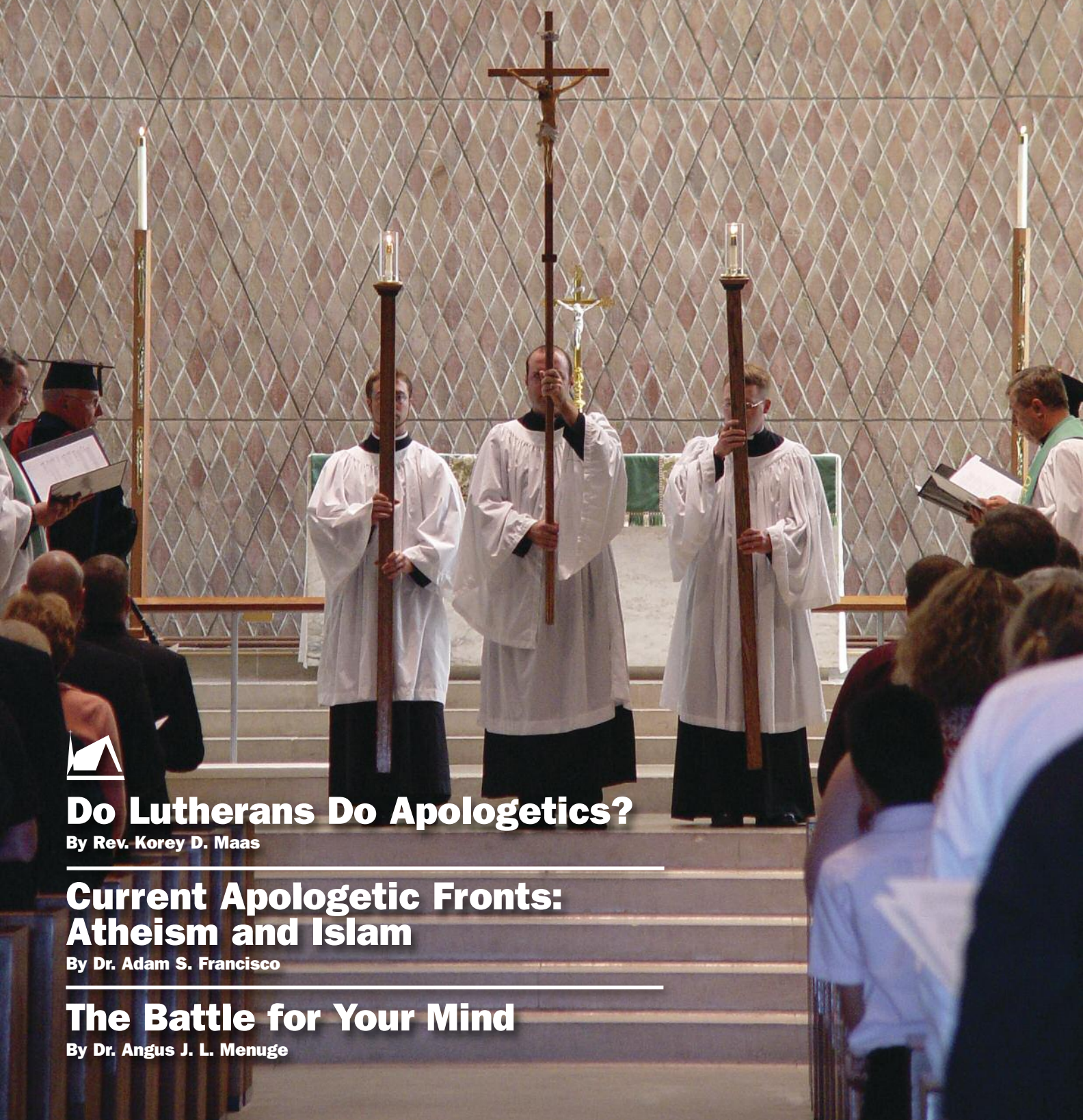


# For the Life of the World

## Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne

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Spring 2009, Volume Thirteen, Number One



### **Do Lutherans Do Apologetics?**

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### **Current Apologetic Fronts: Atheism and Islam**

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# Can We Trust the Gospels as History?

