

The Pastor as Church Historian

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium

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Pastor Bart Brauer

The Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary campus in Mequon immediately surrounds visitors with a sense of history. After driving through the arched entrance off of Freistadt Road, visitors see the green grounds give way to an orange-red architecture that goes back to a distant time and a distant place. The architecture was designed in the 1920's from concepts drawn up by Professor J.P. Koehler. The architectural style hints at the German castles of the Reformation era half a millennium ago. Some say the style imitates Eisenach's Wartburg Castle, where Martin Luther translated the New Testament into German, though it bears perhaps an even closer resemblance to Coburg Castle, where Luther had a difficult stay during the tense days while the Augsburg Confession was being drafted 170 miles to the south. (You can, by the way, have your own opinions on the seminary architecture. Dan Rautenberg, graduate of 2000 and currently a pastor on the Apache reservation in Arizona, told in a 2010 summer quarter class how he brought a group of Apache women to see the heartland of WELS in Wisconsin. When they saw the buildings on the seminary campus, they had their own take on what they were seeing: "It looks like Harry Potter's house!" It's all a matter of perspective.)

When visitors swing open the dark wooden door under the tower and enter near the administrative offices of the seminary, there is the sudden sense that history is much more than talk of times and places. History is about people. The most recent graduating class has its own consecrated space for just one year, a lone graduation picture hanging on the wall. As visitors proceed down the hall, every few steps takes them to another year of history as the graduation pictures roll by – 2012, 2011, 2010, 2009... Lay visitors to the seminary scan these pictures to find a name and a face they know, and there is excitement to find the pastor who married them or baptized their child or buried their loved one. For graduates of the seminary, the walk down memory lane can be more sobering. You become aware of the passing of time as your class picture no longer hangs in the main hallway. You and your classmates are now tucked in a corner of a classroom, consigned to the fate of having your names and faces memorized by a current seminary student simply because he experiences the tedium of sitting next to you every day. You and your classmates are often just names and faces to that current student. He is probably unaware of who has since resigned, or even who has since died. For the current student, your class has become history. You have just become another small part of church history.

Winding their way throughout the classroom building, descending flights of stairs, passing by the archives (How much history is locked up behind those doors?), visitors eventually arrive at the class of '95 – 1895, that is. The oldest graduation picture in the building, it hangs on the wall of the current multipurpose classroom. That photo and its sister photos of the classes of the late 1890's and early 1900's take visitors back to the early days of the Wauwatosa Seminary, to names like Koehler, Pieper, and Schaller. The Wauwatosa past links up with the Mequon present in a fascinating photo that hangs just outside the multipurpose room. The snapshot is labeled as August of 1929, the dedication of the Lutheran Theological Seminary – Thiensville. In the foreground are rows and rows of makeshift benches, with temporary loudspeakers strung near the outdoor center stage. In the background is a long line of parked Model T's, and maybe even some of Henry Ford's brand new Model A's. But what really grabs the attention are the countless faces staring silently toward the camera in the late summer sun. They are the congregational members of yesteryear who gathered by the thousands to celebrate the opening of their brand new seminary. Viewing that picture, you feel like you could take a seat next to them and have a talk – or, at least, you wish you could because, again, history is about people. All those people and all that August day's dedication have become a part of church history.

The history of our synod and the history of our seminary are relatively recent additions to church history. The scope of church history is huge. In fact, with the doctrine of election in mind, we could say that church history has its roots in eternity past and its future in eternity to come. Luther expressed that in his congregational hymn: “Da jammert Gott *in Ewigkeit* / Mein Elend übermassen” – “But God beheld my wretched state / *Before the world's foundation* / And, mindful of his mercies great / He planned my soul's salvation” (CW 377:4). Later in the hymn Luther points to an inseparable future with the Savior, with Jesus telling us: “For I am yours, your friend divine / And evermore you shall be mine / The foe shall not divide us” (377:7). Dogmatics and exegesis are a given. The pastor deals with them every week in sermon preparation. Pastoral theology is a given. The pastor is dealing with that every day. Given those pressing realities, church history may seem like more of a niche for the interested. Perhaps, though, it is also the huge scope of church history that makes it an extremely challenging study for any parish pastor. Where to begin? What best to focus on with the limited time that is available? How to use the knowledge of history to benefit the people we serve with the gospel?

The practical aspect of using church history to serve the people of the congregation will be the third aspect of this paper. But first, since the occasion marks the anniversary of the seminary's founding in 1863, the paper will attempt to put some definition on the historical discipline of church history and give a brief history on how it has been taught in our circles. So here is the paper's outline:

1. How do we define church history?
2. How do we teach church history?
3. How do we use church history?

1. How do we define church history?

Church history is the history of the church. Specifically, as we define it, it is the history of the New Testament Christian church from the day of Pentecost until the present moment. It is a constantly expanding subject and will be so until the return of Jesus Christ to judge the world. Then the study of church history as we know it will cease. "The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind" (Isaiah 65:17). The church militant – which is the concern of church history – will then become the church triumphant. Then all who have trusted in Christ as true God and Savior from sin will gather around the throne and bring unending praise to the One who in love paid the price to get them there.

