PRAISE FOR *BEING LUTHERAN*

Being Lutheran by Rev. Trevor Sutton is a must read for all Christians wanting to dig deeper. It is a great resource for pastors and teachers to put into the hands of "new" Christians and "old." It is good for anyone who seeks a better understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ, one who desires even more to get to know Jesus and the power of His Word in his or her life. This book would be excellent for any individual, but it is especially useful for small groups because of Sutton's use of today's relevant concerns and apathies as the context into which to speak the things of Jesus and the Good News of God's grace. Complete with vignettes and discussion questions, this is a resource that is sure to bless.

—The Rev. Dr. Gregory P. Seltz
"The Voice of the Lutheran Hour"

With a crisp and vivid style, Trevor Sutton's *Being Lutheran* is a well-structured, easily digested overview of a faith that is uniquely spiritual and earthly, Christ-centered, and creation-aware. This is a great book for a small-group book study; patiently thumbing through each chapter week after week will challenge readers to think *and* act in ways that fit with Scripture and the lavish grace of God in Christ. This is a hopeful book that sees faith in Jesus as more than just a ticket to heaven. Every page invites us to join many others (by name!) in the faithful discipleship that marks one who is truly Lutheran. In short, *Being Lutheran* helps faith work right.

—Rev. Scott Seidler, DMin
Senior Pastor, Concordia Lutheran Church, Kirkwood, MO

A far cry from "blatant Lutheran grandstanding," Sutton's provocative text reclaims the Lutheran narrative with exceptional style and substance, extending to the lifelong congregant and the uninitiated alike a fresh invitation to live boldly under God's open and expansive grace—grace that animates our thinking and doing. Every Lutheran should read this book and dive headlong into being what and who they are, in Christ.

—Gretchen M. Jameson
Senior Vice President—University Affairs
Concordia University Wisconsin and Ann Arbor

Not religious bravado! Not highbrow stuffiness! Rather, Pastor Sutton refreshingly shows us how God uses the ordinary to do the extraordinary: humankind created from earth, sinners saved with water, everyday believers motivated by ordinary words in God's Word, doing a world of good.

Sutton's accessible style weaves references to hipsters, marital love, digital content, Sacraments, quantum physics, ennui, the workplace, texting, bloodletting, and the problem of evil. With a global and multiethnic scope, Sutton remains insistently confessional, never oversimplifying Lutheran identity, focused unapologetically on the mystery and the clarity of the Good News in the cross of Jesus Christ.

—Rev. John Nunes, PhD
President, Concordia College—New York

A. Trevor Sutton's work, *Being Lutheran*, is both a delightful and a truly helpful look at the depth and the richness of the biblical faith. He undergirds this important writing in the sharing of brief stories (vignettes) about individuals whose heartfelt faith made a difference. In fact, the brief story of Ben's life and faith moved me to tears of joy and thankfulness. As I read the book, I was at different times encouraged, challenged, comforted, affirmed, and motivated in the truth of God's love for me. Readers, be blessed!

—Rev. Luke R. Schnake, DMin
Director of Ministries, Christ Lutheran Church, Lincoln, NE

In an increasingly multiethnic America and global landscape, being Lutheran has to be more than being German. What, at the essential core, is a Lutheran? In a fresh way, Sutton insists being Lutheran is more about a "who" than a "what." First, it is an unhindered focus on Jesus Christ. From there, being Lutheran is a life of beliefs and actions that flow from the Gospel center. This is a useful tool for new generations exploring Lutheran thinking and practice.

