

The Cloud

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News and Articles from the St. Cloud Circuit of the LCMS

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All the answers aren't
the same this time!



The Confession Issue

By Rev Joshua Reber (Trinity, Clear Lake; Faith St. Cloud; SCSU Campus Pastor; Editor of the Cloud)

Happy New Year! We've got great some big plans for 2025 – there's a men's retreat in Fairhaven January 31-February 1, the District Convention in February (see news), and a podcast on the way. It all starts with this issue, though, and it's all about confession. Pastor Timm and Pastor Buchs positively outline why confession is a great blessing. Pastor Hollingsead tells his personal story of his public confession and why he joined the Missouri Synod. I review a book of Augustine's – not *Confessions* which would've fit the theme, but *The City of God*. I'm looking forward to another of year of God's mercy!

A Day When Heaven Opened: The Office of the Keys

By Rev Bruce Timm (Redeemer, St. Cloud; MNN VP)

It was one of my best days as a pastor. I had been instructing a woman in the faith. I'll call her V. V lived in the neighboring small town and was an outcast. She lived alone, was on disability, drove an old car, was very poor, and wasn't related to anyone. One of my members had befriended her and invited her to church. V quickly became an every Sunday attender and asked to join the congregation. Her background was in a very liberal Christian denomination, so we began to meet weekly as I taught her the true Christian faith using Dr. Luther's Small Catechism.

One afternoon I taught her about "Confession and the Office of the Keys." We were meeting in the church, and I said, "You know V, we could do this right now. We could go to the communion railing, and you could confess and receive forgiveness." I made it clear that she didn't have to, but she could. At that moment, she wasn't sure, so we ended the class, and she went home.

The next morning, before 8 o'clock, the phone rang at the parsonage. Even though I lived in farm country, no one ever called before 10 am in the morning, and even then, sometimes people would apologize for calling so early. Some of this was due to the darkness of winter. It didn't get light until after 9 am. It was V calling. She had been lying awake thinking about confession, and she wanted to confess, right now. In addition to the "early" hour it was also storming outside. The roads were treacherous but there was no stopping V. She would be at church as soon as possible. I got ready and trudged the three blocks to church in the storm.

V. arrived and we knelt beside each other at the communion railing. She poured out the vile and wicked things she had done in her life. God's Holy Spirit had worked repentance and V wanted to be rid of her sins. In confession she named them, one after another. I don't remember if she cried, but I do remember her eagerness to get them out. When her confession was finished, I said, "V, do you believe that my forgiveness is God's forgiveness?" She said, "Yes," and then I placed my hands on her head and said, "V, in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Together we said "Amen."

This is the Office of the Keys, the authority given by Jesus to the Church to open the doors of heaven to sinners. This is the unique or peculiar power of His Church. The Church on earth exists to forgive the sins of those who repent and to retain the sins of those who do not repent. On that day in the middle of nowhere Saskatchewan the angels rejoiced over one sinner who repented of her sin, and the Devil was more grumpy and vile than usual as another sinner was broken out of hell and welcomed into heaven.

According to the Small Catechism this is what we believe about the Office of the Keys: *"... when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us himself."*

One aspect of confession that the Lutheran Reformers emphasized, and Rome neglected, was faith. Rome forced people to confession and with their teaching of penance made confession a work which merited forgiveness. If your confession wasn't complete, you merited time in the work farm of purgatory. For Rome it wasn't a matter of what you believed, but what you did, and how well you did it. For Lutherans, confession is about faith. If you believe you are a sinner you will desire forgiveness, go to confession, and rejoice in the forgiveness your pastor declares. Your faith will despise your sin, delight in forgiveness, and desire to do better. If you want to continue in sin and fool around with it, you have no faith. The pastor's refusal to forgive is God's warning that heaven is closed to you.

One of my professors, Dr. Robert Kolb, said the pastor's task is to be a hit-man and a mid-wife. Hit men bring death. The pastor pronounces God's judgment on your sin. A mid-wife brings life; the pastor forgives those who repent. God has opened the door of heaven to you through the work of His Son Jesus Christ. His called ministers proclaim that truth by slamming the door shut on unrepentant sinners, in the hopes that they repent, so the door can be opened with Christ's forgiveness. God, grant us faithful hit-men and mid-wives so that we die in confession and are raised to life in absolution.

Confession as Judgment

By Rev David Buchs (Concordia, Fairhaven; Circuit Visitor)

“Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt 16:19; 18:18).

