

# Issues, Etc.

## JOURNAL



### What Hearers Owe Their Pastor: Receive the Gift

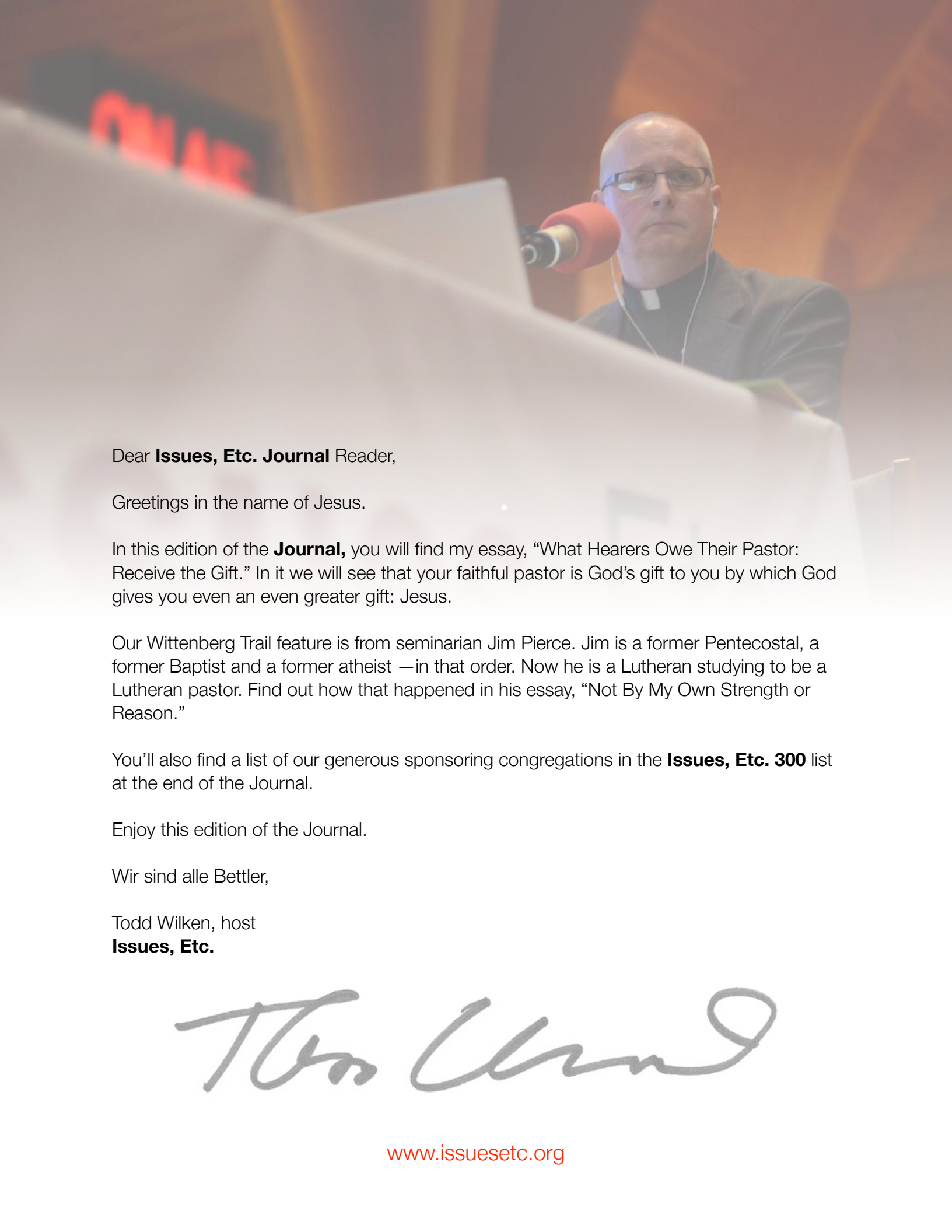
by Todd Wilken

### Wittenberg Trail: Not By My Own Strength or Reason

by Jim Pierce

Spring, 2015

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

Greetings in the name of Jesus.

