

## Introduction

# Unchanging Truth in Changing Times

by Paul T. McCain

*Jesus said, "For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice."  
Pilate said to him, "What is truth?" (John 18:37-38).*

Walk into any large bookstore and you will find walls of books about personal enlightenment, pop-psychology, self-help, self-improvement, meditation, Eastern religions, and the ever-popular subject of spirituality. Many people are searching for truth today. They try to find it by peering within themselves, trying to find meaning in the fleeting emotions they work so hard to experience from one day to the next. Too many try to find meaning and purpose in the very things that will only continue to let them down: pleasure, power or possessions. We are constantly tempted to look for truth in the wrong places. We confess that at times we have not only looked in the wrong places, but believed the lies we found there. We are following in the footsteps of our first parents who doubted God's Word and thus fell into sin, plunging all the world into the darkness of sin and death. Where then is the truth? What is it? How may it be found?

### What Is Truth?

Pilate's question, "What is truth?" demands an answer. Truth that lasts, truth that changes us forever, is found only in the One who is truth incarnate: Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). This bold claim has scandalized peoples of all times and all places ever since that small group of Jesus' first followers took His message out from the city of Jerusalem, into the surrounding lands of Judea and Samaria, and then to the uttermost parts of the world. This great mission task continues to this very day and hour. The apostles and the first disciples were beaten, tortured and killed by various groups that rejected their message as utter foolishness and profoundly offensive. The same thing continues to today whenever this message is declared:

All human beings are sinful. From the moment of our conception, we are at war with God and enemies of God. We are slaves of our sinful desires, thoughts and actions. We des-

perately need God's forgiveness, which He gives, freely and completely, through Jesus, His Son. Jesus was true God and true Man, born of a virgin in the land of Palestine. He lived a life in complete obedience to God's will, thus doing for us what we can never do. He was executed on the Roman instrument of torture and death, the cross. His death was the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the entire world. His blood cleanses us from our sins, all of them. Jesus came out of the grave alive after three days, confirming and demonstrating His absolute and final victory over sin, death and all the forces of Satanic evil.

God the Holy Spirit calls us to trust and believe that we are forgiven by God through Jesus Christ and thus we receive the gift of eternal life forever in heaven. Our Lord cares and guides and leads us throughout this life, sustaining and nurturing us through His Word and Sacraments. Christ Jesus replaces our cold, stony hearts of unbelief with living hearts that trust in Him and express that faith in thankful service to others.

This message, this good news, is the heart and soul of Christianity. It is still disregarded and even violently resisted in many parts of the world. It runs contrary to the common opinion that human beings are basically good, with the ability to save themselves through their own efforts. Ironically, never has this good news message been proclaimed without causing division, conflict and turmoil. Jesus Himself said, "Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and cast insults at you, and spurn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man. Be glad in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for in the same way their fathers used to treat the prophets" (Luke 6:22-23).

### The Growth of the Church and the Scandal of Division

Jesus' followers moved through the known world of their day, starting congregations of Christian believers every-

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where they went. These congregations were led by men who were given the task of continuing to hand down the teachings of Jesus Christ by proclaiming His forgiveness through preaching and teaching His Word and administering His Sacraments. These small congregations of believers drew people from all walks of life into a living and active faith, expressing itself in works of love with the goal of bearing witness to Jesus their Lord.

From the very early days, false teachers arose within the church, twisting and distorting the teachings of Christ, either adding something to the Word of God or trying to take something away. With each false teaching, the church had the opportunity to speak the truth clearly. When finally Christianity was legalized in the fourth century, the church faced new pressures and challenges that came with official toleration and then even popularity among the people who recognized the social, economic and political benefits of being a part of the church. Sadly, in 1054 A.D., there was a major split between the churches of the West and the churches of the East, a division that remains to this day.