Who are you to judge? That's often the question. When a pastor keeps a visitor from Holy Communion or addresses the cohabitation of some unmarried couple or urges a delinquent member to come back to church, they often want to know, “Who are you to judge? You can't see into my heart. God knows what's in my heart.”

It's true, of course – no one can see into your heart except God, and it's only to God that you have to give an answer for what is in your heart.

I think pastors are as surprised as anyone that, given that they cannot see into the human heart, God nonetheless calls them to make judgments. After all, that's the answer to the question – “Who are you to judge?” The pastor is someone God has called for that very purpose.

Part of the challenge, perhaps, is that we tend to think of judgment only working in one direction, and we tend to equate it with condemnation. So, when you keep a visitor from Holy Communion, it is supposed that you're judging them, and that you're damning them to hell. Meanwhile, if you admit them to Communion, no one thinks of it as a judgment.

Both tendencies are misguided. Start with the second – whatever kinds of judgment any human may render, none of them can damn to hell. That belongs to God alone. More pertinent to this article, however, is that first tendency – the tendency to think that judgment only works in one direction. Quite to the contrary, it's a judgement either way. If I accept the cohabitation of an unmarried couple, I'm judging it to be righteous and good. If I reject it, I'm judging it to be sinful and wicked. It's a judgment either way.

Pastors make such judgments because they are called to exercise the office of the keys. They are always either binding or loosing. There's no middle ground. Forgiveness is either granted to the repentant or withheld from the unrepentant. You're one or the other, and the pastor is called to judge. The only information he has to go on is what you say and what you do. He cannot see your heart. And so, if you refuse to come to the Divine Service, though you are perfectly able and though you think of yourself as a Christian, the pastor rightly concludes that you are unrepentant. Jesus said, "Eat and drink," and you are rebelling against his word. Forgiveness must be withheld.

When the pastor forgives sins, he is rendering a judgment. Moreover, it is a judgment that apparently has some bearing on how things are reckoned in heaven, to say the least of what Jesus twice declares in Matthew. There is no "erring on the side of mercy." And the general absolution is no small thing. The pastor is not somehow "safe" as long as he only ever uses the loosing key, as long as he only ever forgives sins.

Rather, a pastor who only ever has occasion to forgive and never to withhold forgiveness must be in an utterly unique setting.

All of this is to say that withholding forgiveness, and that even to the point of excommunication is a vital tool in the pastor's toolbox. Just before Jesus gives the keys in Matthew 18, he gives careful instructions about how to approach the unrepentant. The goal in addressing sin is to regain your brother, which requires judgment. And if he refuses to repent, you must treat him as a Gentile and a tax collector. It is not as though your judgment makes him an unbeliever. On the contrary, if you do not judge him rightly as an unbeliever, how can you ever pray for or minister to him rightly? If churches never excommunicate the persistently unrepentant, it is not that they will have been spared some great misery. Rather, it is that they will have failed to acknowledge the great misery that is already present. If the binding key is never used, what use is the loosing key?

My Journey to the LCMS

By Rev Ben Hollingsead (St. Paul's, Eden Valley)

I have had the privilege of serving as a pastor for twelve years. I served in a church called the Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC) for eight of those twelve years.

The LCMC was founded in 2001 as twelve congregations that broke off from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) because that year, the National Gathering of the ELCA gave authority to the Bishops over the call process and over removing pastors. Later, the LCMC would grow from twenty congregations to over seven hundred a year after the ELCA voted at the Churchwide Assembly to authorize LBGT+ individuals to serve as Pastors on August 19, 2009.

In July 2009, I began my seminary education at Luther Seminary (ELCA) in St. Paul. My classes started with a Summer Greek course. My home congregation in Bellevue, NE, was an ELCA congregation. Though it was an ELCA congregation, it maintained much of its roots as a congregation once a part of the American Lutheran Church (ALC) and once in fellowship with the LCMS. Before 2014, they had never had a woman serving in a pastoral role. It seemed to me to have a high regard for the Bible and Christian morality, and most members were politically conservative/libertarian. As a member of this congregation, I had attended many Bible studies and was a lay leader who helped lead a youth Bible Study. Entering Seminary, I had a good grasp of what was in the Bible. When I went to the Seminary, I was unaware of the more significant politics and issues in the ELCA, especially that they were going to vote on allowing LBGT+ people to serve as pastors. Shortly after moving into the dorms of Luther Seminary, I learned that the ELCA Churchwide assembly would vote on this decision but naively thought that the ELCA would not pass it, thinking why would a church pass something that contradicted God's Holy Word?

