

Issues, Etc.

JOURNAL



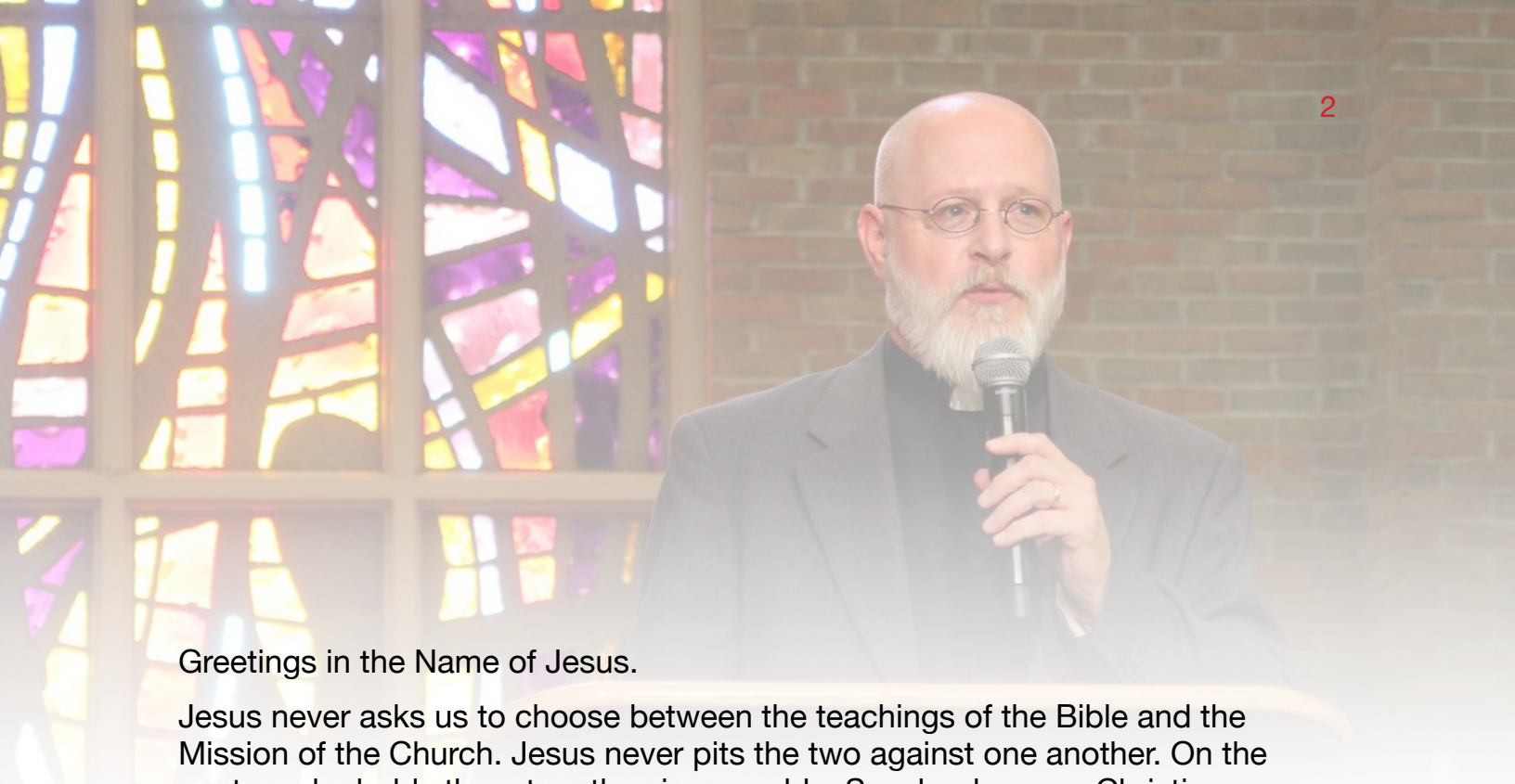
Playing the Mission Card

by Todd Wilken

To Lutheranism from Mormonism

by Jeremy Lamont

Winter—2023



Greetings in the Name of Jesus.

