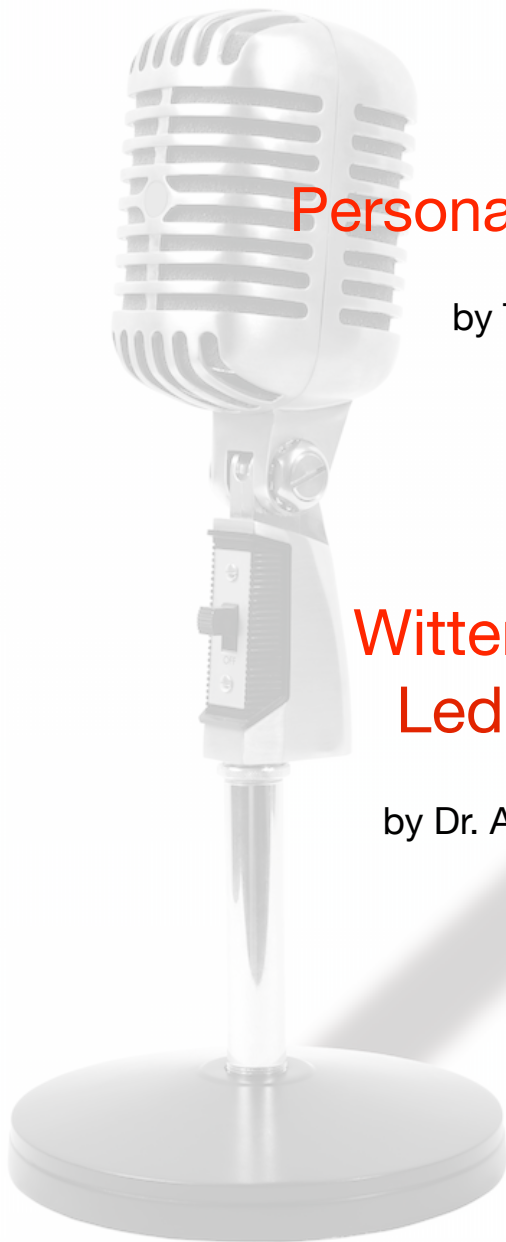


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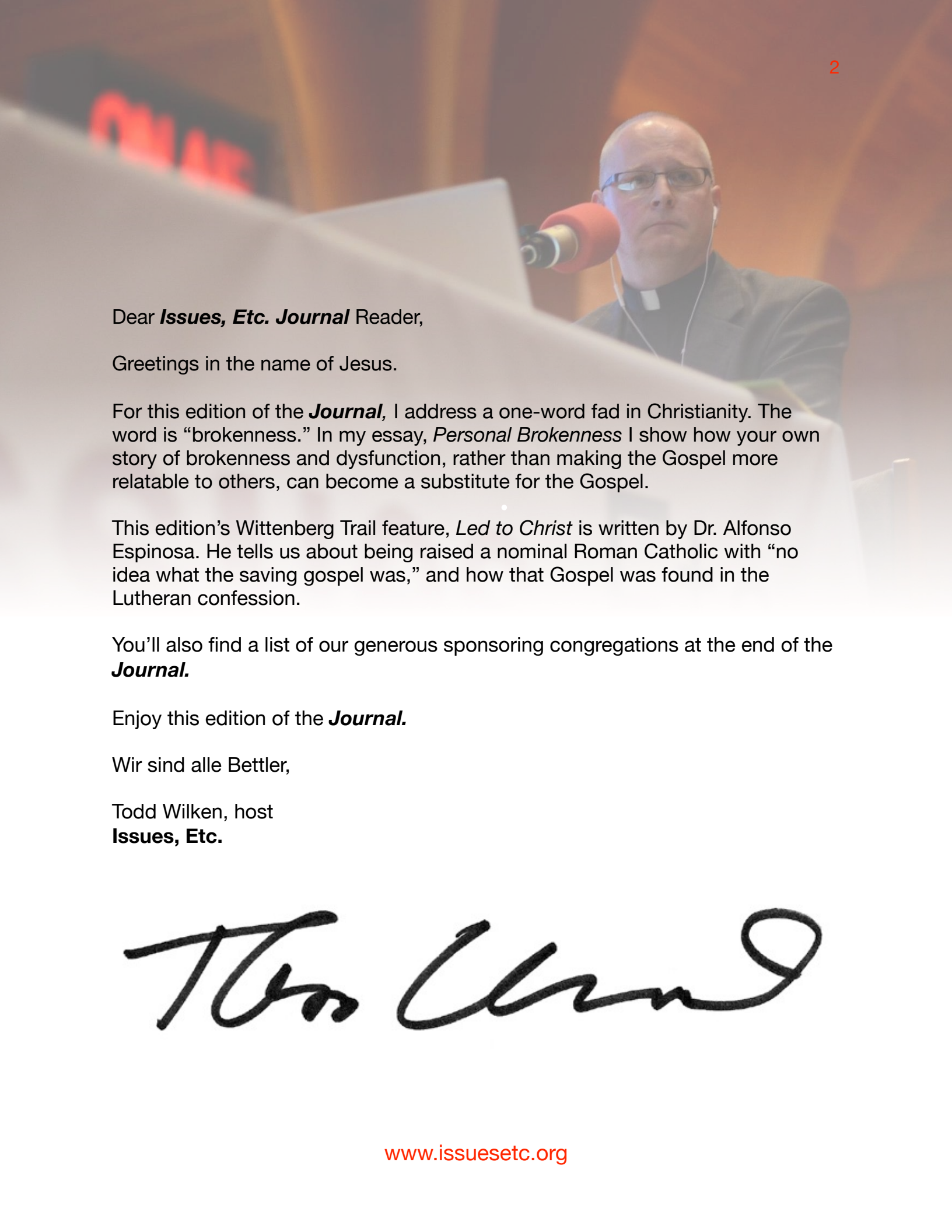
Personal Brokenness