In this edition of the **Journal**, you will find my essay, “What Hearers Owe Their Pastor: Receive the Gift.” In it we will see that your faithful pastor is God’s gift to you by which God gives you even an even greater gift: Jesus.

Our Wittenberg Trail feature is from seminarian Jim Pierce. Jim is a former Pentecostal, a former Baptist and a former atheist —in that order. Now he is a Lutheran studying to be a Lutheran pastor. Find out how that happened in his essay, “Not By My Own Strength or Reason.”

You’ll also find a list of our generous sponsoring congregations in the **Issues, Etc. 300** list at the end of the Journal.

Enjoy this edition of the Journal.

Wir sind alle Bettler,

Todd Wilken, host  
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# What Hearers Owe Their Pastor: Receive the Gift

by Todd Wilken

There are two kinds of theologians in the world. There are those who believe that theology is a series of complicated questions and even more complicated answers. And there are those who believe that theology is a series of mostly simple questions with mostly simple answers. The first kind of theologians make good PhDs; the second kind make good pastors.

I am a very simple-minded person. I prefer to have ideas presented in their “irreducible complexity,” that is, in their simplest possible form, with no more moving parts than are absolutely necessary. I believe that an idea —especially a theological one— should be only as complicated as it needs to be, but no more.

When a pastor is asked a simple question in Bible class, and his first response is, “Well, that’s a complicated question,” he’s either trying to buy time, or he simply doesn’t know the answer. Theoretical physicists, who deal with some of the most complicated ideas in the world, will tell you that if you can’t explain an idea to your grandmother at the kitchen table in 15 minutes, then you don’t really understand the idea yourself. Theology is not theoretical physics.

The theological question here is simple: What do hearers owe their pastor? The answer is simple and straight from the Bible: a paycheck, honor and obedience.

## The Essence of the Question

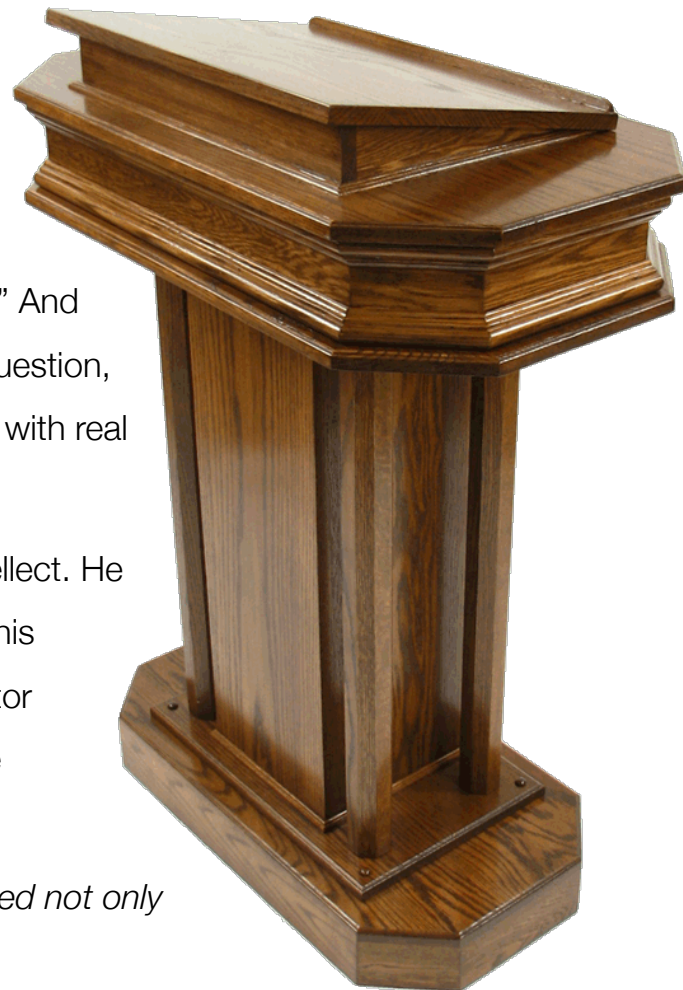
There are two things I love about Lutheran theology. The first is that I don't have to ignore or explain away a single syllable of Scripture to be a Lutheran. The second is that no matter what the theological question is, we never need to go any further than Scripture and our Confessions for an answer. If the answer isn't there, it's not important.

