

PRAISE FOR *BECAUSE JESUS TAUGHT IT*

This sounds like a book about ancient Christianity, but even more than that, it is about *contemporary* Christianity—with its perfectionism and endless self-scrutiny—and our desperate need for the Sacraments. FLAME’s joy in discovering the efficacy of Baptism and the real presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, as found in the church father’s works and carried over into Lutheranism, is exhilarating and contagious. This seminary-trained rap star makes an engaging case for a faith that is both evangelical and sacramental. Or, as he calls it, “ancient Christianity as preserved through confessional Lutheran thought.”

—**Dr. Gene Edward Veith Jr.**, PhD; author of *Spirituality of the Cross* and *Embracing Your Lutheran Identity*

In his most recent book, *Because Jesus Taught It*, FLAME tells inspiring stories of faith and faithfulness through the ages in ways that speak to our contemporary times. With insights from the earliest Christians as well as his own walk of faith, FLAME challenges readers to explore a deeper understanding of the teachings of Jesus that make a difference in our lives today.

—**Rev. Dr. Gerhard Bode**, chairman of the department of historical theology and director of the Center for Reformation Research, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri

Church history, contrary to popular opinion, is far from a mere theoretical academic pursuit. Studying the contexts, writings, and lives of faithful men and women who have gone before us in Christ’s church should be a deeply practical and faith-building journey that helps us make sense of our own life experiences and Christian walk. *Because Jesus Taught It* is an illustration of this truth. In a seamless melding of memoir and theology, FLAME brings the reader along on his personal journey of patristic discovery. This study highlights the strengths of the

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Lutheran theological tradition, equipping those new to Lutheranism and lifelong Lutherans alike to identify the comfort, assurance, and beauty of our confession of faith when contrasted with errors common in American evangelicalism. Deeply relatable and moving, yet informative and researched, FLAME's book on the early church fathers and the historic Christian view of the Sacraments is fresh, well-written, and difficult to put down.

—**Christa Petzold**, author of *Journey Through Church History* and *Gathered by Christ: The Overlooked Gift of Church*

FLAME gets the church fathers—and they got him too. Despite what you may have been taught growing up, Christianity did not go off the rails after the New Testament, only to be rediscovered by Martin Luther. The Holy Spirit has a history, and this book rejoices in that history. The Word of God and the sacramental life have always gone hand in glove. Like Plato's analogy of the cave, Marcus "FLAME" Gray shares his own discovery of this life, bringing his readers along with him to reacquaint them with the great tradition. I highly recommend this book.

—**Rev. Dr. Joel C. Elowsky**, professor of historical theology, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri

Because Jesus Taught It by FLAME is an essential guide for anyone seeking to understand and teach the true nature of Jesus Christ. It emphasizes the importance of clear, Christ-centered instruction, ensuring that even the youngest believers can grasp the core tenets of the faith. This book delves into several key themes:

1. **A History Behind the Teachings:** Exploring the origins and development of Christian doctrines.
2. **Church According to the Early Church:** Understanding how the early Christians practiced and organized their communities.
3. **Baptism According to the Early Church:** Examining the

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significance and practice of Baptism in early Christianity.

4. **The Eucharist According to the Early Church:** Investigating the early church's understanding and celebration of the Eucharist.

By delving into God's Word and the teachings of the early church, this book will help preserve and pass down the Gospel message for generations to come.

—**Rev. Dr. B. Keith Haney**, assistant to the president for Mission, Human Care, and Stewardship, LCMS Iowa District West

As a lifelong Lutheran, I've learned much from FLAME's journey and gained an even deeper understanding of what we believe about Baptism and the Lord's Supper. FLAME gives us a front-row seat to his tussle with Scripture and the early church fathers as he discovers that Lutheran teaching on Baptism and the Lord's Supper isn't European innovation but a preservation of what the earliest Christians taught. This book will foster understanding and dialogue among readers with different views on the Sacraments and is a fantastic resource for lifelong Lutherans, pastors, church workers, and those wrestling with questions about the Sacraments.