Defined in this way, church history does not include the study of the church before Christ. That study belongs in Old Testament isagogics. Church history does include symbolics. We study the creeds of Christianity and of Lutheranism in their historical context. "Why were they written?" is just as important to study as "What do they say?"

A hundred years ago, J.P. Koehler expressed the following thoughts on defining church history in the introduction to his history textbook, *Kirchengeschichte*:

According to the biblical concept, the church is the communion of saints, which the Lord alone knows, the invisible church. It is brought into being through the gospel about the Savior of sinners. This gospel produces trust in the Savior when distressed by sin and also produces a holy life. That is Christianity. That is the work of the Holy Spirit, and his goal is not to form all peoples into one humanity of God, but to lead God's elect communion out of the world to eternal salvation. This governance of God, as far as it is recognizable in history, is the true subject of church history.

It is worth it to understand how God, through the interplay of all powers, is always making room on earth for his gospel so that the gospel, in greater or even in lesser clarity, comes to individual hearts. Then in an invisible, but effective way the gospel

contributes to the entire life of the world for this purpose: that the Lord gathers his elect communion out of all peoples and languages, preserves the gospel for his communion and through his communion, and preserves his communion to the great day of Jesus Christ.¹

August Pieper expressed similar thoughts. In his great exegetical work, *Isaiah II*, Pieper wrote the following as a commentary on Isaiah 40:3-4, the voice crying in the wilderness:

God and man, grace and sin, the Gospel of salvation and the rage of the devil do not change, but remain the same throughout all times. There is really nothing new under the sun. History keeps repeating itself till the Last Day...the history of man will produce only sin and grace, unbelief and judgment. Human history reaches its climax in the cross of Christ and comes to its final conclusion on the great Day of Judgment. Until then the history of mankind is a constant repetition of the offer of grace and the call to repentance, of the rejection of grace and of judgment. Only the historical, geographical, ethnic conditions, the external and individual peculiarities vary; the essence of what takes place is always the same.²

Though Pieper spoke of a repetition in history, he did not see history as circular, always coming back to the same spot. Neither did Koehler. Church history is neither circular, nor a constant process of evolutionary progress, nor pointless. Church history as we understand it is linear. It has a definite beginning at Good Friday and Easter and Pentecost. Those crucial events fulfilled God's Old Testament prophecies, which had revealed the plan God made before he even created the world. Church history has a definite end at the Last Day, a name Christ himself gave to the day when he will return to raise the dead (John 6:39,40,44). In between Pentecost and the Last Day is the time when Christ spreads the gospel through his believers and the Holy Spirit brings the elect to faith in Christ and keeps them in faith.

Since this is Wisconsin *Lutheran* Seminary, some of Martin Luther's thoughts on history are also appropriate here. In 1538, Luther wrote a preface for a history written by a man named Capella about the reign of the duke of Milan. In the preface Luther gave some of his thoughts on history in general, which can also apply to church history.

Histories are nothing else than a reminder...of God's work and judgment. They tell how he maintains, rules, hinders, supports, punishes and honors the world, especially human beings, just as each deserves, whether good or wicked.

[History writing] should be used by prominent people or at least by those called to do it. Histories describe nothing else than God's work – that is, grace and

¹ J.P. Koehler. *Lehrbuch der Kirchengeschichte*. (Milwaukee: NPH, 1917.) My translation of select verses from the introduction.

² August Pieper. *Isaiah II*. E.E. Kowalke, transl. (Milwaukee: NPH, 1979), 85.

anger – which people should believe just as if they stood in the Bible. That is why histories should be written accurately with the highest diligence, integrity, and truthfulness.³

Luther viewed God as active in all human history, not only church history. We, however, do not always see with our eyes what God is accomplishing through any kind of history. We believe he is working in human history. Commenting on Genesis 13:8-10, Luther wrote:

It surely is a great consolation that God establishes, upholds, and protects empires and that they do not grow and fall by mere chance, as we commonly think. The heathen do not see this governance of God but foolishly imagine that empires are established and governed by their own industriousness.

A great spirit and extraordinary industriousness are found in Hannibal; so he thinks that is how he conquers the Romans. Even greater gifts are found in Alexander [the Great]. Equipped with these gifts, he succeeds in everything. But such things are, as it were, masks. We see these alone; but God's governance, by which empires are either established or overthrown, we do not see.⁴

Eusebius of Caesarea is considered the father of church history. He compiled a history of the Christian church from the birth of Jesus to the reign of Constantine in the early 300's. Eusebius recorded the names of worldly rulers, Christian leaders, martyrs, heretics and many other individuals from the first three centuries A.D. But for Eusebius, the most important name in the history of the Christian church was Christ. In the opening thoughts of his history, he wrote:

I will begin with a concept too sublime and exalted for human grasp: the ordering of events [by God] and the divinity of Christ. Anyone intending to write the history of the church must start with the Christ himself, from whom we derive our very name, a dispensation more divine than most realize.⁵

Eusebius went beyond viewing Christ as the center of New Testament church history. He viewed Christ as the hinge of all history from the beginning at creation to the end. Toward the conclusion of his introduction, Eusebius made the point that the “new” New Testament faith was really the same as the “old” Old Testament faith. In his words:

This introduction was necessary lest anyone think of our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ, as novel, in view of the date of his incarnation, or his teaching new and strange, as crafted by a typical man of recent date...