Before August 19, 2009, my summer Greek professor, David Fredrickson, had only taught things you would think you would learn, like the Greek alphabet, vocabulary, and such. On August 19, 2009, rather than moving on with the typical lecture that was scheduled for the class that day on the agenda, Professor Fredrickson gave a lecture on how he believed Jesus was gay. When the class took its first break that day, I left the class for that day. I was upset and realized I may have made a big mistake going to Luther Seminary. I tried to keep calm and went to my part-time job in the mailroom. It was a beautiful August day, and I delivered the mail to the different buildings and departments.

I returned to the mailroom after making my deliveries to find a coworker and fellow seminarian crying and cheering because the ELCA had just passed the resolution to allow LBGT+ people to serve as pastors in their congregations, and within an hour of hearing this news, a large tornado cloud formed over Minneapolis and a tornado touched down next to the convention center where the ELCA assembled for the vote. The tornado ripped off the cross from the roof of Central Lutheran Church (ELCA) in downtown Minneapolis across the street from the convention center, and the cross landed in the wine and beer garden where the assembly goes planned to celebrate their vote for "progress".

The next day, I got a hold of my ELCA Candidacy representative and withdrew from seeking ordination in the ELCA. About a month later, after conversations with my home pastors, who were planning to leave the ELCA, and professors at Luther Seminary like Steven Paulson and James Nestingen, who supported students who were leaving the ELCA, I learned of the LCMC, and a newly starting denomination called the North American Lutheran Church (NALC) that could be a good alternative. At the time, sadly, my reason for joining the LCMC was because its leadership structure matched my, at the time, libertarian political beliefs that saw top-down government as being the problem nationally and within churches. I believed the NALC only aimed to be the ELCA just before the August 19, 2009, vote, and I wanted nothing to do with bishops or a polity with a lot of bureaucracy, which the NALC seemed to have.

Though I remained at Luther Seminary, and most of what I learned regarding doctrine and church leadership was unbiblical garbage, I had to do the work of seeking out faithful Biblical Lutheran doctrine teaching on my own that would help me take what I was learning at Luther Seminary and argue against it faithfully and respectfully. Reading the early church fathers like St. Augustine, the Lutheran Confessions, Luther's Works, and Lutheran fathers like Martin Chemnitz, CFW Walther, Francis Pieper, and Bible commentaries by Concordia Publishing House became my go-to resources for learning solid biblical Christian doctrine. A friend of mine suggested I listen to an LCMS program called Issues Etc. I became a regular listener because I enjoyed the solid Christian teaching, reading suggestions, and conversations on culture from a Biblical perspective. YouTube shows like Worldview Everlasting by LCMS Pastor Jonathan Fisk made me appreciate the LCMS. I also became aware of the hypocrisy in my thinking. I was so upset about the ELCA having LBGT+ pastors that I overlooked that the LCMC allowed women to be pastors, which goes against what God teaches (1 Timothy 2 & Titus 2). Despite this realization, I completed my Master of Divinity coursework at Luther Seminary, received my first call as an Associate Pastor at Christus Lutheran Church in Clintonville, WI, and was ordained in the LCMC on February 9, 2013. After five years in Clintonville, I accepted a call to be the Sole Pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church in Stacy, MN.

The congregation had many dear Saints who were incredible to me and my young family. Unfortunately, I learned that though there were some good aspects of not having an extensive organizational structure micromanaging a congregation like the ELCA, it is equally unhealthy to be part of a group with no ecclesiastical oversight. If the civil government and the Church have loosely enforced laws, unity can deteriorate quickly if morals or confessions of faith are not shared within the group.

CFW Walther, the first President of the LCMS, says in his book *Church Fellowship* that true unity in the church comes only through doctrinal unity and that God's Word must never be compromised. The LCMC is the Burger King of Lutheran Church bodies because they operate with a "have it your way" mentality. This is because the LCMC believes the Bible only *contains* God's Word (rather than *is* God's Word). They choose what is true in the Bible based on human reason. In the LCMC, that standard changes from one congregation or pastor to another.

Disagreements in doctrine create a challenging landscape for unity among clergy in congregations and the entire church body. After about six years in the LCMC, I understood I

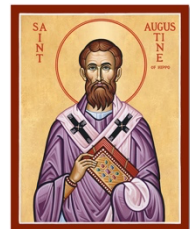
needed to find a church body to serve that shares my confession that the Bible is the Word of God, and it reflects in their doctrine and practice of the Christian faith. After further research into the LCMS, and after attending continuing education courses at both LCMS seminaries, and developing friendships with LCMS clergy members, I wanted to join the LCMS. The LCMS believes the Bible *is* God's Word and practices closed communion because our confession of faith matters to Jesus. It should matter to us. That's why I chose to become a pastor in the LCMS.