Jesus never asks us to choose between the teachings of the Bible and the Mission of the Church. Jesus never pits the two against one another. On the contrary, he holds them together, inseparable. So why do some Christians continue to say, “We need to stop focusing on doctrine, and focus on the mission”? Find out why in my article, “Playing the Mission Card.”

Also in this edition of the **Issues, Etc. Journal**, Jeremy Lamont recounts his slow and sometimes painful path out of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints to the Lutheran Confession.

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Playing the Mission Card

by Todd Wilken

Some years ago I wrote an essay about a tactic I called “the Pharisee Card”:

The “race card” is a political term of art made famous during the 1988 presidential race between George H. W. Bush and Michael Dukakis. In today’s presidential politics, we also have the “gender card.” ...In American politics, the Race and Gender Cards are played to discredit someone by implying that he is racist or sexist. Just as politicians and pundits play the Race Card or the Gender Card, many in the Church are playing the “Pharisee Card.” Just like the Race or Gender Cards, the Pharisee Card is not designed to raise a legitimate issue of doctrine or practice. Rather, the Pharisee Card is used to discredit someone by implying that he is narrow, rigid, and unloving—a Pharisee.

The Pharisee Card is still a popular tactic for some Christians. But there is another, equally popular tactic; I call it the Mission Card. The Mission Card is designed to distract from, demote and dismiss biblical teachings, under the guise of reaching the lost.

No one plays the Mission Card like Rick Warren, founding pastor of Saddleback Church in California and author of *The Purpose Driven Life*. In fact, Warren played the Mission Card masterfully at the 2022 official gathering of his denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention in Anaheim, California. Warren had recently ordained several women as pastors, contrary to Scripture and the SBC’s teaching and practice. He had also appointed a husband and wife pastoral team as his successors upon his retirement. Needless to say, this disturbed some of his fellow Southern Baptists. Late in the gathering, Warren addressed the assembly from the floor. After reciting a long and exaggerated litany of his personal accomplishments benefitting the SBC, Warren said,

You're never going to find another Baptist, who agrees with you completely on everything. There are Baptist brothers here today who don't believe Jesus died for the whole world. But we imagine, [sic] somehow get along with them. ...2033, just eleven years from today, is the 2000th anniversary of the Great Commission. I hope one of you, because I won't be here next year, will make a resolution that Baptists take the next ten years to finish the task of the Great Commission, in our generation, before the 2,000th anniversary of the church. Are we going to keep bickering over secondary issues? Are we gonna keep the main thing, the main thing? We need to finish the task. And that will make God smile.

The Mission Card was on the table. Why, Warren asked, were his fellow Southern Baptists fretting about him ordaining women pastors when the clock was ticking on the Great Commission? Didn't they have more important things to do, like finishing the mission that Jesus commanded them to do? "Are we going to keep bickering over secondary issues? Are we gonna keep the main thing, the main thing? We need to finish the task."

That is the Mission Card. Distract, demote and dismiss.

It is important to understand that the Mission Card is not really about the mission of the Church at all. The Mission Card is played to change the subject, nothing more. It is a tactic designed to distract, demote and finally dismiss doctrinal concerns. In this case Warren wanted to distract his fellow Baptists from the fact that he had ordained women pastors, demote their concerns to category of "secondary issues," and dismiss those concerns as irrelevant to the "main thing," the mission of the Church.

And it worked. After playing the Mission Card among his fellow Baptists, Warren won the hand. The SBC gathering applauded, the SBC Credentials Committee tabled a recommendation to disfellowship his Saddleback congregation, and Warren's critics quietly folded. Warren got exactly what he wanted. The Biblical teaching regarding the pastoral office was dismissed as secondary (perhaps even contrary) to the mission of the Church. Warren



