

# Doctrinal Challenges Facing Lutheranism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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Being neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet I wondered how to go about predicting the doctrinal trends and problems of the next century. During the last days of 1999 newspapers were filled with many retrospective glances at the predictions which futurists, psychics, and quacks had made at the end of 1998, in which they had outlined their vision for the next year, or way back in 1900, when they had predicted what things would be like at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The main entertainment value of such reviews is, of course, seeing how totally wrong the prognosticators were in their visions of the future, even when they were looking only one year into the future. About the only thing about the future that we can be sure of is that we must expect the unexpected. Our record of trying to predict specific future trends for our church has not been very distinguished.

## How Did We Get into This Mess?

Put your self in the place of an observer in 1900, looking ahead and trying to imagine what lay ahead for Lutheranism in the bright new century, the 20<sup>th</sup> century of the Christian era, the 5<sup>th</sup> century for the Lutheran church. Things were looking good. The 19<sup>th</sup> century had been the best time for Lutheranism since the life of Luther.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century had not gotten off to such a great start. The effects of Pietism and the Enlightenment were being felt throughout the Lutheran church. As the 300th anniversary of the Reformation rolled around, the Prussian Union had appeared as a state enforced plan to put an end to an independent, confessional Lutheran church. Throughout the century the acid of historical-critical methodology would continue to eat away what remained of the scriptural foundations of the Lutheran theology faculties of Germany.

Yet amazingly, in the midst of this crisis there would be a rebirth of confessional Lutheranism, which would return the teachings of Luther and the Confessions to a prominence that was unmatched since the mid-seventeenth century. In some respects Luther's teachings were put into practice more fully in the 19<sup>th</sup> century than they had been in Luther's own time, because now for the first time the Lutheran church was free from the entanglement and pressures of a state church that had prevented the implementation of Luther's biblical principles of church and state and church and ministry.

The location of this rebirth was not, of course, Germany, but the New World. The man at the center of this resurgence of true confessional Lutheranism was C. F. W. Walther. To be sure, he had predecessors, allies, and successors in America and to a lesser extent in Europe, but more than any other individual Walther embodied the newfound vitality of confessional Lutheranism. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century came to a close, the Missouri Synod and the other confessional synods drawn into fellowship with it in the Synodical Conference of North America were well positioned for rapid growth in their new homeland, for mission expansion throughout the world, and to be a source of strength and encouragement to smaller confessional churches throughout the world. The rising material prosperity brought on by the industrial revolution, a revolution in transportation and communication (the steamboat and railroad, the telegraph and telephone), and the arrival of the electrical age seemed to foreshadow a great age of opportunity and expansion

for the church. Colonial empires provided open doors for missions around the world. Rapid advances in automobiles and air travel were widely anticipated. Some bold futurists even predicted that by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it would be possible to send pictures instantaneously around the world in color. Optimism abounded for what was coming for society and the church.

To be sure, there were some ominous clouds on the horizon. Confessional revival in Europe was barely a ripple in the pond. The poisons of evolutionary theory and negative criticism continued to undermine the vitality of Lutheranism. In the North American heartland the election controversy of the 1880s had caused the first major fracture in the alliance of solidly confessional Lutheran churches. In eastern Lutheranism Schmucker's "American Lutheranism" which was a voluntary embrace of the principles of the Prussian Union, had been beaten back, but the old eastern Lutheranism had not experienced a true confessional revival. Even this wing of American Lutheranism, however, could produce a theologian of the quality of Charles Porterfield Krauth. The doctrinal differences separating the Synodical Conference from the predecessor bodies of the ALC were issues like pulpit and altar fellowship, lodges, conversion and election, millennialism, and open questions. These were not trivial questions, but there was unity in fundamental doctrines.

It was obvious that, as always, there were dangers facing the Lutheran church as the new century broke, but who could have foreseen the depth of the disaster that the 20th century would produce for Lutheranism around the world. In Germany the church was devastated by two world wars, Nazism, Communism, secularization, and a total surrender to critical views of the Bible. The Lutheran lands of the North became secular societies, more heathen than many mission lands of the third world. In the mission societies and revival movements within the national churches and in the tiny confessional churches a small remnant still carries on a faithful testimony, but the voice of confessional Lutheranism is almost silent in its European homeland.

