

Issues, Etc.

JOURNAL



Why We Bother with the Fathers

by William Weedon

Wittenberg Trail:
From the Book of Common Prayer
to the Book of Concord

by Adam Koontz

Fall—2019



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

Greetings in the name of Jesus.

In this issue, Pr. Will Weedon explains that Lutherans, since the time of the Reformation, have treasured the teaching of the ancient Church Fathers so that “we might have our own faith confirmed and strengthened when we see how they held fast to the teaching of Scripture in various times and places.”

The Wittenberg Trail feature, “From the Book of Common Prayer to the Book of Concord,” recounts Pr. Adam Koontz’s path out of the empty progressivism of Anglicanism toward the confession of the Lutheran faith.

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

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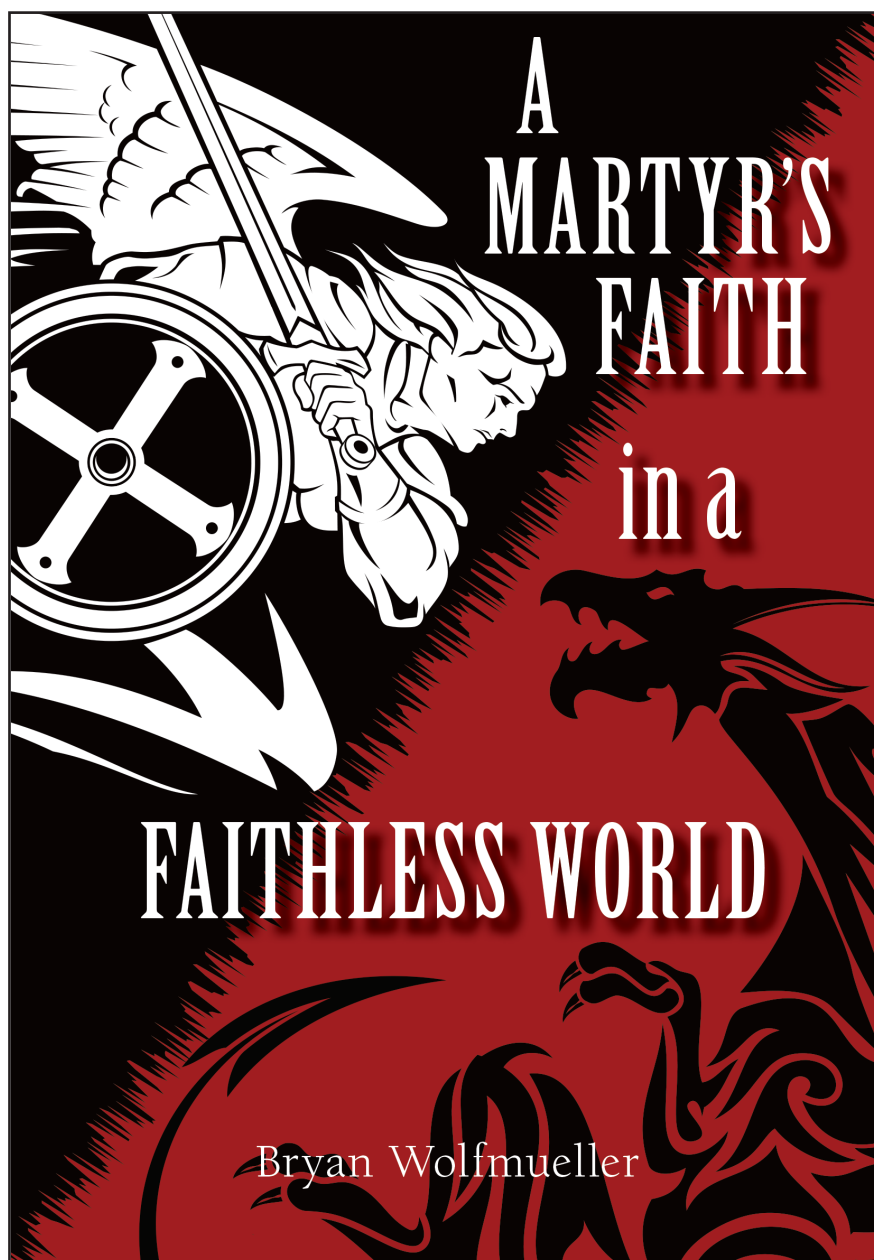
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Why We Bother With the Fathers