—Rev. Jeff Cloeter
Senior Pastor, Christ Memorial Lutheran Church, St. Louis, MO

BEING LUTHERAN

BEING LUTHERAN

Living in the Faith You Have Received

A. Trevor Sutton

DEDICATED TO

Mom and Dad
My firm foundation

Elizabeth
My loving bride

Grace and Hannah
My unending joy

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Contents

Foreword xi
Acknowledgments xv
Introduction xvii

Part 1: Being Lutheran: What We Challenge 1
Chapter 1: Closed 3
Vignette: Seliman 24
Chapter 2: Lukewarm 29
Vignette: Dietrich 47
Chapter 3: Confused 53
Vignette: María 72
Chapter 4: Lazy 77
Vignette: Bessie 93
Chapter 5: Pastel 101
Vignette: Jack 120

Part 2: Being Lutheran: What We Cherish 125
Chapter 6: New 127
Vignette: Ben 145
Chapter 7: Ordinary 151
Vignette: Sharon 170
Chapter 8: Unresolved 177
Vignette: Hannah 198
Chapter 9: Purpose 205
Vignette: Scott 222
Chapter 10: Local 227
*Vignette: [*Insert Name Here*] Lutheran Church* 244
Conclusion 249
Leader Guide 255

FOREWORD

We are told that if the Church is to be relevant to our contemporary generations, it needs to proclaim a Christianity that is not legalistic, moralistic, or political. The twenty-first-century Church needs a theology that is grace-filled, inclusive, and down-to-earth. Rather than being a philosophical exposition of abstractions that aims at intellectual understanding, twenty-first-century theology needs to affirm mystery. For all of its spiritual mystery, this theology somehow should also relate to everyday life. Worship in the twenty-first-century-Church should resemble neither a lecture hall nor an entertainment venue; rather, it should manifest that mystery and that practicality in a shared experience of a community of faith. As "emergent Christians," postmodern theologians, and church-growth experts try to devise such a church and such a theology, Trevor Sutton shows that such a church and such a theology already exist: it's called Lutheranism.

Whereas the various attempts to reform Christianity along those lines are devolving into cultural conformity, religious relativism, and new variations on the failed liberal theology, this book shows how the original Reformation still has the same effect; the way forward for the Church is to recover its confessional legacy and to apply it in a new cultural context. Lutherans themselves, as the book shows, have often forgotten and drifted away from Lutheranism, to the diminishment of their church and their witness. This book can help Lutherans understand what it means to be Lutheran, even as it

points those of other traditions and those of no traditions—including those who are "spiritual but not religious"—to a place where they will find Jesus.

Although this book is about being Lutheran, above all it is about Jesus. This book mentions Jesus far more than it does Luther, which is, of course, the main point of being Lutheran. Every Lutheran doctrine comes back to Jesus—the incarnation of God, His cross, His resurrection, His saving work, His love, His Word, His Sacraments, His presence, faith in Him—and this book makes that clear on virtually every page.

The theology—Christology, justification, the Word of God, Baptism, Holy Communion, vocation—is all here. Trevor Sutton expresses it and explains it in utterly fresh ways, in terms that never existed in previous centuries. He draws analogies and examples from the world of open-source software, contemporary science, and today's social scenes. He does not fawn over contemporary culture as do so many Christians who try too hard. In fact, he criticizes contemporary culture, but he is also communicating with it.

Every Lutheran doctrine comes back to Jesus

Members of contemporary culture do have their good qualities. Raised in a world that often seems artificial and as though it's trying to sell them something, they crave authenticity. Ironically, many churches try to reach these people by using the same techniques that they are sick of. These churches try to use modern marketing techniques to sell Christianity, try to change themselves artificially in a mostly vain attempt to make the Church more attractive, and thus come across as fake. This book, by contrast, is authentic. It presents Lutheranism warts and all. It is honest, realistic, and open to correction. It admits that Lutheranism does not have all of the answers, that Lutherans make mistakes and have a history of not living up to their own ideals. But such transparency makes Lutheranism—and

what Lutherans say about the radical effects of sin and our constant need of God's grace—seem more believable.

As an example of how the author uses a contemporary cultural movement to drive home important Lutheran teachings, consider what he does with localism. Reacting against today's uprootedness, mass consumerism, and cultural homogenization, many people today are rediscovering the value of a sense of place. They are cultivating an appreciation for the "local." They want to eat food that was grown by nearby farmers, drink beer that was brewed where they live, and live in unique local communities. Sometimes, of course, the impulse to eat locally, drink locally, and act locally devolves into just another kind of consumerism, but it arguably comes out of a healthy reaction against today's impersonal mass society. Pastor Sutton shows how Lutheranism emphasizes the local: God localized Himself by becoming incarnate as a specific human being in a specific locale at a specific time in history. This incarnate God, Jesus Christ, is locally present in the bread and wine of Holy Communion. He is thus present and active in the local congregation, however humble it may seem.