³ Martin Luther, Weimar Edition of Luther's Works, WA 50, 385. My translation with some assistance from Prof. Arnold Koelpin.

⁴ Weimar Edition of Luther's Works, WA 30 III, 507. My translation combined with the translation from Ewald Plass in *What Luther Says* (St. Louis: CPH, 1994), 650-651.

⁵ *Eusebius: The Church History*. Paul Meier, transl. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 22.

Although we are new and this clearly fresh name of Christian has only recently become known among all nations, our life, conduct, and religious principles are no recent invention of ours...All of these credited for righteousness, going back from Abraham to the first man, could be described as Christians in fact if not in name, without exceeding the truth.⁶

In establishing a definition for church history, the ultimate source to consult is divine. God the Holy Spirit gave the apostle Paul the words and thoughts he wrote down for the Ephesians (1:3-14) and for us:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, may be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing your inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession – to the praise of his glory.

God’s love, God’s grace, God’s will, God’s good pleasure, God’s purpose, God’s plan, God’s glory – though we may sometimes think of church history as a recitation of names like Ignatius of Antioch, Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Chemnitz, C.F.W. Walther, Pope John Paul II, or Billy Graham, the apostle Paul defines church history around God and his Christ. By faith we view it the same way. Again, the Spirit’s words through the apostle Paul, this time from Colossians 1:15-20:

He [the Son loved by the Father] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to

⁶ *Eusebius*, 30.

have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

I went back to my junior church history notes. On the first day of class with Professor Siggelkow, on the first page of the notes, we were given a working definition of church history. It was written in bold type, and I noticed I had it checked (√) and starred (*).

√*A working definition: History is the record of God administering his world for the purpose of gathering his elect by means of the gospel.

2. How do we teach church history?

It was the fall of 1865. The battle of Gettysburg was a decisive victory for the Union just two summers before. In the spring of 1865 on Palm Sunday, April 9, Generals Grant and Lee signed terms of surrender at Appomattox in Virginia. Now Union troops from east and south were returning home to the Midwest. If you enrolled to study for the ministry that fall, you stepped into a brand new building, the one and only building of the Wisconsin Synod worker training system in Watertown, Wisconsin. What did your daily course of study look like?

Instruction began at 7:30 a.m. (8:00 when winter came around). At mid-morning there was a short break, with instruction continuing until noon. After lunch, classes picked up again at 1:00 p.m. There was a short mid-afternoon break, and then you were in class until 5:30 p.m. (6:00 in winter). Monday morning you had dogmatics, church history, New Testament study, German (especially to practice your composition), arithmetic, and Latin (both oral and written). Monday afternoon you had New Testament Greek, symbolics, Greek grammar, English, Hebrew, Old Testament study, world history, and geography. Tuesday you did it again, with some Xenophon and Cicero replacing symbolics and Hebrew in the afternoon. Wednesday afternoon put Horace in place of Xenophon and Cicero. Thursday afternoon put Homer in place of Horace and added Hebrew back into the mix. Friday morning brought variety. There was review. Then there was debate on a theme of history or ethics, followed by a critique of written works, with some German and arithmetic, or possibly Latin and Greek grammar to round out the morning. Friday afternoon it was back to Homer and Greek along with some geometry. As for Friday evening, there was a lecture on a free topic at 8:30.⁷

⁷ I owe a thank you to Professor Korthals, who directed me to this information found in the proceedings from the fifteenth synod gathering held in Watertown, Wisconsin on June 22-25, 1865. *Verhandlungen der*

In 1865 you had church history every morning of the week, right after dogmatics.

It was the fall of 1913. The Titanic sank a year and a half before. Hobey Baker and Jim Thorpe were the big names in sports, Baker for his accomplishments at Princeton and Thorpe for his in the previous year's Stockholm Olympics. Flying machines powered by engines were a decade old. If you entered the seminary in 1913, you went to Wauwatosa, your class replacing the 18 seniors who had been enrolled the previous year.

The course of study was divided into the four disciplines of exegetical, historical, systematic, and practical theology. Professor Pieper taught a general course called encyclopedics, a sort of introduction to theological study, which was taught the first half of the year. Your historical theology was broken up into church history taught by J.P. Koehler and symbolics taught by Pieper. Church history was first semester and symbolics was second semester. The style of each course was lecture.

The church history taught by Koehler was a three-year program. All three classes on campus met together for one seminary-wide history class for one hour every day of the week. First year students slotted into whatever slice of church history was being taught that year. The seminary catalog for the 1913-14 school year described the course as *Geschichte der neuen Zeit mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der gleichzeitigen amerikanischen Kirchengeschichte*. (The course description was only in German, as was the entire catalog. By the 1920-1921 school year, the catalog was completely in English. Then the course description was: "Modern Church history, with special consideration of contemporary church developments in America." The English course description was a straight translation of the German.) In 1914-15, you would cover *Geschichte der alten Kirche und des Mittelalters bis 1300* ("The Ancient Church and the Middle Ages, to 1300 A.D.") Your final year, 1915-16, you would get into the Reformation – *Geschichte der Zersetzung der mittelalterlichen Kirche, der Reformation und der Gegenreformation* ("Corruption of the Mediaeval Church, the Reformation, and the Counter-Reformation.").