by William Weedon

Many a Protestant Christian might well ask: “But seriously, why should we bother with the Church Fathers? They weren’t inerrant! Isn’t Scripture enough to establish doctrine and practice?”

To the latter question, the answer is, of course, “Absolutely, yes! Scripture is not only enough but it is the *only* infallible rule for doctrine and practice.” Here’s how Lutherans express this in the Book of Concord: “We believe, teach, and confess that the *only* rule and norm according to which all teachings, together with all teachers, should be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testament alone.” (FC Ep Summary, Content, Rule, and Norm 1, *Concordia*, p. 491). This confession goes on to state unequivocally: “However, other writings by ancient or modern teachers—no matter whose name they bear—must not be regarded as equal to the Holy Scriptures. All of them are subject to the Scriptures.” (FC Ep Summary 2, *Concordia*, p. 491)

And yet, the Lutherans were persuaded that the Fathers could be read “subject to the Scriptures” with profit. They were nearer to the time of the Apostles than we, and very many of them shed their blood to confess Christ as proclaimed in the Scriptures. We would be foolish not to hear and consider their witness.

So appended to the Book of Concord one finds the *Catalog of Testimonies*, citing one after the other of the great Fathers. It concludes with these words: “Christian reader, these testimonies of the ancient teachers of the Church have been provided here not to suggest that our Christian faith is founded on any church teacher, old or new, but only and alone on God’s Word, as contained in the Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles, an unquestionable witness of divine truth. With his special and uncanny crafts, Satan has caused fanatics to lead men from the Holy Scriptures—which, thank God! even a common layman can now read with benefit—to the writings of the Ancient Church which are like a broad ocean. A person who has not read the Fathers carefully cannot know precisely whether or not these new teachers are quoting their words correctly and thus they leave a person in grievous doubt. This is why we have been compelled to declare with this *Catalog*, and to show everyone that this new false doctrine has as little foundation in the ancient, pure teachers of the Church as in the Holy Scriptures.” (*Concordia*, p. 675)

And of course, it’s not just in the *Catalog of Testimonies* that the Lutherans appealed to the teaching of the Fathers! It doesn’t take more than a passing familiarity with the Lutheran Confessions to realize that these documents, which absolutely insist on Scripture’s sufficiency, also gave detailed and careful study to the writings of the great Church Fathers.

So what gives with that? The Formula again points the way: “Other writings should not be received in any other way or anything more than witnesses that testify about how this pure doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved after the time of the apostles, and at what places.” (FC Ep Summary 2)

Which means, people loved by God, that the beloved Church Fathers are not something that we ought to simply dispense with! They remain valuable witnesses to us of *how* and *where* the clear teaching of the Sacred Scriptures was preserved by God the Holy Spirit in the Holy Church.

The great second generation Lutheran reformer, Martin Chemnitz, addresses this point right from the get go in his magisterial four volume work, *Examination of the Council of Trent*. Fascinatingly, he does so by asking the Fathers themselves to help us sort out the relationship of Scripture and traditions. He cites many helpful sayings of the Fathers in which they make it abundantly clear that they only want to uphold and teach nothing but Scripture. None, though, is perhaps clearer than the letter that St. Augustine once wrote to St. Jerome (Epistle xix:1): “Only those books of Scripture which are called canonical have I learned to hold in such honor as to believe that their authors have not erred in any way in writing them. But other authors I so read as not to deem everything in their works to be true, merely on account of their having so thought and written, whatever may have been their holiness and learning.” As the great theologian Thomas Aquinas pondered these words in his famous *Summa Theologia* (Part I, Question 1, Article 8), he concluded that the authority of the doctors of the church is an authority “that may properly be used, yet merely as probable. For our faith rests upon the revelation made to the apostles and prophets who wrote the canonical books and not on revelations (if any such there are) made to other doctors.”