In America, the new stronghold of Lutheranism, liberal eastern Lutheranism, as embodied in the ULCA and LCA, has swallowed up the moderate Lutheranism of the mid-western ALC. Groups like the Ohio, Buffalo, and Norwegian Synods, once so close to the Synodical Conference, are now absorbed into the ELCA merger, which retains a paper profession of loyalty to the confessions, but has abandoned virtually every teaching which they confess. Gone is even a paper profession of the inerrancy of Scripture. Gone is a firm confession of the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament. Gone is "by faith alone," the core principle of the Reformation. "American Lutheranism" has won after all.

The LCMS, the anchor body of the once solidly confessional Synodical Conference, has slid over into the slot once filled by the so-called moderate Lutheranism of the old and new ALC. In 1900 who could have imagined that by the 1930s Missouri's staunch position would already be suffering serious erosion, that by the 1960s historical criticism would dominate its theological training system, that at the end of the century it would be abandoning the small confessional Lutheran churches that it had helped bring into being and working more closely with the Lutheran World Federation. Who could have believed it! It took us 25 years for us to convince ourselves that it was really true. Even today many around the world have a hard time believing it is really true.

Of more than 60 million Lutherans in the world fewer than half a million belong to church bodies that stand firmly on the doctrinal platform and the fellowship practices of the old Synodical Conference. A few million more belong to church bodies trying to hold a compromise position between the stance of the Synodical Conference and the extreme pluralism of the Lutheran World Federation.

Talk about doctrinal challenges for Lutheranism as we enter a new century! One hardly knows where to begin.

### **The Main Challenge**

Without a doubt, the most serious challenge facing Lutheranism as a whole is whether doctrine will even be important enough that there will be any serious doctrinal controversies. The ELCA merger was consummated with very little doctrinal discussion. The LWF agreement with Rome on justification didn't cause much of a stir within the member bodies. Pluralism is the rule of the day. Most individuals are "church shoppers" who display little "denominational loyalty," that is, little knowledge of or commitment to doctrine. Morality is adrift in a sea of relativism. Modernists could still ask Pilate's cynical question, "What is truth?" Post-modernists are identified not by a question but by a statement, "There is no truth."

Modernism placed man at the center of reality, with confidence in the scientific method's ability to discover truth and in society's ability to express that truth in universal propositions. To the modernist knowledge was certain, objective, good, and accessible to the human mind. There was unflagging trust in reason and an unquestioning optimism about the progress inevitable through science and education. This world view was the great threat to the church at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In contrast, postmodernism has no center of reality, no core explanation for life. Reality is conditioned by one's context and experience. It is relative, indeterminate, and participatory. There is no "truth" to discover, only preferences and interpretations. Radical pluralism means that there may be many "truths" alongside each other. There can be no "objective" truth or reality because there is no neutral stance from which to view things. Emotion and intuition are valid paths to knowledge, not just reason. And knowledge is always incomplete. Rather than an optimistic confidence in progress, postmodernism has a pessimistic focus on human misery. It is the inevitable conclusion of existentialism, the denial of any meaning, purpose, or reason to life. This is the world view confronting the church at the turn of the millennium.

This post-modern way of thinking has had its influence on our members too. Even the segment of our membership which attends Bible class regularly is often more drawn to "practical topics" than to serious doctrinal study of a portion of Scripture like Romans 1-8 or Galatians. The major exception is doctrinal topics like fellowship and the roles of men and women, which are seen as having a practical (or impractical) impact on the daily life of the church. Even in such courses there is great pressure from the class to speed past a careful study of Scripture to application.

More than we want to admit, members of the church have lost the close connection between their faith and their life that a Christian culture promoted. Polls say that people view themselves as "spiritual," even though they deny absolute truth and biblical morals. People are more interested in finding practical applications which work for them than in studying the abiding truths on which all application and practice must rest.

It is no longer possible to assume that people know the basic Bible stories that shaped the Sunday school curriculum and even the public school curriculum of a generation ago. It is unwise to assume that people understand and agree with all the doctrines their church teaches. While some of our hearers are very aware of the conflict between their faith and the world in which they must work and live, others have comfortably adopted the postmodern pluralism that sees no conflict between opposing worldviews for the different spheres of life.

In spite of widespread indifference to doctrine, however, we can expect that doctrinal issues will remain important enough to a core of concerned people in the church that doctrinal disputes will still arise. What are likely to be the main issues?

## **Crucial Issues For Lutheranism Today**

### **Issue 1) The Gospel of Christ**

The most crucial issue facing the Lutheran Church today, as in every age, is preserving the gospel of Christ. Today this gospel is under heavy attack within the Lutheran church. Certainly God's love and forgiveness are being preached in all Lutheran churches, but today there is frequently neglect or even direct denial of the objective payment which Christ made for sin. If I preach "God loves you and forgives you," I have not yet preached the gospel. To preach the gospel clearly I need to state "Jesus lived, died, and rose for you." I am not preaching the gospel unless I emphasize the payment which Christ made as my substitute and the legal verdict of acquittal which God pronounced on the whole world. This message is the heart and core of all truly Lutheran preaching, but this is the very point which is being undermined within the Lutheran church today.