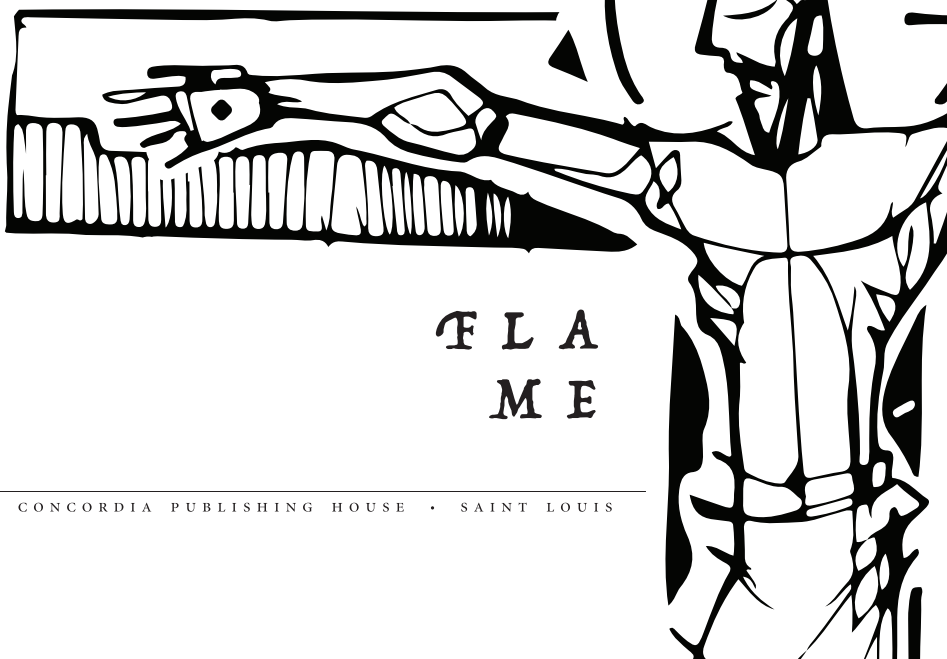
—**Michelle Diercks**, author of *Promised Hope: Finding Peace in God's Faithfulness*

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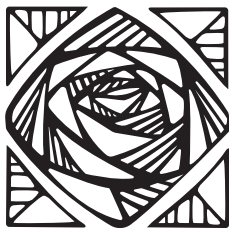
TAUGHT

IT

CHRISTIANITY
THROUGH THE EYES
OF THE CHURCH FATHERS



FLA ME



I dedicate this book to my most precious aunts,
Sharon Marie Moore and Jane Ellen Pryor.
You two have always functioned as angels for
me—God’s helpers to carry me along the way.
I love you both endlessly.



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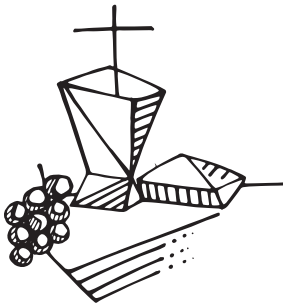
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CHAPTER 1

KEEPING IT SIMPLE?

The concept below sounds spiritually mature, but it is not. It is misguided piety that is meant to show off one's singular focus on Jesus, but it falls short. The statement typically goes something like this:

"I don't get caught up in denominations, tradition, or theological debates. I simply follow Jesus and the Bible."

On the surface, this person comes across as spiritually mature, devout, and free of all baggage because they are solely focused on Jesus and the Bible. However, this is not entirely true.