The first time Luther deals with the question of what hearers owe their pastor is in the Small Catechism under the subject of the Third Commandment: "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy. What does this mean?" Luther answers, "We should fear and love God that we may not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred, and gladly hear and learn it."

Notice that Luther says nothing about the Sabbath, days of the week or even holiness. Luther finds his answer in the pulpit and the pew: It is about how hearers hear the preaching of their preacher. This is the simplest answer to the question, "What do hearers owe their pastor?" And if that alone was the only answer we had to the question, it would be more than enough. The answer starts with real hearers and real preachers.

Now, Luther was a man of truly historic intellect. He could have given a long, complicated answer to this question. But he doesn't. Luther is at heart a pastor and a preacher himself. Nonetheless, in the Large Catechism Luther explains a bit more.

*Know, therefore, that you must be concerned not only*



*about hearing, but also about learning and retaining it in memory, and do not think that it is optional with you or of no great importance, but that it is God's commandment, who will require of you how you have heard, learned, and honored His Word.*

*Likewise those fastidious spirits are to be reprov'd who, when they have heard a sermon or two, find it tedious and dull, thinking that they know all that well enough, and need no more instruction. For just that is the sin which has been hitherto reckoned among mortal sins, and is called [acedia, ὀκνηδία,] i.e., torpor or satiety, a malignant, dangerous plague with which the devil bewitches and deceives the hearts of many, that he may surprise us and secretly withdraw God's Word from us. (LC, 98–99)*

What is Luther saying? He is saying that it is a mortal sin, a sin that can rob you of your salvation, if you are bored with your pastor's preaching. To be tempted to boredom during the sermon on Sunday morning is one thing. All of us know this temptation. But the devil wants nothing more than to convince you that you ought to be bored with your pastor's preaching, that your pastor's boring preaching gives you the right to stop listening to God's Word. Luther warns that such a sin risks hell itself. Why? Because as Luther says, that is the means by which the devil will secretly take all of God's Word away from you. And without God's Word, you are lost.

This is the essence of the question, "What do hearers owe their pastor?" Will we hearers despise preaching and His Word, or will we hold it sacred, and gladly hear and learn it?

### **A Paycheck**

Luther takes up the question, "What do hearers owe their pastor?" explicitly in his Table of Duties at the end of the Small Catechism. He lists four passages. The first two have to do with the pastor's paycheck:

*In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel (1 Cor. 9:14).*

*Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches (Gal. 6:6).*

The principle is simple. The man who preaches the Gospel should be paid for preaching the Gospel. In the first passage, Paul likens the paying of preachers to the fact that the Old Testament temple priests were permitted to eat from the sacrifices made at the temple. "In the same way, the Lord has commanded . . . ." Paul describes the payment of preachers as a divine command. This is not optional. It is the holy obligation of the hearers to pay their preacher. A congregation that will not provide the preacher's living is violating a direct commandment of Christ Himself.

A very wise pastor once taught me that when a congregation collects the Sunday offering, they should not "spiritualize" the affair. The offering is not being taken to support the Platonic idea of "the Lord's work" or "the work of the kingdom." No, the offering is being taken to pay your pastor, plain and simple. The offering is also about paying the congregation's bills, but primarily so that there is a building, lights and heat for the preaching of the Word. A church can have all its bills paid and a warm building on Sunday morning, but if it has no pastor, that church is derelict in its divine obligation and is in danger of forfeiting the name "church."

The second passage, "Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches," describes the paying of the pastor in intimate terms. It is the personal sharing of hearer with the preacher. The word Paul uses is the verb form of the often misunderstood "koinonia." It means to have something in common with someone else, a partnership, and in this case, a financial partnership.

Here also Paul adds a stern warning, "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap" (Gal. 6:7). The failure to share all good things with your pastors is to mock God Himself.



Here we need to make a distinction between what Christians are able to pay their pastor and what they are willing to pay their pastor. I served a very small Lutheran congregation for about a decade at the beginning of my ministry. That congregation was willing to pay me appropriately, but they were not able to do so. There was no sin in that.