Also unique in this treatment is that Pastor Sutton treats not only Lutheran beliefs, but he also treats the attitudes and mind-sets that those beliefs inform. Thus, he divides his book into two parts: what Lutherans challenge (being closed, lukewarm, confused, lazy, and "pastel"), followed by what Lutherans cherish (the new, the ordinary, the unresolved, purpose, and the local). This helps explain the quirks of Lutherans—why they are so doctrinally rigorous, yet so fond of paradoxes and unresolved doctrinal tensions; why they seem both conservative and radical; how their theological strictness manifests itself in a spirit of freedom; how they can make such strong supernatural claims, while also focusing on the much-neglected spiritual significance of what is ordinary—while also accounting for what we could describe as the Lutheran theological culture.

To further ground this theology, this spirituality, in real life, Pastor Sutton includes in each chapter a vignette of an actual person who has lived out the issues he has been writing about. All of this in a style that is original, stimulating, and often (significantly) humorous.

For the already Lutheran, this treatment takes beliefs and practices that have become so familiar they are taken for granted and defamiliarizes them, presenting them in a new way so that they can be experienced as if for the first time with full astonishment. For Christians in other traditions, this treatment shows what a Christ-centered theology built wholly around the Gospel looks like. For non-Christians, this treatment presents a compelling proclamation of Christ, one that points to His saving work and where He can be found.

Gene Edward Veith

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. (Proverbs 3:5)

I am thankful for the many influential people in my life. God has blessed me with a family—Mark and Jane, Bill and Gwen, Ashleigh, Connor, and Steven—to be my firm foundation filled with love and trust in the Lord. My wife, Elizabeth, is my endlessly patient and supportive bride. My daughters, Grace and Hannah, are my unending joy. Without their love and prayers, this book would not have been written.

God has used many to shape my faith: I would like to thank Paul Moldenhauer, Mark Bushuiakovish, Jeremy Schultz, Dave Davis, as well as the people of St. Matthew Lutheran Church (Walled Lake, Michigan), St. Paul Lutheran Church (Royal Oak, Michigan), and St. Luke Lutheran Church (Haslett, Michigan).

God has used many to shape my understanding: I am indebted to the faculties of Concordia University in Ann Arbor and Concordia Seminary in St. Louis for forming me as a thinker. I would particularly like to thank Dr. Neal Migan for teaching me how to write and Dr. Charles Arand for teaching me how to think theologically. I am also thankful to my colleagues in the Writing and Rhetoric Department at Michigan State University.

God has also used many people to turn this project into a book: I would like to thank Scot Kinnaman and the rest of the team

at Concordia Publishing House for their guidance and editorial wisdom. I also appreciate the careful work of Joshua Miller in reviewing the manuscript.

And God has used many others not listed here. I am grateful for everyone who has taught me to trust in the Lord.

INTRODUCTION

Being Lutheran

Being Lutheran. Not thinking Lutheran. Not acting Lutheran. Being Lutheran. Being is where thinking and acting collide. It is more than going through the motions. It is more than simply considering an idea or pondering a subject. Being is thinking *and* acting.

We can think yet never act. We can know all about a subject yet never do anything about it. Intellectually grasping God's desire for neighborly love can fail to get us off the front porch. Knowing that hungry people live just beyond our front porch can barely rouse our compassion. Understanding that entire communities are in despair without the Gospel can lead to nothing more than a shrug of the shoulders. It is possible to think as Lutherans, yet never act as Lutherans.

Or we can act without thinking. We could rise to action before a single synapse fires in our brain. Caring for others can be fueled by a misguided hope to earn salvation. Prayer can be as thoughtless as dropping coins in a slot machine. Worship can become nothing more than a spectacle. It is possible for us to act as Lutherans, yet never think as Lutherans.

