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# *Missouri at the End of the Century*

## *A Time for Reevaluation*

DAVID P. SCAER

THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) may be a time for celebration, but it is also an occasion for reflection, evaluation, critique, and repenting. It is a time for sitting on the front porch to escape the rain and for realizing that many of us are unwittingly parts of that history and sometimes its last remnants. Self-evaluation, even on a corporate level, is only beneficial if it leads to contrition, faith, and an amendment of life to do good works. Otherwise, historical self-reflection is useless. "For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like" (Js 1:23–24).

But just how does one evaluate one hundred and fifty years? And is this the right time to do it? Matthew divided Jewish history into three spans of fourteen generations. Such a precise division challenges historical accident, but it provides us with a precedent in dividing our own Lutheran history into three epochs: 1546–1696 (the death of Luther and the Age of Lutheran Orthodoxy); 1696–1846 (Pietism-Rationalism-Schleiermacher); 1846–1996 (LCMS).

One hundred and fifty years after Luther's death, the period of classical Lutheranism was being quickly overtaken by a flaming Pietism (1696), which, like programs encouraging self-absorption, proved to be sterile. Its short and mercifully unproductive life was the narthex for Rationalism. The former was a disease of the heart, the latter of the mind.

At the end of another span of one hundred and fifty years (1846), Schleiermacher's *The Christian Faith* (1830) rang the death knell for Enlightenment Rationalism, but in another sense preserved its critical approach to biblical scholarship in tandem with the foundationless piety of Pietism. A Christianity was constructed out of a historical skepticism and a self-impressed piety. History and faith were separated without a final decree of divorce. Enlightenment destroyed the reasons for being religious and Pietism gave a reason for being religious to those who had no reason to be so. Like a water softener, this schizophrenic existence has constantly recycled itself in the last one hundred and fifty years (1846–1996). With only mild exaggeration we can say that anything the radical Jesus Seminar has uncovered by 1996 could already be found in David Friedrich Strauss's *Jesus* (*circa* 1846).

Paradoxically the heritages of Rationalism and Pietism, which Schleiermacher brought together to provide an ersatz certainty for the religious despisers, provided the stimulus for the regeneration of the confessional Lutheran movement. Until the present time, the LCMS has been the most obvious and prosperous survivor of the nineteenth-century confessional Lutheran revival. Even if the LCMS should choose another path, its first one hundred and fifty years were historically remarkable. Its current flowed against the tide and the world knew it. We still have a name recognition that would be the envy of any advertiser. "Missouri" has less to do with a geography and more to do with a religious conviction.

Even without such an even division of one hundred and fifty years each, those of us who have lived through the events in the LCMS since the middle of this century have the sense that one era was closing, even if the outlines of a new era were not perfectly clear. Personal links with C. F. W. Walther have, with Spanish-American War veterans, long disappeared. Few are those who sat at the feet of Francis Pieper. Those who knew the heroes are gone, and replacements for the heroes have not been found.

Those who began their ministries in the '50s are aware, from the nature and conduct of their ministries, that we have crossed a boundary within time. Abortion was a crime. Divorce was socially and not simply theologically unacceptable. "Day care center" was not part of the vocabulary. Mothers were not employed outside the home. Afternoon women organizations flourished. The word "engagement" had not been replaced by "relationship," and neither meant cohabitation. No one would have understood what was meant by "the significant other." Voters' assemblies were male, and only charismatic churches had women preachers. Hymnals were used for singing hymns. Regular churchgoers knew page five by heart. That was not a golden era, but it was a simpler one.

In marking a denominational anniversary, we must acknowledge that truth is not the permanent possession of a specific denomination, even ours, but truth is the confession of the faith once delivered to the saints by the apostles (Jude 3). Any church is faced with the temptation of judging any issue by the mind of the synod, namely, "what people think" on this or that issue. Then what claims to be a church becomes another organization. Problems are then resolved by pointing to the LCMS's "officially adopted doctrinal statements" without the-

DAVID P. SCAER, a contributing editor for *LOGIA*, is Chairman of Systematic Theology and Professor of Dogmatics and Exegetical Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana.

ologically engaging the Confessions of the church and the problems they address.[1] The existence of "officially adopted doctrinal statements" has allowed LCMS commissions to offer opinions on everything from gambling to church-state relationship. Such opinions invite the same kind of allegiance given to the Confessions.

The shapers of our history have been Walther and Pieper, Wyneken and Sihler, Pfotenhauer and Behnken. Any church's self-absorption with its own history stands in danger of giving birth to a sectarian mindset. Such a mindset is characteristic of any church that understands itself as a custodian of the truth, which of course it must do if it wants to be a church. A church that does not make this claim is not even recognizable to the world as a church. This leaves us in a Catch-22 situation. Our church—any church—must understand herself as a guardian of the truth, but at the same time not read her history as an exclusivistic *Heilsgeschichte.* A church that does not see itself as a custodian of the truth soon looses its claim to be church.

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Our problem is not yet an organizational problem, in which a bishop or a pope is blessed with being correct or infallible, but ours is a confessional self-assuredness, the belief that our historic confessional commitment is a guarantor of the future truthfulness of our church pronouncements. Continued self-assuredness, which cannot be confused with infallibility, requires continued self-critique. To her own embarrassment, Rome as an organization has failed with papal infallibility and tried to ignore and redefine it. Only the recorded history of Christ and the apostles is above critique.

We may be destined to being self-directed and so required to look exclusively at our own history, even if that road is covered with sectarian pitfalls, which clouds the search for pure objectivity, as if that were even theoretically possible. Like earlier explorers, we are obligated after our short journeys to leave maps that later theological cartographers may find hopelessly naive in their primitive understanding of the church. Ours may prove to be a less significant journey than that of the reformers or the LCMS founders, but our journeys are the stuff out of which Christ has built his church.

Each generation may have its own heroes, but many classmates of mine are more or less agreed that our generation was not provided with very many. The giants who commanded the admiration of an entire generation were gone. One septuagenarian is troubled that the names of Piepkorn, Lueker, Caemmerer, Franzmann, and C. S. Meyer are unknown to today's seminarians. P. E. Kretzmann, Ludwig Fuerbringer, and Stoeckhardt were only names to my generation and hardly pulled on the heart strings. With only few exceptions, heroes get only part-time employment. The lack of heroes in the 1930s and 1940s may be a determinative factor for a later malaise that has permitted externally acquired infections.

Even before the death of Pieper, the LCMS had lost its pristine vigor. It was perhaps a matter of aging more than anything else. A vigorously healthy body is more likely to have an effective immune system. Nothing in LCMS history prior to 1950 can match the diverse challenges faced since then. With our corporate body's defenses down, we had become susceptible to any number of theological viruses—and the heroes of that time are nearly gone. Their counterparts in ELIM, *Missouri in Perspective,* Seminex, and AELC—movements that threatened the core fibre of the LCMS—are no longer factors and their names are also not remembered. This is the history we want to recount.

Both the LCMS and Concordia Theological Seminary, now again in Fort Wayne, have a history of one hundred and fifty years. In the last forty years (1956–1996) both institutions may have experienced more changes than in any other comparable period. Many of us observed this history and were drawn into it, and so we were shaped by it. We were more controlled by events than we controlled them. This anniversary invites us to remember that the controversies of the 1960s and 1970s were the theological environment whose air our souls breathed. Evaluation of that time cannot be anything else but autobiographical.

In the period since the 1970s, what is distinctively Lutheran is in danger of being lost, because we cannot agree among ourselves what is distinctively Lutheran. If this is so, then this is only a replay of the eras first of Pietism and then of Rationalism. Lowell Green has pointed out the similarities between neo-evangelical forms of Lutheranism in our time and the "American Lutheranism" fostered by Samuel S. Schmucker. Ours may not be a new conflict, but rather a resumption of one that was never resolved. A pervasive Protestantism, which is more Reformed and Arminian than it is Lutheran, contaminates the ecclesiastical soil from which all American churches are nourished. After a Roman Catholic priest of the Byzantine Rite had sung the liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, he claimed "Amazing Grace" as his favorite hymn. The same sub-ground aquifer may lead many of our parishioners to favor this hymn over "A Mighty Fortress." All American churches are drinking from the same stream.