However, when a congregation is able to pay her pastor appropriately, but is unwilling to do so, that is deeply sinful. Elsewhere, Luther addresses that very situation:

*But in this matter every one refuses and resists, and all are afraid that they will perish from bodily want, and cannot now support one respectable preacher, where formerly they filled ten fat paunches. In this we also deserve that God deprive us of His Word and blessing, and again allow preachers of lies to arise to lead us to the devil, and, in addition, to drain our sweat and blood. (LC, 162–163)*

Here Luther is speaking of hearers who are unwilling to pay their preacher out of concern for their personal well-being. What about a congregation unwilling to pay her pastor out of apathy or even malice? And what if the congregation simply wants her pastor to leave, to quit and go away? What if those hearers actually calculate thus: “If we cut or withhold our preacher’s pay, he will eventually get fed up and leave on his own”? Don’t think that this doesn’t happen. It does. I shudder to think of what judgment such a mockery of God deserves.

Pastors should be paid well. (Who but the stingiest among us would disagree?) So, why aren’t they? In every other realm of life, we pay for what we value. We say, “You get what you pay for.” Why not in the case of our pastors?

I recently was in the market for a used truck. I began my search with completely unreasonable expectations. I wanted a vehicle that has less than 200,000 miles on it; that will last me for the next decade without any major expenses for repairs or maintenance; and I want it all for \$2,500. After inspecting



and rejecting several of my prospective choices, my mechanic told me what I should have known all along: “You’re going to get what you are willing to pay for.”

I was not unlike many Christian congregations when it comes to their pastor. Why do we persist in the attitude that we are going to shortchange our pastors? Why do we even “piously” shortchange them, that is, with the allegedly good intention of “making a man out of him” or “teaching him to trust the Lord”?

Should it surprise us that we have so many poor pastors—poor, not only financially, but also in quality? We tell God what we really want and value by how we pay our pastors.

### Honor

The next passage Luther cites to answer the question, “What do hearers owe their pastor?” sounds like it is about the preacher’s paycheck as well:

*Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,” and, “The laborer deserves his wages” (1 Tim. 5:17–18).*



But there is more here than simply a paycheck.

Because, as we have already seen, the preacher’s paycheck is more than just a paycheck. It is a symbol of the congregation’s attitude toward their pastor and his task.

What is this “double honor” Paul mentions? This is not as much about what we pay our pastors as it is about how much we value our pastors. Paul says to let him “be considered worthy.” That small congregation I served early in my ministry was not able to pay me appropriately, but she nonetheless considered me worthy of this double honor. In spite of the low pay, never did I receive anything less in the decade I served them. In every other way, that congregation demonstrated its love, concern and honor for its young preacher.

Those to be considered worthy of the double honor are the “elders who rule well.” We don’t need to get hung up on the phrase “who rule.” It simply means “to oversee.” And Paul clarifies “those who labor in preaching and teaching.” These aren’t the guys who graduated at the top of their seminary class; these are just ordinary preachers who carry out the duties of their office well by preaching and teaching.

## Obedience

The final passage Luther lists is the least popular today:

*Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you (Heb. 13:17).*

Paul uses both passive and active verbs—“be convinced” and “yield”—translated “obey” and “submit.” This implies more than just outward obedience, but a relationship of trust with your pastor. As much trouble as we have paying our pastors as we ought and honoring them as they deserve, we have the most trouble with this last obligation, trusting obedience.

Paying your pastor is easy; you just sign the check, and your heart doesn’t need to be in it. Honor can be faked in a similar way. But trusting obedience cannot

be faked, because behind our distrust of and disobedience to our pastors is our distrust of and disobedience to God and His Word.

In this passage, we find the Lutheran insight about “What hearers owe their pastor.” The answer is simple: a paycheck, honor and obedience. But the insight in Luther’s use of this passage is that everything the hearers owe their pastor they owe not because of the pastor himself, but because of what we receive through the pastor God has given us. Your pastor is God’s gift to you by which God gives you even greater gifts. Rather than one to whom we give a paycheck, honor and obedience, the pastor is one from whom we receive the gifts that God gives. So, we receive the pastor himself as God’s gift to us.