Lutherans are being told, "Jesus was born not to die, but to live for us. ... The cross is central to our preaching because it shows the depth of God's love for us. ... Some preaching describes Jesus' death as a payment to God's wrath. This approach stresses guilt as a barrier to our entry into heaven. There is truth here, but this is only one of many ways the Scriptures proclaim the meaning of Jesus for us" (The Lutheran, Mar. 30, 1988, p. 46). In such teaching the doctrine of the vicarious atonement is reduced to being one of several theories about the meaning of Christ's death, rather than receiving the pre-eminence which it does in Scripture.

A prominent American Lutheran theologian can write, "The meaning of the historical cross was transmitted in the suprahistorical language of mythological symbolism. ... When the cross is viewed mythologically, and not simply as one historical event alongside others, it receives redemptive significance of cosmic proportions" (Braaten and Jensen, I, 547,548). If such teaching prevails in the Lutheran church, Lutherans will be left with a crucifixion which is a means of salvation only when it is mythically interpreted.

The doctrine of justification by grace through faith is the central doctrine of biblical and Lutheran theology, but today the doctrine of Christ's payment for sin is being stripped of its legal aspects. A prominent Lutheran dogmatician writes, "The historical event [of the cross] must be translated into eternal truth about the satisfaction of God's honor, or elevated to a sublime example of dedication to whatever religious people are supposed to be dedicated to, or transcribed into a story about the deception of cosmic tyrants. None of that is evident from the event itself. It comes from the moral, mythological and metaphysical baggage we carry with us" (BJ, II, 79), and again, "There is no strange transaction that takes place somewhere in celestial bookkeeping halls to make it universal. The one we killed, the one no one wanted, is raised from the dead. That is all" (BJ, II, 92). Certainly, it is true that the significance of the crucifixion must be explained. Scripture provides such an explanation, "God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood." This dare not be reduced to one of several theories explaining Christ's death.

We should not be shocked that theologians who share the viewpoint cited in the preceding paragraphs have surrendered the biblical teaching of justification in their dialogues

with Roman Catholics. “Agreement in the gospel” no longer means acceptance of the biblical, Pauline, Lutheran doctrine that our sins are freely forgiven by the gracious verdict of God, not because anything which we have done, but solely on the basis of Christ’s perfect payment for sin. Today some Lutherans are reducing “agreement in the gospel” to the belief that somehow or other our salvation is ultimately dependent on God’s grace.

The biblical message that Christ paid for the sins of the whole world and that God has credited that payment to the whole world is being watered down to a ill-defined religious encounter. This is the greatest tragedy of contemporary Lutheran dogmatics. Lutherans who cherish the clear proclamation of the scriptural doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone as their greatest joy and privilege must vigorously oppose such teaching and strongly disassociate themselves from it.

Equally dangerous is the tendency toward universalism and pluralism within Lutheranism. Christ is no longer being upheld as the one way to heaven. Even many of our own members have been influenced by the “many roads to heaven” myth.

A well-intentioned desire to resist this trend has, however, produced an unfortunate overreaction among some confessional Lutherans, namely the denial of the teaching which was called “objective justification” in Synodical Conference terminology. This problem was explicitly addressed in the LCMS’s 1983 statement on justification, but Lutherans can never be reminded too often that the focus of Lutheran preaching is Christ’s completed payment for sin and God’s objective verdict of acquittal pronounced for the whole world. Inquiries to our synod’s web page and material appearing on the internet make it clear that confusion about objective justification and dis-information about the Kokomo Statements are still floating around in confessional Lutheran circles.

## **Issue 2) The Law of God**

The reason many contemporary Lutheran theologians have difficulty coming to grips with the biblical concept of justification is that they have watered down the biblical concept of law. For them law and gospel are not distinct biblical teachings which assert certain truths. Law and gospel are defined as two different types of religious experience. Law is defined as “one way in which communication functions when we are alienated, estranged, and bound” (BJ, II, 400). When God’s moral law is no longer an objective standard which defines what is right and wrong, the only possible result is moral chaos, in which subjective human opinion and emotions become the arbiters of morality. In such a climate, Lutherans can dismiss even the most basic principles of morality, which societies throughout history have recognized on the basis of the natural knowledge of the law. Two conspicuous examples of this are seen in the advocacy for abortion and homosexuality by many Lutherans. Even among our members a ready acceptance of divorce and living together without marriage are evidences of the influence of this worldview.