So, in effect, the Lutherans laid the foundation for everything they taught in the clear and fully sufficient words of Sacred Scripture. But when they were accused of a novel and unheard of way of reading those Scriptures, they had recourse to the Fathers. And thus, in the struggle for the truth of the Scriptural doctrine, the actual “science” of Patristics was born! The Lutherans, humanists almost to man, heeded the call “ad Fontes!” (“Back to the source!”). And thus they sought to demonstrate, “No, our read of the Sacred Scriptures is anything but novel! It’s witnessed to by the Fathers themselves.”

Perhaps a couple of examples will suffice. Lutherans, for instance, rejected the unbiblical teaching of transubstantiation (that the bread and wine are annihilated and their substance is replaced with the Lord's body and blood, only the "accidents" of bread and wine remaining). They did so by pointing unhesitatingly first and foremost to the certain biblical fact that St. Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, can refer to the consecrated element as "bread"! "Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup" (1 Cor. 11:27, 28 KJV). That was enough to establish the fact that in the Eucharist, bread and wine are still present. But when they were accused of thereby introducing a novelty, they could and did appeal to no less a personage than Pope St. Gelasius, who wrote: "Certainly the sacraments of the body and blood of Christ are divine things, through which we are made partakers of the divine nature; and *yet the substance or nature of bread and wine does not cease to be*" (PL IV 1:422). The doctrine of transubstantiation was the actual novelty!

Similarly, when Luther inserted the little word "alone" in his translation of Romans 3 (that we are justified by faith alone in Romans 3:28), he was pounced upon immediately as inserting and teaching an absolute novelty in Church doctrine. In fact, it was said that faith alone *is* mentioned in Scripture, but only in James 2 where it is rejected. But was Luther distorting the meaning of the text by glossing it with the addition of *allein*? Not if you ask St. John Chrysostom! Consider: "Here he shows God's power, in that He has not only saved, but has even justified, and led them to boasting, and this too without needing works, but looking for faith *only*" (Homily 7 on Romans). Or again: "But what is the 'law of faith?' It is, being saved by grace. Here he shows God's power, in that He has not only saved, but has even justified, and led them to boasting, and this too without needing works, but looking for faith *only*" (Homilies on Romans 3). And one more example: "For you believe the faith; why then do you add other things, as if faith were not sufficient to justify? You make yourselves captive, and you subject yourself to the law" (Epistle to Titus, Homily 3).

Why study the Church Fathers? That we might have our own faith confirmed and strengthened when we see how they held fast to the teaching of Scripture in various times and places. Did they make no mistakes, no missteps? By no means! They were not inspired by the Spirit in the same way the writers of Sacred Scripture were. But they did devote themselves to those sacred writings. They studied them, and wished above all to impart nothing but what could be established and proved from them. How beautifully did St. Cyril of Jerusalem instruct his catechumens about this:

“For concerning the divine and holy mysteries of the Faith, not even a casual statement must be delivered without the Holy Scriptures; nor must we be drawn aside by mere plausibility and artifices of speech. Even to me, who tell you these things, give not absolute credence, unless you receive the proof of the things which I announce from the Divine Scriptures. For this salvation which we believe depends not on ingenious reasoning, but on demonstration of the Holy Scriptures.” (Catechetical Lectures, IV:17, in NPNF, Volume VII, p. 23)

On demonstration of the Holy Scriptures, he said! And that is something that the Fathers can teach us very well. Or, as the Catechism teaches us to ask, “Where is this written?”