Professor Pieper taught symbolics to first year students. You studied the content, origin, and importance of the ecumenical creeds, the Augsburg Confession, Smalcald Articles, Luther's Large Catechism, and the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord. The confessions of the

Fünfzehnten Versammlung der deutschen Evangel.-Luther. Synode von Wisconsin und anderen Staaten. The translation work from the German is my own.

Roman, Greek, and Reformed churches were also briefly covered. The class met four times a week. In addition, any extra hours in the first half of your second year could also be used for the study of symbolics.

By 1913 the four theological disciplines were clearly defined within the seminary course of study. All students studied church history five hours every week in the fall semester.

We move ahead to the fall of 1963. John F. Kennedy was president. Vince Lombardi was head coach of the Green Bay Packers, who were coming off a repeat league championship in last year's season. The United States military was ramping up the number of advisors it was sending to a distant country called Vietnam. The Wisconsin Synod had voted to suspend fellowship with the Missouri Synod two years before. In 1963 Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary was celebrating its centennial, and for over 30 years its home had been in Mequon. Juniors arriving on campus that fall of 1963 were replacing the 20 seniors enrolled the year before.

The church history courses on campus were virtually unchanged from 1913. In fact, the course descriptions in the 1963-64 catalog were identical to those given in the 1913-14 catalog (in German) and the 1920-21 catalog (in English). Unlike in 1913, all students now covered church history in chronological order throughout their seminary education. Juniors had "the Ancient Church and the Middle Ages" with Professor Armin Schuetze. Middlers had "the Reformation Era" with Professor Paul Peters. Seniors had "Modern Church History" with Professor Martin Albrecht. All seminary students had church history every semester on campus, and they had it three periods per week.

The structure of the symbolics course was also different from 1913. Juniors now had the Augsburg Confession and the Apology. The Smalcald Articles were no longer taught at the seminary level because Northwestern College in Watertown had agreed to cover them in a symbolics course at the college level. Seniors had the Formula of Concord along with discussion of the Large Catechism. Professor Schuetze taught all the symbolics courses.

When I was in middle school in the mid-1980's, I heard a sermon from our pastor at St. Luke's in Oakfield, Wisconsin. Pastor Bitter was preaching on the public ministry, and he made the point that if a seventh grade boy planned to study for the ministry, he would graduate in 1999 – "a new pastor for a new century," as he put it. (How's that for a recruitment sermon?)

The day my class graduated from Northwestern College, it ceased to function as a separate entity and was combined with Doctor Martin Luther College to form Martin Luther

College. At Northwestern we had an intensive Western Civilization course. We had two symbolics courses, one on the three ecumenical creeds and another on the Smalcald Articles.

My class arrived on the Mequon campus in the fall of 1995. Our first class in the field of historical theology was actually a symbolics class. Right off the bat we studied the Augsburg Confession with Dean Brenner every day of the week for the first quarter. Justification by grace through faith was the obvious emphasis that set the tone for all our seminary training. Dean Brenner supplemented his lectures with plenty of agree / disagree questions, and Meyer's essays on the Augsburg Confession were assigned reading outside of class.

Church history came in the second and third quarters, five days a week with Professor Siggelkow. The second quarter covered Pentecost to Chalcedon. The third quarter covered from Chalcedon to 1500. Middler year we had the Reformation and Post-Reformation eras with Professor Richard Balge. The Reformation Era emphasized Luther's writings, and we were assigned a lot of reading in Luther's Works. Professor Balge was known to come up with interesting thoughts on aspects of church history in particular and of life in general. Here are three quotes recorded from his courses: "Defenestration doesn't mean to take someone's window away, but it means to throw someone out of it." "Notice that Ignatius of Loyola didn't have need of a tonsure; he had a pretty bald dome." "We don't give exams to bust you or make you feel dumb. We only give them to find out who the very best of you are. Doesn't that make you feel better already?"

It's interesting that a course called "Mission Perspectives" was added to the middler year by the time my class studied at Mequon. It was considered a part of the church history curriculum. I assume it had its roots in the mission and evangelism emphasis which Professor Valleskey (President Valleskey while I was on campus) was called to bring on campus starting in the 1980's. Professor Johnne, who had spent 17 years as a world missionary in Japan, taught the course on mission perspectives.

The church history courses for senior year were Modern Christianity (a second quarter class, four hours a week) and Lutheranism in America (third quarter class, 3 hours a week) with Dean Brenner. To prove what a constantly expanding subject church history is, just imagine how different the topics and discussions in our Lutheranism in America course must have been from the topics covered by Koehler nearly a century before. Of course, the big assignment in the final church history course was the church history paper.

The symbolics course for senior year was the Formula of Concord. Our instructor was Professor Korthals, the same professor many of us had back in college for the Western Civilization course.