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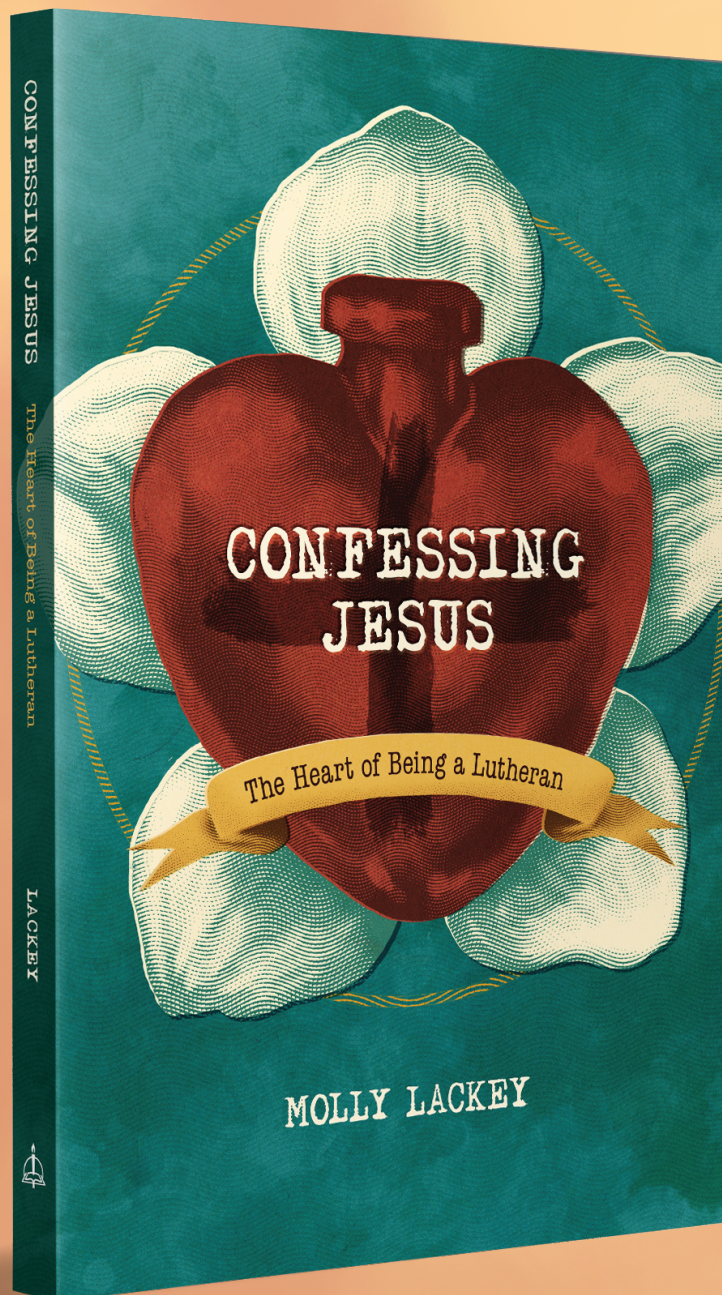
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successfully changed the subject away from his unbiblical ordination of women. Warren got both his female pastors and the ovation of his fellow Baptists.

What was Warren really asking his fellow Baptists to do? He claimed he wanted them to focus on the mission of the Church, but what he was really asking them to do was compromise a Biblical teaching in the name of the mission.

Why does the Mission Card work? It is because the Mission Card is a not-so-subtle accusation. The player is saying “If you disagree with me, you are standing in the way of the mission of the Church.” No one wants to be portrayed as impeding the mission of the Church.

The Mission Card is a call for doctrinal compromise, plain and simple. In Warren’s case, he was asking his fellow Baptists to compromise the Bible’s teaching on the pastoral office. But the Mission Card works just as well on any doctrine of Scripture. By the way, this has been Warren’s strategy for his entire ministry. In 2004 Warren reminisced about the founding of Saddleback:

I knew that by simplifying doctrine in a devotional format for the average person, I ran the risk of either understating or overstating some truths. I'm sure I have done that. ...But I decided when I planted Saddleback in 1980 that I'd rather reach large numbers of people for Christ than seek the approval of religious traditionalists. In the past eight years, we've baptized over 11,000 new adult believers at our church. ("A Purpose Driven Phenomena, An Interview with Rick Warren," Modern Reformation, January/February 2004.)

The “religious traditionalists” Warren dismissed in 1980 were, of course, anyone who questioned what Warren was actually teaching those 11,000 believers.