Although there does not seem to be much pressure against the scriptural view of such issues among our pastors and theologians, it is quite possible that we will encounter more pressure and even persecution for holding “politically incorrect” views on these issues, as well as more frequent abandonment of biblical life-styles among our members.

## **Issue 3) The Inerrancy of Scripture**

The doctrine of biblical inerrancy has been consciously repudiated by the official doctrinal confession of two thirds of American Lutheranism. The ELCA's confession of faith intentionally disavowed the doctrine of inerrancy, which had been asserted in the constituting documents of one of its predecessor bodies, the ALC. ELCA's confession is clearly intended to reject verbal, plenary inspiration and to allow for the view that there are many errors in Scripture. This confession speaks highly of the Bible's function, but much less highly of its content and accuracy.

The ELCA's first bishop explained his church's viewpoint in this way, The prescriptive method [of using Scripture] is based on the assumption that Scripture is used to discover final answers to questions. Thus, when confronted with a particularly thorny issue, one could go to Scripture, study carefully every text that addresses the issue and come up with a conclusive response. Scripture as "norm" means Scripture as answer book.

I suspect that most of us in the LCA come at these matters from the descriptive method. We see Scripture as no less important. . . . But for us "norm" means "guide" rather than "rule." Having informed ourselves of what Scripture has to say, we go on to ask questions about other ways in which God may be trying to enlighten us" (The Lutheran, March 21, 1984).

A basic premise of most of contemporary Lutheranism is that the historical-critical method has made the traditional view of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture obsolete. The grounds for abandoning the doctrine of biblical inerrancy are the alleged exposure of many errors and contradictions in the biblical text and an alleged desire to avoid elevating the Bible as an idol above Christ. According to this view the Bible is the Word of God only in a derived way. The Bible is the Word of God, not so much because it was given by inspiration of God, but because it conveys the message of salvation. According to this view it is not possible to assume the literal historicity of events recorded in the Bible.

The disastrous effects of this approach upon any attempt to produce a biblical theology are exposed by the following statement:

Critical attention to what the texts actually say has exploded the notion that one orthodox dogmatics can be mined out of Scripture. There are different theological tendencies and teachings in the various texts. Ecumenically this has led to the practical conclusion that the traditional demand for a complete consensus of doctrine may be wrong-headed, if even the Scriptures fail to contain such a consensus (BJ, I, 77).

It should be clear that meaningful doctrinal discussions are impossible between confessional Lutherans and the advocates of such critical views of Scripture. Where there is no agreement on the nature of Scripture as the norm of doctrine, attempts to reach doctrinal agreement are futile. Subscription to the Lutheran Confessions, important as it is, is no substitute for agreement on the doctrine of Scripture, because many contemporary issues, such the inerrancy of Scripture, the role of women in the church, etc, are not explicitly dealt with in the confessions. Furthermore, those who limit their acceptance of the accuracy and authority of Scripture also qualify their subscription to the confessions in the same way.

The practical outcome of this is that no meaningful doctrinal discussions are possible between us and most of the Lutherans in the world today. The battle over this issue in the ELCA and the LWF is for all practical purposes over. There are, however, still two areas of significant concern involving this topic.

There still is a tendency among some in the LCMS and its sister churches and within the confessional movements within the national Lutheran churches of Europe to try to use the historical critical method in a controlled, moderate way. This is a continuation of the attempts of Herman Sasse to find a “middle road” on this issue, which produced such disastrous results for Lutheranism in Australia.

Another alarming trend at the confessional end of the spectrum is the practice of some confessional Lutherans to mine the confessions and Lutheran fathers for quotations to establish their opinions about such topics as the moment of presence in the Lord’s Supper, the adoration of the elements, or particular views on the ministry or ordination as doctrines binding on the church. The confessions themselves do not wish to be a second source of doctrine, but a secondary source that testifies to the doctrine contained in Scripture. No doctrine can be established without Scripture, and in controversy confessional Lutherans should always turn first to Scripture, not to other writings.

#### **Issue 4) Church Fellowship**

Though the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone, especially the truth of objective justification that God has declared the sins of the whole world forgiven for Christ’s sake, is the special emphasis of the Wisconsin Synod, it is hardly possible to discuss doctrinal challenges to a WELS audience without addressing the issue of fellowship.