by Todd Wilken

Wittenberg Trail: Led to Christ

by Dr. Alfonso Espinosa

Fall—2018

A man with glasses and a clerical collar is speaking into a red microphone. He is looking slightly to the right. The background is blurred, showing some red and orange lights.

Dear **Issues, Etc. Journal** Reader,

Greetings in the name of Jesus.

For this edition of the **Journal**, I address a one-word fad in Christianity. The word is “brokenness.” In my essay, *Personal Brokenness* I show how your own story of brokenness and dysfunction, rather than making the Gospel more relatable to others, can become a substitute for the Gospel.

This edition’s Wittenberg Trail feature, *Led to Christ* is written by Dr. Alfonso Espinosa. He tells us about being raised a nominal Roman Catholic with “no idea what the saving gospel was,” and how that Gospel was found in the Lutheran confession.

You’ll also find a list of our generous sponsoring congregations at the end of the **Journal**.

Enjoy this edition of the **Journal**.

Wir sind alle Bettler,

Todd Wilken, host
Issues, Etc.

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Todd Wilken".

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Personal Brokenness

by Todd Wilken

If there were an award for the most overused and misused word in the popular Christian vocabulary, it would have to go to the word “broken.”

I am a broken person.

We connect to each other and to God through our shared brokenness.

All of us are broken. By acknowledging our flaws and imperfections, we can find the beauty and strength that come from our brokenness.

When a word enters Christian parlance, the first question we should ask is, what does it mean? Is this word just another way of teaching an old truth of Scripture, or is this new word introducing a new doctrine?

When Scripture describes Christians as broken, it is always talking about repentance. The prime example is in Psalm 51:17, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” Here are a few other examples:

My spirit is broken, my days are extinguished, The grave is ready for me.
(Job 17:1)

I have been forgotten like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel. (Psalm 31:12)

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.
(Psalm 34:18)

Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice.
(Psalm 51:8)

Reproach has broken my heart and I am so sick. And I looked for sympathy, but there was none, And for comforters, but I found none.
(Psalm 69:20)

He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. (Psalm 147:3)

The Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted. (Isaiah 61:2)

Is this how Christians are using the word “broken” when they say things like, “I am a broken person,” or “We all have our own stories of brokenness”? Often when Christians talk about their brokenness they aren’t taking about repentance. They aren’t saying, “I’m repentant.” Rather, they are saying, “I’m dysfunctional, I’m flawed, my life is messy, in disarray, I don’t have it all together.”

