TRANSCRIPT

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Episode 6: "Interview with Melanie Wittwer on Creative Word Fellowship and Biblical Literacy"

Creative Word Fellowship is a Lutheran teaching mission that works to help Christians understand their Bibles. In this episode we talk with CWF's Treasurer, Melanie Wittwer, about the amazing work of this organisation and why biblical literacy is so important.

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Sonja: In today's episode, we will be talking with Melanie Wittwer from Creative Word Fellowship. Creative Word Fellowship is a Lutheran teaching mission that exists to equip people with the life-giving word of Jesus Christ. Welcome, Melanie.

Melanie: Hi. Thank you.

Lexy: Thank you so much for joining us today, Melanie. We really appreciate having you come on and talk about Creative Word Fellowship. So to begin with, we would love to know a little bit more about you. So would you please give our listeners a brief bio on who you are and what you do?

Melanie: Yeah, sure. So I live in South Australia, about an hour north of Adelaide, and I'm married to Peter Wittwer. He's the current Chairperson of Creative Word Fellowship. And we currently have a little four-year-old who's in Kindy and he loves finding out how things work, and he asks a thousand why questions every day. But as for me, I would rather be curled up in a very comfortable couch somewhere with a good book, preferably a cup of tea in hand, a cat on my lap, and maybe some rain on the window. Where you're more likely to find me is trying to attempt my never-ending list of things to do that I'm always constantly overwhelmed with.

Lexy: So what type of books do you enjoy reading?

Melanie: Oh, I'm definitely a mixture. I do like a bit of escapism, so a bit of fantasy or light hearted murder, if there's such a thing. I do love my theological books as well, or just kind of help books. Love reading. I always have more than ten books on the go, probably.

Lexy: Wow! The most I can do is two or three. I'm pushing it with three.

Melanie: In real life, I mean, three is there, but I've got about ten unfinished ones.

Lexy: Okay. So have you always been Lutheran?

Melanie: No, I didn't grow up in the Lutheran church, but Pete grew up in the Lutheran church, and when I met him and when we got married, we started going to his church. So I was confirmed there and realized that God loves his church, no matter, especially if it's Lutheran, no matter what kind of denomination it is. So, yeah, had a bit of an interesting journey there, but it was good.

Lexy: Did you grow up in a Christian home or different denomination?

Melanie: Yeah, in a Christian home. Really strong Christian family.

Lexy: Beautiful.

Melanie: So I've had a very solid foundation, which I'm very grateful for.

Lexy: Yes. So you said that your husband is, was it the chairperson, did you say?

Melanie: Yeah.

Lexy: Of CWF. And this episode is primarily talking about CWF and the work that they do. So could you please tell our listeners what exactly is Creative Word Fellowship?

Melanie: Yeah, so as was kind of introduced at the start, it's a not-for-profit Lutheran teaching ministry in Australia. So it is confessionally Lutheran and it's independent, so it stands alongside existing churches, existing bodies, but it's not part of any particular synods within Australia. And as you said, it exists to equip people with a life-giving word of Jesus Christ. So in John 6:68, we read, *"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."* So that's kind of a passage which guides a bit of the ministry, which I'll definitely go into more detail as we go along.

Lexy: So what type of things does CWF offer and do?

Melanie: So, as a bit of background as to what we do, I thought I might, if I may, go through the confessional statement that we have. So Creative Word Fellowship has been set up as like a proper, we're a registered not for profit organization. We have an ABN and a company number, and so we have a constitution, we have a very clear confessional statement which you can find on the website. And I just thought, if I may just briefly summarize what we're committed to as a group. So the first thing that we're committed to is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So we confess that we must be justified by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone, and his atoning death for our salvation. And that comes from Romans and Ephesians. So that's the first thing we're committed to.

The second thing we're committed to is the Holy Scriptures. So we strive to believe, teach and confess the whole council of God as it is contained in Holy Scriptures, so that's from Acts and Matthew.

We're committed to confessional Lutheran teaching. So we acknowledge and accept the Book of Concord of 1580 as a true exposition of the Bible.