1. You may not think you follow a denomination, but you do. Even if you claim nondenominationalism. If I asked you what you believe about Baptism, for example, your answer would expose what theological tradition you follow. No way around that.
2. You say you only follow Jesus, but you undergo a healthy intake of preaching from your favorite Christian preachers, podcasters, rap artists, authors, and influencers. You trust them to help interpret Jesus' Word for you and to help you process your faith walk. So in fact, you follow others too, as they are following Jesus. Hopefully, they are following Jesus and His Word, rightly understood.
3. Since the Bible was written in three ancient languages and you read yours in your language, you are already subject to translation, transliteration, and

interpretation, especially if you have a study Bible with notes and commentary for each verse. So it's not simply you and your Bible. It's your Bible as it's been collected and codified, handled and filtered through a strenuous process, packaged for your consumption.

All this to say, you should relax your confidence in your individualism. This notion that it's just you, Jesus, and your Bible is misinformed and unhealthy.

Paul said that the Holy Spirit gave us teachers to build up and unify the Body (Ephesians 4:11–13).

This sets the context for why we must consider the history of the Holy Spirit's teaching of His church. Why we must consider the origins of the Reformation and Dr. Martin Luther's contribution, the apostolic and church fathers, taking us back to the plain meaning of Scripture as best we can.

To dismiss this joyous task and replace it with your private interpretations, your personal relationship with Jesus, and your Bible revelations is a deviation from God's communal and corporate goal for His Body. Which is dangerous.

Let us consider together the historicity and definition of the church and the Word of God and Sacraments. Even if it challenges our contemporary expression.

Amen?¹

This is one of my classic social media posts. It is a response to a real comment born out of common criticism. On several occasions, commenters have expressed utter disappointment with my shift in focus as a Christian public figure. That small collection of people laments my attention toward the centralizing of the sacramental life

1 Adapted from a Facebook post by the author on February 10, 2024.

that has always defined Christianity, and they long for the FLAME who overtly championed the five-point TULIP (a way of summarizing key teachings of Reformed theology).

They miss the “old FLAME” who limited his verbiage to the cross of Christ, the crucifixion, and the resurrection. They miss when I did not “harp on” Baptism and the Lord’s Supper alongside the cross of Christ. For them, the Sacraments—or the sacramental life—are totally foreign language, completely irrelevant and greatly unnecessary, and thoroughly remove the focus from Jesus’ finished work on the cross. When talk of the Sacraments leaves my mouth or parts from my pen, they ache over the seemingly insignificant and inconsequential mentioning of the rites.

If you don’t know me, allow me to introduce myself. My name is FLAME, also known as Marcus Gray. I am a Christian rap artist who has been on a lifelong journey for biblical truth, and I’ve found my home in confessional Lutheranism. Critics who once supported me view me as having fallen from great heights. Some even think I’ve fallen from grace and have embraced false teaching, that I’ve been drawn away from truth and am now obsessed with propping up Dr. Luther above Jesus. Or worse, in their minds, that I’ve become Roman Catholic! “Lord, have mercy,” they cry. The distance in their minds between Jesus’ earthly ministry, culminating in His finished work on the cross, and the ongoing dwelling of God’s presence in our lives as expressed in the sacramental life of the church is as vast as the earth is from the sun.

That long sentence you just read is desperately trying to express how shunned and ignored the Sacraments have become in generic expressions of Christianity. All across the world, brothers and sisters have bitten into the rotten fruit of expressions of the Christian faith focused on morality and personal experience. Sacraments have

truly become an afterthought or been forgotten altogether. Where the Sacraments do show up in many church denominations that occupy contemporary airspace, they have been so redefined and altered that they are nearly dead.

I get it, though. I by no means am pretending that I've understood the Sacraments rightly for the majority of my time as a believer. Lamentably, I've gone most of my years as a Christian malnourished and underfed of the bread of heaven, at least in the sacramental way God designed. I remember the utter disgust I would experience upon hearing of baptismal regeneration. As I type this right now, I can recall having a physical reaction on my face and in my stomach. I felt something akin to fright and solemn sadness at the mere thought of the ancient truth of baptismal regeneration.