Again, I am a very simple-minded person. And it seems this simple to me: Wherever you find a faithful pastor poorly paid, dishonored, distrusted and disobeyed, at the very root of that sad situation are a people (and often a pastor too) who do not regard the pastoral office and the preaching of God’s Word as God’s gracious gift.

You say, “Wilken, yes, my pastor is faithful, but you don’t know how \_\_\_\_\_ he can be!” Fill in the blank: annoying, dense, forgetful, stubborn, etc. You might say, “He’s just not a good fit for our congregation. He would be much happier at another congregation.” In response, I suggest that you consider this analogy: All Christian parents know that their children are gifts from God. But isn’t raising children expensive, difficult and messy? Aren’t these little gifts from God expensive, difficult and messy themselves? Ask any Christian parent, and they will tell you that their children are still a gift from God. All Christian children know that their parents are gifts from God, but aren’t parents often difficult and messy as well? Ask any Christian child, and they will tell you that their parents are still a gift from God.

We should regard our pastors the same way. They cost a lot of money, and they sometimes make trouble or messes. Sometimes they are easy to love; sometimes they aren't. But every single one of them is still a gift from God to His people.

Of course, this parent/child analogy is more than an analogy. It is exactly what pastors are. Luther revisits the subject of what hearers owe their pastor in the Large Catechism, under the subject of "Fathers," in the Fourth Commandment, "Honor your father and mother:"

*Besides these there are yet spiritual fathers; not like those in the Papacy, who have indeed had themselves called thus, but have performed no function of the paternal office. For those only are called spiritual fathers who govern and guide us by the Word of God; as St. Paul boasts his fatherhood 1 Cor. 4:15, where he says: 'In Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the Gospel.' Now, since they are fathers they are entitled to their honor, even above all others. But here it is bestowed least; for the way which the world knows for honoring them is to drive them out of the country and to grudge them a piece of bread, and, in short, they must be (as says St. Paul, 1 Cor. 4:13) as the filth of the world and everybody's refuse and foot rag. (LC, 159–160)*

You see, even in Luther's day, faithful pastors were not recognized as God's gift to the Church. Luther's response is that pastors are fathers —not of blood but of office. And like all fathers, pastors are owed honor of their spiritual office. Luther continues:

*Yet there is need that this also be urged upon the populace, that those who would be Christians are under obligation in the sight of God to esteem them worthy of double honor who minister to their souls, that they deal well with them and provide for them. For that, God is willing to add to you sufficient blessing and will not let you come to want. (LC, 161–163)*

Again as quoted earlier:

*But in this matter every one refuses and resists, and all are afraid that they will perish from bodily want, and cannot now support one respectable preacher, where formerly they filled ten fat paunches. In this we also deserve*



*that God deprive us of His Word and blessing, and again allow preachers of lies to arise to lead us to the devil, and, in addition, to drain our sweat and blood. (LC, 161–163)*

What is Luther saying? God's judgment on those who will not receive a faithful pastor as a divine gift is to take the gift away. Moreover, not only will a congregation not receive the gift, but it will be given a curse wearing a clerical collar (or, more likely, a designer t-shirt).

*But those who keep in sight God's will and commandment have the promise that everything which they bestow upon temporal and spiritual fathers, and whatever they do to honor them, shall be richly recompensed to them, so that they shall have, not bread, clothing, and money for a year or two, but long life, support, and peace, and shall be eternally rich and blessed. Therefore only do what is your duty, and let God take care how He is to support you and provide for you sufficiently. Since He has promised it, and has never yet lied, He will not be found lying to you. (LC, 164–165)*

Do you hear Luther's confidence in God and His promises? Luther is so bold as to assert that there are temporal and eternal blessings in store for a congregation that receives a faithful pastor as the gift of God. If hearers will give to faithful pastors what they owe them—paycheck, honor, obedience—God will repay them in this life and in the life to come.



I love Luther's optimism in God's gift and faithfulness. Remember: When Luther wrote these very words, 12 years into the Reformation, he had just returned from the infamous Saxon Visitation. While visiting the German congregations of the

Reformation, he found the condition of the pastors and the people “deplorable, miserable.”