We're also committed to trusting in God as the only one who has the power to build the church. So we trust that his word will not return empty, but that God will use it to build his church by drawing people to Jesus Christ in faith. So we're not church builders. We trust that God is the church builder. And we're also committed to the theses of agreement of the Lutheran Church of Australia in 1966. So you can find that on our website if you want to know more about it.

Lexy: And we will link all of this into the show notes as well, so people can easily find your website as well.

Melanie: Yeah, perfect. So from all of guess, you know, being motivated by the Gospel of Christ and the Holy Scriptures and the Confessional Lutheran teaching, the objective of Creative Word Fellowship is to advance the Christian faith by providing theological education and theological resources that are Biblical, evangelical and Confessionally Lutheran.

Lexy: So why did CWF start up?

Melanie: Yes, so it's got a great kind of background which I've been learning a little bit about. I wasn't there right at the start, Pete was. Back in the synods of 2013 and 2015, there was quite a lot of people who noticed a really distinct lack of biblical teaching within the Lutheran Church of Australia, for example, delegates who went to the synods were unwilling to engage in biblical debate and they claimed it's because they didn't know the Bible well enough and also said that things like, “As laypeople, we shouldn't be deciding on theological matters.” So there was this feeling that they were not washing their hands of knowing the Bible, but not being willing to engage in it. And that was of great concern, especially when synods are there to discuss all the important things about the church and difficult matters.

So Pastor Michael Lockwood was the instigator of this whole thing. He kind of gathered a group of like-minded people together. So originally it was Ps Michael Lockwood, Ps Guntars Baikovs. Peter my husband, the late Ps Darren Court, and then some laypeople. So a lady called Karen, Ian and Sophie, and they got together and Michael kind of just asked them, he said, “What can we do about this problem?”

Melanie: So they had a lot of discussions about it and the first thing they did, I guess a bit like this podcast, within a very short space of time, they had already organized a conference which addressed the Bible and what the Bible teaches about itself and why we can trust its word. So, yeah, came about pretty quickly.

Lexy: Yes.

Melanie: And so the first conference was in May 2015 and had people like Rev. Dr. Adam Hensley and Michael Lockwood and Guntar's Bikov speaking on the Bible and its interpretation. It's kind of gone from there.

Sonja: So to summarize, a need for teaching what the Bible says and how to read the Bible and that was seen. And CWF is kind of there to be able to fill that space of teaching what God's Word says and how we read it and that kind of thing.
Melanie: Yeah, absolutely. And they kind of from 2015, then formalized it. So became a formal not- for-profit, I think, in 2019. So you know, things take time. So we've had the Speak Lord conferences and we've had a few other things happening.

Lexy: Yes. And we'll talk a little bit more about the Speak Lord conferences as this episode goes on, because that's something that we really want our listeners to know about as well. But I'd love to touch a little bit more on biblical literacy and the importance of it. And you mentioned some of the things that came up in one of the synods, just some of the attitudes and thoughts that especially laypeople had when it came to knowing Scripture. Which is very interesting because I believe that everything's theological.

Melanie: Absolutely.

Lexy: What we believe and the theology that we hold to influences how we perceive the world, what we think, how we do things. So when someone says, "Oh, I'm not theological," I think, "Well, you are. You either have really good theology or you don't." So I'd love to talk a little bit more about the importance of biblical literacy.

Melanie: Yeah, absolutely. I've been thinking about this as well. And I guess the first place to start when you're talking about biblical literacy and why is it important to know our Bibles is to see what the Bible says about itself. So I've just got some Bible verses which I've found quite useful. So in particular, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, which says, "*All Scripture*," so the Word, the Bible, "*is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness that the man and woman of God may be complete and equipped for every good work.*" So just even reflecting on that passage alone, in order to be a man or a woman of God, you really need to be knowing what the Bible actually says. And Pete and I were having a discussion about this before that, why do we need to be constantly drawn back to the Word? And it's because it's so easy to be led astray to be fed kind of half-truths. And let's not forget that the evil one would love to have us not believing in the real God and not acting out the real faith. So he's very subtle in the way he can change and warp the truth. And I think, I'm sure you would agree that the main way we can protect ourselves against that is making sure that we are reading what is in the Bible, what Jesus says and what the apostles say and what God says about

Himself. So that we're guided and we're equipped.