So why did I change my thinking? After visiting the campus of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and deciding to move forward with my training there, I ordered the appropriate books to study for my pending test to gain acceptance into the master's program.² I got those books in the mail, cracked them open, and began to dive in. Many things rang true and were familiar. Yet the sections on the Sacraments were particularly vexing. While reading, I thought to myself a myriad of times that I could not possibly study at this school. *They may not even be Christians*, I said to myself. I feared. I prayed. I asked God to open my eyes, to give me discernment and a sensitive conscience to recognize if there were harmful falsities being espoused there. Scary.

It's funny. I just went to grab off my bookshelf one of the books that I had to read to test into the program. You should see the highlights, underlines, and snarky comments written on the page.

2 For details of the whole origin story, read my first book, *Extra Nos*.

“Weird.” “Huh, that make no sense.” “Okay, good point.”

All of this is to say that I understand where my critics are and the mindset they have, the mode of defense they reside in. I am not too far removed from the lived experience of the countless good and pious brothers and sisters in the faith out there in the world. They are dear believers who are used mightily by God to love neighbors and contribute much good to their circles of influence. Yet they deny and have denounced ancient Christian teachings on the grounds of conscience.

One important reason for this is because many of them have not even once been presented the opportunity to consider the historic understanding of the Sacraments. They have never, at all, heard talk of it anywhere. Some tremble at even discussing such Sacraments because they get chills to their bones that they are entertaining Roman Catholicism and so avoid any sacramental small talk.

This reflex to avoid talking about the Sacraments comes, in my opinion, from two main desires. One desire is to guard with dear life the teaching of justification by faith alone (rightfully so!), and the other desire is a longing for unity. I was initially confused by the thought that the Christian life is a baptismal reality, a daily dying and being raised to newness of life. Immediately, the way that concept hit my eardrums was that humans contribute to their own salvation. I thought I was hearing that God uses our first act of obedience (Baptism) to save us.

Quite naturally, I bumped up against that notion in defense of the clear biblical proclamation that we are justified, or made right with God, by faith only. After all, Paul was explicit about this in Romans 5:1–2:

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. 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.

Case closed! Therefore, I felt that there was no way Baptism could fit into this picture. In my mind, like many others who are trained in a similar manner, this necessitated a rejection of baptismal regeneration, in the name of defending justification by faith alone. This is one primary reason a person turns a deaf ear to ancient Christian teaching. They believe they are doing God a solid, honoring Him and His Word by resisting Baptism's role in delivering forgiveness.

The second desire, I believe, is a felt one. This desire goes unspoken but is at the core of the initial argument given at the beginning of this chapter. It leads to the belief that debating Sacraments or even discussing them is senseless, secondary to the Gospel, and distracting from the main thing—Jesus Himself.

This, to me, shows that Christians long for unity. For simplicity. We ache for a day when there is no more disagreement among the saints, when we are all finally on the same page and in complete concord with one another. Isn't this what Jesus prayed for? It's recorded in John 17:21:

That they may all be one, just as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You have sent Me.

By God's Spirit, we all desire this oneness. It is a beautiful desire, one that will be realized on that Great Day! Hallelujah! Meanwhile,

we wait with patience for the return of our dear Lord. It appears, however, that some creative minds have found a back entrance into that Great Day already. They found the rear door propped open while an angelic being went to take out the trash, and they snuck in, grabbed a spare key, and now offer entrance into that tranquil place here on earth. That place is known as nondenominationalism.

Nondenominationalism sells itself as a kind of heaven, a place where they have carved away all the fat and have the leanest expression of Christianity. No more theological debates. No more bickering over doctrine and fine points of theology. Just pure bliss. Ease. Harmony. Unity. It brings together Christians who disagree on the Trinity, on the nature of Christ, on the Sacraments, and on church structure. But they all love Jesus, want to live “holy,” and desire to do big things for the Lord! “Let’s reach the culture,” they say. “Let’s make Jesus famous!” they shout. “Let’s fulfill the Great Commission and take Jesus all over the globe.”