Perhaps you are reading this right now and thinking, Not me. My thinking informs my actions, and my actions reflect my thinking. I always think as a Lutheran, and I always act as a Lutheran. Congratulations! You are among the five people in human history who can make that claim.

For the rest of us, me included, we constantly need to merge our thinking and acting. There are days when we think Lutheran thoughts and fail to act accordingly. And there are other days when we act as Lutherans yet are completely misguided in our thinking. If you struggle to put it all together, then this book is for you. If you need help in living out your Lutheran theology in daily life, then this book is for you. If you need a better understanding of Lutheran theology and heritage, then this book is for you. I hope that this book helps you to grow closer to Jesus.

Perhaps you are reading this book and you are not Lutheran. Maybe you are of the Reformed tradition. Maybe you are Roman Catholic, Methodist, nondenominational, or some other tradition. Welcome! You will bring good thoughts to these pages. Your tradition undoubtedly has a rich heritage of theologically informed thinking and acting. By reading this book, you will gain a better context by which to examine your own tradition. If you are reading this book from a non-Lutheran perspective, then it will certainly raise questions that you can bring back to your own heritage. Ask these questions of your own tradition. Find answers. I hope this book helps you to grow closer to Jesus.

I suspect that there are still other readers of this book as well. Perhaps you are reading this and you are not a Christian. Welcome! You also bring a beneficial perspective to these pages. Reading this book will allow you to be well-informed and have thoughtful discussions with your Christian friends. The world needs more well-informed people. And the world needs more thoughtful discussions. I hope this book helps you to grow closer to Jesus.

This book is about being Lutheran. It is about theologically informed practice, biblically based behavior, and godly action. It is about living in the faith you have received. Being Lutheran is to know what Lutherans believe and to act on those beliefs.

WHAT TO EXPECT

It will be helpful to have some guidance about what to expect from this book. Questions will arise as you read. Certain topics may initially seem out of reach. Contradictions will create a tension. Objections will undoubtedly cause you to consider putting it down. Fight the urge. Keep reading. Chapters will push against other chapters. Objections will come up in one chapter, and answers will appear in another chapter. Balance comes from all the counterweights working together. Read this book in its entirety. And then you can tell your friends that you entirely disagree with it. Here is what you can expect from this book:

Expect Jesus. He makes all things new. He is victorious over death. He has the power to forgive sins. He is the Good Shepherd. You may be thinking to yourself, I thought this book was about being Lutheran! It is. Being Lutheran is about following Jesus. A Lutheran's primary identity is in Jesus, who has claimed you as His own, given you new life through the waters of Baptism, and invited you to come follow Him.

Being Lutheran is about following Jesus

And as you follow Jesus, you will find that you keep on bumping into other people. Certain people have followed Jesus in such a profound way that it is hard not to notice them. If you follow Jesus long enough, you will inevitably bump into Martin Luther. If you follow Jesus long enough, you will eventually bump into Philip Melanchthon, Martin Chemnitz, C. F. W. Walther, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and many others. If you follow Jesus long enough, you will find yourself repeatedly bumping into

Lutheran theology and practice. Being Lutheran is about following Jesus. Lutheran theology aims only at faithfully following the teachings of Jesus Christ. This book is ultimately about Jesus.

Expect honesty. This book is not Lutheran hagiography. Authors writing about the saints—a genre known as hagiography—will write volumes of praise about an individual. These sorts of texts depict an impossibly perfect image of a person or group of people. Hagiography tends to go something like this: "St. so-and-so could do no wrong. Everybody loved him. He invented sliced bread. He won 'Most Likely to Succeed' in high school."

This is not that sort of book. This book will claim Lutheran theology is the fullest articulation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This book will explore various attributes of our belief. This book will tell the story of various Lutherans living out their faith in tremendous ways. This book will point out errors in other denominations. It will occasionally sound like blatant Lutheran grandstanding. However, this book will be painfully honest in recognizing that Lutherans seldom live up to their own theology. We talk the talk but often miss walking the walk. Being Lutheran has become pretty vanilla. This book will not be a chest-thumping, back-patting, self-aggrandizing depiction of Lutheranism.