It is easier to mark the end of an era than to recognize the beginning of new one. So if we can recognize that certain signs of the period of classical Lutheranism are not as evident today as a century ago, it is virtually impossible to provide precise blueprints for the future. People who make a difference are identified after they have served and very rarely before. Only in the midst of World War II did Churchill emerge as the great political leader of this century. Before that he was regarded as a gadfly and a nuisance.

As the LCMS goes into the next period of its existence, it will do so without such prominent names as Lewis Spitz, Walter Roehrs, Robert Hoerber, and John Klotz, all of whom have passed away. More significant in the last two years were the deaths of J. A. O. Preus in August 1994 and his brother Robert D. Preus in November 1995. Those who attended the memorial

services for Robert D. Preus instinctively knew that an age had come to an end.

When Robert D. Preus came to the St. Louis seminary in 1957, the LCMS was one hundred and eleven years past its founding. His brother J. A. O. Preus arrived in Springfield in 1958. For nearly the next forty years, both brothers were in the middle of what made the LCMS and its public theology what they were, as no other persons were. This is a value judgment and open to debate. The Preuses fascinated two generations as no other men had. Both were leaders and theologians, men of recognizable personality and character. They were not the issue, but without them the issues would not have surfaced, at least in the way they did.

## THE PREUS BROTHERS

Perhaps we must wait for another generation, or even a century, before the contributions of J. A. O. Preus, a.k.a. "Jack," and his brother Robert D. Preus, a.k.a. "Robert," can be evaluated from a detached perspective, but then it may be too late to recapture the emotions they stirred when they entered the LCMS. The LCMS in the last half of the twentieth century is not the history of these brothers, but without them, our history would have probably been entirely different. Only God knows. Humanly speaking, what happened would not have happened without them. In life, and now in death, they have a name recognition that the native-born LCMS members do not have and will never have. We can offer any number of other prominent names, but only the Preus name will define our times.

A now-deceased uncle of mine spoke with the abundance of Christian liberty that is given to those who approach their centennial, saying that the LCMS would only be happy when the Preuses were gone. His sentiments reflected those of erstwhile colleagues who were indiscriminate in sharing their emotions. Now since both brothers are gone, we can expect historical evaluations, some of which will be brutally honest, even if we may question their correctness.

Even before he was gone, some announced themselves as "Preus watchers," a term that referred almost exclusively to Jack. They could be found in the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS), where he had been a pastor before going to Springfield. A small and, in a sense, outcast synod had produced, if not the most significant, then its most controversial Lutheran leader of the century. "Preus watchers" were also found in the ELCA, of whose predecessor synod he was also a pastor. People who did not know him loved and hated him with the same intensity, and mostly for the same reasons. Often they were the same people.

One district president who was removed by Jack remembers with some fondness a visit to his home where he helped out in the kitchen. Everyone who knew him will recognize this as Jack. I have not read his funeral orations, but what was said probably described him as an "old Missourian." Yet there was something more complex about him. Besides a book that was written about him, *Preus of Missouri* (1977), two other outside analyses have been made, one by a friend after his death and one by a critic before.

Leigh Jordahl, a long-time family friend, writes kindly and warmly of Jack's faith, and finally critically: "Preus was not the theologian or church leader who was needed to forge a new way to overcome the delinquencies already apparent in the Lutheran controversies of the nineteenth century."[2] He was, however, both the theologian and the church leader who addressed the problems that came to a head for the LCMS in the 1970s.

This is a point acknowledged by Leonard Klein, who was not a friend. Klein was and remains closely associated with those involved with Seminex and the AELC. Klein holds that Preus was right in rejecting the notion that the "announcement of grace could pre-empt questions of dogma, authority, and meaning." ELCA antinomianism is the result of what Klein calls Seminex's "bizarre *Schwärmerei*."[3]

In his last conversation with Jack, Jordahl called his attention to "a Missouri flirting around with such novelties as Church Growth" and claimed that Jack was intrigued with the "evangelical catholics" of the ELCA—not that Jack would have gone along. It was part of his nature to keep people guessing. This is my observation. Jordahl may be right in seeing that Jack had not laid down a course for the LCMS, but there is only so much that one man can do.

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We have not seen any written reviews on Robert, but oral tradition was flourishing even before he died. People loved and hated Robert with the same intensity that they loved his brother, but for different reasons. Jack was an organizer of the troops. Robert was the standard around which the troops, more unorganized than not, gathered. Even when deprived of office, he was the body around which the eagles gathered.

Brothers cannot avoid comparison and the Preuses were no exception. Both were theological and political animals, but here the comparison will stop. Robert had become a symbol and a rallying point at different times in his life for groups within the LCMS that are now increasingly disparate. So he may have been the last *universal* Missourian, as much as this was possible. His passing left both a political and a theological void.

While Robert was often at odds with LCMS officialdom, he *consciously* represented "old Missouri." His defense of biblical inspiration gave him immediate recognition with neo-evangelicals, with whom he fostered and cherished alliances when LCMS officialdom locked him out of his old haunts. Many advocates of Church Growth-like programs were allied and supported by him. At his death, his greatest admirers were those who showed a growing interest in the classical Lutheranism of the earlier period and who were seeing theology in terms of the old church liturgies.

Robert fits under Klein's critique that the LCMS isolated its doctrinal commitment from its liturgical life, but towards the end of his life, Robert recognized the dangers in the Church Growth Movement. Outwardly in the matter of forms, the liturgical products of Church Growth were not unlike a way of life with which Robert was most familiar. No one could accuse him of being liturgical.

Robert's dismissal from the seminary and synod provided a direction in his theology of which we have only threads. Out of these threads, had he lived, Robert would have woven a cloth. In defending the concept that "All theology is Christology," he came to see the legitimacy of the liberals' argument that the Scriptures and all doctrines had to be defined within the dimensions of the gospel, though this gospel was more than "the sheer announcement of grace," to borrow Klein's terminology.

Gospel for Robert Preus involved *both* theological and historical dimensions, which were missing from the "gospel-reductionism" of the liberal position. Gospel was both historical and theological Christology, now in uppercase. Robert's sermons were never doctrinal dissertations but a preachment of Christ. The substance of his later understanding was already there, but the final controversies made this existential for him in a way he had not experienced before.

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Robert's removal from office helped him reshape his understanding of the ministry, which he published two years after his removal in *The Doctrine of the Call in the Confessions and Lutheran Orthodoxy.*[4] Previously Robert held that the ministry was established in Article XIV of the Augsburg Confession, while Article V dealt with the general ministry, or ministry in the abstract. Now he saw that the ministry was established in Article V. This book was indeed an attempt to set forth the classical Lutheran position on this issue, but it was also a defense of his own position as seminary president, and later also seminary professor, set against certain practices he found abhorrent in the LCMS.

In the conclusion to *The Doctrine of the Call,* Robert took issue with these now current or proposed practices: laymen preaching in churches; disposing of pastors without due process or because they are employees; placing pastors on "restricted status," whereby they are ineligible to receive calls; district presidents controlling call lists; district presidents or counselors talking to congregations apart from their pastors; temporary calls; forced retirement; and ministerial calls to women.

Robert took up these issues in 1990, almost seven years ago. These are now the very issues that are being proposed to the LCMS. I am convinced that as recently as ten or even twenty years ago, he did not see the issue of the ministry as the one that would disrupt in the LCMS. His own situation forced him to this conclusion, even though he had been the preeminent symbol and rallying point for all of Missouri's conservatives in the "Law-Gospel Debate."

## THE LAW-GOSPEL DEBATE

During the 1970s a controversy broke out in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod over the role of the law and the gospel in theology. Afterwards similar debates over biblical inspiration, inerrancy, and history arose among the Southern Baptists and other Protestant denominations, but for Lutherans the debate over the Bible was connected with the law-gospel principle. Perhaps a majority of now-active LCMS clergymen were pastors or seminary students at that time. Their historical witness can serve as a needed corrective on my own interpretation of those events.

What is intended here is more of a theological appraisal of the movement and less an historical one, though on that account it is not ahistorical. Controversies necessarily produce exaggerated language and exorbitant claims for each position, from which I hardly exempt myself. Soldiers do know more about battles than those who visit battlefields only after the wounded have been safely hidden away and unsightly debris removed. On that account it is better to concentrate on the issues themselves, with the least possible attention to the participants in that debate, though complete abstinence from historical biography is impossible.