For the next five centuries the Western Christian church endured various storms and crises, attempting to preserve the faith in times of intellectual decline and cultural chaos, but always moving the Gospel out among peoples in the world who had never heard it. A profound error was made by the church when it located its authority and power in the person of the Bishop of Rome. The Pope, as he came to be known, claimed to be the one, and only one, who could speak as God Himself, setting himself, as it were, in the very temple of God, ordering and enacting regulations and insisting on teachings that were never given to the church by her Lord and His apostles (1 Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Thess. 4:3-4).

During the Middle Ages, the good news about Jesus Christ and the teachings of God's Word became increasingly obscured under layers of papal doctrine. The people of the church were plunged ever further into superstitious darkness. They could not even understand the worship service since it was recited in a language they did not know. There were pockets here and there of quality Christian teaching, but for the most part, the common people were headed ever further into the darkness of ignorance about the most basic truths of the Christian faith. Efforts to reform the direction and leadership of the church during the later Middle Ages met with only minimally lasting results. What was needed was a sweeping renewal and rediscovery of the the core teachings of the church, drawn from, and founded on, the Apostolic and Prophetic Scriptures. The Gospel had to come to light again in the church. During the 16th century, Martin

Luther and his followers were intent not on starting a new church, but in reforming the existing church and bringing it back to its Gospel center. They were eventually expelled from the Roman Catholic Church and therefore had to stand against it, forming what would become known as the Lutheran Church.

The Lutheran reformers realized that as long as Rome continued to insist on false teaching, the Gospel was being neglected, forgotten or set aside. It had been replaced with teachings that elevated man's ability to work to earn God's favor and love, thus always throwing man back onto himself, making him either hopeless, or self-righteous, and in either case ignorant of the comfort and promise of Christ. They acknowledged and thanked God that, in spite of error, He had preserved His Word and the message of the Gospel. They knew that there were Christians in the Roman Catholic Church. The same is true today, among not only the Roman Church, but among all erring churches. People sometimes ignorantly accuse faithful Lutherans of believing that they, and they alone, are the only Christians in the world. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Unfortunately, at the same time that the Lutheran Reformation was bringing the Gospel to light again, there arose various erring Protestant splinter groups, which led to the bewildering number of denominations today. The various Protestant churches all trace their origins to either the so-called "Reformed" church, or the more radical groups from the days of the Reformation, with a variety of splinter groups originating from these Reformation-era churches. The number of denominations and various sub-groupings within denominations strikes the outside observer as hopelessly confusing, and indeed, the divisions in Christendom are scandalous. Though it is relatively easy to explain the various denominations with a brief review of church history similar to this one, the scandal of Christian division remains real and offensive. It is not what our Lord intends for His people. But is the solution to be found in the trends we notice today? A pell-mell rush into various ecumenical agreements and declarations of "full communion?" No.

Equally as scandalous as the divisions within Christendom are attempts to resolve the differences between Christians on the basis of what is known as "reconciled diversity." Many ecumenical agreements today are based on an agreement to disagree about teachings of God's Word. Better is the approach followed by those churches that are intent on upholding Christian truth: honest expression of disagreement with the intention of bearing witness to the truth of God's Word and working toward actual agreement,

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and, where this is not possible, refusing to express a fellowship in the Gospel and all its articles that does not exist (see 1 Cor. 1:10 and Rom. 16:17).

### The Greatest Threat to the Church Today

Overshadowing all these issues today is a near-total capitulation to the worldview of liberal theology that we find in many of the so-called “mainline” churches. It has resulted in a skepticism about any specific truth claims and a rejection of the insistence that there is one, and only one, saving truth, found and located in Jesus Christ alone. This trend has worked its way deeply into all major church bodies, Catholic and Protestant alike. What many well-intentioned laypeople do not realize is that in many Christian denominations, including the larger Lutheran churches in the United States and around the world, the Bible is no longer regarded as actually being God’s Word. Readers should know that The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod continues to insist that the Scriptures *are* the Word of God, infallible and inerrant.