It is clear to me from the correspondence to the Northwestern Lutheran and to our synod web page and from speaking on this subject in many settings that fellowship is still one of the top two doctrinal issues for our people. We will continue to lose prospects, members, and pastors because of this issue. Because of the spirit of the times, continuous on-going training on the scriptural principles of fellowship is of critical importance. We also need to beware of a legalistic rigidity in applications which loses sight of the principles and their purpose.

We receive a significant number of inquiries from LCMS pastors and lay people on this issue, so our testimony is not without effect in those circles. Our testimony is also bearing some fruit among the confessional movements in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe.

Restoring the former principles and practices of church fellowship which were once the common position of the synods of the Synodical Conference is the most crucial issue facing the LCMS today. Throughout the long history of American Lutheranism confessional Lutherans who refused to make a clean break with those who persisted in un-Lutheran, unbiblical doctrine lost their Lutheran heritage. The sad doctrinal deterioration in American Evangelicalism, which has accelerated in the last decade, is another evidence of the deadly effect of lax fellowship practices. A church body cannot remain confessional for long if it learns to live with doctrinal pluralism in its midst or tolerates an erosion of its testimony against heterodox churches.

Unfortunately, there is little reason for optimism that such a restoration can be accomplished. Under President Barry’s leadership the LCMS in convention has reaffirmed the practice of closed communion, but there is little evidence that the district presidents are inclined to exercise discipline in this matter. There is virtually no evidence even in the confessional wing of the LCMS for an understanding of the unit concept of fellowship or for the application of the principles of fellowship to prayer or to worship which is not formal altar and pulpit fellowship. Even in conservative circles a form of former-presidents Bohlmann’s “levels of fellowship” is the operating principle.

## **Issue 5) The Role of Women in the Church**

This is one of the top two issues disturbing our people.

In the ELCA this battle is pretty much over except for some lingering disagreement about quotas and goddesses. The LCMS is trying to hold a middle ground, distinguished from the ELCA by its refusal to ordain women and from the WELS by its permitting women to vote in the governing assemblies of the church and to hold most offices except those of pastor and elder.

The LCMS finds itself in an awkward middle position because it too often is approaching the question in the wrong way, namely, via its doctrine of the pastoral ministry, rather than on the basis of an exegetical study of the relevant passages of Scripture. These passages do not limit the application of the biblical principle concerning the roles of men and women to the pastoral ministry.

This one issue may in some ways be the most crucial issue currently facing the LCMS because it is a microcosm involving almost all of the crucial issues confronting confessional Lutherans today. How do we use Scripture in resolving doctrinal differences, and how do we face the pressures of society? How do we remove the doctrinal differences in our midst? This issue involves the proper understanding of moral law, the use of Scripture, fellowship, and ministry. It may well prove to be the bellwether on how the LCMS will go on all the rest of the issues it faces.

On the home front the immediate pressure will be on the issue of women voting in the governing bodies of the church. The WELS will face considerable and continuous pressure on this issue due to society and to the changes adopted by other church bodies such as the LCMS. To some degree it is surprising that our losses because of this issue have not been greater than they have so far. There is also a good possibility of greater legal and government pressure because of this issue.

## **Issue 6) Church and Ministry**

The doctrine of church and ministry is without doubt one of the hottest topics in Lutheranism today. It is the issue which is hotly discussed “across the board.” Even those who are not very interested in doctrine cannot avoid this issue because it is “practical.” It determines who is who in the church. When the ELCA was formed, the ministry was the only doctrinal issue that generated considerable debate. Concern about the ministry is the reason that the concordat with the Episcopal Church encountered much more resistance in the ELCA than the far more damaging agreements with Rome on justification and with the Reformed on the Lord’s Supper.

Within the Wisconsin Synod and Missouri Synod current discussion centers on the relationship of the service of the laity to that of the called public ministry and on the relationship of other forms of ministry to the pastoral ministry.

Today there would be relatively little that could be accomplished in official talks between the LCMS and WELS on this topic because the range of disagreement between various viewpoints held by sizable factions within the LCMS is much greater than the difference between the so-called Wisconsin Synod and Missouri Synod views as they have usually been expressed. This diversity was reflected in the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary convocation of the LCMS on this subject. On the positive side, there is a move toward a less rigid version of the so-called Missouri Synod position among the majority of the adherents of this view.