The juniors arriving on campus this fall of 2013 have grown up with words like terrorism, texting, and toxic assets. Times have changed since amalgamation, JFK, the Wright Brothers, and Appomattox, but by the grace of God – and I don't use that term lightly – by the grace of God the theology taught on the campus of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary has not. The faithful groundwork laid by Adolf Hoenecke in the late 1800's is still bearing fruit. The historical-grammatical approach to Scripture is still the standard, and has been for a hundred years. We have much to thank God for.

So what has changed in the seminary's church history department since the turn of the 20th into the 21st century? The seminary's catalog describing the courses is now completely online in cyberspace. Putting online the seminary essay file, which contains many essays on church history topics, has given students and pastors much more immediate access to those materials. Although history is still a study that requires lecture, technology is more a part of instruction than it used to be. Professors Brenner and Korthals are the veterans in the church history department. In 2011 Joel Otto arrived on campus to teach church history as well as education. Church history courses now play a part in the Pastoral Studies Institute for non-traditional students. The PSI has been a big change on campus just within the last decade. Continuing education for pastors in the field has also received greater emphasis in recent years.

In an interview I had with Professor Korthals, he pointed out that curriculum is never a static thing. Curriculum adjusts to the needs and demands of the church. He said a much more practical emphasis is called for today. As a result, the church history courses have been reduced in the amount of time given them to allow time for other courses. It seems to me that the call for practicality results in a tug-of-war for time between church history and practical theology, with the stronger anchor currently pulling on the side of practical theology.

In an interview I had with Professor Brenner, he pointed out another change since my classmates and I were on campus. All seniors used to write a church history paper. Professor Brenner said that the era of writing church history papers began with Professor Edward C. Frederick's arrival on campus in 1970. In 2011 seniors at the seminary began writing a senior thesis instead. The senior thesis can be from any of the four disciplines, not just church history.

One thing Professor Brenner especially liked about the assignment to write a paper specifically on a church history topic is that it made students put time and effort into a subject that may not have been their first love. Many students gained a deeper appreciation for church history through the process.

History teaches that change is a constant. No doubt there will continue to be adjustments in church history as with any area of the seminary's curriculum. To show, however, that church history remains an integral part of the seminary education, listen to some of the personal thoughts expressed to me by Brian Semrow, a 2013 graduate assigned as a pastor to Rochester, Minnesota:

“I enjoy history classes because they show where you came from. They show how a lot of the devil's tricks get repeated. They show dogmatic issues in their historical context. I plan to keep up on reading about church history. I want to be aware of contemporary history, compare it with the past, and see how they dealt with similar situations. I would like to use church history as a background for Bible class, and I want to teach the confessions.”⁸

3. How do we use church history?

After two years of tutoring, my parish ministry began with a bang – a loud bang. Less than two months after I was installed as an associate outreach pastor and a home missionary, 9/11 happened. That event was so shocking that in my mind I still think about contemporary history in terms of pre-9/11 and post-9/11. As I look back, the catastrophe of 9/11 also introduced me to a gross misuse of history. Often after the dust of an event's “what happened” has settled, the “why did it happen” of an event takes center stage. But in the case of 9/11, the “why” was being discussed even while rescue workers were still searching for bodies.

On September 13, 2001, Jerry Falwell (since deceased) appeared as a guest on the “700 Club” with Pat Robertson. They discussed the causes of the horror that had taken place two days before. Jerry Falwell identified “the Husseins, the Bin Ladens, the Arafats” as “monsters” and “enemies of America.” Then Jerry Falwell also identified groups within America whom he held responsible for this attack. He listed “the ACLU...the federal court system...the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians...People for the American Way...all of them who have tried to secularize America.” He said, “I point the finger in their

⁸ Brian Semrow. Personal interview. July 3, 2013.

face and say ‘you helped this happen.’”⁹ Jerry Falwell was claiming to know that 9/11 happened on the human level because of terrorists and on the divine level because of God’s anger against American secularism.

We can know through forensic evidence who commits horrible atrocities. But unless God has given his word on a specific event, how can any man presume to know what is going on in God’s mind? “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever...” (Deut 29:29). There was no press release from God on September 11, 2001, nor on September 13, for that matter. Looking around at my society then and looking around at my society now, of course I can see many sins that cry out to God for judgment. If I claim to be without sin, then I am fooling myself. That is why my society and I need Jesus Christ. But I am also fooling myself and fooling people I was called to serve with God’s truth if I presume to know with certainty why a historical event happened from God’s perspective when I have no clear written word from God about that event.

We are also fooling ourselves if we think we can know the future. Church history shows a debris field of individuals and groups who have tried to predict the future. William Miller, Charles Taze Russell, and Harold Camping are some of the infamous names who tried to predict the end of the world. Their folly has been clearly exposed, but there are more subtle predictions that also appear to be foolish in hindsight. I remember predictions that if Northwestern College closed, the pastor track would decline because so many men would gravitate toward the “easier” teacher track on the same campus. I spent two years on campus at MLC as a tutor. I can safely say that the pastor track was going strong, even considering that the program at MLC seemed more demanding than when I had been at Northwestern. History teaches us: Don’t make predictions.