The miracles of both Old and New Testament are considered by many theologians and pastors within liberal churches to be largely fictional accounts. The events in the life of our Lord recorded in the Gospels are not considered to be factual, but rather myths created and repeated by the first Christians to overcome their dismay about the death of their leader, Jesus. Other scholars, in an attempt to modify such radical views, today emphasize that the factuality of the Biblical accounts is not the issue, but rather what those texts mean to the reader. According to this view of the Bible, the factuality of the texts are not the point, but rather the response these texts, true or not, elicit from the reader. The Bible becomes authoritative only in a way similar to the authority we would attribute to any ancient legend or myth that has the power to move us to belief and action.

Let’s take but one example of how the predominant liberal view of the Bible results in ecumenical agreements based on agreement to disagree. For example, why should there be any church-divisive disagreements today about Jesus’ words, “This is my body” and “This is my blood” if we can no longer be certain Jesus actually said these things? If we do not believe that Christ actually said these words, there is no point in letting disagreement about them stand in the way of full communion. And the same principle works itself out in many areas of Christian teaching.

Churches today that have compromised the faith by rejecting the historic truths of the Bible, tolerate and even praise false teachers in their midst. We notice many symptoms of this: toleration of the murder of unborn children

through abortion, the acceptance and even advocacy of homosexual relationships, the ordination of women and now even homosexual clergy, and so forth. While these issues may receive the most attention in the media, they remain symptoms of a much deeper problem—doubt about the reliability and truthfulness of Holy Scripture, God’s Word.

### Confronting the Challenges Today

These are the changing times in which we today live. We may wish to hide ourselves from this reality, or pretend that it is not so, but if we do, we are only deceiving ourselves. More than ever do we need God’s unchanging truth. Christians who want to remain faithful to God’s Word must actually learn and study the doctrines of the Bible, acquaint themselves with the basics of church history, and become familiar with modern trends and current issues facing the church. They need to receive high-quality and in-depth instruction in Christian truth from their pastors and other church workers. Faithful parents need to work carefully with their children, and by prayer and meditation on God’s Word, teach them the basic truths of the Christian faith, using Luther’s Small Catechism. Lutheran laypeople need again to become familiar with the Book of Concord, thus coming to know what it is to be a genuinely confessional Lutheran.

People are hungry for substance in their spiritual lives. They may not be able to articulate precisely what that substance is, but they are hungry for it—particularly younger people. Many of them have had enough with the empty entertainment of popular culture. They are not impressed by attempts to mimic this culture. They are looking for authentic spiritual reality, not an imitation of TV culture. Churches of the so-called “mainline” continue their rapid decline in large part because there is finally no reason for them to exist if they can not offer anything much different than can be found in any social club or organization devoted to charity and friendship. When churches are no longer willing or able to say with certainty that Jesus Christ is in fact the Son of God, the second person of the Holy Trinity, born of a virgin mother, and that His death was the sacrifice for the entire world’s sin, and that he did truly bodily rise from the dead, there is no point in proclaiming Him at all. The world doesn’t need a spiritual master, an enlightened teacher, or a good role model and leader. It needs a savior from sin and death and hell. The world needs Jesus Christ.

Truth liberates. Lies enslave. To reject Christ’s truth is to become a slave to ignorance, fear, sin, and death. This slavery results finally in separation from God in hell, forever under

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His judgment and condemnation. But there is freedom. Our Lord promises us, “If you continue in My Word, you are truly my disciples, and you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free” (John 8:31-32). Churches are under enormous pressure, even churches that wish to be and remain genuinely historic, confessing Lutheran churches. The pressure comes from outside the church, but also from within. Our Lord warned us against false teachers, “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (Matt. 7:15).