“The Missouri Synod position” has usually been thought of as asserting that the local congregation is the only divinely instituted form of the church and that the pastoral ministry is the only divinely instituted form of the ministry. All other offices and forms of organization are human institutions, which are auxiliary to the divinely instituted forms. The most rigid version of this position would deny that the synod is church or that anyone other than a parish pastor is serving in the divinely instituted ministry. Some in the LCMS and in groups which have split from the LCMS hold this rigid view, but today most advocates of “the Missouri Synod view” hold a modified version of this view. Kurt Marquart and others state very clearly that the synod is church. Most would also grant that the parish pastor is not the only form of the ministry instituted by Christ, but they would draw the line somewhere short of Christian elementary school teacher. Recently, David Scaer, a frequent critic of the WELS view, expressed his surprise to find out that the WELS taught that the public ministry is instituted by God. Perhaps there will be a lessening of misinformed caricatures of the WELS position which have appeared frequently in certain periodicals.

More disturbing trends are the tendency of some to attach the efficacy of the sacraments and of absolution to the office of pastor and to minimize the role of the church in the calling of pastors, the elevation of ordination to sacramental level, and the repudiation of Walther’s views of church and ministry with a corresponding move toward the views of Grabau.

Within the Wisconsin Synod there has been a general consensus that Christ established one ministry in the church, namely, the gospel ministry or the ministry of the keys, and that this one ministry may be exercised privately by any Christian and publicly by those who have been called by the church to do so. The public ministry has been instituted by Christ, but the church is free to create various forms of public ministry according to needs and circumstances. The form or forms into which the church organizes itself to carry out its work are not prescribed by Scripture, but are left free to the church.

Continued effort is needed in the following areas:

1) *Ongoing efforts to clarify the use of the terms diakonia and ministry.* In inter-church talks this includes not only the relationship between the Greek and English terms, but the differing usages in other languages as well. Continued misunderstandings about terminology across language barriers is part of the difficulty in ongoing talks in Europe.

Much of the confusion arose because of changes in the English language. The English word “minister” like its Latin parent originally meant “servant” and formerly referred to servants of every sort. Gradually however, “minister” came to be used almost entirely as a technical term for “pastor.” We must, therefore, warn against a simplistic parroting of the claim, “Everyone is a minister.” This claim can, however, be properly understood. If we use the words “minister” and “ministry” to refer to other forms of service in the church besides that of the pastor (such as the service provided by Christian teachers), we are simply returning to this wider usage of the term “service” or “ministry” found in the New Testament. In this sense everyone who is called by the church to carry out some service in its name is a “minister.” This is often called “public ministry.”

If Lutherans are going to use “ministry” in this wider sense, a number of cautions are necessary. Since the wider usage of “ministry” is labeled archaic by the English dictionary, to avoid confusion we must make it clear to our hearers that we are returning to a wider usage of the term “minister” than that which has been common in the recent past. Lutherans must be careful that they do not confuse the service which Christians do on their own initiative as part of the priesthood of all believers with the service which they carry out in response to the church’s

call and in the name of the church (public ministry). We also must be careful that we do not diminish respect for the pastoral ministry, the most comprehensive form of the public ministry of the Word. If “ministry” is going to be used in a wider sense which reflects both its Latin meaning and the usage of the Greek word *diakonia*, this should not be done without careful explanation of the shift in usage, so that the distinction of the priesthood of all believers from the pastoral ministry and other forms of public ministry is not blurred or confused.

2) *Further explanation of what we mean by ‘forms of ministry’ and clarification of the relationship of such forms to the congregation, the pastorate, and the apostolate.* The expression “forms of ministry” is a good term because the English word “form” implies both that there is a oneness that unites all of the various forms and that there are differences that distinguish the various forms. Christ has given only one assignment to the church, to preach the gospel. Everything else the church does, even the preaching of the law, has spiritual value only as it supports the church’s one mission: to preach the gospel.

This one ministry of the gospel may be exercised privately by all believers or publicly by called ministers of the Word. The same gospel is used in both private and public ministry. The same divine authority stands behind the gospel when it is used privately and when it is used publicly. The establishment of the public ministry, however, is not an adiaphoron, left to the freedom of the church. It is a command of God.

Pastors are trained and called to provide comprehensive spiritual oversight of the congregation. They preach, teach, and counsel. They administer the sacraments. They are shepherds to all of the members of the congregation. For this reason we call their ministry “comprehensive.”

The church today can choose to have various forms of ministers: bishops, pastors, head pastors, assistant pastors, deacons, missionaries, professors, administrators, and so on. It can also call members of the congregation to serve the church publicly as Sunday school teachers, evangelists, and so on. The church has the evangelical freedom to create new offices and to change old ones, to recognize and provide for specializations and concentrations among the various forms of the one gospel ministry.