Lexy: Yes. Because the Bible is where God reveals himself.

Melanie: Absolutely. So another really important Bible verse is Matthew 4:4 and it says, *"It is written, man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."* And so this just really picks up to me. We can't even live without God's Word. And I have a great story from my child who really struggled with the concept of God. And I think it's very interesting teaching kids who God is and why we believe in Him when so many other people don't. And I said to him one night, I'm like, "What do you want to thank God about tonight? What do you want to pray about?"
He's like, "I don't like God." I'm like, "Oh, okay. Why is that?"
He said, "He talks funny." And I'm like, "What do you mean?" He's like, "He doesn't talk."
I'm guessing he was trying to say he doesn't verbally speak like another person does. And I said, "Yeah, that's right, He doesn't always," I think in some rare cases, He does speak audibly to people, " but He doesn't speak audibly to most of us most of the time, except that we do have the Bible, which is His Word to go to and he does speak through our mum and dad and family. And we can go to church and hear the pastor speak God's Word as well."
So it was just great. I love how having a kid to kind of makes you think about faith, makes you think about why we believe what we believe and it made me think about why is the Bible important?

Sonja: And then Romans 10 it says, *"So faith comes from hearing and hearing the Word of Christ."* And that word *hearing* is just it falling on your ears.

Melanie: Oh, wow.

Sonja: So if we just hear the Word spoken out loud, God's Word, that's how we get faith, according to Paul.

Melanie: Yeah, which is so encouraging, right? Because it goes back to a lot of laypeople complaining, well not complaining, but you know, "I'm not a theologian. I shouldn't be involved in these kinds of biblical discussions, because I don't have the knowledge of a pastor" or whatever. But I think we have that knowledge because when we hear it, as it says, it falls in our ears. God teaches us in our Spirit, the Holy Spirit does teach us, and we're all part of the priesthood of believers. We're all part of God's body, and we all play a role in teaching and encouraging each other and knowing about God.

Sonja: And it comes back to the fact that God is the one doing it.

Melanie: Yeah.

Sonja: We don't need to do it. You know, all we need to do is open up His Word and He does the rest.

Melanie: How hard is it to open up His Word, though sometimes, hey?

Sonja: I think that's sometimes it's the enemy fighting back, isn't it?

Melanie: Exactly. Yeah.

Lexy: I've had a conversation with someone once who really wanted to get

into the Word and get into understanding the Bible, but she was just daunted. It's a big book, and she was, “Where do you start?” And the important thing is to just start. To just start, just start reading and start making notes and then the next time, when you finish the Bible, go back and start it again.

Sonja: And ask the Lord to help you.

Lexy: Yes, just ask questions and write things down. And Scripture, I've heard this said before, Scripture interprets Scripture, and as you're reading it, the verses will connect together and they'll help interpret each other. And yeah, it's been really interesting, because I've shared bits here and there, I once had this attitude of the Bible wasn't really that important. Because I believed that divine revelations from God, that was truly God speaking to me. And so I was using these, what I called divine revelations, which was really just my mind filling in the blanks. And I was being led by that and I was being directed by that. And what happened is that my theology was not good. My understanding of God was not good. It was harming me spiritually and emotionally. And this is in honesty, is that I was very zealous and very in love with a Jesus that didn't really exist. Because I hadn't gone to the Word to learn who Christ was, to learn what he has done for me. I was going to my own divine, I call them divine revelations. So it's just so important to study the Word and to know what it says about Christ.