Warren is but one example. The Mission Card has been used in Mainline Protestantism for decades to justify every doctrinal compromise and every departure from the teachings of the Bible. In the name of the mission, these progressive denominations have ordained women pastors, then openly gay and

lesbian pastors, and most recently, transgender pastors. And it's not only the pastoral office. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America played the Mission Card to justify full communion fellowship with the Presbyterian Church USA, the Reformed Church in America and the United Church of Christ:

It is God who opened the eyes of these Reformed and Lutheran theologians to see that the disagreements that divided were in fact differences that need not divide... It was God who opened their eyes to see that we could live more closely together in mutual affirmation and admonition, drinking from the same cup of salvation in witness to the one who shed his blood for us all... Part of the meaning of this day has to do with committing ourselves, as the Formula of Agreement declares, to engage together in God's mission. ("U.S. Lutheran and Reformed Churches Make History," <https://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/3240>)

Warren might be surprised to learn that he is using a tactic dreamed up and employed by theological liberals for decades. A survey of Mainline Protestantism today might show Warren the possible future of Saddleback. I recently asked Dr. Albert Mohler of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary to respond to Warren's use of the Mission Card at the SBC Anaheim gathering. He said,

It is a pragmatism that just opens the door, and that liberalizing is just going to happen... Rick Warren is not a theological liberal, but I believe he opens the door to it. As you look to the rise of theological liberalism in Protestant churches in the nineteenth century, the leading edge of that liberal, even heretical teaching was on the mission field... You had people on the mission field who said, "Look, we've got to adjust Christianity because we can't bring all this stuff, including the exclusivity of the Gospel, the virgin conception of Jesus. We've got to cut Christianity down to a message that we can actually communicate over here..." The Great Commission doesn't say minimize everything the Scripture teaches in order to supposedly win as many people as you can for what you'll call Christianity.

* * * *

So, how should you respond when someone plays the Mission Card? First, recognize the Mission Card for what it is, a false dichotomy. It assumes, at best, that we must strike a balance between the mission of the Church and the

teachings of the Bible. At worst, it assumes that we must choose between the two.

Jesus, the one who gave us the Great Commission, never asks us to balance or choose between the teachings of the Bible and the mission of the Church. Jesus never pits the two against one another. On the contrary, he holds them together, inseparable from one another, saying,

*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **teaching them to observe all things whatsoever that I have commanded you;** and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:19-20)*

Notice, the mission of the Church (making disciples) is done by baptizing AND teaching. And, that teaching includes “all things whatsoever that I have commanded you.” “All things” means all things. There are no “secondary issues” that can or must be compromised for the sake of the “main thing.” The totality of the Bible’s teaching is an essential part of the “main thing.” Compromising the Bible’s teaching doesn’t further the mission of the Church, it hinders it.

Second, when someone plays the Mission Card, call their bluff. Ask, “Are you saying that we should minimize or disregard something the Bible says?” Ask, “If we are free to minimize or disregard something the Bible says, why should I take the Great Commission itself seriously?” Ask, “Why do I have to choose between the mission and the teachings of the Bible?” Ask, “Where does the Bible teach us to compromise its teaching for the sake of the mission?” Ask, “Are you sure you’re not just trying to change the subject?”

Third, play a card of your own: the actual grammar of the Great Commission. In that command, Jesus includes a little relative pronoun, ὅσα. It is translated “whatsoever.” It is sometimes left untranslated because it is considered redundant with the word “all,” but it isn’t redundant. It is emphatic.

Jesus doesn't just instruct us to teach "all" He has commanded, He instructs us to teach "all whatsoever" He has commanded us. Jesus forestalls any compromise of anything He teaches. That's the grammar of Jesus' Great Commission.

Jesus never asks us to balance or choose between the teachings of the Bible against the mission of the Church. Jesus never pits the two against one another. Jesus holds them together, inseparable from one another.

And Jesus trumps the Mission Card every time.