Call it Personal Brokenness. It began with the evangelicals, borrowing from the language of self-help and group therapy. They were “broken” before it was cool. Evangelical pastor Erik Reed writes,

Brokenness. Listen, and you will hear it. Songs in worship gatherings and on Christian radio contain it. Churches use it on their websites to describe their culture to potential visitors. Pastors and leaders stand on stage and explain how broken they are and how their church is a place for broken people. Congregants use the word to describe themselves. Brokenness has never been so popular.¹

Lately, even Evangelicals have started to see a problem. Articles have begun appearing online about the dangers of Personal Brokenness. Even Evangelicals have realized that romanticizing personal dysfunction and glamorizing bad life decisions can lead to a “more-broken-than-thou” one-upmanship among pastors and laypeople.

Personal Brokenness isn’t simply a new way to express an old Scriptural truth. It is itself a new teaching. What is it?

Personal Brokenness Is a Means of Grace

Tullian Tchividjian is a best-selling Christian author and the former pastor of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. He is perhaps the most famous evangelist for the gospel of Personal Brokenness.

Tchividjian has turned his own story of brokenness (adultery, divorce, public disgrace and removal from the pastoral office) into a cottage industry. In his writings, Tchividjian sometimes uses the word brokenness to mean sin, and sometimes to mean merely the dysfunction and messiness of life. The two are often confused. Here's a good example. In a blog post titled, "The Good News of Dysfunction" Tchividjian has written about being welcomed by his second wife's extended family:

When I met my wife Stacie and she started to tell me about her jacked-up family, I was taken aback. All of the issues on that list—from teen pregnancies to multiple divorces to affairs—make up just a small portion of the many dysfunctional narratives of her large and extended family.... I instinctively latched onto a piece of moralistic driftwood to help me think I was better off than they were. After all, I came from one of the "good" families, an intact family, a famous Christian family. Sure, we have our own form of dysfunction, but not like her family. Our sins are more "respectable", "normal", and "acceptable." The sins of her family are more explicitly and socially grievous. But all of my blind, self-righteous nonsense was confronted head-on when this rag-tag group of bedraggled "less thans" welcomed me with open arms. They embodied Jesus' words that "those who have been forgiven much, love much."

Tchividjian concludes:

But the beauty that emanates from their brokenness is this: they comprehend something profound about God's mercy because they comprehend something profound about their messiness.²

What does brokenness mean here? To be fair, we really don't know. Is it sin? Is it the negative consequences of sin? It is merely the fact that I can't get my act together? It seems to be all of these rolled together.

Is it biblical to talk about the “Good News” of our sin/brokenness/dysfunction/messiness? No.

Tchividjian’s writing is typical of the message of Personal Brokenness. Sin and its consequences are a frequent subject—not as a warning, or a call to repentance, but as a kind of means of Grace.

Our brokenness isn’t a state from which we need to be rescued by the Good News of Jesus Christ. Rather our brokenness is itself a kind of Good News, something that itself emanates beauty and comfort. But Scripture never describes our sin or its consequences in our lives as a source of comfort, much less “Good News.”



Personal Brokenness Comes in Degrees

While everyone is equally sinful, not everyone’s life is equally messed up by their sin. Many Christians, sinners that they are, don’t throw their marriages, families and careers into ruin. They manage, by God’s grace, to avoid some of the worst consequences of their sin.

So by that measure, some Christians are more broken than others. This is something Personal Brokenness readily admits and emphasizes. Look again at Tchividjian’s statement: “the beauty that emanates from their brokenness is this: they comprehend something profound about God’s mercy because they comprehend something profound about their messiness.” So, what about those Christians whose lives aren’t as messy and dysfunctional? Do they comprehend less about God’s mercy? Apparently so.



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If brokenness comes in degrees, and if the degree of your brokenness determines your comprehension of God's mercy, then the more broken you are, the more mercy you comprehend.

Again, this is the problem with Personal Brokenness. It creates two classes of Christians: those who really comprehend God's mercy because their lives are a train wreck, and those who don't fully comprehend God's mercy because their lives aren't. The former "get" the Gospel, the latter don't.

This is an obvious overreaction to late 20th century evangelicalism's emphasis on "God's wonderful plan for your life." If Evangelicals of the recent past portrayed the Christian life as all rainbows and sunshine, with the "real Christians" living their best lives now, Personal Brokenness stands that on its head and thereby tumbles off the horse on the other side. According to Personal Brokenness, the "real Christians" are now those whose lives are most screwed up; because they are the only ones who can truly understand God's Grace.