Sonja: Yeah, also, when Moses went up to get the Ten Commandments, the people, they could see the lightning and the cloud and it was very scary. And so they wanted to sort of appease God. But instead of finding out what does our God want from us and listening how He wants to be worshipped and listening to Him, they decided to worship Him in Baal worship-style by making the calf and stuff. So it's so easy for us in our mind to make up an idol in place of Jesus when we don't actually go to His Word and find out what He is and who He is and how He is. And we just kind of make up our own Jesus in our mind.

Melanie: Absolutely. So I have this great quote which I'd love to share from a guy called Brennan Manning. He's not a Lutheran, but he's one of those people where you say, I think he knows Jesus really well. And he says, “The Word that we study has to be the Word that we pray.” And he says, “My personal experience of the relentless tenderness of God comes not from exegetes or theologians and spiritual writers, but from sitting still in the presence of the living Word and beseeching Him to help me understand with my head and heart His written Word. Sheer scholarship alone cannot reveal to us the gospel of grace. So we must never allow the authority of books or institutions or leaders to replace the authority of knowing Jesus Christ personally and directly.” And I just thought that was a really lovely image of, we have great resources and don't get me wrong, Creative Word fellowship is all about getting good resources out, but these should always be coupled with a return or a drawing you into the Word, sitting in God's presence, asking Him to teach you, asking Him to, as he said, reveal how much He loves us, what He's done for us, what His plans are for us and how to live.

Lexy: Yes. And it's from the Word where we get discernment and wisdom. And

that's a claim that it makes about itself. You mentioned 2 Timothy 3:16 and how it is sufficient. The Word is sufficient and it enables us and gives us what we need. And there have been so many times in life where I should have just gone straight to the Word, just straight to the Word to see what it said.

Melanie: Yeah.

Lexy: Sonia, was there anything that you wanted to add to that?

Sonja: Yeah, well, first of all, there's also one of our favourite Bible verses, which is John 17:17, *"Sanctify them in the truth; Your Word is truth."* So if we want to know what the truth is, it's God's Word. That's very straightforward.

Melanie: It's very straightforward.

Sonja: If you want to know anything about anything, it's right there.

Melanie: Yeah.

Sonja: And I just wanted to ask, so it's a non-for-profit organization, so you hold events and you said you sponsor events or something like that?

Melanie: Yeah, so I can go a little bit more into what we're doing at the moment, if you'd like.

Sonja: Please.

Melanie: So one of the ministries is the Speak Lord Conference and it sounds like a funny name, Speak Lord, but it comes from 1 Samuel 39, which says, *"Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."* And I guess the organisers of the conference, Michael and Guntars and Pete and the team, wanted to create the emphasis that we as people are coming to hear what God says to us. So we're saying with these conferences, "Speak, Lord, we're listening. We're humbly coming to You willing to be taught." So we've had over the years, it was every year we'd have a conference, one in Adelaide, and then we've had some in Hamilton as well, which has been great. I think there's been a couple up in Queensland, with the idea of getting someone to come and speak, getting everyone to open up their Bibles and get the good teaching out there, a little bit more in depth than what you'd hear on a Sunday morning, perhaps. And if you're not part of a routine Bible study, that kind of more in depth teaching. So then the second thing that Creative Word fellowship has been doing is the Young Adults Bible Study Retreat. So, again, same kind of thing. We wanted to be immersed in God's Word and we had a focus on younger adults. So from university age up to not too old, we had a cut-off, but some of us are getting too old to even fit under the cut-off anymore. So it's a work in progress. So we've had that in Hall's Gap for a number of years and it's for a couple of nights with someone coming to do a teaching on a particular topic over those times. And that's been a real joy for a lot of people, especially because we've had a mixture of young singles, young couples, young families coming together. And it's a real time of encouragement. I think there's something special about being able to meet and eat together and fellowship together and just do life for a couple of days.

Lexy: Yes.