The sameness of these various forms of ministry consists in two points: 1) the holders of all these offices or forms of ministry are serving in the one gospel ministry established by God; 2) those who serve in all these forms of ministry are called by Christ through the church.

The differences between these various forms are in the scope of the work which the church assigns to them in its call. Some may be called to serve in a comprehensive ministry of the Word and sacraments, as most pastors are. Others may be called to serve in a limited sphere, such as teaching the Word to children.

In using the expression “forms of ministry” we are attempting to emphasize both the points of identity and the points of difference between the various offices of ministry.

The new edition of *This We Believe* says, “We believe that the church has the freedom to establish various forms within the one ministry of the Word, such as pastors, teachers, and staff ministers. Through its call the church in Christian liberty designates the place and scope of service” (p 30). This statement emphasizes both the oneness of the ministry and the different forms in which that one ministry may be practiced.

3) *There will be continued discussion of the wisdom of applying the term ordination to offices other than the pastoral office.* We will be revisiting the question of ordination for male teachers, and the LCMS has before it a proposal to ordain deacons.

In resolving some of the current unrest concerning this doctrine it is crucial that confessional Lutherans focus on the following areas.

1) Initially, the discussion should focus on thorough exegesis of all of the pertinent passages of Scripture. Unless there is agreement on what Scripture says about the matter, little progress can be made by debating interpretations of the confessions, historical precedents and contemporary practices. Lutherans must do a thorough study of the *norma normans* before we are ready to discuss our understanding of the *norma normata*.

2) Terms must be defined clearly, so that people are not speaking past each other. In what sense, is the term “ministry” being used? Unless there is clarification and understanding of the terms which are being used by various parties there will be continual confusion.

3) Lutherans must be careful that they do not minimize or undercut either the priesthood of all believers or the called public ministry of the Word which was established by God.

4) Lutherans must be careful that they do not under-emphasize either the institution by Christ or the call of the church when discussing the origin of the public ministry. “By Christ through the church” is the origin of all forms of ministry in the New Testament, except in those few cases where there was a direct call from Christ. “By Christ through the church” is also the position of Walther. (See his Thesis 7 on ministry) An over emphasis on the role of the public ministers, rather than the church, in the appointing of new ministers for the church is more sympathetic to the approach of Grabau than to that of Walther.

It seems likely that that church and ministry will be the leading topic of theological discussion in all parts of the Lutheran church in the opening years of this century.

### **Issue 7) Manufacturing Man**

Scientific attempts to manage human life both during its arrival and departure will lead to continued discussion of the nature of human life and the soul. Genetic engineering, various forms of artificially assisted conception, cloning, and perhaps yet unforeseen technologies will raise challenging ethical and theological questions in the next century.

### **Issue 8) The Validity of the Sacraments**

We will increasingly face more practical difficulties concerning the validity of the sacraments of other churches, as the denial of the Trinity becomes more pronounced in main line Christian churches and Lutheran-Reformed intercommunion becomes commonplace.

The difficulty of judging the reality of various mix-and-match combinations of Lutheran-Reformed joint communions is not an urgent practical problem. All we need to know is to stay far away from such communions. We do not have to solve the question of which ones have real presence and which ones do not.

The question of the validity of baptisms performed in such churches will become more pressing. It appears that the ELCA is still performing valid trinitarian baptisms except in those cases in which the Trinitarian formula is altered, but the question will become more urgent as the denial or obscuring of the trinitarian faith becomes more pronounced.

### **Issue 9) Who Can Imagine?**

Who would have guessed at mid-century that confessional Lutherans in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century would have to spend so much time and effort debating the moment of presence in the Lord's Supper with such disastrous results for the confessional movement in Scandinavia. An end to the fallout from this issue does not appear to be in sight. It appears that it will cause the same split in confessional Lutheranism in Finland that it did in Sweden and Norway.

Since Satan is still working full-time, we have to expect that some other such issue will arise to cause unnecessary grief for confessional Lutheranism in the coming years.

### **Conclusion**

The outlook for Lutheranism as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century is much less positive than it was on the eve of the 20<sup>th</sup>. The 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, was a century of unparalleled doctrinal decline. Whether the 21<sup>st</sup> century will witness another blessed revival like that which occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> century or whether we have entered the final downward spiral that precedes Christ's return is known only by the Lord of the Church. Though further decline appears inevitable in Europe and America, prospects for numerical growth in Africa and Asia remain strong, but often on rather weak doctrinal foundations.