Personal Brokenness Is Personal

Personal Brokenness has a penchant for personal testimony. An author at a Christian blog, Dominick Santore, writing of a fellow contributor, explains this fondness for autobiography:

I'm not Chad Bird. None of us are. But like him, we've been broken. We've dealt with our share of suffering. We've all got a story to tell about it. Some of us don't do it on paper. Some of us do in conversations over coffee, looking across the table at someone with the raw expression of honesty written on our faces. Some of us do it in small groups, urging people with our stories to see what grace and mercy really looks like, so they might find the courage to follow suit.³

This may help answer the question of why so many Christians are drawn to Personal Brokenness. Evangelicalism has a long history of personal testimony. The Evangelical testimony was about how much your life had

improved since being saved. The testimony of Personal Brokenness may be about how little your life has improved, but the subject of the story remains the same: you and your life.

This all comes with the best of intentions. It's an attempt to say to others, "I'm no better than you are. I'm a sinner just like you." And this is a good thing to do. Erik Reed puts it this way:



One value at the church I pastor... is "pompous-free realness." This refers to our unwillingness to celebrate facades or masks. We discourage pretending in church because there is a full quota on churches hosting weekly masquerade balls. Churches must be places of refuge for hurting people. People crave realness. So, I am for broken people and welcoming the broken. I do not discourage brokenness.⁴

But the testimony of Personal Brokenness seems designed to help others relate to the messenger more than the message:

We have opportunities to paint vivid pictures of brokenness and heartache, and we have an even greater opportunity to frame that picture with mercy, grace, forgiveness and love... To paint this picture, to frame it, and hang it across your body for someone to see, is to share the Gospel.⁵

The picture Personal Brokenness paints is "brokenness and heartache." God's "mercy, grace, forgiveness and love" are the frame. So ask yourself, *which is usually more important, the picture or the frame?* What is the gospel being shared if the picture is one's own brokenness and heartache, and God's mercy is merely the frame?

Personal Brokenness as Another Gospel

If others need to hear the story of your life before they can hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ, something is wrong. If God's mercy applies only to the degree of your dysfunction, we are dealing with a different gospel.

What makes it different is not that it denies the sufficiency of Jesus saving work, but that it denies that His work applies fully to every Christian, regardless of the state of their life.

What makes it different is not that it fails to present the story of the Savior, but that it presents that work as merely a frame to the more important story of personal brokenness.

Jesus bled and died for all sinners. This means that His Gospel is for all sinners—no exceptions, no distinctions, no conditions to qualify. The Gospel is for BOTH the guy who can't hold down a job or keep a wife, AND the successful businessman who can. The Gospel is for BOTH the girl with a promiscuous past AND Grandma who never slept with anyone but Grandpa.

Should Christians be honest about the state of their lives? Of course. Admit your sin and dysfunction, but don't allow them to become the point. Far less should they become the standard that others must match to qualify for God's mercy.

This is why when Scripture uses the word "broken" it is always talking about repentance. The Brokenness of repentance is a miracle worked in the heart of sinners by God Himself. The Brokenness of repentance doesn't come in



degrees. The Brokenness of repentance doesn't look for comfort in your brokenness, but in Jesus death on the Cross. The Brokenness of repentance isn't about you; it's about Jesus and Jesus alone.

If You Really Want the Gospel to Be Clear

If you really want the Gospel to be clear, then be clear. If you're talking about sin, then use the word sin. If you're talking about repentance then use that word. If all you're talking about is how you don't have your life together, don't confuse that with sin or repentance. Use the word "broken" the way the Bible uses the word. It will avoid a lot of confusion.



If you really want the Gospel to be clear, stop worrying about whether or not people can relate to you and your story. Besides, people like to talk about themselves. Your personal story of brokenness is very interesting to you, but it is less interesting to others.

If you really want the Gospel to be clear, don't send a mixed message about finding comfort in your own brokenness when the only comfort for sinners is in Jesus Christ.

If you really want the Gospel to be clear, remember, the Gospel isn't about you.

If you really want the Gospel to be clear, remember, the Gospel doesn't need your personal testimony to make it relevant or relatable.

If you really want the Gospel to be clear, talk less about yourself and your life and more about Jesus and His.

If you really want the Gospel to be clear, then make Jesus the picture, not the frame. Paint that picture, but make sure that it is a portrait of Jesus, His life, His death, His sacrifice at the Cross, His mercy and His forgiveness.

