only serves to undermine full confidence in the authority of the Bible as the Word of God. When you practice how to confront a biblical teaching and successfully deprive it of its power, you have learned how to assume the role of the tempter in the Garden: “Has God *really* said . . .”

These are some of the reasons that led me to sit in St. Louis, facing the Colloquy committee of the LCMS on that April day. All of my experience as a lifelong Baptist and minister in that tradition were juxtaposed with the very different traditions and teachings of Lutheranism. The next day the Colloquy committee voted to certify me for pastoral ministry in the LCMS. Three weeks later, the board of my Baptist retirement home ministry received and voted to accept my

resignation as president and CEO. One cannot imagine, and only God knows, how these next years will proceed. But by the grace of God, they will be found in the family of Missouri Synod Lutherans. Not every trip on the Wittenberg Trail, you see, can be completed quickly. Mine took almost six decades.



The Rev. Dennis E. McFadden and his wife, Jeanette, are members of Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, Ind. Dennis retired this summer after 17 years leading a large Baptist-affiliated retirement community in California, following 22 years pastoring Baptist congregations in southern California. He was admitted to the ministerium of the LCMS this spring by colloquy and intends to use his remaining active years assisting in ministry in his adopted LCMS family.