The doctrinal situation in the church at large is as bad or worse than it was in the days just before Luther. Catholicism is in worse shape doctrinally than it was in 1517 because it retains all the teachings of Trent and has added universalism and the negative critical view of Scripture. Having lost a clear confession of the gospel, it is now losing even a clear preaching of the law. The condition of Lutheranism is worse than it was in the days before Walther. The challenge for the remnant of confessional Lutheranism is to give a clear testimony to the great truths of Scripture both to society and to the apostate church. We must continue to shelter the faithful in the walls of a strong fold. We must avoid or mend sinful divisions caused by going beyond Scripture to the doctrines of men.

These are the challenges facing the church.

## **For Further Study**

For this paper my approach was to utilize materials that have recently been prepared for discussion of doctrinal issues in our midst and with other church bodies over the last decade. For the most part this paper is simply a summary derived from papers I have been called upon to prepare on the individual topics discussed above. This paper is condensed from and adapted from the following materials, which give more detail and further bibliography on the topics we are discussing.

### **19<sup>th</sup> Century Background**

Brenner, John F., "Forward in Christ: The Maturing Synod Looks Beyond Itself," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Spring 2000.

### **The crucial issue: indifference to doctrine**

Paul Kelm, "Understanding and Addressing a Postmodern Culture," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Spring 2000.

### **Overview of Crucial Issues**

John Brug, "Crucial Issues for Lutheranism Today: A Viewpoint from WELS," Presented to the Northern Illinois District of the LC-MS, 1995. A more detailed discussion of some of these same issues.

John Brug, Edward Fredrich, and Armin Schuetze, *WELS and Other Lutherans*, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1995.

*This We Believe*, WELS, 1999.

### **Issues 1-3: The gospel, the law, inerrancy**

John F. Brug, "The Doctrinal Position of ELCA," 1989 and 1994. Five essays available from the files of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library. Update 2000, forthcoming.

Patsy Leppien and Kincaid Smith, *What's Going On Among the Lutherans?*, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992. A detailed doctrinal study.

John F. Brug, "Why Confessional Lutherans Can't Use the Historical Critical Method," Finland, 1995.

John F. Brug, "Osiandrianism Then and Now," Finland, 1997.

### **Issue 4: Church Fellowship**

\*\**Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, 1997 edition, p. 25-38. An official statement.

John F. Brug, *Church Fellowship: Working Together for the Truth*, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996.

### **Issue 5: Man and Woman**

\*\**Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, 1997 edition, p. 61-69. An official statement.

John F. Brug, *Man and Woman in God's World*, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992.

### **Issue 6: Church and Ministry**

#### **WELS Sources**

\*\**Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, 1997 edition, p. 39-52. An official statement.

\*A Series of articles in the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*:

John F. Brug, "Current Debate Concerning the Doctrine of the Ministry," *WLQ*, Winter 1994, p. 28-44.

John F. Brug, "The Priesthood of All Believers and the Ministry," *WLQ*, Spring 1994, p. 117-125.

John F. Brug, "The Ministry of the Apostles and Our Ministry," *WLQ*, Summer 1995, p. 168-178.

John F. Brug, "Ordination and Installation in Scripture," *WLQ*, Fall 1995, p. 263-270.

Thomas Nass, "The Pastoral Ministry As A Distinct Form of Ministry," *WLQ*, Fall 1994, p. 243-272.

John Brug, "The Ministry: By Christ Through the Church: Current Discussion Concerning the Doctrine of the Ministry," Finland, 1997; updated bibliography.

John Brug, "Doctrinal Briefs: Forms of Ministry," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Spring 2000.

#### **LCMS Sources**

\*LCMS-CTCR, *The Ministry, Offices, Procedures, and Nomenclature*, 1981. Official statement.

\*Kurt Marquart, *The Church and Her Fellowship, Ministry and Governance*, Fort Wayne, IN: International Foundation for Confessional Lutheran Research, 1990. A modification of the "Missouri Synod" view.

*The Collected Papers of the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Theological Convocation of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*, Office of the President, 1998. Cf. also reviews in *Logia*, VIII, 3, 1999, p. 41-46.

### **Issue 7: Making man**

John F. Brug, *Review Article—Human Cloning: Religious Responses*, edited by Ronald ColeTurner), *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Fall, 1999, p. 310-313.

**Issues 8 and 9: The validity of the sacraments**

John F. Brug, *The Sacraments of the ELCA: Are They Valid?* LaCrosse, Wisconsin, September 15, 1998.

John F. Brug, "The Real Presence Of Christ's Body and Blood In The Lord's Supper: Contemporary Issues Concerning The Sacramental Union," Finland, 1998.