Formulating the point of controversy will be determined by where we begin our analysis. A date for the roots of the controversy in the 1940s would suggest that the issue of the '60s and '70s was a growing desire for LCMS participation in the ecumenical movement. This was an alleged but not proven goal of the *Statement of the Forty-Four.*

Placing the roots for the debate in the 1950s would suggest that the issues were biblical inerrancy and the use of certain methods in interpreting the Bible that cast doubt on its historical reliability. The end of John Behnken's nearly lifelong tenure in 1962 signaled the overt politicizing of the LCMS Theological differences took form in political organizing. Unlike his predecessors, Oliver Harms could not look forward to an election for life.

The election of certain district presidents and J. A. O. Preus as LCMS president in 1969 meant that concerns about the theological direction of the LCMS had become so public that congregations who implicitly trusted the synod were ready to replace certain church leaders. With two opposing groups emerging as virtually self-contained "churches" within the LCMS by the 1970s, clearly opposed theologies could be recognized. Until then the LCMS was faced with individual theological opinions, but in the 1970s quasi-official theologies emerged, one associated with the St. Louis seminary and the other claiming tradition.

By mid-decade matters had progressed far enough to allow representatives of each position to recognize and critically ana-

lyze the other's theology. In retrospect these alliances were not ideologically monolithic. We can put aside the issue that some alliances were often joined by some for political reasons and personal advancement. This is not unusual in church life, and only the totally naive will hold up hands in indignant horror.

Members of one group or the other had theological differences among themselves that were not evident to its members. For example, an undiagnosed Fundamentalism, which is now known as neo-evangelicalism, was seen as the equivalent of confessional Lutheranism. When asked what Lutheran influences a prominent theologian was making outside the LCMS, one college professor replied that the man in question was a defender of verbal inspiration, as if that were a uniquely Lutheran doctrine.

The failure to recognize these theological differences may be at the root of any discord and disharmony that the church experienced one generation later. This was as true for the conservatives as it was for the moderates. The break, which was finalized in 1976 with the LCMS president following a decision of the 1975 convention to remove some district presidents from their positions, was not absolutely catastrophic for the body politic. The LCMS maintained its shape and form with some districts taking the brunt of the schism. An inevitable gloomier forecast felt by some of us in the late 1960s and early 1970s did not materialize. The feared "liberals" did not storm the walls, as they had done in every other major Protestant denomination.

Though many issues were coming together in the 1970s, surfacing as the prominent one was whether the Scriptures or "the law and the gospel" were the determinative principle in theology. One writer noted that "at the heart of the discussions in our Synod is the question of whether the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is the *sole source* of our personal faith and the *center* of our public teaching." The author of this statement, who was a critic of the new position, agreed with his opponents that law and gospel formed the substance of theology, but he spoke for the traditional position in asserting that the governing principle for theology was the Scriptures.[5] He also noted that the new position was an "arbitrary polarizing of the gospel over against the Holy Scriptures," which was never known in confessional Lutheran theology.[6]

The new position was commonly called "gospel reductionism." Even though it had a somewhat negative ring to it, and was not used by its proponents, it was suggested by the title of an article by one of its leading advocates.[7] Adding to an intended or unintended confusion was that law and gospel were understood differently by the opposing sides. Gospel reductionism brought a number of factors together, including a legitimate Reformation principle that the law and the gospel provided an outline, goal, and content for preaching and theology.

Justification, the core Reformation doctrine, was carried out for the believer in the law, which condemned him, and in the gospel, which assured him of his salvation. Law and gospel gave meaning to the Reformation. In Articles IV, V, and XX of the Augsburg Confession (1530) and the Apology (1531), Melanchthon held that salvation was by the gospel and challenged any idea that works of the law made any contribution. A peculiarly Lutheran controversy resolved itself in the formulation of Article V in the Formula of Concord (1578), titled "Law and Gospel." It condemned the idea that the preaching of the gospel led to repentance and saw this a confusion of law and gospel.

Article VI of the Formula took the matter further and addressed the role of the law in the life of the Christian. The Formula acknowledged that the word "gospel" could be used in several ways, but in the strictest sense it was exclusively a proclamation of grace and not a conviction of sin. From the beginning, law and gospel became the characteristic principle of Lutheran theology and historically continues to distinguish ours from other churches, as the proponents of gospel reductionism themselves recognized.

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The law and gospel principle was reinforced in the nineteenth century by C. F. W. Walther, the Missouri Synod's first president, whose *Law and Gospel* remains a standard for homiletics. The debates of the Reformation and the role of the law and gospel as a principle for preaching were not the issues that surfaced in the 1970s. Gospel reductionism of the 1970s was not a revival of the old controversy in which gospel was confused with law, nor was it a renewal of the question of what role the gospel had in preaching. Gospel reductionism was the claim that the law and the gospel, and *not* the Scriptures, were normative for Lutheran theology.

In gospel reductionism, justification was seen not merely as the chief, but as the only required doctrine. Other church teachings were relegated to a secondary position, as if they were nothing else than adiaphora. In comparison with the law and the gospel, other items were expendable. Law and gospel was used as a principle of exclusion rather than inclusion and as a method of analyzing the biblical data.

According to Reformation definition, law and gospel were diametrically opposed to each other and characterized God's revelation of condemnation and redemption. Redeemed by Christ, the believer is still not free from condemnation. In gospel reductionism, law and gospel went beyond describing the human dilemma in standing before a God who hates him for his sin and loves him in Christ and became the standard in evaluating the worth of other doctrines and the biblical documents. Whatever was not found to be in disagreement with the law and gospel principle was allowed.

As a principle in exegesis, gospel reductionism allowed any opinion of biblical interpretation, as long as the gospel as a message of forgiveness was proclaimed to the hearer. Evaluating a given pericope as either myth or history was allowed, if the message of forgiveness was quarried from the biblical text

and preached. Agreement on the literary character of any section of the Scriptures was secondary and freedom of opinion was allowed. What was previously considered to be a historical account might be considered poetic saga.

At that time Bultmann's definition of "forms" was the rage of the scholarly world, though little attention is given to them now. Some who identified with the new movement in the LCMS seem to have found this approach too radical. They held and still hold to recognizably conservative positions by insisting on the biblical history and, in certain cases, even defending it. Among these are some now in the ELCA.

Gospel reductionism did not introduce an entirely new way of thinking, though the terms were mid-twentieth-century vintage. Rationalism in the seventeenth century had already made a distinction between the Scriptures and the Word of God. This type of thinking has persisted to the present time and is characterized by pointing out that the phrase "Word of God" in the biblical documents has other meanings besides the Scriptures themselves. A one-for-one equation between Bible and Word of God was against the biblical evidence.

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This position was, of course, defensible but hardly new. Peculiar to the new position is that the Word of God was looked upon as an overarching category out of which any number of sub-categories are derived: words spoken by God, prophetic and apostolic word, Scriptures, sermons, hymns, liturgies, Christian testimonies. These sub-categories can be labeled as Word of God, insofar as they provide significant witness to that Word of God, but are not identifiable with it. They are bearers of the Word, but they are not ultimately authoritative Word of God, an honor reserved for the gospel.

Gospel reductionism regarded gospel, that is, the word of forgiveness, as *the* Word of God in the primary sense. Scriptures were the Word of God only because, or insofar as, they proclaimed the gospel, that is, the word of forgiveness. It was something like the old liberal platform that the Bible *contains* the Word of God, but not exactly. The newer concept was more fluid. On one occasion a certain portion of the Scriptures could be the Word of God and on other occasions not. Sections of the Bible that were found not to proclaim gospel could be discounted as Word of God, at least on that one occasion when they were heard. Oral proclamation was more likely to be Word of God than written Scriptures. One pericope could be, and could not be, the gospel depending on whether it accomplished its goal in preaching the gospel.

Such a view flew right in the face of the traditional doctrine of inspiration, which had been brought to prominence by the publication of Robert Preus's *The Inspiration of Scripture*, a study of the classical Lutheran position on this issue. His stature in the LCMS as an opponent of gospel reductionism was directly connected with the position he set forth in this book.

