

Issues, Etc.

JOURNAL



A Lutheran Letter to Ex-Evangelicals

by Todd Wilken

Wittenberg Trail:
My Journey to the
Lutheran Christian Tradition

by Rob Kieselowsky

Wittenberg Trail:
Sixteenth Century Strasbourg

by Ken Schurb

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Wittenberg Trail: My Journey to the Lutheran Christian Tradition

by Rob Kieselowsky

I do not exaggerate when I say that historic Lutheranism saved me from falling off a precipice of despair at a time when I nearly abandoned the Christian faith. So I love it.

I learned the hard way that American Christianity is a mere approximation of Biblical Christianity, and in the end, not enough to sustain faith. As one who was taught the Lutheran Christian tradition as an adult, this beautifully clear expression of Holy Scripture is what animates my church-planting work in Philadelphia. I am driven with a passion for Christ's Word and His life-giving body and blood graciously bestowed in Holy Communion.

I grew up in a Bible church in which the teaching was relatively haphazard, without a unifying system to understand the Scriptures. I was baptized at 12 years old, after giving a testimony of my conversion in front of the congregation. Then, I spent my freshmen year of college at a Bible institute at a Baptist camp in the Adirondacks where I read the Scriptures all the way through. I was heavily influenced at the time by Calvinist theology. It offered a sense of substance and focus. I transferred to a Bible college near Philadelphia to complete my bachelor's degree and in my junior year I spent a semester abroad, studying in Israel among students from different evangelical colleges from all over America. In Israel, I first began to understand the broader scope of historic Christianity, visiting Presbyterian,

Anglican, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic worship services. And for the first time, I saw a common devotion to the Lord's Supper and the sacraments.

I looked for something of substance when I returned to the States for my final year of college. I joined a large Presbyterian church and eventually studied at Westminster Seminary.

And spiritually, I burned out.

I had returned to a place where there was a tremendous amount of Bible and theological study but little spiritual care. Specifically, the idea that one's spiritual well-being and growth is a matter of biblical and theological knowledge ran its course. Calvinist theology in practice emphasizes the accumulation of Bible knowledge over preaching of Christ crucified and the objective gifts of the Lord's Supper and Holy Baptism. As a result, spiritual maturity becomes learning more stuff. And I had learned a lot of stuff already.

My soul was in bad shape when I received an offer to teach history at a Christian high school in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. I knew I needed something different. I thought for sure that I would have to abandon biblical theology and a foundation of justification by faith alone in Christ alone to worship in a setting that valued historic liturgy. Desperate and willing to try something different, I attended my first Lutheran service at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA. To my great joy, I found beautiful liturgy and sound biblical theology, along with strong preaching and true pastoral care by Rev Christopher Esget. It seemed too good to be true.

My wife and I had both grown up singing Baptist hymns and were very disillusioned by modern forms of worship. We longed for a church that cherished hymns. It was challenging when we realized that the Lutheran tradition possessed theologically rich liturgy but that most of the hymns were foreign to us. The German

chorales and ancient Latin hymns were a significant culture shock, but they quickly drew us in by the depth of their substance.

I also remember being a little upset with Pastor Esget that I couldn't take Holy Communion right away—I had a degree in theology! After he patiently catechized us over several months, we learned to rejoice in the gift of the Small Catechism. Finally, here was a tool to unify our understanding of the Scriptures. With the catechism as a guide and a beautiful Divine Service to heal our souls, my wife and I were confirmed on Easter 2003.

A few years later, with great confidence bestowed by the Lutheran tradition, I had to sit my wife down and tell her that I thought I needed to go to seminary again.

Now the Lord has seen fit to call me to serve in Philadelphia. I currently care for a congregation just west of the city and also am cultivating a new congregation within the heart of the city. Logos Lutheran is the first-ever LCMS congregation in Center City. Regionally, there are 6 million people, and it is the most underserved city in our synod. We gather each week for Holy Communion because the tools we use to win people to the faith should be the same things that will sustain their faith. There is no gimmick or marketing strategy that can create and sustain truth faith in Christ like being instructed by means of the Small Catechism and, in real repentance, joining true communion with the Savior of the world.

Christians down through the ages have prayed the words of John 1:14 at Communion: “And the Word (*logos*) became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” When we began meeting in the heart of Philadelphia, we chose the name Logos Lutheran as the name of the church. The aim is to proclaim Christ crucified, the Word made flesh, distinctly and unapologetically from the Lutheran perspective. I am thoroughly convinced that our great Lutheran theological heritage is a gift to be

treasured. Though many new churches in Philadelphia avoid a clear affiliation with a theological tradition in an attempt to quickly increase membership, we remain convinced that Lutheran teaching and identity will be the bedrock of a congregation that will endure.

We seek a faith that clings to the Word that took on flesh to suffer and die, to shed His precious blood for the entirety of humanity. This new church has formed in order that many might hear the Word, truly believe in the Christ, and receive His body and blood given for the forgiveness of sins. The confessional Lutheran tradition excels at cultivating a humble spirit that clings to Christ alone and His gifts to carry redeemed sinners through this life.

The Word continues to rescue my soul and the souls of those in my care. Christ continues to come to us, forgive us, and lead us so that we might delight in His will and walk in His ways. And I still love it.



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