How do we resist pressures on the Lutheran church to compromise and water down its insistence on the Biblical truths that have been confessed since the time of the Reformation? We resist these pressures by remaining firmly anchored in the truths of God’s Word, the Holy Scriptures. The stormier the times, the more the need for a strong anchor to hold us fast to God’s Word. The Lutheran Confessions are that anchor. The Lutheran confessors themselves understood this when they wrote in the introduction to the Book of Concord of 1580:

The most acute and urgent necessity demands that in the face of so many invasive errors, aggravated scandals, dissensions, and protracted divisions a Christian explanation and accord of all the disputes that have arisen come into being—one well founded in God’s Word and one according to which the pure teaching will be differentiated from the false and everything will not be left free and open to restless, contentious people, who do not want to be bound to any fixed form of pure teaching so as to excite scandalous disputes at will and to introduce and defend absurd errors from which can only result that in the end right teaching will be entirely obscured and lost and that nothing else will be transmitted to future generations than uncertain opinions and dubious, disputable imaginations and views” (Preface to the *Book of Concord*, paragraph 22, Kolb/Wengert, p. 14).

The first Lutherans learned that definitive statements of Christian doctrine are necessary in order to keep the church firmly fixed on the Word of God. Every generation of Lutherans must learn that lesson as well. God’s Word moves Lutheran Christians to say with joyful confidence and all boldness, “This we believe, teach and confess” and also to say, “This we reject and condemn.” This twofold aspect of confessing God’s Word, declaring the truth and rejecting error, characterizes all who desire to remain genuinely Lutheran.

### Patient Joy and Calm Strength

We dare never give in to a tendency that has become all too common in some circles. When we see the great challenges that lie before us, we are tempted to despair and indulge in self-pity and hand-wringing. Though we are always on vigilant watch, and though we do realize the urgency of the mission task our Lord has given, we go about our various callings in life with patient joy, and with calm strength. Why? Because we know that the Lord whom we serve is always praying for His church, is always with us, and will always guide, guard and govern His church on earth. With King Jehoshaphat we are comforted by God’s promise, “Do not be afraid or discouraged . . . for the battle is not yours, but the Lord’s” (2 Chron. 20:15). Therefore, the “panic mode” that seems to grip some concerned Christians is not what our Lord desires for His people. We are ever realistic, never pessimistic. We are marked by the joy of the Lord, which remains our strength. In that strength—in His strength—we move ahead patiently and carefully, faithful to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, eagerly engaged in the church’s great mission task.

For people searching for spiritual renewal, Christ gives new birth through the washing of water with the Word in Holy Baptism. For those seeking a personal relationship with God, Christ gives His body and blood, under the bread and wine, for forgiveness, life and salvation. For those struggling with the burden of guilt, Christ speaks the sure and certain word of absolution. For those who feel lost, without direction, and without hope, the Lord comes to them through preaching and teaching and meditation on the Holy Scriptures, which are like a refreshing stream of cool water, a true lamp in the darkness of life.

While many search for spiritual direction, seemingly from every self-help guru who appears on the afternoon talk shows, our Lord continues to send faithful pastors who shepherd, lead and care for Christ’s church with His Word and Sacraments. In an era of remarkable advances in communication technology, people feel more lonely and isolated than ever before. Here again, they find what they are looking for in the Lord’s church. Together, as brothers and sisters of our Lord, they bear one another’s burdens, weeping with those who weep, rejoicing with those who rejoice. They care for one another, loving even as He has loved us. Resting beneath all these treasures and gifts lies God’s unchanging truth in Christ, which all Christians are given to share and proclaim.

There is truth. God has revealed it. God has given it through His Word, which never can err or deceive. There are many truth claims competing for our attention, but only One

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who ever claimed to be *the* truth (John 14:6). Him we praise and honor. Him we serve and obey. Him we follow and on Him our hope is built. Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever. And so, with sure and certain hope, grounded and rooted in His life, death and resurrection, we proclaim Jesus Christ to be the One who has smashed apart Satan's chains that held us captive as a result of sin, setting us free to be His people, serving Him now and forever. To Him be all praise, honor and glory, who with the Father, and the Spirit, reigns ever one God, world without end. Amen.