I think history also gets misused when historical figures get hijacked to support a stance on a contemporary matter of adiaphora. As an example, would the apostle Paul use “facebook” to reach out with the gospel? He certainly advocated becoming all things to all men in order to save some. But as for the mission pastor today using “facebook” or some other modern technology, that is something the missionary needs to decide for himself based on the apparent

⁹ Professor Mark Braun also comments on this conversation in his excellent paper called “*You Will See My Back: A Lutheran Approach to History*” printed in *Logia* vol. 21 no. 1. I found the transcription of the entire interview at <http://www.commondreams.org/news2001/0917-03.htm>. I also watched it on youtube.

advantages and the documented pitfalls of the technological tool at his disposal. Paul sailed in ships and wrote letters in the first century. Martin Luther rode in wagons and used the printing press 500 years ago. WELS missionaries in the late twentieth century drove cars and began using e-mail. None of those historical events determines whether or not the graduate assigned to a home mission in 2013 should use “facebook” or “tweets” or the next big social media. The historical events have a part in the discussion. But the home missionary has a decision to make based on love for his own spiritual well-being and love for the souls of others.

Questions about worship have historically been a difficulty for us, especially since the boom of the Christian recording industry in the last thirty years. It may be easy for us now to think how silly the Romans and Corinthians were to quibble about eating meat sacrificed to idols, but we experience the same grief they did in our worship wars. Paul called for Christian love in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8. It is still our goal to practice Christian love.

What would Martin Luther wear in worship today? What style of music would Luther advocate in worship? What chancel arrangement would Luther advocate? There is much to learn from history. When people stated why they did what they did, that can be especially valuable. But we should always be cautious about dragging deceased historical figures into a present subjunctive state: What would they do? They made decisions where they were and when they were there. We are called upon to make decisions where we are and when we are there. We use history as a guide as well as a warning. But the key to healthy decisions about adiophora is Christian love for the individuals looking us in the face or for the individuals on the other end of our cyberspace connection.

As food for thought, perhaps the following historical judgments might be of interest. At the 1919 synod convention, Professor Koehler and Professor Pieper each gave some personal thoughts on the topic of hymnology. The report from that convention stated:

Prof. Koehler fears the era of the German Lutheran chorale is past. The church must create something new. For the time being, it is of paramount importance to rescue what can be rescued of the inherited and hitherto ignored treasure: distinctive melodies with marrow, principal hymns in translation, etc.

In order to rescue as much as possible, Prof. Pieper explains at length, the transition into English must be retarded as intently as possible, until we are able to pour German Lutheran gold into English forms.¹⁰

¹⁰ “*The Goal of the work at the Seminary.*” Philemon Hensel, transl. *Faith-Life* vol. 62 no. 3, p. 16.

Dare I ask? What would Koehler and Pieper do today?

A final gross misuse of history is to ignore it. Every church body has a history, and every congregation within that church body has a history. Pastors, especially pastors new to a location, are wise to learn about it. If we ignore the local history, we may very well end up making mistakes that we could have avoided. If we have a lack of historical knowledge, we may be tempted to become judgmental. Professor Brenner, in my interview with him, especially noted the danger of a young pastor becoming judgmental of the previous pastor's work based on a lack of historical knowledge. History cannot predict the future, but history does allow us to spot trends and take warning when appropriate. We ignore history at our own peril, plus the peril of the people we are called to serve.

The congregation I was called to begin as an exploratory home missionary had no history. Even so, the core group that eventually formed out of a couple local WELS congregations contained individuals who had histories of their own. It was a lesson for me in microscopic church history, so to speak – right down to the cell level. Individuals in the group had backgrounds in Roman Catholicism, Methodism, Baptist theology, Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, Reformed Church in America, Christian Reformed Church, WELS (including individuals who had attended synod prep schools), non-denominationalism, and complete secularism. I knew some things about those backgrounds from my Seminary education but needed to learn more. Then, instead of telling people what they used to believe, I learned to let them express for themselves what they used to believe and how their views had been changed.

Eventually a steering committee formed and then developed into a church council. At our regular monthly meetings, we read through some of the Lutheran Confessions together during our opening devotion. Over time we read through the Augsburg Confession, the Epitome of the Formula of Concord, the Smalcald Articles, and parts of Luther's Large Catechism. The goal was not to discuss the content in depth. The goal was to provide them a little historical background and then expose them to these confessions of our church. A side benefit for me was reviewing the documents I had sworn allegiance to at my ordination. The men seemed to read through these documents with interest and asked some good questions about the content.

Beginning worship at a new congregation brings questions. What is our worship form going to look like? How will we set up our temporary worship space? How often will we have the Lord's Supper? What version of the Lord's Prayer are we going to use? Even though a good

number of the core group had been WELS for some time, it was a good opportunity to return to the Scriptures and see what the essentials of worship are. It was a good opportunity to talk about the Christian church year, the vestments of the pastor, the content and style of hymns and songs in worship, and the historical arrangement of worship around the Word and Sacraments. Having to address these things made me read some history and think through it for myself.