The theoretical understanding of Word of God as law and gospel had direct practical implications for the LCMS. The law-gospel principle allowed for the ordination of women as pastors, an issue under consideration first in the American Lutheran Church (ALC) and then the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) in the 1970s, though its proponents in these churches acknowledged that specific Bible passages disallowed it. Biblical and historical evidences were against the practice. The fragile LCMs-ALC fellowship, which was initiated in 1969, was in danger of being disrupted by the latter's declaration of fellowship with the LCA and their intent to ordain women.

At this juncture the law-gospel principle served LCMS proponents of fellowship. Placing women as pastors did not directly oppose the gospel as the Word of God proclaiming forgiveness, and so they could be ordained, it was argued. At least one woman was admitted to the regular M.Div. program of the St. Louis seminary and was assigned to vicarage. Lines were being drawn.

The law-gospel principle also was used to show that a sufficient basis for fellowship between Lutherans and other churches was already in place.[8] No longer was it a matter of coming to agreement on the specific doctrines that previously divided churches from one another, but whether the gospel was being preached in these churches. What was happening replaced what had happened. Result was more important than source or origin.

The ELCA has now used similar arguments to achieve alignment with the United Church of Christ, the Reformed, and Presbyterian Churches. Classical Lutheranism could express its material principle in several ways: forgiveness, justification, law and gospel, or Christ. Scriptures as the source of theology were the formal cause. In gospel reductionism, the material principle was transformed into the formal one. Justification, or the law-gospel principle, was both source (formal principle) and content (material principle). Law and gospel became the norm.

In gospel reductionism, something was true, or allowed, if the law and gospel were *effectively* proclaimed. Where a word had created faith, that word could be recognized as the gospel or the Word of God. The result indicated the nature of the proclamation. Only when the proclamation was accepted by the hearer could that proclamation be recognized as gospel and hence as the Word of God. Faith became the final arbiter. This is easily recognized as an existentially influenced theology, which it was. Objectivity was swallowed up into subjectivity.

The background and the substance for the new position was twentieth-century neo-orthodoxy, especially the Swiss theologians Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, as well as the Scottish theologians Don and John Baillie, who had put this peculiar understanding of the Word of God in the center of their theologies. John A.T. Robinson, bishop of Woolwich, represented this thinking for awhile in England. Paul Tillich played the same role in the United States. Though Barth, Brunner, and Baillie were not Lutheran, they used theological terms familiar to Lutherans.

At first many Lutherans may not have been aware that these terms were given other definitions. Rudolf Bultmann also belonged to the movement and spoke in recognizable Lutheran terms. He made his mark as a New Testament scholar with his method of demythologizing, but his theology was recognizably Lutheran, especially in the pulpit. Piety, in this case Lutheran, survived in a Nestorian arrangement with complete historical skepticism.

Neo-orthodoxy was not without European Lutheran critics. The Swedish theologian Anders Nygren and the German Lutheran scholars Werner Elert and Paul Althaus Jr. were the most prominent. They recognized that neo-orthodoxy, with its redefinition of terms and its lack of attention to biblical history, was hardly compatible with Lutheran theology, and they engaged it in polemical dialog. Some Lutherans in America took a more positive attitude to neo-orthodoxy and saw in it an opportunity for expanding their theological horizons.

For all of its failings, neo-orthodoxy offered a substantive theology compared to the lightweight liberal theology that dominated the American scene long after it had lost its credence on the European side of the Atlantic. Neo-orthodox theological fibre may account for its popularity in America among conservatives, including neo-evangelicals. The president of one seminary assured the synod that his institution was "doing theology." It was!

The influences of neo-orthodoxy among Lutherans, including the LCMS, may be more difficult to decipher. With the loss of German as the theological language in the LCMS by the end of the 1920s, and the problems in maintaining contact with the Continent during the Second World War, leading American Lutheran theologians may have become less informed about European theological developments than, for example, did Francis Pieper. Pieper's bibliographical knowledge was encyclopedic and is still unmatched today.

The war had cut the Missouri Synod off, not only from her sister churches in Germany, but from the general theological developments there.[9] Thus when neo-orthodoxy took hold in American soil in the 1950s, many theologians of the conservative churches were not fully equipped to analyze it and were susceptible. Failure to analyze neo-orthodoxy allowed its introduction into the LCMS. One district official described the new method as reading the Bible, praying, and then interpreting it.

Something more complex was afoot, but such simple, and yes, naive explanations of what this was were not uncommon. It would be equally false to say that everyone who had been dissatisfied with traditional LCMS theology and practice in the '30s and '40s were "gospel reductionists," though they made common political alliance with them. The gospel reductionism movement did have informed, committed, and articulate spokesmen who came to be associated with Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and Valparaiso University in Indiana, either as faculty members or as writers for their scholarly publications. Memoirs and autobiographies may still uncover theological and political alliances.

Neo-orthodoxy does not attract the attention it did in the 1950s through the 1970s, and in a sense we are visiting battlefields of wars from which the soldiers have longed departed. Some well-known combatants have enlisted in other armies. One suspects, both intuitively and from personal knowledge, that those who then used its phrases may not in every case have known neo-orthodoxy's origins as a protest in the 1920s. This protest was directed against the optimistic liberal tradition that was spawned by eighteenth-century Rationalism and then nurtured by Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, Albrecht Ritschl, and finally by Adolf von Harnack.

***When neo-orthodoxy took hold in American soil in the 1950s, many theologians of the conservative churches were not fully equipped to analyze it and were susceptible.***

From our point of view, neo-orthodoxy was "liberal." On the European shores it was conservative, hence the term "neo-orthodoxy." European liberalism had met a sudden death with the Great War (1914–1918), which destroyed the idea that a heavenly society on earth was within human grasp. Its American cousin was not scarred by the ravages of the war and survived in the form of the Social Gospel, which followed the rationalistic tradition of reducing biblical history and theology to bare but recognizable minimums. These liberals were not historical agnostics in the sense that the Jesus Seminar is. Harry Emerson Fosdick, who was removed from Princeton Theological Seminary, perpetuated the old optimistic liberal tradition into the 1960s. American theological liberalism lingered into old age and died a natural death.

To American Protestantism, which had not known the ineffectiveness of Continental liberalism, neo-orthodoxy may have appeared as nothing more than a mild diuretic. Barth, the consummate theologian of the twentieth century, had been politically involved and was not above addressing societal ills and national evils. He was a mover behind the Barmen Declaration. To many conservatives neo-orthodoxy, with its protest against liberalism, may have seemed simply a revival of classical theology. It seemed to be similar to the repristination of confessional theology in the 1830s and '40s among Lutherans in Germany and Anglicans in England, which of course, it was not.

Still, Barth was a scholar of the classical Lutheran and Reformed theologians as few men have ever been. His theological presentations are the most valuable of this century, and serious doctrinal scholars must engage him and, where necessary, accept his corrections. Underlying his theological program were principles that may have sounded traditional but were built on an existential foundation and would have appeared strange to the leading parties in the Reformation and post-Reformation debates. At that time all agreed that the Bible was the Word of God and hence the source of theology.

Barth's definition of the Word of God as encounter between two subjects, one giving and another receiving, does not belong to Reformation theology, though some in our circles attempted to cite Luther in its defense. Rudolf Bultmann provided an existential definition of gospel, which he had borrowed from the philosopher Martin Heidegger, a colleague at the University of Marburg on the philosophical faculty. Forgiveness was the willingness to accept oneself. The gospel was the proclamation that effected this. Scriptures could be equated with the Word of God if they proclaimed gospel to effect a new self-awareness and self-acceptance. These views were exported to the United States and appeared in the traditional Lutheran dress of law and gospel in gospel reductionism.

***For neo-orthodoxy Scriptures were the Word of God only insofar as they were believed as gospel.***

For all the objectivity neo-orthodoxy claimed for its definition of the "Word of God," the Word was dependent on a subjective reception of it by the hearer. Thus neo-orthodoxy fundamentally did not advance beyond the liberalism it claimed to displace. In fairness to neo-orthodoxy, the liberalism originating with Schleiermacher saw the Scriptures as nothing else than the expression of the community. For such a liberalism, the transcendental was only an expression of a commonly held self-consciousness.

For neo-orthodoxy Scriptures were the Word of God only insofar as they were believed as gospel. If all the Scriptures were accepted as the gospel, then they could all be reckoned as Word of God. Just the opposite was equally true. If the Scriptures did not effect any change in the hearer, they were not gospel and hence not Word of God. It could be said and it was said: "All the Scripture was the Word of God" and "None of the Scriptures were the Word of God." Totally opposing statements were true according to the situation. Aristotle's law of self-contradiction, that a thing cannot both be and not be, was inoperative.