Lord, keep us steadfast in Thy Word!



Pr. Will Weedon is host of the daily, short-form Bible study podcast [The Word of the Lord Endures Forever](#). He is assistant pastor at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Hamel, IL. He formerly served as the Director of Worship for the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. He is author of the books, *Celebrating the Saints*, *Thank, Praise, Serve and Obey*, and *See My Saviors's Hands*.



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Wittenberg Trail: From the Book of Common Prayer to the Book of Concord

by Adam Koontz

The final time I received Holy Communion in an Episcopal church, I invited a friend to come with me. She was a lapsed Buddhist who had only been to a church once in her life before that evening service. When it was time to leave the pew and receive the Lord's Supper, she was ushered up to the altar rail with me. We knelt at the rail, and when the priests arrived (one male and one female), my friend and I were both communed without a question or second thought.

I did not leave the Episcopal Church in a huff after that incident, because I had already planned to leave for nearly a year. After being raised outside any church, I arrived at Swarthmore College near Philadelphia, PA. I was open to the idea of Christianity, but knew practically nothing about it. In my extracurricular reading in high school and early in college I was deep into the works of T. S. Eliot. Eliot was born to a prominent Saint Louis Unitarian family and died an Anglican Christian. He converted to Christianity in adulthood. You can track his arc of change from the desire for meaning and beauty in *The Waste Land*, to the reality of meaning and beauty in his explicitly Christian works such as *Ash Wednesday*, *The Four Quartets*, and *Murder in the Cathedral*. Eliot witnessed to a profound grasp of *why* the Gospel made sense of everything else, and how Christ could be the hope of hopeless modern people. Eliot drove me to church.

The church I attended on that first warm September Sunday was the church to which I was committed for most of my time in college. It was an Episcopal church, the largest portion of the Anglican tradition in the United States. This was the same tradition Eliot had found when Christ found him, so it made sense to go to there myself. I showed up in a suit and tie because I figured

that's what people wear to church, and I was partly right. I had no idea what was going on in church: why people were standing up sometimes, kneeling sometimes, singing sometimes, and listening sometimes. But the liturgy became familiar after a month or two of Sundays. At first I went alone, but I began to ask people to go with me. Soon, I always had a friend or two getting up early on Sunday, and then talking about what we'd heard and seen in church at Sunday brunch back on campus.

I became deeply involved not only in my parish but also in the college's "Protestant" ministry. It was truly an Episcopalian ministry, headed by an Episcopal priest with a student leader (myself) who was also Episcopalian. We had Eucharist Wednesday nights and Sunday evening prayer on campus. I began a tradition of Friday noonday prayer on the large lawn in front of the main college building, Parrish Hall. I organized retreats and looked up incoming freshmen who were Episcopalian, inviting them to our services. In all of this, I was captivated by how glorious Christ is and how wonderfully he had found me. I was not taught to distrust the Bible because I was not explicitly taught much of anything. I simply believed the Bible as I read it more and more. That reading and that trust drove all the activity I did on behalf of the church and the campus ministry.

After a couple years I began to learn more about the Episcopal Church and the troubles that were deeply roiling it in the early 2000s. I perceived that my trust in the Bible was usually spoken of in my own church as "naïve" or (more darkly) "fundamentalist." I discovered a book by a fellow Anglican, J. I. Packer, written in a similar period of intense theological and practical dissension in the Church of England. If Eliot witnessed me into the church, Packer sowed the seeds that sprouted when I left the Episcopal Church and found confessional Lutheranism.

Packer's book, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, laid out a clear case for the verbal inspiration, inerrancy, and *clarity* of Holy Scripture. I could not believe what I was reading. I had read Internet articles and later books by Episcopal and other mainline Protestant scholars who said that the Bible was an

old, dusty, and (worst of all) bigoted book that had justified every evil thing in human history. Rather than clinging to the old, I should find the Spirit speaking through the rise of the LGBTQ lobby in the church and other “progressive” sources that could direct me, a bigoted fundamentalist, into the greener pastures of an ever-changing truth. Reading Packer was the first time anyone taught me to trust in the Bible as God’s Word. Packer even showed that the Bible taught Christ is the only way of salvation. This was something I had also “naïvely” thought in inviting my friends of assorted and no religious backgrounds to church with me.