An especially valuable historical document in our midst is the *Handbook to Christian Worship*. Since history is about people, there is a gold mine of church history in there. I think at least some of the people I serve enjoying learning some church history. I'm not so sure that people are impressed by how old a hymn is or isn't, but it's an emotional connection for them to find out what a fellow Christian was going through in the past that may relate to their present. Does it not benefit them to know something about the patient endurance of Paul Gerhardt? About the talents which Isaac Watts used for the glory of God? About how much we in English-speaking Lutheranism owe to an educated woman like Catherine Winkworth? Once in a while, I try to include a very short story about the person who wrote the song we are about to sing, and usually I get that information from the *Handbook*.

When we were blessed to be at the point of thinking about designing a building, then it was time to teach something about the history of Christian architecture and Christian art. We had a Sunday morning Bible class discussing those topics, going all the way from the tabernacle and temple through basilicas and cathedrals to the newest buildings built by fellow home missions in WELS. Worshiping in a temporary worship space has given us freedom to experiment with what we may find beneficial. I know that some of the brothers are not keen on projection in worship, and I understand some of the hesitancy to use it. But even a frequent LCMS visitor to our worship, who has said he will have nothing to do with "the bouncing ball" he has seen in other churches, has stated that he does enjoy every now and then seeing works of Christian art displayed on the screen when they match the message for the day.

I became the de facto chronicler of the infant years of the congregation. In addition to the usual records of baptisms and membership and the usual reports to the mission board, I made a point to record the congregation's history in the pastor reports I gave at voters' meetings. On record is the history of how the congregation bought property and how it planned to put up a building and who served the congregation in these formative stages. The struggles I know; they

are on my mind. But it helps to put the advances of the gospel on paper so we can rejoice and give thanks to God for those things, too.

Wherever a pastor serves and whatever specific work he is called to do, there is one great benefit to church history that applies universally. Since history is about people, history teaches us to know people better. In preparing for this paper, I sent out a brief questionnaire to a number of men who have taught history in our worker training system. Two of the men, Professor Deutschlander and Professor Paul Koelpin, both used the same word to describe the importance of history: *Menschenkenner*. Being a *Menschenkenner* involves more than knowing a name, bookends of dates, and a historical fact or two about that name (though that groundwork does need to be laid). Being a *Menschenkenner* is a lifelong process of learning to be a keen observer of the human nature.

We know and we believe from Scripture that human beings are evil. “There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:22-23). Our Augsburg Confession agrees: “It is further taught among us that after Adam’s fall all human beings who are born in the natural way are conceived and born in sin. That means that from the mother’s womb all people are full of evil desire and inclination. All people by nature can have no true fear of God, no true faith in God” (art. 2).¹¹ This truth which we confess because of our exegesis and dogmatics is probably the single most evident truth revealed through a study of history.

I remember a specific story from a history class at the seminary. I was pressing Dean Brenner on how a so-and-so’s actions did not seem to make sense. Dean Brenner’s reply went something like this, “Ever since the fall, consistency has not been one of man’s strengths.” Spend some time in the ministry, and you observe that – often painfully so. First, in yourself. Then, in others. Historically, a person’s strong start does not necessarily guarantee a strong finish (Melancthon). Historically, a person can back himself into a corner but stubbornly refuse to issue an amendment (Flacius). Observations about human nature are more than historically intriguing. These kinds of turns get observed in real time in the pulse of congregational life. If we know these things ahead of time, we can be less shocked when it happens and more prepared to do what we can to help.

The books that stick in my mind the longest tend to be the books that challenge my thinking the most. One such book was not a book specifically about church history, but there are

¹¹ *Concordia Triglotta* (Milwaukee: NPH, 1988), 42. The translation from the German is my own.

elements of church history in it. Over 40 years ago a man named Dee Brown wrote the book *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*. In the introduction, Dee Brown wrote, “This is not a cheerful book, but history has a way of intruding upon the present.” Dee Brown put deplorable qualities of mankind on display in that book – greed, deceit, betrayal, violence. And not just white against red. But white against white and red against red. After reading that book, a guy can gain an understanding of why people still today carry with them some of the attitudes they do. After reading that book, a guy can only be all the more amazed at how a small WELS world mission to Apaches in the Southwest a few years later gained the traction it did. It must have something to do with God, not man. Being a *Menschenkenner* involves being willing to read and explore sources that may very well confront our own misperceptions and challenge us to take a new look at ourselves.