What is the danger of letting the Mission Card just sit there and go unanswered? The danger is that in the name of carrying out the mission, we harm the mission. In the name of bearing witness, we compromise our witness. In the name of making disciples, we teach those disciples to compromise God's Word. After all, how many compromises will it take until the mission itself is changed?

The next time someone plays the Mission Card on you, recognize it, call it out, and take the player back to the words of Jesus Himself.

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To Lutheranism from Mormonism

by Jeremy Lamont

We often think of a path or trail as something that we traverse, full of intention and activity. People walking the path march ahead, reach a crossroad, consult their map, turn it upright and forge onward.

In matters of faith, though, the Word of God is an active agent, and that Word is a path that traverses *you*. Although our feet are walking (perhaps from one church to another), our eyes are searching (maybe the listings for local congregations to visit), and our ears listening (to what's taught in different church bodies), the path you're on is determined to a great extent outside of you, whether you're in motion or not.

Raised as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, my Sunday experience was very American, and not particularly strange or noteworthy. In retrospect, it felt like what I imagine any young kid might experience going to church in suburban USA: hair parted down the middle, shirt buttoned up, Sunday cowboy boots tromping up the sidewalk into the church building. Inside the building, the sacrament meeting was conducted according to the regular agenda, with announcements from the bishopric of our ward, a talk by Sister So-And-So about her experiences canning tomatoes, the sacrament itself (a Lord's Supper-style rite with bread and water), and on special Sundays, testimony-bearing.

The testimonies usually followed the same form. Microphones are passed around until someone stands and begins the process: "I'd like to bear my testimony. I know this church is true. And..." followed by a personal anecdote,

observation, reflection, or other affirmation of faith. “Family Home Evening” was still encouraged during the week as a period of uninterrupted togetherness with the family. Visiting teachers would do the rounds among ward families.

For many young people, Mormonism is basically “Christianity + more.” More stories about Jesus and an American-Israelite people! More revelation! More to know! More to do and more to believe... and naturally, it seems from inside Mormonism that Christians are simply those who have not received the full revelation of the true religion.

As a teenager, some cracks began to form. My parents encountered an impasse of doctrine and practice, and eventually left the LDS church altogether. As a kid in my middle teen years, to me it merely meant, “Great, I don’t have to go to church anymore.” I had participated quite actively up until that point, had received the LDS “Aaronic priesthood,” been baptized for the dead, and even introduced my weird and special brand of religion to peers.

All of that was in my past, but then I started to hear a little bit from my mom and dad on the topic. “Have you heard of this thing called grace? Grace means that there’s nothing you can do to make God love you more, and there’s nothing you can do to make God love you less.” It seemed new, but nothing I could square with what I knew from Mormonism. As a family, we never settled on a Christian church afterward.

And there it sat for a number of years. I experienced no new developments and no strong sense that I had the need of a Savior. I had a passing familiarity with the biblical narrative along with a lot of extrabiblical information. At the age of 19 I met a Lutheran girl, and as part of a condition of our dating, she said “You ought to come to my church.” So I went to Lutheran church. My first impression was that it’s a big upgrade to have a trained speaker up front who knows what he’s talking about. In the LDS church, the “talks” from

the podium were a bit of a grab bag. I also felt like it was an improvement that a church would have dedicated leadership, rather than rotating people out from the church every four or five years.

I eventually married that Lutheran girl, and we had two daughters, both of whom were baptized shortly after they were born. We attended church regularly, but I considered myself a perpetual visitor. I did not approach the altar for a blessing, and I opted out of Bible studies most of the time to sit in the narthex while my wife attended classes or helped with Sunday school with our daughters. I shook hands with congregants as we shared the peace. I helped out at the barbecues and potlucks and was generally a very good perpetual visitor. My time there passed without firmly engaging the Word of God.

And it lasted 15 years. The path moved underneath me, and I sat still.

Somewhere in this period, I was introduced to C.S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce*. As Lewis describes in the prologue, the book is essentially an illustration of the significance and permanence and inextricable nature of sin, as opposed to goodness and righteousness.

When a new pastor was installed, a little reform in preaching and teaching was in order at the parish, and it was not popular. My wife was not happy with expository preaching, and we stopped attending for a few years.