Who can argue against that? To do so sounds like you are casting shade over the bright light of the Gospel. Like you are narrow-minded and have lost touch with the main thing. For sure, that can certainly be true if one swings to the other extreme and is only interested in deep theological talk without teaching simply and clearly in a way that impacts the average person dealing with the common trials and difficulties of life. That extreme should be guarded against, no question. Nevertheless, if a community of believers aims to reach the world for the sake of Christ with words and good deeds, shouldn’t we know what we believe and why we believe it? Shouldn’t we understand what those good deeds do and do not do for our standing before God?

Shouldn’t we know who God is? The nature of God’s existence? The true nature of Jesus, the Messiah? The difference between God’s Law and His Gospel? The nature of these rites He established that

have been called the Sacraments? How those Sacraments ought to be enjoyed and applied? If the Sacraments are important enough for Jesus to implement, then we would do right to wrestle with how they have been historically understood and practiced to see where they fit into the Christian life.

Shouldn't we consider what the earliest of saints thought about these matters? We can learn from those who were taught by the apostle John, the longest-standing apostle. We can know what the students of the earliest church fathers taught, those who then conveyed those biblical teachings to another generation. How they understood the Godhead. The nature of Jesus. Justification. Baptism. The Eucharist. Yes, even church structure and the gathering of the saints as they met.

I agree, it is much easier to avoid these topics. It is way more convenient to keep it simple and to simply do good in the world, to hear motivational messages that lift your mood and empower you to work hard, to fulfill your aspirations, and to help the community as much as you possibly can, all with the help of God. It is more comfortable to gather on Sundays and enjoy superb music with a full-out dynamic and enthusiastic worship experience, leaving you full in heart, happy in mood, and hungry to do it all over again next weekend.

However, if all those permissible things are happening on Sunday morning and as a part of church life and culture but pastors and parishioners alike have no understanding of the Trinity, the nature of Jesus, or the Sacraments, then that leaves an emptiness that proves to be more harmful to souls than helpful.

I recall a time I spoke with a youth leader about Jesus. Initially, the conversation was about how good Jesus is, how patient He is, and how He unites His church. Even though we may not all see things the exact same way, Jesus binds us together as a family.

The conversation was rich. It was encouraging. Then, things shifted. The youth leader began to tell a story. While telling the story, he corrected himself about something he thought he had gotten wrong. He said, “Well, I’m not saying Jesus is actually God.” To which I replied, “Say that again.” I thought maybe I had heard him wrong. He restated it: “I’m not saying Jesus is actually God.”

I tried to politely correct him. I said, “You mean you’re saying He is actually God, right?” By this point, he paused and appeared a bit confused, asking what I meant. I said, “Jesus is actually wholly God and wholly man, in one person. He is the God-man.” From there, he began to hear me out and showed strong interest in further conversation. I was genuinely moved with compassion by how open he was to embracing orthodox Christian teaching. He was not resistant at all. He humbly took in the information and agreed with me that Jesus is God from that point on. It was great brotherly fellowship. We both left encouraged.

I thought about it later that day. I became curious about the criteria for being a youth leader in his circle of Christian influence. I did not fault him but thought more deeply about the leaders in place at his local assembly and even his denomination. Did they know he didn’t know Jesus was fully man and fully God? Did they ask? Do they teach that anywhere in the course of their church culture? Do they even affirm Jesus’ divinity? Or do they not think it relevant to check when hiring a youth leader, as long as the person is good with teens, still looks youthful and relevant, and can help students live morally upright lives while having fun with them?

And, yes, if you’re curious, this was a nondenominational church. A perfect example of what happens when the focus of the church is placed mostly on morality and cultural relevance and not on creeds