There is an aspect of being a *Menschenkenner* that holds special significance for us as we seek to do gospel outreach in this globally connected, extremely diverse world of ours. A hundred years ago, our seminary was thinking about starting to use English. A hundred years later, our seminary is graduating men of Hmong and Latino background to do work among Hmong and Latinos – in the American Midwest! Many pastors in parish ministry regularly come into contact with individuals from a background quite diverse from their own. Knowing history, we hopefully become more understanding, more patient, and less critical of things that initially seem different. Here is a thought Professor Ted Hartwig sent me when he answered my questionnaire: “If the study of history will be of service to educate our students toward the goal of exercising restraint in their attitude toward people and societies with whom we do not agree, then it is well worth the time and effort it receives in our academic curriculum.”¹²

Interestingly, J.P. Koehler expressed a similar thought in 1904:

While dogmatics promotes sharp thinking and by directing attention to the precise definition of theological concepts leads to a clear, unambiguous presentation, both historical branches [exegesis and church history] train the mind to probe, to criticize, to be cautious in judgment. They promote modesty, gentleness, and patience in judgment.¹³

I want to end this section with comments on the parish pastor’s continuing growth in history. The volume of church history material is enormous. Where to begin? What best to

¹² Ted Hartwig, *DMLC Centennial Essay on History*, 1984. The quote was sent to me by the author.

¹³ J.P. Koehler, “*The Importance of the Historical Disciplines for the American Lutheran Church of the Present*,” in *Theologische Quartalschrift*, vol. 1, no. 4, p. 6. Translation by Irwin Habeck.

focus on with the limited time that is available? Summer classes at the seminary offer opportunities to grow in specific areas of historical interest. Most, if not all, pastors have some interest in things to do with the Reformation, especially since the topic naturally comes up at the end of every October. Summer classes enable pastors to dig deeper into that area. The “Bondage of the Will” course I took in 2010 was really beneficial, especially because it forced me to read Luther’s document thoroughly. Although I suppose technically it was a systematic theology course, it had to cover some history behind the document as well. Pastors can also go further in other specific areas – early church history, for example.

I would guess we all have a list of books we would like to read at some time. This writing assignment got me into reading Eusebius, and I would like to finish his history. Considering that he is called the father of church history, and considering that so much of the information we have about the early church comes through him, we would benefit to read it at some time in our ministry. I have other books on Martin Chemnitz and Flacius that I would like to read, as well as continuing through Kenneth Latourette’s *History of Christianity*, which was purchased for a course at the Seminary. Then there are some standard Christian classics that have stood the test of time – books like Augustine’s *Confessions*, the Venerable Bede’s *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, and John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. In other words, it can be helpful to pick a book and say, “I’d like to read that within the next couple months” or something similar. Taking the time to read through the Lutheran Confessions is time also devoted to church history.

If you serve on a program committee for your conference, consider asking a man to read through a book of classic Christian literature and then give an essay on it to the conference. Our conference program committee asked a man to read Augustine’s *City of God* and present its contents and possible applications to the brothers at conference. Another man did a study of St. Patrick’s life for last winter’s conference. If program committee planning mirrors the four-discipline approach which was a part of our seminary training, it keeps conference presentations fresh and prevents the conference discussion from becoming a one-dimensional return to the same old pet themes. In my interview with Professor Korthals, he stated that not everyone can be or should be an “expert” on church history, but everyone studying for the ministry should be exposed to it. He also said a pastoral conference benefits from having at least one man who has special interest in one of the four disciplines, including church history.

Finally, we learn best the things we teach. We can teach some church history in our Bible classes and purposely incorporate Scripture into the lessons. One area many laypeople seem to have an interest in is the different denominations and where they came from. That is as much a historical question as it is a doctrinal one. As another idea, a pastor could take the outline of the “Sixteen Key Events in Church History” from volume 98 of the *Quarterly* (year 2001) and boil all 16 or a select number down for an adult Bible study, giving people an overview of the church’s history since Pentecost. Teaching a class on Christian hymns naturally includes a good amount of church history in it. Planning Bible class courses with the four-discipline approach in mind can keep adult classes fresh and new. If the pastor enjoys diving exegetically into a Scripture text each week and then surfacing in the sermon to tell his sheep, “This is what I found this week!” then a pastor can have that same excitement exploring a new area in church history and teaching what he has learned to adults who are also interested in learning something new.

Conclusion

We have gathered at this symposium as brothers in Christ to give thanks to our Savior, Jesus Christ. He is the cornerstone of our education, the reason for our work, the center of our life, and the only hope of our eternal salvation. Our years at seminary were and are a true blessing from a gracious God. We do well to remember them and to remember those who taught us.

In closing, I came across a program for a celebration which took place on the Wauwatosa campus on September 22, 1918. The worship was celebrating the 25th anniversary of the year when the seminary moved from central Milwaukee out to Wauwatosa. At the back of the bulletin are a few paragraphs explaining the reason for the day’s celebration. Though the words are 95 years old, they seem to be very fitting for the present day:

During its 25 years on this location, the seminary has hosted 25 classes of theological students. The class which has just entered this fall brings the count to 26. With just a few exceptions, all those who enrolled as students have successfully concluded their studies and left this institution to serve in the church. They number nearly 300. Most of these former residents of our seminary building are still actively serving the church. They carry on the work of the gospel.

So looking back on the last 25 years of our seminary, we all have cause to give great praise to God for his kindness. “The Lord has done great things for us;

therefore we rejoice.” May he remain gracious to us and continue to bless the work of our hands for the sake of Jesus Christ.¹⁴

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Also:

E-mail correspondence with History Professors Mark Braun, Daniel Deutschlander, Ted Hartwig, Arnold Koelpin, Paul Koelpin, Joel Otto.