*Mercy! Good God! What manifold misery I beheld! The common people, especially in the villages, have no knowledge whatever of Christian doctrine, and, alas! many pastors are altogether incapable and incompetent to teach —so much so, that one is ashamed to speak of it. (SC, Preface)*

In the midst of this seemingly hopeless situation, Luther still trusted that God had given the Church the gift of pastors.

God makes no mistakes. He does not call a man to be a pastor unless He is prepared to give him as a gift to the Church. Of course, not every man who calls himself “pastor” is a gift to the Church (false teachers abound), but every man whom God calls “pastor” is. When a pastor forgets that he is God’s gift to his congregation, to do what God gave him to do, then it may be God’s will that the congregation remove him. That happens too.

Nonetheless, if we understood our pastors to be God’s gift through whom God gives even greater gifts, then we would have less trouble parting with money at paycheck time, honoring them even when we don’t like them and obeying them.

You may not like him. You may not understand him. You may want to trade him in for a different model. But your pastor is God’s gift to you by which God gives you even an even greater gift. That gift is Jesus.

The logic of Lutheran theology connects the very salvation of sinners with the gift of faithful pastors:

*Men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight. Rom. 3 and 4.*

*That we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and*

*Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith; where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel, to wit, that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ's sake, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ's sake. (AC, V–IV)*

Can a pastor forget this too? Sadly, yes. And when he does, what do his people do? They remember that he is still God's gift to them. They trust that God knew what he was doing when He gave them that gift. They remind their pastor of why God gave him to them: to give the greater gift of Jesus Himself.

What hearers owe their pastor isn't finally a question of paychecks, honor or obedience, even though all of these are owed. What hearers owe their pastor is finally a question of receiving the gift that God has given in and through your pastor. After admonishing us to provide for, honor and obey the pastors God gives us, and after reminding us of God's promise to bless us with, in and through faithful pastors, Luther concludes:

*This ought indeed to encourage us, and give us hearts that would melt in pleasure and love toward those to whom we owe honor, so that we would raise our hands and joyfully thank God who has given us such promises, for which we ought to run to the remotest parts of India. (LC, 166)*

Perhaps Luther knew of no more distant land than India. Still, his point is clear. Rather than shortchanging, dishonoring or disobeying our faithful pastors, we should receive them as the gifts they are. A faithful pastor is among God's greatest gifts because this is how He brings His Word to us poor sinners. Through this gift, God gives us Jesus.

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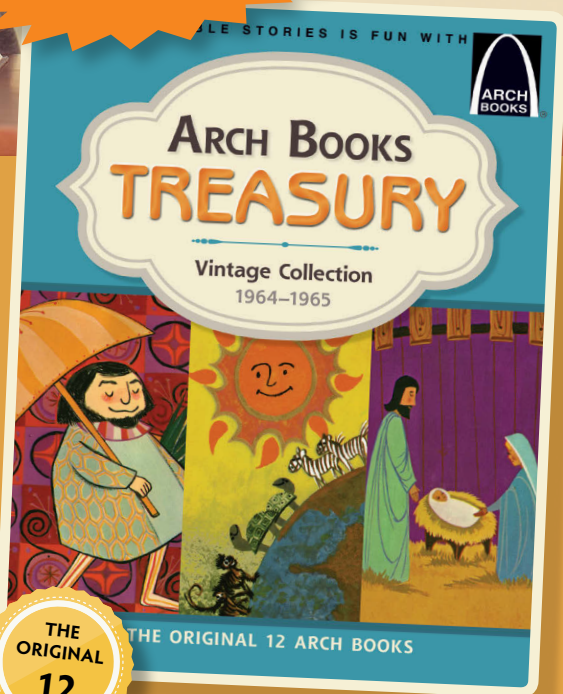
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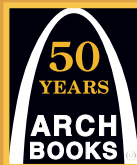
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# Wittenberg Trail

## Not By My Own Strength or Reason

by Jim Pierce

How does one go from being a Pentecostal to being a conservative Baptist to an atheist only later to become a Lutheran? The question is more than a little bizarre, and the answer to it is filled with twists and turns and gets somewhat tangled in places. Nevertheless, the following is a short, true story of how God works through His Word to bring life to a particular dead man: me.