¹Erik Reed, "Pastors & Churches: Don't Celebrate Brokenness," April 20, 2018, <https://ftc.co/resource-library/blog-entries/pastors-and-churches-dont-celebrate-brokenness>.

²Tullian Tchividjian, "The Good News of 'Dysfunction'," <https://www.tullian.net/articles/the-good-news-of-dysfunction>.

³Dominick Santore, "I'm Not Chad Bird," <https://www.chritholdfast.org/blog/im-not-chad-bird>.

⁴Reed, "Pastors & Churches"

⁵*Ibid.*



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Wittenberg Trail: Led to Christ

by Dr. Alfonso Espinosa

My journey from Roman Catholicism to Confessional Lutheranism was the result of divine monergism; the outcome of *sola gratia*. All I did in contribution to the LORD's gracious work was fight against Him. Thanks be to God that His love and mercy in Christ is stronger than the resistance of the enemy of God (Ro 5:10). In Christ, life overtakes death.

I was born to loving Mexican-American parents who demonstrated dedication and commitment to family. I was proud of my dad Robert, a U.S. Marine who served in the Pacific arena during World War II. My mother was tireless and made it her priority in life to serve her family. They were nominally Roman Catholic in practice, but thoroughly Roman Catholic in cultural identity.

Though we did not attend weekly mass, our house had beautiful crucifixes adorning all the bedrooms. That sacred sign indelibly impressed me, but I never knew its significance. My parents identified with the Catholic Church to the extent that it went without saying that children were to be baptized, and (at the very least) receive catechesis for first Holy Communion. My mother taught me the Lord's Prayer, and because she was a good Catholic mother, I also learned the Hail Mary. When I was little, she blessed me with the sign of the cross while speaking the name of God over me: *"God bless my baby in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen."*

Through all of this, my Roman Catholic mother was -- to the best of her ability -- my first catechist. She did not hesitate to teach me that the LORD created the heavens and earth. She would say as we did yard work together under the beautiful sky, "How can anyone say that there is no God? Just look at

what God has made!” My sister Susan, ten years my senior, talked to me about the life of Christ, and made sure I knew what occurred on Christmas and Easter. We also learned that in addition to the rites of the church and sacraments, weddings and funerals were embedded in the life of the church.

Furthermore, basic Christian ethics were solid: sexual intimacy was for marriage between a man and woman; marriage was life-long, and divorce was shameful; children were sacred and abortion unthinkable. It was inappropriate to curse, and it was sinful to disrespect and not obey parents. This is to say that The Ten Commandments were held in high esteem. They were to be obeyed. They were not negotiable.

Still, in all of this, I had no idea what the saving Gospel was. I was as religious as I knew how, but I knew *nothing* of grace. Making matters worse, I didn’t understand my violation of God’s Law, so I perceived no need for God’s salvation. I was in trouble and didn’t know it.

I entered high school, therefore, with the following state of mind: attending mass was not essential, but believing in God’s existence, coupled with being a good person, was the key. I had the sense that if I honored my parents and lived well (in accord with the religious markers detailed above) I had every reason to consider myself right with God.

I was oblivious, however, to the fact that I was holding to the natural religion of man. I had swallowed – hook, line and sinker – what Luther warned of, namely, *the presumption of righteousness*. While I would not have hesitated to say, “I believe in Jesus Christ,” I did not know why I needed Him, or what He had done to save me. The crucifix was a mystery in the sense that its meaning was hidden from me. It was good, it was holy, but I didn’t know why. I took false comfort in believing that as long as I was doing my best while holding to the basic teachings of the church, then I was good.

What had *not* happened was my knowing a Christ-centered faith. Jesus Christ was *a part* of “the faith”. We must be careful here: all the things which

flow *from Christ* (like the prayers, Divine Service, good works, holy vocation, as well as the sacred crucifix) are indeed holy things *when in fact they flow from Christ*. But when they do not hold up the centrality of *solus Christus*, then the holy things easily become the things of *anthropocentric religion*. Their man-centered approach assumes that we will be deemed worthy of God's grace and eternal life by our works and our lives.