We do not always embody the attributes that we claim as our own. Perhaps there was a time in our history when we embodied more of these traits. However, we have long since forgotten their importance. We do not always live out the practices of Lutheranism. We have distorted our practices into an unrecognizable condition. We forego their

value and pretend to be like other denominations. We have cashed in our beliefs on numerous occasions for any shiny new trend that comes our way. This book is going to be brutally honest.

Expect theology. Most people assume that theology is as exciting as reading tax law or the phone book. Theology brings to mind dead guys with epic beards. Many folks would rather tailgate at *Antiques Roadshow* than read a book about theology. People assume theology is boring. They are mistaken. Theology is not some sort of esoteric, quasi-philosophical muttering. Theology is about daily life. It situates God's eternal truths in the present. It takes Scripture and applies it to your challenges as student, spouse, employee, friend, and parent. Theological reflection tries to make sense out of life and death, suffering and violence, love and marriage, work and rest.

Theological reflection tries to make sense out of life and death, suffering and violence, love and marriage, work and rest

Theology has gained a bad name for a couple of reasons. It is a complicated discipline occupied by theological scholars. As happens with many disciplines, scholars engage in conversations with one another. Scientists discuss science with other scientists. Historians debate history with other historians. Theologians talk theology with other theologians. A problem arises when theology becomes inwardly focused. God came to His people and spoke to them in their own language. Theology gets a bad

name when it fails to speak to average people in their own language.

Another grievance cited against theology is irrelevancy. Medieval theologians used to postulate how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. This was relevant to them because it fit into broader questions they were asking at that time. The average farmer in that day was far more concerned with how many cows he could fit in his barn. Theology can fixate on discussions that are relevant only to a small group of specialists. Instead of that, expect that in this book we will discuss theology using accessible language and will make it relevant to daily life—make it relevant to you.

Expect history. Theology often draws on history. Certain figures from the past come up frequently. This book will reference various times in Church history. Ancient Christianity and the Reformation will provide context for our present beliefs. You will hear certain names come up repeatedly: Augustine of Hippo, Martin Luther, and C. F. W. Walther. It may seem as though theology is just stuck in the past and overly fixated on dead people. While this may be partially true, there is a reason for referencing different times and people.

We are not the smartest people to ever live. Science, medicine, literature, and art have advanced since the time of the Early Church. We know much more now than people did in the past. Bloodletting is out, and antibiotics are in. Our geocentric universe is now a heliocentric universe. Curly mustaches came and went. And then they inexplicably came back again. Tweets, posts, and snaps are the new scrolls. Still, we are not nearly as smart as we think we are.

The ancients had an incredible knowledge of astronomy, architecture, language, and philosophy. Memorizing whole works of literature was standard practice. Martin Luther would read through the entire Bible twice a year. We can barely read through our in-box. Theology unabashedly draws on other times and people. God does not change. Sin and salvation do not change. Scripture is already written. This book uses the past to illuminate the present.

Expect people—real people. People matter to God. He fearfully and wonderfully made every person who has ever lived. God knows His people by name. God loves people so much that He is willing to die for them. God stays up at night and counts the hairs on your head (Luke 12:7). Lutheranism is not about institutional survival or perpetuating a brand. People are not just a nameless statistic or demographic. Being Lutheran is sharing in God's love for people.

Each chapter concludes with a vignette depicting a real person. Some of the people in the vignettes are exceptional individuals from history. Most of the people are just average folks: recovering alcoholics, mothers, teachers, doctors, and immigrants. These are composites of real people who have really grappled with being Lutheran. These individuals embody some aspect of being Lutheran. These vignettes will help you translate theology into daily life. Their stories will show you what it looks like to be Lutheran.

Expect Lutheranism. This book will explore the core characteristics of Lutheran thinking and practice. It will give you a better understanding of how Lutheran theology is unique. It will explain how we are like other denomina-

tions. It will point out the ways in which the Lutheran Church differs from other church bodies. Central figures and events in the history of the Lutheran Church will give you context for present-day Lutheranism. There will not be any recipes for German potato salad, lutefisk, or casseroles. It will give you what you need to develop a thoughtful explanation for being Lutheran.