Things in my marriage got difficult over time. Eventually I suggested that we return to church. This was not received well. I watched my young daughters grow up week after week, without any real grounding of faith. However weak my Christian confession was at that time, I decided that I would try to set a strong example in the family by returning to church.

I began taking exhaustive notes from the sermons. I began attending Bible study. Maybe if I understood the Bible better I could fix things at home.

Another visitor in the congregation, a young woman who had also come lately from Mormonism, sat at my table. In response to questions, we often related some of our experiences with Mormon belief and practice to our Lutheran brothers and sisters.

At home, things did not improve. I began taking our daughters to church. I was convinced that my job as their father was to care for their spiritual well-being.

Meanwhile, I began to understand more fully God's answer to the problem of sin. I learned the differences between the Christian faith and the belief and doctrines of the LDS church. I gained a better understanding of the ancient Church as it faced heresies, false gospels, and heterodox teachings.

The foundations of Mormonism looked shaky, as the man Joseph Smith and the story of the founding of the church faced scrutiny from history. I learned that it shared much with the questionable origins of Islam and the prophet Mohammad, which misapprehended Jesus Christ. I understood better the critical role served by the written Word, the spoken Word, the Word that is effective and transformative, and the Word that endures. I learned that Christian doctrine is not a detached set of declarations. Rather, the doctrines of the Christian faith are the spokes that hold together the wheel of the Church through their connection to the hub, which is Christ. Everything centers on the person and work of Jesus. The Lutheran view of the Bible became apparent: Lutherans can't and won't stop talking about Jesus in relation to everything, because He is at the center of all of it.

My marriage fell apart during all of this, and I was living Sunday to Sunday. Church was a tangible point of contention. I felt sick and defeated, but I couldn't bring myself to tell anybody. My family and coworkers didn't know. I

asked only that I be allowed to continue to bring my daughters to church every Sunday.

A few months later, an elder at the church approached me: “Hey, we should really think about getting you baptized.” The new pastor invited me to his house along with my ex-Mormon compatriot to learn deeply from the Augsburg Confession and Formula of Concord. We had covered *Luther’s Small Catechism* in class.

I still tell people that “I fell backward into the true faith,” although it might have been the 15-year marinate in the Word of God that helped things along. In the catechesis leading up to my baptism and membership, we learned the historic context of the Lutheran Reformation. We drilled deeply into the theology of justification by grace through faith, and the delivery of forgiveness through God’s Word and the Sacraments of His Church. I was built back up with a firm foundation that the Lutheran Confessions were the only viable lens through which to read the Bible. I could say amen, without reservation, to everything that Lutherans confess. I found it extremely satisfying to know that the Lutheran confession is one which is extremely reasonable but not bound by reason. I was able to appreciate the fact that Luther was not a prophet, that we are not tied to the man, but that he was a consummately careful theologian.

A Pentecost baptism brought me into the Christian faith as an adult convert, along with my “baptismal fraternal twin” from class. The path had moved underneath me to the gateway of the Kingdom of Heaven. I was adopted there in Holy Baptism as a son of God in the sanctuary which I had known for some 18 years.

With my oldest daughter I was confirmed that day and received First Communion alongside her. My path, measured and guided by the mile markers and signposts of the Word of God, continues to move underneath me.

To those within the LDS church and who have left it, I offer some encouragement. The testimony of the truth of the Bible does not hang on my inner counsel, or any human action. It relies on the Word of God which says what it does and does what it says because of the person and work of Jesus Christ, the second person of the Holy Trinity, the eternal Logos, who is the Word made flesh. To a Christian-derived religion that leans heavily on covenant-keeping, American exceptionalism, eternal marriage and procreation, a founder and a prophet who do not confess the Christ, I can only show you the path that moves you to Jesus Himself. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He is ready and waiting to receive you on the path by which He draws all people to Himself: the faith given in His Word and the forgiveness delivered in His Sacraments.



Jeremy Lamont currently serves as vicar at Grace Lutheran Church & School in Sandy, Utah.

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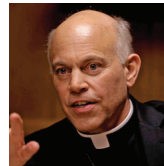
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