If you have ever watched Jimmy Swaggart or Pat Robertson preaching on one of the several Christian broadcasting stations, then you have seen a Pentecostal preacher in action. Pentecostals believe that a water Baptism is not enough to make one a full-blown Christian. According to the Pentecostal, you must also be baptized with the Holy Spirit, evidenced by speaking in tongues. Some Pentecostals dogmatically assert that unless you have spoken in tongues, then you aren't a Christian. I was one of those Pentecostals for much of my childhood and young adult life.

At a young age, I started preaching and eventually became a licensed minister in the United Pentecostal Church, which is a denomination that rejects the teaching of the Holy Trinity. I was a youth pastor at a local congregation and was soon to be promoted to assistant pastor. It was at that point I thought I should increase my understanding of the Bible, so I took a course in biblical Greek offered at a Reformed congregation. The class worked together to translate the first chapter of John, which is some of the easiest Greek to learn. John writes, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." John later tells us in the same chapter that the Word was "made flesh" and is the

Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the whole world. Right there in the opening chapter of John, the teaching of the preexistence of God the Son is unmistakably clear. I had completely misunderstood the Scriptures. Shortly after this, I had to resign my position as youth pastor and departed the United Pentecostal Church. A couple of friends of mine, who worked me through the teaching of the Holy Trinity, pointed me to a neighborhood Baptist congregation where I was re-baptized and publicly confessed my faith in the one true God.

I hadn't been a Baptist all that long when my story spread out into the local evangelical community. Soon I was asked to preach, teach and to give presentations about the United Pentecostals. It was at one of these speaking events that I was invited to give an apologetics presentation to a small group of Lutherans. I knew little about Lutheranism, and what I did know of it made me wonder if Lutherans weren't part of a cult, since they taught infant Baptism and baptismal regeneration, among many other teachings I thought unscriptural at the time. However, my curiosity got the best of me, and I accepted the invitation.

I was pleasantly surprised to find that I was to speak in a home and that after the presentation we would have dinner. Our hostess was a very kind woman whose husband was a Lutheran pastor. We weren't too far into our meal when the pastor's wife, whose name is Greta, queried me concerning my faith, and soon we were talking about what she termed "justification through faith alone in Christ." In short order, I was told I couldn't have possibly made a decision for Christ while dead in sins, words I automatically resisted. Of course I made a decision for Christ! I had publicly confessed Him after much soul searching and investigation into the truth of His Word. I looked at the evidence, weighed it, and the verdict came back in Christ's favor. That I decided Jesus was my Savior made perfect sense to me; my will was free to choose Jesus. How else could I have come to God except through my own free will?

My Lutheran interlocutor would have none of it. She walked me through the Scriptures and showed me how I had been dead in sin and how faith was given to me as a free gift through the hearing of God's Word. According to her, I couldn't have made a decision for Jesus; Christ had to give me faith that I might receive the truth of the Gospel. For the very first time in my life, I was confronted with the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ, but at that time I didn't understand it as such.

My desire to know the truth above all things drove me not only to study theology but also into the study of philosophy. I loved philosophical studies and, in particular, discussing issues regarding how we come to have knowledge and why human language works the way that it does. I was in college at this time, and it was in my junior year that I took a course about the Enlightenment philosophers. I fell head over heels in love with the philosophy of the Scottish philosopher David Hume. Now, this isn't the article to discuss Hume's views in any depth, but suffice it to say that he was quite inclined to doubt the truthfulness of any talk about God or the supernatural. Hume's ideas can be summed up into the motto of "Seeing is believing!" Hume was most certainly a skeptic, and I quickly became enchanted by skepticism.

One day, Greta called me on the phone and asked if I could come over for dinner to talk with a new friend of hers who had been a Pentecostal but rejected Christianity to become an agnostic. I talked with Greta's new friend for many hours, and it was during one of our long discussions that we talked about atheism. This man wasn't sure that he could remain an agnostic. He presented several arguments that seemed to logically disprove the existence of God. I wasn't able to interact successfully with the arguments presented, since they also appealed to me. Indeed, they sounded much like something Hume would have presented, and he was my favorite philosopher at that time! My faith was shaken. What if I was wrong about Christianity as I had been wrong about Pentecostalism?