After reading Packer’s book, I began to see the discrepancies between the Bible and my own church’s ways (especially the ordination of female priests) as the fruits of its dismissal of Scripture. If Scripture could not speak in the church as God’s Word, then man’s word would replace its divine voice. Man’s ways would prevail in the church over God’s ways. I knew this could not be, but I did not know where to go. I wanted to continue witnessing to Christ and hoped to go to seminary, but had no idea how that would be possible in the Episcopal Church.

Growing up in Pennsylvania, I was only aware of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), which appeared identical to my Episcopal Church with perhaps a lower budget. I had organized a retreat jointly with ELCA campus ministries in the Mid-Atlantic region. I found them to be shockingly sloppy, using Coke and Doritos for Communion (something Episcopalians didn’t do). They were very interested in “contemporary Christian music,” a genre that I was then unfamiliar with. So my exposure to Lutheranism was pretty bad, until I discovered that there was a Lutheran church that believed in the inspiration of Holy Scripture – The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

The conviction of truth that the Gospel brings was something that, until finding Lutheranism, I had thought was perhaps my own arrogance. How could I be so sure that Jesus was the only Savior? How could I be so sure that the Bible was God’s own Word written to reveal divine things? A very dedicated and patient pastor began to teach me about the distinction of the Law and the Gospel. As I learned about the Lutheran faith from him, I realized that the conviction of truth is

natural for the Christian. A Christian is sure because his Father has surely revealed these things to him. The child of God born of water and the Spirit trusts God when He speaks in His Word.

My children know nothing of the uncertainty, the personal turmoil, or the loss of friendships that come from finding confessional Lutheranism and leaving other ways of Christianity behind. That's as it should be. They have never been taught anything other than truth in its wholesome, gracious fullness. Even now as a minister in the LCMS, I am astounded by what God does for His people who trust in his divine and saving Word. The marvelous treasure we have in the Gospel is something that so many people, some speaking through their words long after their deaths, helped me to find by God's grace. I am grateful to all of them. Eliot brought me here. Packer brought me here. Pastor St-Onge, Pastor Engler, and Pastor Fisk brought me here. So many brought me here.

The Sunday of my reception into the Lutheran church, we sang "Jesus Sinners Doth Receive" (LSB 609) This hymn sums up everything true about me the sinner, and Christ the only Savior from sin. From my first Sunday in church trying to figure out when to kneel, to this day where the liturgy is second nature, I have learned what John means when he speaks of receiving in Christ "grace upon grace," (John 1:16). It is a fullness of joy, glory, and peace that Christ has in store for His beloved. To Him is all praise forever and ever.



Pr. Adam Koontz is Assistant Professor of New Testament at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, IN.



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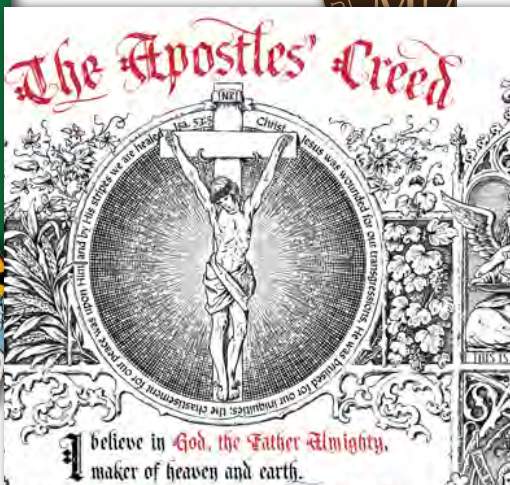


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