Any number of problems surface in this program. Since unbelievers cannot be convicted by a word that is not Word of God, any objective basis for a world judgment is removed. Barth did not write his volume on eschatology and thus avoided resolving the dilemma. In this position, history and theology operate in their own spheres and so historical questions are not necessarily related to theological ones. Without a necessary historical base for the proclamation, no reason exists for not substituting a historical base from another religion. The creedal substance of Christianity (*incarnatus est*) was compromised. On the possibility of revelation in other religions, the proponents of neo-orthodoxy were silent, even though they vigorously protested liberalism's denial of the uniqueness of Christianity.

Neo-orthodoxy's familiar language provided points of contact, contagion, and confusion in American religion. This is simply to say that responses to it were not uniform. The form that neo-orthodoxy assumed in LCMS gospel reductionism was easily recognized as a variant of its European forms, which were first offered prominently by Barth, Emil Brunner, and Bultmann. Barthian neo-orthodoxy placed the gospel before the law and had to be adjusted to fit the Lutheran formula that law precedes the gospel. "Encounter," the code word among the neo-orthodox theologians for the moment of revelation when God and man met each other, made its way into the common LCMS vocabulary.

The "gospel reductionists," as they were commonly called in the LCMS, preferred to be called "moderates," though both names were of their own choosing. Their most strident opponents called them liberals, because some of them held a view of biblical history that was little different than what was offered by eighteenth-century Rationalists and nineteenth-century German New Testament scholarship. Gospel reductionism was an amalgam of Barth and Bultmann's positions set forth in Lutheran terms, though Bultmann's vocabulary needed little translating.

Gospel reductionism was offered to the church through the pages of the *Concordia Theological Monthly* of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and an officially adopted document, *Faithful to Our Calling, Faithful to Our Lord.* The latter document was set forth both as a statement of common belief and a collection of individual testimonies, which comprised an accompanying publication. Critics of the new position were said to be more versed in what the new theology involved than its proponents.[10]

Spokesmen for gospel reductionism looked to the late German Lutheran theologians Paul Althaus[11] and Werner Elert of the University of Erlangen. Althaus and Elert were, ironically, contemporaries and the original critics of neo-orthodoxy, especially Barth's inversion of law and gospel. Althaus and Elert, from today's perspective and even from that of the 1930s through the '50s, would be recognized as conservative.

Werner Elert, along with his erstwhile colleague Hermann Sasse, are revered as confessional Lutheran icons. They had no use for Bultmann's negative judgment on biblical history or Barth's agnosticism towards the objective history to which the life of Jesus belonged. Ironically, the law and the gospel reductionist theology of the Missouri Synod in the 1970s, which claimed reliance on Elert and Althaus, allowed for Bultmann's historically radical exegesis and worked with Barth's definition of the Word of God as encounter.

This prior history was not widely available in the LCMS even as late as the 1970s and made theological assessment impossible. It was inconsistent with itself. Some prominent spokesmen of gospel reductionism saw biblical history as essential to their definition of the gospel,[12] a position that was not Barth's. Even at the time of the controversy, the newer theology neither pretended to be fully developed nor to be the position of all its adherents. The second volume of *Faithful to Our Calling* contained individual testimonies. Confessional theology operates from commonly accepted documents and not what this or that person believes.

*A Statement of Biblical and Confessional Principles* provided a theological conclusion to the controversy, at least for that moment. A division in the church provided a political conclusion to the controversy. If the controversy had not fractured the church, it might be passed over. The rupture did raise the question of how the law and the gospel functioned in Lutheran theology and thus struck at the core of what a Lutheran church was all about.

A then-LCMS clergyman's published dissertation provided a hint on how this movement wanted to understand itself. As Walther had made the law-gospel the basic principle for practical theology, that is, pastoral care and preaching, the church now had an opportunity and obligation to apply this same principle to exegetical and dogmatical theology.[13] When the dissertation appeared, Barth and especially Bultmann had long since constructed their theologies along these lines, and their ideas were gaining ground in the LCMS.

This dissertation was a rationalization—that is, it provided a rationale for what was then happening in the LCMS, though it seems as if this *apologia* attracted little attention. New theologies dig through graveyards of history looking for church fathers. Gospel reductionism was not a populist movement among the laity, as for example Fundamentalism was and Evangelicalism is now. Some lay persons interpreted the newer message in terms of the classical Lutheran position. Neo-orthodoxy's ambiguity allowed for this. It also appealed to the agnostic in many Christians.

As a theology neo-orthodoxy was esoteric and was attractive to those who had raised questions about the biblical history, but who were not ready to surrender traditional Lutheran worship and theology, or at least to give the impression that they did. Religion is valuable apart from its truth claims. Here neo-orthodoxy's agenda was carefully followed. Gospel reductionism presented itself as a Lutheran theology without demanding commitment from the hearer to a particular biblical history. Belief in the gospel did not require belief in the biblical history. Theology could exist without, or apart from, insisting this or that recorded episode in the Bible.

For Lutherans a bifurcated approach in doing theology was not new. In the nineteenth century the Erlangen theology claimed a double commitment, one to the God-consciousness principle of Schleiermacher and the other to classical Lutheran theology. Von Frank and Ihmels carried water on two shoulders and eventually the water shifted to Schleiermacher's side. Pieper recognized and condemned this kind of inconsistency. Lutheran theology was hardly the result of the individual or the collective religious consciousness of the church.

In practice the Erlangen theology was comparatively mild. It did not adopt the radical historical methods of David Friedrich Strauss in that time or of Bultmann in our times. Twentieth-century neo-orthodox forms of bifurcating faith and history were hardly so benign. Barth ignored questions of historical authenticity. Bultmann, in the tradition of the nineteenth century, flatly denied the miraculous, including the virgin birth and the resurrection. Both had well developed and, on many points, acceptable theologies! It was their historically agnostic attitude that attracted wide attention among the people and caused alarm in the LCMS and led to the political upheavals of the '70s.

Promoters of gospel reductionism were careful in informing their congregations with as few details as possible. Historical doubt was raised about the Old Testament prophet Jonah, who, so it was thought, was historically remote and hence inconsequential. Few would care if he had existed or not. His sojourn in the fish seemed to be as much the product of poetic imagination as it was history. The example of Jonah was so often raised by public speakers explaining the new method to LCMS congregations, that one suspects that it was part of a prearranged script, similar to the methods of Jehovah Witnesses who are well versed on only certain Bible verses. Missionaries for the new movement introduced themselves as conservative or confessional Lutherans, but their attitude to biblical history gave a glimpse into the new method. At the time of the controversy, the resurrection of Jesus was kept off the table, but it was not unusual for some to suggest that the virgin birth may be more of a theological truth than an historical one. Here the neo-orthodox bifurcation was recognizable. Even the uninformed could recognize that something in the theological-historical distinction was amiss, even if they did not know how gospel reductionism was constructed.

Clearly such distinctions between theology and history must be made, but the distinction is not a reason for eliminating one or the other. Traditional liberalism simply dismissed the resurrection and virgin birth as legendary accretions and did not attempt to look for theological value in them. Neo-orthodoxy found value everywhere in the Bible, but made its history secondary to the point of exclusion, if necessary. Fundamentalism requires belief in the historical, but often without seeing and requiring acceptance of the theological truth. *There is a theological rationale to the virgin birth as there is to the resurrection.*

***Gospel reductionism presented itself as a Lutheran theology without demanding commitment from the hearer to a particular biblical history.***

In classical Lutheran theology, law and gospel serves as a principle of theological integration around a christological core. But this principle was never intended or used as an autonomous standard of what was historically authentic in the Scriptures. Nor was it intended or used as a judge and norm to determine what was acceptable or not. It was not so much *a doctrine* among other doctrines, but the principle or method of applying the biblical data and doctrines in preaching. The goal was to convince the hearer that his sins had been forgiven because of an objective atonement that had taken place in the *historical moment of the cross.*

Historical crucifixion could not be equated with but was the occasion for the atonement. Virgin birth or conception was not

the incarnation, but was the occasion for it. *Supernatural realities are encased within historical moments and so are dependent on them.* The same is true of the sacraments. Water does not bring about regeneration, but is the occasion for it. Take away the history or the physical matter and Christianity deteriorates into a gnosticism.