In this system *grace* itself is something different, and not grace at all. Here, grace is *quantitative and infused*. It corresponds to what we do, so that what we do is indicative of our efforts to substantiate grace. Our life – what we do – becomes the focus of the religionist. Grace itself takes on a different meaning from the grace spoken of in the Lutheran Confessions on the basis of Scripture. According to Scripture, grace is imputed. Grace is what is in the mind of God on account of Christ alone. Grace is completely and utterly *extra nos* (from outside of us).

Then, as a young teenager, I ran into a beautiful upperclassman and fell head over heels (my wife approves of my sharing this for the purposes of this column). Nancy (of sacred memory) was a baptized and confirmed member of Church of Our Savior Lutheran Church (LC-MS) in Delano, CA. I was smitten and asked how I could continue to see her. She informed me that *that* wasn't happening unless I came to her church. That was an easy call for a young man with self-serving motives. I would have gone out to dig a ditch if I could just see her again. Going to her church did not pose a problem. I am probably being too extreme in my description, recalling that my upbringing considered church attendance a good thing (though I had never developed the discipline). It was a two-for-one deal: I could please God and see the girl at the same time! When was life this good?!

That was when everything changed. Sitting in that LCMS pew I was taught the Divine Service in *The Lutheran Hymnal* on page 15 and the Service of the Word on page 5. The liturgy was more shaped by the Word of Christ than I had ever seen it before. I was learning it for the first time. The Word of Christ

enveloped me. It was an experience of sight and sound. The stained glass above the altar was an image I will never forget: the Good Shepherd Jesus holding His lamb. I was the lamb. This experience was about Jesus holding me.

Then there was my introduction to our hymnody. “Chief of Sinners Though I Be” was one of the first hymns that provided me a visceral sense of the Gospel. It put forth in a simple way my great malady. God’s answer was crystal clear: *Jesus shed His blood for me; Died that I might live on high, Lived that I might never die, As the branch is to the vine, I am His, and He is mine.* These words started changing me. God’s light also came through Emma (a matriarch of a pillar family in the church), who drafted me into the choir. The Word of Christ was filling my heart and mind through Christ-centered sacred music.

Next came the main dishes. The pastor was a faithful man of God who relied on the power of the Word of Christ. He was bold and transfixed to Christ alone. Most importantly, he was all about Law and Gospel in his preaching. I recall the first times I listened to him preach the Law. I sat squirming in my pew: “Who is he speaking to?” He was unafraid to preach the truth about my sin. The Law was cutting me down and cutting open my heart. I was helpless and could never in a million years do enough to earn eternal life. By myself, I was a poor, miserable sinner; dead in my trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1). But then this orthodox pastor preached the Gospel: God had sent His Son to live for me, to die for me, and to rise for me. Forgiveness of sins and eternal life were God’s gifts to us in and through the only Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Framing his preaching was – once again – our hymnody. Another hymn that we sang constantly was “Christ, the Life of All the Living”:

*Christ the Life of all the living,
Christ, the Death of death, our foe,
Who, Thyself for me once giving
To the darkest depths of woe,
Through thy suffering, death, and merit*

*I eternal life inherit:
Thousand, thousand thanks shall be,
Dearest Jesus, unto Thee.*

Before I knew it, while I always enjoyed seeing my girlfriend, the day came when I was going to Divine Service for Christ. After worshiping for about three years, I started adult catechesis for confirmation. The pastor carefully took me through our Confessions and taught me never to let anybody or anything stand between me and the free grace of God in Christ Jesus. He taught me that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, revealed to us through Scripture alone, and all this was founded upon and made possible by Christ alone. At age 18 was I confirmed into the Lutheran confession and given Romans 8:28 as my confirmation verse: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." This journey was for my good as it led me to the Lutheran confession. It led me to Christ.



Rev. Dr. Alfonso Espinosa is senior pastor at Saint Paul's Lutheran Church of Irvine, CA, adjunct professor of theology at Concordia University Irvine, author of the book *Faith that Sees Through the Culture* (CPH 2018), one of the authors of *The Lutheran Difference*, one of the study notes contributors for *The Lutheran Study Bible*, the drafter of the 2018 CTCR document on *Confession and Absolution*, and author of the award-winning essay "C.F.W. Walther on Sanctification" in the book *C.F.W. Walther Churchman and Theologian*. Dr. Espinosa serves on the LCMS Board for National Mission as vice-chair. He and his wife Traci have eight children and in January will have their fourth grandchild.

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