After having my faith challenged to its core, I started digging into my studies much deeper. My entire focus turned to ideas concerning the nature of being and how it is we come to have knowledge. I wanted to know the truth about God. Was He real? My resolve was to find the truth at any cost, even if that meant God didn't exist. Indeed, human reason became the object of my faith. As I worked my way through the many philosophical issues I thought critical, I had forsaken Jesus. He became an intellectual exercise found in a pile of apologetic books collecting dust in my library. In fact, I started questioning the truth of the Scriptures, listening to the great lie of the devil, "Did God really say?"

Predictably, my faith died, and I became an atheist. I spent 18 years in atheism. During that time, I went from being a militant, evangelical atheist who wanted every Christian de-converted and set "free" from his or her delusional faith to being a "spiritual atheist," grasping at any belief that could silence the nagging of the Law of God, which told me I was in trouble with the Being whose existence I denied. For 18 years, God's Law tormented me day and night. I hated God!

Eventually I collapsed under the weight of my sins; the Law of God had done its work. Remembering the Gospel Greta had shared with me, I cried out to God, repenting of my unbelief and knowing my sins were forgiven me for the sake of Christ.

At this point, I was well aware that I needed solid teaching. I needed a church that taught salvation was by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus. For that reason, I couldn't return to the denominations I had been part of, but I didn't know where to go other than to find the one person I had lost contact with over the years who could help me: Greta.

Finding her phone number, I called Greta and told her the wonderful news and asked if she could help me find a church. Eagerly she sent me to a friend of

hers, and I eventually found myself in an LCMS congregation that was close by house: Messiah Lutheran in Seattle. I promptly called the pastor there, the Rev. Ernie Lassman, and he extended to me and my family a warm invitation to the Divine Service.

I was excited to attend Sunday service for the first time in 18 years, but at the same time, I was nervous. What was to happen to me? Would church members seek me out and try to convert me? Would they lay hands on me and start praying over me? Was I to be the object of the preacher's altar call? I arrived early to the church and quietly slipped into a pew, but not unnoticed. A man wearing a clerical collar and vestments approached me. Oh, dear, had I mistakenly walked into the wrong church? Maybe this was a Roman Catholic Church. Well, it was too late now to leave without embarrassment, but to my relief it turned out to be Pastor Lassman. After a warm greeting, he invited me to chat with him after the service.

As the pastor went into the sacristy, the organ began warming up and the pews started to fill with people. I heard glorious singing of hymns and the chanting of Psalms. It was as if I had come to the intersection of heaven and earth. I fumbled, bumbled and stumbled through the liturgy, but as the congregation joyfully sang hymns, confessed their sins and received absolution, I was comforted by the words I was hearing. It was during the pastor's sermon, though, that I knew I hadn't gone to the wrong church, for I heard the Gospel of Jesus as it was told to me by Greta. After that Divine Service, I started attending the adult catechism class, and months later, I had my first Holy Communion, receiving the true body and blood of Jesus Christ.

Now I would be remiss not to mention something about my family. What happened with them? Well, at first they didn't know what to make of my conversion, and none of them were immediately receptive to the idea of following

me to church. For several months, I prayed, agonized and invited my family to join me. My son was the first to attend church with me, and he was eventually baptized. Shortly after my son began attending services with me, my wife began to come along, and hearing solid Law and Gospel preaching, she received through faith the forgiveness of her sins. My daughter was the last "hold out," so to speak. She had been an avowed atheist, which broke my heart, since I had taught her to be such. However, God had something else in mind for her, and she, too, was eventually baptized, catechized and received her first Communion kneeling with me at the altar. Thanks be to God!

How does one go from Pentecostalism to atheism and finally to Lutheran Christianity? The answer is really simple. One only needs to be a sinner who destroys his faith through hatred for God. However, what I could not do by my own strength or reason was find God. Our God is faithful, and while I had turned against Him, He came and found me and, taking pity on me, He gave me faith to receive the forgiveness of sins on account of what His Son, Jesus Christ, has done for me.



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