By Mr. Mark A. Pierson

After two thousand years, the world remains divided over the identity of Jesus. Was He a mere Jewish peasant with religious pretensions, or was He the Messiah of Israel and God incarnate? Was His crucifixion simply an unfortunate miscarriage of justice, or was it the means by which the Lamb of God took away the sin of the world? Does He remain dead to this day, or is He the risen Lord of life? All sorts of responses are generated by questions such as these. What one thinks of Jesus, however, invariably stems from one's opinion of the four canonical Gospels.

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Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, *Gospel in Polyglot New Testament*. Hutter, Elias, and Jacob Coler. Noribergae: [s.n.], 1599, from the rare book collection at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, library.



In previous eras, the assumption that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John painted an accurate picture of Jesus due to the Holy Spirit's inspiration generally went unchallenged. To suggest that these accounts contain errors was virtually unthinkable. Skepticism began to emerge, however, during the Enlightenment and has progressed to this day. Now the Gospels are routinely considered flawed from the start with scholars playing fast and loose with the facts while offering the so-called real story behind biblical persons and events. Recent revisions include a Judas who was the most faithful disciple, a King Herod who never slaughtered the innocents, and a Jesus who was married with children.

Christians who ignore such challenges typically turn inward, relying on an existential experience with their own personal Jesus. But at root, these are all matters of history, which is one reason the incarnational emphasis of Lutheranism is of such vital importance. For in Christ, God definitively entered time and space, allowing His life, death, and resurrection to be observed and, subsequently, recorded (John 1:14; 14:26). Hence, Luther stressed that theology must “start at the bottom” with the tangible flesh-and-blood Jesus who alone provides knowledge of God (AE 26:30). This approach does not require Christians to presuppose the inerrancy and divine origin of the Gospels but rather invites one to examine their veracity simply as records of ancient history.

Whether or not the reports of Julius Caesar's demise are trustworthy is determined through methods of historical, literary, and textual analysis. If these same tests are applied to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the inescapable verdict is that the Gospels pass with flying colors. Included are questions of authorship, date of composition, number and uniformity of extant manuscripts, and corroboration by external artifacts such as archaeological finds and contemporaneous writings. In nearly each of these particulars, and certainly overall, the Gospels have more evidence in their favor than any document from the ancient world. Thus, if one were to brand these biographies about Jesus as flawed, mythical, or legendary, one would first have to discard all knowledge of antiquity—something no historian or classicist is likely to do.

Some specifics are worth mentioning here. First, each Gospel was written either by an eyewitness of Jesus, or by one who knew the eyewitnesses firsthand with early sources confirming the traditional authors. Second, these four detailed narratives about Jesus were almost certainly composed before the Jewish temple was destroyed in AD 70. These points expunge the popular notions that the Gospels are from unknown sources and have questionable content—especially since hostile witnesses of Jesus would have still been around to compose corrective versions—yet none exist from this time. Third, twenty-five supplementary texts were penned by Christians during the first century, and even non-Christian historians (such as Tacitus, Suetonius, and Josephus) confirmed key elements of the Gospels. Fourth, all spurious Gospels (like the Gospel of Judas) were written no earlier than the second century by authors who never knew the eyewitnesses. Lastly, an overwhelming number of early copies of the Gospels have been found with scribal mistakes having a negligible effect on their consistency.

Unfortunately, there is no reason to think antagonistic assaults on the Gospels will let up any time soon. But thanks to the efforts of erudite apologists, Christians are able to combat these misguided criticisms and demonstrate that the Gospels are, in fact, historically reliable accounts of Jesus. 📖

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