Melanie: That's been really enriching. And the other things which we've been doing is getting some books from Concordia Publishing House in the States and so they have a really rich library of, they publish a lot of really rich confessionally Lutheran books and they're really expensive to buy in Australia because of postage. So we wanted to, as part of our mission, get those books to Australia at an affordable price so that people, you know there wasn't a barrier to people getting these resources. And so we've had a couple of really large donations that have been able to cover the postage and even offset a lot of the cost of the book. So, for example, at the moment we're able to offer the small catechism, the new one, the 2017 one, which is normally about $50 through places in Australia, but we're able to offer it for $30. So it takes off a little bit of the bite.
Sonja: And where do you sell those?

Melanie: At the moment we're limited to just the events that we hold. So books will be available at the Speak Lord Conferences this year. We've had them at the Young Adults Retreats. But we are looking into how can we further this to make it so that people could put in orders and we could post them out.

Lexy: Yes.

Sonja: So people can still sign up for this year's conference.

Mel: Absolutely, yes! So I will tell you a bit more about that. So we've got our Speak Lord Conference this year in Hamilton, at the Hamilton Lutheran Church and that is from the 23rd to the 24 September. And we've also got then the following week at Magill Lutheran Church from the 30th September to the 1st October. And this year we're really excited because we have Pastor Bryan Wolfmueller who is an American theologian and pastor and he has written a number of books and he's heavily involved in radio and podcasting. He's a regular guest on some podcasts like Issues Etc. and Sharper Iron and some others. And he's done a lot of video teaching. He's got a YouTube channel and we thought he would be a great person to come over and give us some teaching on hope that is found in the pages of the New Testament. So really excited.

Lexy: Bryan Wolfmueller actually played a very big part in helping me to understand what Lutheranism was and he's played a big part in us coming into the Lutheran Church. So we're hoping to make it to one of the conferences and it's very exciting that you were able to actually bring him over here.

Melanie: Yeah, I think that's one of the most exciting things of what's happening at the moment is we're in a good position to be able to, I guess, finance these things to start with. And we've had the experience of running these conferences now for a while and there's a lot of exciting things happening. We're going to also be hoping to get a couple more speakers out to Australia from the States and other places around the world.

And some of the other things that Creative World Fellowship is up to in the background, we're hoping to partner with a lot of, I guess one of the main things we're hoping to do, is partner with a lot of existing organisations. So as much as we exist to provide teaching through the Speak Lord Conferences and the Young Adults Retreats, we're in a really great

position and we can partner and come alongside other organizations. So, for example, in Victoria, we're partnering with the Victorian Men and we'll be putting on a conference with them. And we've got a speaker that we've been able to provide. We're also hoping to work alongside some women's groups and partner with them, provide some speakers or funding or even we've got facilities like recording equipment, live stream services. If you check out the website, we're hoping to be able to offer some doxology training for pastors. And another big thing which is in the future, a little bit more unfortunately, we're trying to work it out, is how to provide scholarships for people wanting to undertake theological studies over at reputable institutions overseas. And that's really exciting me because there's deaconess courses, there's obviously courses for men to become pastors and there's just a whole lot of resources out there. So for those who have seen or signed up to our mailing list, may have seen that we've been getting a bit of interest in the scholarships, but we're still working on it, trust me.

Sonja: Yes, that's great. So sign up to their mailing list, everyone.

Melanie: Absolutely.

Sonja: And on that note, is there a way that people can support Creative Word Fellowship financially? Can we donate through your website or something like that?

Melanie: So unfortunately, we're not a tax-deductible institution. So if you have a look at our website, we have some different bank accounts which you can donate to. So we've got general running bank account which would support things like the Speak Lord Conferences. We provide subsidies for pastoral students to attend Speak Lord, for example, so a donation would go towards that. We have our mission account and that would support then the mission to Nepal and Cambodia and other areas overseas where we provide teaching. And we also have our Young Adults Ministry. So if you wanted to support a family or a young person to attend a Young Adults Bible Study Retreat, you can do that there as well.

Lexy: Excellent. Well, thank you so much, Melanie, for coming on today and talking about Creative Work Fellowship. It was such a pleasure to have you on and we'll keep you in our prayers.

Melanie: Yeah, thank you. It was a pleasure to join you.