Gospel reductionism, by disparaging the scriptural revelation as Word of God and making its history a secondary feature, had no firm foundation on which its gospel principle could be located. One proponent found support for the new principle of equating the Word of God with the gospel in Luther's Small and Large Catechisms.[14] This was overtly Lutheran, but it amounted to making the Lutheran Confessions an independent source of theology before or apart from the Bible. Lutheran theology, at least in this form, took on a life of its own. Law-gospel as a source (formal principle) for theology was a caricature of the sixteenth-century Reformation doctrine. In any event, a sixteenth-century principle cannot provide a normative principle for biblical hermeneutics.

In Barth's proposal, gospel without the law had the honor of being Word of God. For gospel reductionism, law and gospel and not the gospel was proposed as a formal principle in theology, though in practice the law was assumed into the gospel.[15] The first LCMS version of neo-orthodoxy was a variation on Barth: not gospel-law as Barth proposed, but law-gospel. Here the Lutheran version was unstable and had to be resolved. While stressing the gospel as *the* Word of God, it had to extend a similar honor to the law, if it were to be traditionally Lutheran.

***In classical Lutheranism, the law and the gospel cannot be separated from their origin in histories of Israel and Jesus.***

This Lutheran variation of neo-orthodoxy had within itself the seeds for its own philosophical self-destruction. Gospel reductionism, as the wording of the phrase suggests, eventually eliminates the law as the first Word of God or as Word of God in any sense. This results either in antinomianism or includes the law's function in the gospel, as Barth did. That view was condemned in Article V of the Formula. Lutherans are more likely to move gradually in the direction of antinomianism, which allows biblical imperatives to become ethical parentheses, that is, culturally bound commands inapplicable to later cultures.

Making the gospel the norm for the Scriptures is a self-authenticating principle and hence unsatisfactory. It is defined by, or in, one's own encounter (that is, one's experience) and not judged by an external authority like the Bible. This conclusion is not even the result of any historical-critical method but the intrusion of a neo-orthodox theory set forth in Lutheran terms. Historical-critical methodology, with its claim to scholarly (scientific) objectivity, does not produce or cannot verify the law-gospel principle of gospel reductionism. At best it comes from a Lutheran environment into the text, but is not necessarily drawn out of the text. Critical New Testament scholars would have found it strange to make normative such a prior dogmatic truth as "gospel."

If the new approach was a protest against the "Lutheran fundamentalism" of Pieper's dependency on the Scriptures as the norm of theology, it was misdirected. It paid little attention to what he had said about the gospel being the purpose and core of theology. This is clear from the first pages of his dogmatics, where he distinguishes the true religion from false ones in their failures to make the gospel normative and the core for their theologies.

First of all, Pieper's assessment was right. Second, gospel is a doctrinal norm, but not gospel as the mere declaration that sins are forgiven, but the gospel as the projection of the events of salvation into the present through preaching and sacraments. In Lutheran theology, it was not simply enough to demonstrate that this or that doctrine was taken from the Bible, but it had to expound Christ. Any claim that classical Lutheran theology operated from a bare doctrine of biblical inspiration and inerrancy, as if it were a variant form of Fundamentalism, is simply wrong. A theology that is not normed by the gospel and served by it is not Lutheran.

Both the Reformed and the Arminians (Methodists) do not work with such a christological principle, and so the former tend towards legalism and the latter to humanism. Lutherans do not recognize independent, autonomous religious truths that are without a necessary connection to Christ. This is true also of biblical inspiration. The Spirit of God who inspires the Scriptures is the Spirit of Jesus. God's Spirit is defined by the cross and has his origin for the church in the crucifixion of Jesus. *On that account* the Scriptures contain and define the redemptive word of the gospel, and the gospel in turn opens up the Scriptures. One does not know the intent of the biblical authors without Christ. Gospel is not superimposed on the inspired Scriptures, but it belongs to their origin, content, and fibre.

In classical Lutheranism, the law and the gospel cannot be separated from their origin in histories of Israel and Jesus, as Bultmann and his disciples had done. Without the historical moments of the cross and resurrection, there is no atonement and justification, and the law and gospel lose their foundation and approach the hearer with an *empty* Word. Message remains nothing else than message. Confessional Lutherans hold that gospel interprets the saving events, but in no way constitutes them. Gospel proclamation cannot be substituted for redemptive history. In gospel reductionism the gospel as a preached message took on a life of its own, as the Word of God did with Karl Barth. As a principle for its theology, classical Lutheranism never intended the law and gospel to be used as a hermeneutical tool permitting historical sections of the Scriptures to be understood as myths, legends, or tales. Gospel provides no license to find the biblical history irrelevant. Just the opposite is so. It requires that this history be affirmed.

Gospel derives its life from *incarnatus est* and *crucifixus est.* As previously mentioned, law and gospel as a principle is not a

doctrine alongside other doctrines in that it reveals *something*, but it provides the key in *applying* that which is already revealed, that divine something, that is, *all biblical history and doctrines*. It does not teach us *something* we did not know before, but takes what has been revealed in Christ and applies it to believers and unbelievers, so that they might be convicted of sin and believe. Law and gospel bring the historical realities of salvation into the history of the believer. Gospel reductionism put the higher value on the history of the hearer at the expense of the biblical history. Ultimately the history of the believer becomes the only history.

Neo-orthodoxy's hold on American Lutheran theology was quickly usurped by the theologies of hope, history, revolution, and feminism, but it was the first effective, external irritant into the theology of a confessional Lutheran church body known for its conservatism. The results of this intrusion into the LCMS were controversy, disruption, and schism which led approximately three hundred congregations out of the LCMS into the newly formed Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC). The AELC recognized former professors at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, as their faculty, which was organized as Christ Seminary in Exile, commonly known as Seminex. The AELC provided the catalyst for bringing the two other large synods into joining it in forming the ELCA in 1986.

Gospel reductionism was clearly a parochial theology, peculiar to the LCMS. It evoked sympathy from a scholarly world who was concerned that academic freedom was being stifled. But external reinforcements soon dissipated. Future generations may conclude that the eruptions of 1970s were hardly more politically motivated than theologically. Of course the same could be said of the fourth-century Arian controversy. In a real sense the AELC was responsible for the formation of the ELCA, which has stretched out its ecumenical hands in every direction and provided an institutional basis for all kinds of theological currents.

The ELCA's most severe critics are its own members, some of whom were associated theologically or politically with the "gospel reductionist" movement of the 1970s in the LCMS. The ELCA theological and political agenda place it in the Protestant mainstream. Its proposals are indistinguishable from the Episcopal Church, with which it is appropriately negotiating ecumenical accommodation, or the Reformed churches, with whom this has already been accomplished. In the rapid change of church boundaries and theologies, the 1970s controversy, which then captured headlines as a major church catastrophe, today attracts little attention for theological discussion.

The 1970s controversy, as disruptive as it was at the time, was only a brief expression of larger movements coming together in a small corner of the church. Bultmann has been replaced by the *Jesus Seminar*, which arrives at the same historical minimalism as he did, but without his attempt to construct a gospel for preaching, ill-defined as that was. Barth as a theologian is unmatched by any other in the twentieth century, but his gospel-law inversion has created a social gospel of its own making.

Barth was superseded by Moltmann and Pannenberg, both of whom saw theology in terms of global history. From this evolved the theologies of revolution. Some who were prominently associated with the movement in the 1970s have confronted its extravagant conclusions and retreated to more traditional views. Perhaps some of these never accepted these radical views, but were more politically than theologically motivated. They were caught up in the movement and its goals without ideologically understanding it. Others knowingly have followed Bultmann's radical path.

***Law and gospel do not constitute a principle to determine the least common denominator of belief, but they embrace all Scripture and doctrines and so affirm them as binding.***

If the dispute showed that the law-gospel principle cannot be substituted for the Scriptures, it also cautions that Lutheran theology cannot be done without it. A theology without the law and the gospel at its heart, and in all its parts, is not Lutheran and will quickly degenerate into Reformed or Arminian theology in the conservative form of neo-evangelicalism. Little would be gained if the church escaped from the historical relativism of Barth and Bultmann to find refuge in the legalism of neo-evangelicalism, which belongs to American fundamentalist tradition but not confessional Lutheranism.