BOOK OVERVIEW

This book is divided into two parts. In the first section, we look at the human tendencies Lutherans challenge. We push against the broken inclinations of sin. Lutherans challenge a closed culture with a radical openness to sharing God's grace. We loathe apathy and actually defend our faith. We refuse to be ignorant by actually knowing what we believe. We resist the urge to work for God's love and instead work for our neighbor's well-being. We detest being pastel like every other church body. Being Lutheran is challenging broken human tendencies.

In the second section, we look at those things that are distinctive about being Lutheran. Lutherans cling to the peculiarities of the Gospel and believe that Scripture is the Word of God. We embrace the fact that salvation comes from beyond ourselves; Christ makes all things new without sinners contributing anything. We marvel at the mystery of how God uses ordinary material to deliver Christ's extraordinary grace; God takes ordinary stuff and makes it extraordinary. We recognize that certain tensions in Scripture are better left unresolved; every theological dilemma does not have to be untangled. We celebrate Christ working in and through us; our identity and purpose in life come from God. We look to the worship of the local congregation to see Christ coming to us; worship is where God dwells in the midst of the community. Being Lutheran is cherishing the peculiarities of the Gospel.

The book concludes with a chapter about following Jesus. Although we call ourselves Lutheran, our primary identity is in Jesus Christ. Lutherans do not follow Martin Luther because he is among the greatest theologians in history. We do not follow Luther because he liberated the Church from false teaching. We do not follow Luther because he brewed his own beer. Rather, we are Lutheran because it enables us to faithfully follow Jesus. Being Lutheran is faithfully following Jesus.

By the end of this book, you will be able to better articulate what it is to be Lutheran. You will be able to stop googling all of your questions about Lutheranism. You can stop explaining Lutheranism as being somewhere between Baptist and Catholic. You will know what Lutherans believe. Your answer can go beyond explaining the differences between Martin Luther and Martin Luther King Jr. You can stop being boring. And you can start being Lutheran.

Part 1

Being Lutheran: What We Challenge

Chapter 1

CLOSED

Through Him we have also obtained
access by faith into this grace in
which we stand, and we rejoice in
hope of the glory of God.
(Romans 5:2)

Hipsters know how to be cool. Plastic-frame glasses have a sophisticated vibe with just a hint of nerdy. Moustaches and flannel shirts pair well with single-speed bicycles and scooters. Fanny packs offer an ironic twist. And skinny jeans make a statement to the entire world: "I am a brave man for cramming myself into these pants!"

Hipsters also talk about cool topics: indie music, sustainability, farm-to-table, biofuels, and third spaces. Hang around a coffee shop long enough and you will also hear someone talking about open source. The term *open source* emerged from computer programming. Starting in the 1980s, computer programmers began openly sharing the recipes for software. The code was free and open for anyone to use. Other programmers would then take the code and remix it for some other use. This remixed software code was again openly shared with others.

Open-source practices have since spread beyond computer programming. Open-source architects make blueprints available to others for collaboration. Universities embrace open source by freely sharing lectures and course material via the Internet. Pharmaceutical

scientists share the recipes for various drugs to promote global accessibility to medicine. Open source is showing up everywhere.

Wikipedia is an example of open source. Anybody can contribute to the collective knowledge on a topic. Suppose you are an expert in your field. Your field just so happens to be designer dog clothing. You can contribute your substantial knowledge of pooch handbags on the wiki page. Suppose you were to make an outlandish claim about the topic: you wrote an entry stating that dogs do not appreciate dressing up like humans. Other experts could then come and correct your falsity. Likewise, you can correct the false claims of other contributors. Knowledge is openly shared. Collaboration is crowdsourced.

Linux, Firefox, Creative Commons, and Khan Academy are all open-source projects. Code, photos, and knowledge are all openly shared via the Internet. Users are welcome to remix, redux, and revamp. Users do not have to pay for software, code, or content. Open source is pretty awesome.