In February 2020, I began the colloquy process into the LCMS by meeting with then-Minnesota District President Donald Fondow. Unfortunately, shortly after our conversation, the COVID-19 pandemic began. Eventually, after writing essays and interviews with the synod on March 10, 2021, I completed the colloquy process into the LCMS. I received my first call to St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Eden Valley, where I have served since September 2021.

In Conclusion, we learn from the fall of humanity in Genesis 3 that when Satan wants to destroy God's Church, he does so by attacking God's Word in hopes of creating doubt that His Word is truth. Sadly, many churches like the ELCA and LCMC have fallen into Satan's trap of doubt, which has led them to reject clear Christian teachings in the Bible for acceptance and tolerance according to today's culture. False teaching is poison to the soul. May we cling to God's Word and thank the Lord for providing faithful men to lead our LCMS congregations, districts, and synod who teach the true Christian faith and hold us accountable when we start to waver. When congregations in the LCMS are concerned for the future due to shrinking weekly attendance, let us pray that these concerns do not cause us to abandon our biblical Lutheran confession of faith.

Book Review: *The City of God* by Augustine

By Rev Joshua Reber (Trinity, Clear Lake; Faith St. Cloud)



Reviewing Augustine's *City of God* is kind of like reviewing the Bible. Both are great and essential to our understanding of society. I'm not smart enough to analyze Augustine's neo-Platonism and compare Augustine's work to Plato's *Republic*. So, my job as a reviewer is to convince you that you should just sit down and read it. Here's the summary - there are two cities described in the Bible. One is the City of God and its end is heavenly paradise for eternity. The other is the City of the World, and its end is hell. The cities are built on their loves - the City of God loves God, the City of the World loves itself. Augustine traces both cities throughout the Bible. The way Augustine reads the Bible will leave your jaw on the ground. It's really that good.

The best way to entice you into reading this 1000-page work is to provide a sample of quotations. Augustine is extremely quotable, so when you read it, get your notebook ready!

On worshipping the Roman gods after Rome was destroyed in 410 AD - "to worship conquered gods as protectors and champions, what is this but to worship not good divinities, but evil omens?" (Bk 1, ch 3)

On why God's judgment occurs now and yet is fully reserved until Judgment Day - "For if every sin were now visited... nothing would seem to be reserved for the final judgment. If no sin received now a plainly divine punishment... there is no divine providence at all." (Bk 1, ch 8)

On why we suffer - "When He exposes us to adversities, it is either to prove our perfections or correct our imperfections." (Bk 1, ch 29)

The following is a quote by Persius, a Roman poet, but it's so good that Augustine quotes it - "Be taught, ye abandoned creatures, and ascertain the causes of things; what we are, and for what end we are born; what is the law of our success in life, and by what art we may turn the goal without making shipwreck; what limit we should put to our wealth, what we may lawfully desire, and what uses filthy lucre serves; how much we should bestow upon our country and our family; learn, in short, what God meant thee to be, and what place He has ordered you to fill." (Bk 2, ch 6)

On hell, the eternal city of sinful man - "For there is no greater or worse death than when death never dies." (Bk 6, ch 12)

On evil being a parasite - "Evil has no positive nature, but the loss of good." (Bk 11, ch 9)

On God's grace and wrath - "Neither can His grace be unjust, nor His justice cruel." (Bk 12, ch 27)

On professional farters - "Some [men] have such command of their bowels, that they can break wind continuously of pleasure, so as to produce the effect of singing." (Bk 14, ch 24)

On the life of contemplation and action - "No man has a right to lead such a life of contemplation as to forget in his own ease the service due his neighbor; nor has any man a right to be so immersed in active life as to neglect the contemplation of God." (Bk 19, ch 19) By the way, book 19 is the heart of this work, so if you're pressed for time, read that.