Confessional Lutheran theology, because of its dependency on the law and the gospel, is always precariously positioned. This is the nature of Lutheran doctrine, as Luther, the Lutheran Confessions, and Pieper constantly point out. Preaching law and gospel is more of an art learned through experience than a science taught in textbooks. Those who are versed in orthodoxy can preach its doctrines as law and so destroy the gospel. Confusing law and gospel sows the seeds of doubts and destroys salvation. The misapplication of law and gospel, as the source of theology in gospel reductionism, held within it the seeds of historical agnosticism and the destruction of the faith.[16] There are many personal tragedies left in its path. Some no longer pursued the ministry. Others left it. And still others left the faith.

Law and gospel do not constitute a principle to determine the least common denominator of belief, but they embrace all Scripture and doctrines and so affirm them as binding.[17] In one sense law and gospel are ancillary to other doctrines, but in another sense they are the only doctrine in providing the covering and form in which all Christian truth is revealed to man for his salvation. Without them all other Christian teachings are without effect.

## THE AFTERMATH

The law-gospel controversy came to a conclusion in 1974 with the formation of Christ Seminary in Exile, the removal of certain district presidents, and the organization of the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches with dissident LCMS mem-

bers in 1976. *A Statement of Biblical and Confessional Principles* was acknowledged as the official position of the LCMS. Lines between the LCMS and what would become the ELCA were clearly delineated. The ELCA became less of a church and more of social movement in the style of mainline Protestant denominations.

The LCMS had a recognizable doctrinal position in which the doctrine of biblical inspiration and inerrancy were prominent. Miracle stories were not legends or myths. Adam and Eve were historical and the parents from which all were descended. It was expected by all that LCMS would enter into a period of peace, happiness, and prosperity. So it was thought. Perhaps one controversy came to an end, but the LCMS did not live happily ever after with itself. Another controversy soon surfaced at the Fort Wayne seminary.

The Fort Wayne seminary provided in miniature a barometer of the general climate in the Missouri Synod, and for that reason may have attracted first intrusive interference and attention. That intrusion was said to be an organizational revision, but underneath were different theological approaches. In a presentation made to the Fort Wayne seminary faculty on September 13, 1996, Dr. Schoer, professor and former head of the Department of Psychology of the School of Education at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, and recently elected to the LCMS Board of Higher Educational Services, bluntly said that within the LCMS there are several churches, but he did not delineate the boundaries of these churches. He used the old saw that synod means walking together, and it was recognizable to him that this was no longer so.

Since we are in the middle of dividing waters, it is difficult to identify the currents with precision and locate their origins or to forecast the future, except in the broadest terms. Former lines dividing liberals and conservatives are not descriptive of the current situation. We must look elsewhere for answers. What is offered here is only tentative and open to immediate correction.

***Former lines dividing liberals and conservatives are not descriptive of the current situation.***

In attempting to analyze what happened in the late 1970s in the LCMS, I would like to use the analogy of World War II and the rise of Soviet imperialism in its aftermath, something few could predict, but which some like Winston Churchill were aware of. At the war's conclusion our country was intent in bringing its troops home and was in no mood to address the problems fast arising in eastern Europe. Within three years it had fallen under Russian domination, where it lay for nearly half a century. What might have been resolved in 1945 is still now struggling for resolution. We are now struggling for resolution in Missouri.

By 1976 the LCMS had gone through a tiresome theological struggle of twenty years. Theological peace was proclaimed with no commitment to theological self-examination. In other words, the LCMS was not ready or willing to examine the norms by which it saw errors in the approach of others. This was particularly true of views on the Bible, the issue that separated conservatives and liberals. Moderates may have offered a definition of the gospel in gospel reductionism that hardly fit the New Testament and the Lutheran understanding of this word, but gospel reductionism might reflect the proper and necessary view that the Bible serves the gospel—or put in another way, without the gospel the Bible is not understood properly.

In conversations with Robert D. Preus, he did concede the value of the outward form of this argument, though he opposed the definitions allowed by the moderates in the 1970s. Views of the Bible offered by conservative Lutherans, though stated in similar or the same terms, were really different from those of neo-evangelicals, but were in danger of being blurred. Since the neo-evangelical theologians were being read and admired widely within LCMS circles, these differences soon were no longer recognized. This blurring may have already happened decades before.

LCMS theologians and neo-evangelicals and their forebears had recognized a kindred spirit each in the other. Pieper saw value in the position of Charles Hodge. Robert Preus and Carl F. H. Henry were heroes honored across party boundaries. Both groups accepted the Bible's inspiration, inerrancy, and infallibility and were committed to its historical character. They saw that the real enemies were those who denied these kinds of things. It would be natural that some Lutherans might come to think of themselves as neo-evangelicals, but would retain a sacramental practice by baptizing infants and holding to Christ's real presence in the Lord's Supper.

Obviously this is a simplistic observation, but in our own eyes and the eyes of others, this may have been the case more than we would like to acknowledge. Our sacramental position did not prevent our involvement with neo-evangelicals on both scholarly and parish levels. LCMS pastors have been known to recruit for the Billy Graham rallies, and some of us have been involved in writing for neo-evangelical publications. Agreement on the origin and nature of the Scriptures provided a basis for serious discussion, which was not possible even with some Lutheran groups, but it was not and is not a sufficient basis for church fellowship. Under closer examination such a minimal agreement may have been superficial, since it covered up fundamental differences on how we view the Bible.

Though at first glance it appeared that Dr. Schoer was the first to suggest that the LCMS had within its walls more than one church, an editorial by Leonard Klein in *Lutheran Forum* had posited this in 1995.[18] Rather than speaking of churches, it might be better to speak of streams of thought, because organizations or associations representing these schools of thinking are still in the state of incubation and formation. Several publications taking up the various causes are now afloat in the LCMS. Clear evidence of the divisions were the doctrinal charges raised by some individuals against others who in the 1970s had shared the same conservative views as they.

When I later brought up Professor Schoer's observations in a conversation, I was asked what these different churches might be. I had not given the matter any thought, but I spontaneously offered these three options.

1. First might be those who look for a repristination of what the LCMS was before the controversy. Problems can be resolved with reference to the LCMS premier theologians, Walther and Pieper. They are more likely to use the 1941 hymnal and look for a revival of what they remember the LCMS to be in their youth in the 1940s and 1950s. Often theirs is not merely the hope but the belief that the LCMS will always come out on the right side of any issue.[19]
2. A second school of thought has much in common with a revival of Protestant fundamentalism now in the form of neo-evangelicalism. This group is more likely to promote the use of evangelism and stewardship programs and to use different forms of worship and music, which are frequently borrowed from evangelistic and charismatic song books. In Klein's opinion, which seems correct, this group has been allowed to flourish because the LCMS insists on particular doctrines, but considers liturgy to be an adiaphoron.
3. Members in the third group have renewed interest in the Lutheran Confessions, especially the Small Catechism, which may be regularly recited in liturgically regulated church services with a weekly commemoration of the Sacrament. Many of them have a scholarly interest in exegesis and in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Lutheran fathers. They can cite Chemnitz and Johann Gerhard and are not uncritical of Walther. This group may be exercising sizable influence in the LCMS, but to date has not been recognized by outside observers.

LCMS commissions and committees are given the assignment, or so it appears, of providing a united front and generally express themselves in terms that are acceptable to the group that looks for a resurrection of old Missouri. Over diverse streams forming one flood, the officially made LCMS pronouncements are heralded forth. In some way we now have a third layer on top of the Scriptures and Confessions. As valuable as official statements are, they are often cited as if further theological discussion on these issues is inappropriate, but self-citation brings a church to the brink of sectarianism.

The three options set forth above are offered as tentative hypotheses, but we should explore the role of the Bible in Lutheran and neo-evangelical theologies. Leonard Klein, in an editorial complimenting the late J. A. O. Preus, writes, "Biblical inerrancy is an honorable theological opinion, but it is not the touchstone of orthodoxy."[20] Here he hit the nail on the head. The conservative Lutheran position on the Bible has allowed some of us to be associated with neo-evangelical groups who require such subscriptions to biblical inspiration and inerrancy for membership. Such agreement, however, exists only in the *materia,* the outward shape, and not the *forma,* the substance or content. So it happens, even among Lutherans, that if one asserts a prior belief in biblical inspiration, he is given the guarantee, or gives others the guarantee, that what he is about to say *must* be true. This is hardly the case as we look at neo-evangelicalism, which accommodates both John Calvin and John Wesley in seeing that the purpose of Christianity and the Bible is to lead the believer into a life of holiness, which is understood in ethical or moral terms.