Hidden behind all the awesomeness, however, are some serious problems. Open source is not nearly as open as it appears. Massive barriers keep many people from accessing these resources. Obstacles have closed open source. Without Internet access or a computer, these tools are useless. No Internet access means zero access to digital encyclopedias, video learning, and educational material. No computer access means no sharing in open collaboration. This excludes billions of people from open-source access. In 2013, more than 45 million people, or 14.5 percent of all Americans, lived at or below the poverty line.[1] Globally, over 1.3 billion, 18 percent of all people, do not have access to electricity.[2] Open-source access is irrelevant

1 Mark Gongloff, "45 Million Americans Still Stuck Below Poverty Line: Census," *The Huffington Post*, September 16, 2014, www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/16/poverty-household-income_n_5828974.html

2 International Energy Agency, www.iea.org/topics/energypoverty/ (accessed January 5, 2016).

when you warm your hut by burning dried cow dung. Correcting a falsehood about designer dog clothing takes a backseat when you have had no fresh water in two days.

There are also social barriers to open-source access. Literacy is a requirement for the majority of Internet usage. Users must be able to do more than just read; most open-source access relies on being computer literate and adept at coding. Racial barriers keep minority voices quiet. Finances build walls around who can and cannot participate since open source is not entirely free. Computer programmers sell tech support and add-ons for their free software. Architects sell their expertise when customizing free blueprints. Pharmaceutical companies use free recipes to help develop products for profit. Universities offer open access to some content so that you will pay tuition for all the content. Open source is closed to many.

CLOSED IS OUR DEFAULT POSITION

Open source is not the only thing closed. The urge to be closed dwells deep in our bones. We are closed to others. We are closed to different ethnicities, ideologies, and cultures. We are closed to different opinions, strange foods, and rival sports teams. Put a Yankees fan in the same room with a Red Sox fan and you will see what I mean. A Cardinals fan would rather scale the side of a building than ride an elevator with a Cubs fan. On a serious level, racism divides entire communities. Genocide destroys whole tribes. Members Only® is not just a late '80s clothing company; many social circles are for members only. Disparity of wealth is real. Closed is our default position.

Sin demolished our relationship with God

We are closed to one another. And this comes from being closed to God. Sin demolished our relationship with God. Rebellion destroyed

our openness to Him. Sin closes us to God's goodness and love. Sin slams the door on His mercy and justice. We are closed to God. It is our default position.

It was not supposed to be like this. God created you to be open to Him. He made His entire creation to be open to Him. God openly delighted in His work (Genesis 1:31). Adam and Eve had open access to God and to each other in the beginning (Genesis 2:25). God openly walked in the garden of His creation (Genesis 3:8). Creation had open access to the source of all good things.

And sin closed it all. Sin bent our relationship with God. It mangled and destroyed our ability to reflect the image of God. Rather than being open to Him, sin has bent us in on ourselves. We bend God to fit into our own puny purposes. We bend our desires away from God's perfect desires. We bend our eyes away from Him and onto ourselves. Sin makes us self-concerned, rebellious, insolent, and closed to God. Closure began with original sin. And closure persists in us today.

Martin Luther wrote plenty about the closure that comes from sin. He drew upon the theology of St. Augustine and described sin as a bent relationship closed to God. Luther used other images to help explain the destructive power of sin. He explained the inclination to sin, perhaps talking to the bearded hipsters of Wittenberg, by saying:

> The original sin in a man is like his beard, which, though shaved off today so that a man is very smooth around his mouth, yet grows again by tomorrow morning. . . . Just so original sin remains in us and bestirs itself as long as we live, but we must resist it and always cut off its hair.[3]

Our default position is closed to God. Just as facial hair silently grows, sin silently closes our relationship with God. Closure to God

3 *WLS* § 4176.

brings closure to others. Sin closed Adam off to God. He literally concealed himself from the presence of God (Genesis 3:10). Sin closed Paradise to Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:23–24). It is no coincidence that Cain killed Abel (Genesis 4:8) after sin had closed humanity to God. Self-worship replaced true worship (Genesis 11:4). Separate languages led to separate clans, communities, and cities (Genesis 11:9). Violence then filled the earth (Genesis 6:11). And the rest is the painful history of a people closed to God and one another.