On freedom in heaven - "Are we to say that God Himself is not free because He cannot sin?" (Bk 22, ch 30)

News

CIRCUIT OVERTURES SENT TO DISTRICT CONVENTION

At our Circuit Forum in November, we voted to send 8 (eight!!!) overtures to the District Convention, which will be held February 23-25 in Grand Rapids. Here's a summary of the overtures:

- To encourage CPH to offer free shipping
- Thanksgiving for Rev. Dr. Gregory Schulz
- Thanksgiving for Constantine
- To express contrition for sinful suspension of the Divine Service during COVID
- To promote godly disdain for divorce
- To promote godliness among men and women in the God-assigned roles
- To honor the created orders in the congregational assembly
- To honor the created orders in congregational governance

Please pray with us that God would be honored and praised and that He would use us to preach His Word to the ends of the earth!

MEN'S RETREAT – SWORD OF GIDEON – JAN 31 – FEB 1

JANUARY 31 - FEBRUARY 1
FRIDAY EVENING & SATURDAY

CONCORDIA LUTHERAN CHURCH
FAIRHAVEN, MN

Train yourself
for godliness!
(1 Tim. 4:7)



Bible Study,
Strength Competition,
Worship, Food, &
Camaraderie



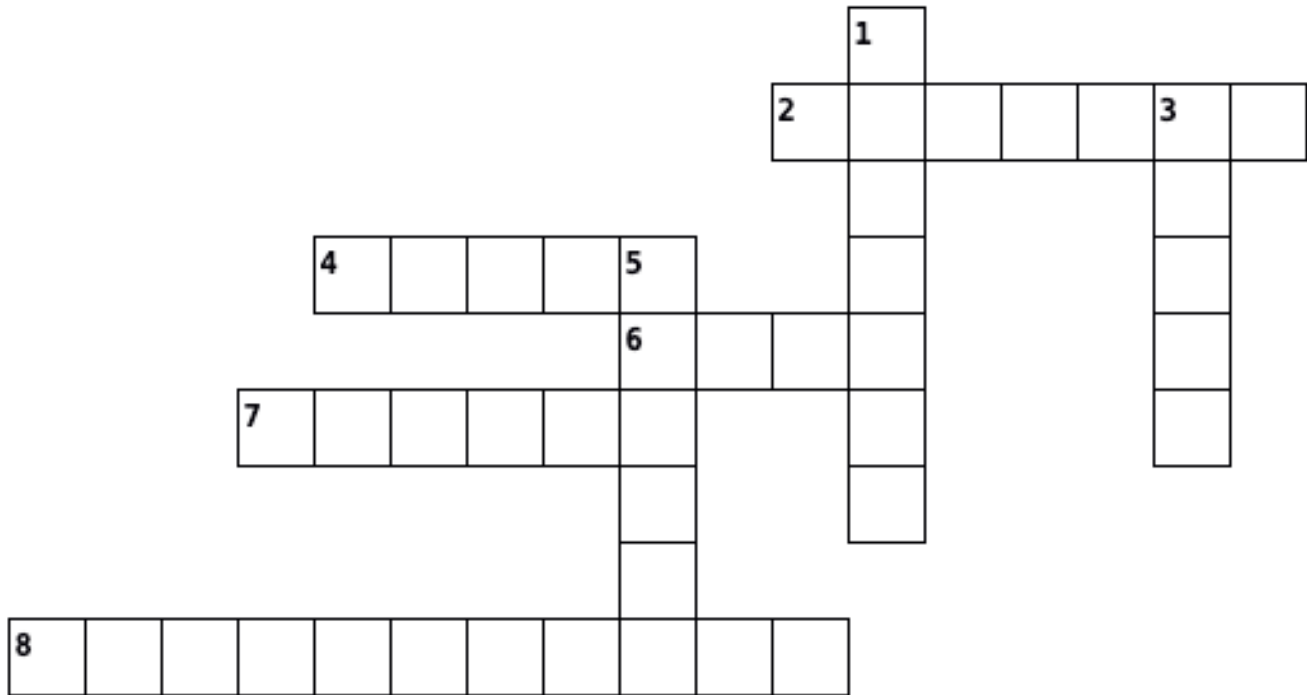
THE OF
SWORD OF GIDEON
— MEN'S RETREAT —



More information & registration: www.concordialcms.com/gideon

Memes of Grace

Due to the popularity of last issue's crossword, here's another one! We're all about giving the people what they want. Each answer is the last name of a pastor in the St. Cloud Circuit. To see the names of the pastors, go to the "Congregations" tab on lcmscloud.org.



Across

2. you actually pronounce the s
4. our fearless leader, Amish?
6. Boomer shark from Finding Nemo
7. pastor, mayor, postmaster general, emperor?
8. lol, good luck spelling this one

Down

1. two fs, one n
3. you can spell it backwards
5. best golfer in the circuit; careful with the most popular letter!