Calvin understood the third use of the law as restraint from sin and saw this as the law's chief purpose. Wesley made progress toward moral perfection the focus or centerpiece of his system. For both theologians, the Bible has a regulatory purpose and provides rules or directives for all aspects of life. The contemporary code term for the legalism of neo-evangelicalism is "biblical principles." God has placed into the Bible principles for maintaining health, including diets and exercise and regulating fat and alcoholic intake; acquiring and keeping wealth, including principles for investing and saving money; stewardship; psychological happiness; sinless lives; happy marriages;, successful parenting; evangelism; and more.

***The contemporary code term for the legalism of neo-evangelicalism is "biblical principles."***

Bible classes in some of our churches are, wittingly or unwittingly, issue-oriented along these lines. Materials for these programs can be found on the shelves of Evangelical bookstores, advertised in such Evangelical magazines as *Christianity Today,* heard on radio stations, and watched on television stations. Personal problems can be resolved by putting together the right combination of "biblical principles." Promise Keepers belongs to this general movement. These programs speak to what we assume are our needs. They promise success and frequently instant gratification. Our moral resolve is the chief factor.

We cannot underestimate the attractiveness of this approach for our people. And we cannot dismiss out of hand good counsel, even from neo-evangelical circles. But such good counsel belongs to natural knowledge and not the gospel. After all, this is the purpose of the Book of Proverbs and, in a negative sense, is also the goal of Ecclesiastes.

Lutherans see the Scriptures entirely in terms of law and gospel; that is, ours is a christological approach. Christ is the content of the Scriptures through which he leads us from unbelief to himself. He is himself the *formal principle, the material principle, and the final principle.* As he takes the outward form of water, bread, and wine in the Sacraments, so he takes the outward form of words in the Scriptures. Just as the Jews did not recognize that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God, so unbelief does not see that the apostolic and prophetic Scriptures are the shell in which the Redeemer is present. In the Scriptures Christ is both preacher and sermon! Here are not laws and principles, but Christ himself drawing all men to himself.

Such different understandings of what the Bible is may account for the dispute that arose over the role of Christology in dogmatics. Though the late Robert D. Preus was not the author of the view that theology had to be defined christologically, he was its defender. He was accused of holding a non-acceptable opinion, from which he was later cleared. A christological view of the Bible and theology was hardly a radical opinion foreign to Lutherans. Luther had said as much and even worse. Without Christ the Scriptures are nothing: so said the Reformer.

The controversy, whose theological resolution begged for an exploitation, may have shown how two groups within the LCMS had grown apart from each other. Anathemas point to different and real points of view. Theology cannot be atomized or fragmented into parts and pieces, or even individual doctrines, but all doctrines are only amplifications and reflections on the one doctrine of Christ. Remove Christ and we are left with the law.

Our topic has focused on Missouri's controversies of the recent past and the present. Controversies are never pleasant, but they are inevitable. Satan cannot be prohibited from entering the field and planting his seed. God grant rest to those who, in a real sense, were already dying for our sakes while they were living. May he grant to us the grace to live that we may die with Christ. LOGIA

## NOTES

1. In response to a letter on whether Walther's *Kirche und Amt* was accepted on the same level as the Confessions with a *quia* subscription and not only with *quatenus*, the editor replied that this book, the "Thirteen Theses" on predestination, the *Brief Statement*, and *A Statement on Scriptural and Confessional Principles* are "officially adopted doctrinal statements of the Missouri Synod." See *Reporter* 22, no. 8 (August 1996): 9. This raises the question of whether such documents are on a level with the Confessions or whether they surpass them in their binding value. Certainly they are open to the same critical analysis given the Scriptures or Confessions. Or are they?

2. Leigh Jordahl, "J. A. O. Preus," *Logia* 5, no. 2 (Eastertide 1996): 49.

3. Leonard Klein, "J. A. O. Preus," *Lutheran Forum* 28, no. 4 (November 1994): 7.

4. Luther Academy, Monograph #1, April 1991. Since he was removed from office in September 1989, he must have begun work on this book almost immediately.

5. The Faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, *Faithful to Our Calling, Faithful to Our Lord* (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 1973). Reviewed by Eugene F. Klug, *Springfielder* 37, no. 1 (June 1973): 67–74.

6. Klug, 70.

7. Edward Schroeder, "Law-Gospel Reductionism," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 43, no. 4 (April 1972): 232–247.

8. Robert W. Jenson found a common basis for intercommunion with Episcopalians since Lutherans agreed with them on the gospel. This appeared in the same issue of the *Concordia Theological Monthly* [43, no. 4 (April 1972)] as did Schroeder's "Law-Gospel Reductionism."

9. Proponents of gospel reductionism claimed roots for their position in the positive reactions that Missouri Synod representatives had to German theologians at Bad Boll after World War II. F. E. Mayer wrote that "The doctrine of inspiration does not stand in the relationship of *apriori*, but of *aposteriori* to our theology. It is not the broad basis upon which the pyramid of dogmatics is built." *The Story of Bad Boll* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1949), 14. This statement is true. Isolating the Bible as an autonomous source of truth is characteristic of Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism, and left without criticism leads to legalism. As true as this statement may have been, later interpretations of it allowed for the Scriptures to be separated from the gospel, and then to be replaced by the gospel as the source of theology.

10. So writes Richard John Neuhaus in *Forum Letter* 4, no. 4 (March 1975): 4: "Scaer challenges the ELIM [Evangelical Lutherans in Mission, the political group supporting gospel reductionism before the split in the Missouri Synod] people to correct what he views as the faults and ambiguities in the statement. In doing so, he demonstrates more seriousness about the statement than has been generally evident in ELIM circles." They used the term "evangelical" of themselves because of their commitment to the gospel as the norm of faith.

11. Paul Althaus, *The Divine Command*, trans. F. Sherman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966).

12. "Their [the Apostles'] proclamation does not create history. On the contrary the history through the Spirit creates its proclamation." Paul G. Bretscher, *After the Purifying*, 32nd Yearbook of the Lutheran Education Association (River Forest, IL: L.E.A., 1975), 29.

13. Robert C. Schulz, *Gesetz und Evangelium* (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1958), 168. "With this American Lutheran theology faces its most important task: to make the law and the gospel the basis for its exegetical and dogmatical theology, as Walther made for practical theology." Translation by writer. In an unpublished work the same author suggests that preaching be done on the superficial meaning of the text without attention to the history behind it. This is, of course, Barth's method, even if there was no intention to copy it.

14. Bretscher, 1–13, 18.

15. Bretscher, 18. "The closest synonym for 'the Word of God' is 'the Gospel' in all its senses, including also the antithetical 'Law'."

16. Arguments for the ordination of women proceed in Lutheran circles from the freedom given by the gospel. This is only possible where the gospel is defined separately from the law. Not surprisingly, those involved in the gospel-reductionist movement in the 1970s proceeded almost immediately to ordain women.

17. As of this date an analytical history of the controversy has not appeared. Mention has been made of an analysis done by Eugene F. Klug of an official statement. Additional information and bibliographical data can be obtained from two of my articles that appeared during the midst of the controversy: "The Law Gospel Debate in the Missouri Synod," *Springfielder* 36, no. 3 (December 1972): 156–171; and "The Law Gospel Debate in the Missouri Synod Continued," *Springfielder* 40, no. 2 (September 1976): 107–118. I have deliberately refrained from including the names of those who were prominently involved in espousing the law-gospel theology of the 1970s, because the positions of some have noticeably changed. The danger facing the Missouri Synod today are forms of Reformed and Arminian Protestantism in such movements as Church Growth.

18. "What Is to Be Done," *Lutheran Forum* 29, no. 2 (May 1995): 6–8.

19. Klein refers to this faction as "politically correct Missouri" in "What Is to Be Done."

20. Leonard Klein, "J. A. O. Preus," 7.