Closure to God brings closure to others

OPEN IN CHRIST JESUS

Enter Jesus. He is God's response to the closure of sin. Jesus opened what sin had closed. God opened the heavens to take on human flesh. The heavens were literally opened at the Baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:16). Jesus opened eyes that were once closed (Matthew 9:27–31; Mark 8:22–26; John 9:1–7). Jesus opened lives closed by sin (Luke 19:1–10). Jesus opened ears and minds previously closed to truth (John 18:20; Luke 24:45). Jesus opened the tomb of Lazarus, closed for four days, and restored life to his rotting corpse (John 11).

And Jesus opens our relationship to the Father. God in human flesh, Jesus restores our connection to the Father:

> Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also. From now on you do know Him and have seen Him." (John 14:6–7)

Opened and unbent, Jesus makes you new. Faith in Christ Jesus replaces your mangled heart with a new one. He replaces your inwardly curved heart with one that is aimed straight at God. He opens your

relationship with God and restores the image of God within you. Eyes opened by Jesus. Ears open to hear God's Word. Heart open to God's will. Hands open to receive His mercy. Mind open to care for others. Mouth open to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Christ Jesus opens you back up to God.

Jesus also opens you to proclaim the Gospel. Scripture makes it clear that faith in Christ opens us to God and one another. We see a vivid depiction of this in the Early Church. The Holy Spirit opened sinners to believe and share the name of Jesus.

Saul was closed. Sin closed him to God's grace. He breathed threats and murder against Christ's Church. He terrorized Christians. God came to a closed Saul and opened him to be a follower of Jesus (Acts 9). This was not at all Saul's doing; the Holy Spirit took a closed sinner and made him an open believer. He then went by the name of Paul and openly shared the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire. God opened Paul to share the Gospel with non-Jewish people.

Lydia was closed. Sin closed her to God's grace in Christ Jesus. She heard the Gospel proclaimed by Paul. God transformed her closed heart: "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul" (Acts 16:14). Baptized into Christ Jesus, she then opened her house to others. This was not simply a polite invitation. She did not open her house to them while secretly hoping they would not accept. Scripture makes it clear that she insisted on opening her house to others: "And she prevailed upon us" (Acts 16:15). A mother offering dinner with a wooden spoon aimed at your head can be very persuasive.

Peter was closed. Sin closed him to sharing God's grace with other nationalities. Peter excluded anyone outside the Jewish people. Peter excluded Gentiles. He thought they smelled funny and ate strange food. God then opened him to proclaim the Gospel to all people, all nations, and all ethnicities. God gave Peter a vision that opened him to share God's Word with all people. Opened by God, Peter

preached to other nationalities: "So Peter opened his mouth and said: 'Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him' " (Acts 10:34–35).

Gentiles were closed. Sin closed them to the Gospel of Jesus. Instead, they were open to misguided beliefs in Epicurean and Stoic philosophy. They chased after the religion of the week and worshiped any god but God. Although they were spiritually closed, God opened the door of faith to them: "And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27).

Jesus opened lives closed by sin

Opened to God in Christ Jesus, the Church is open to sharing the Gospel with all people. We are open to share about Christ Jesus, "in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in Him" (Ephesians 3:12). Jesus opens His people to proclaim the Gospel.

OPEN ACCESS TO THE GOSPEL

Better than open-source access, the Gospel is truly open to all. The Gospel does not exclude on account of race, literacy, or socio-economic standing. The Good News of Jesus offers open access to God for all people.

Open access to God's grace is at the heart of being Lutheran. This was a central issue leading up to the Reformation. At various points throughout Church history, people have tried to close access to the Gospel. But Lutherans have always resisted the urge to close the Gospel.

Martin Luther was born into a time of closed access to the Gospel. Before the time of the Reformation, the majority of worship was in Latin. The Latin used in the Church of the day was little more than