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Witness and Worship in Pluralistic America

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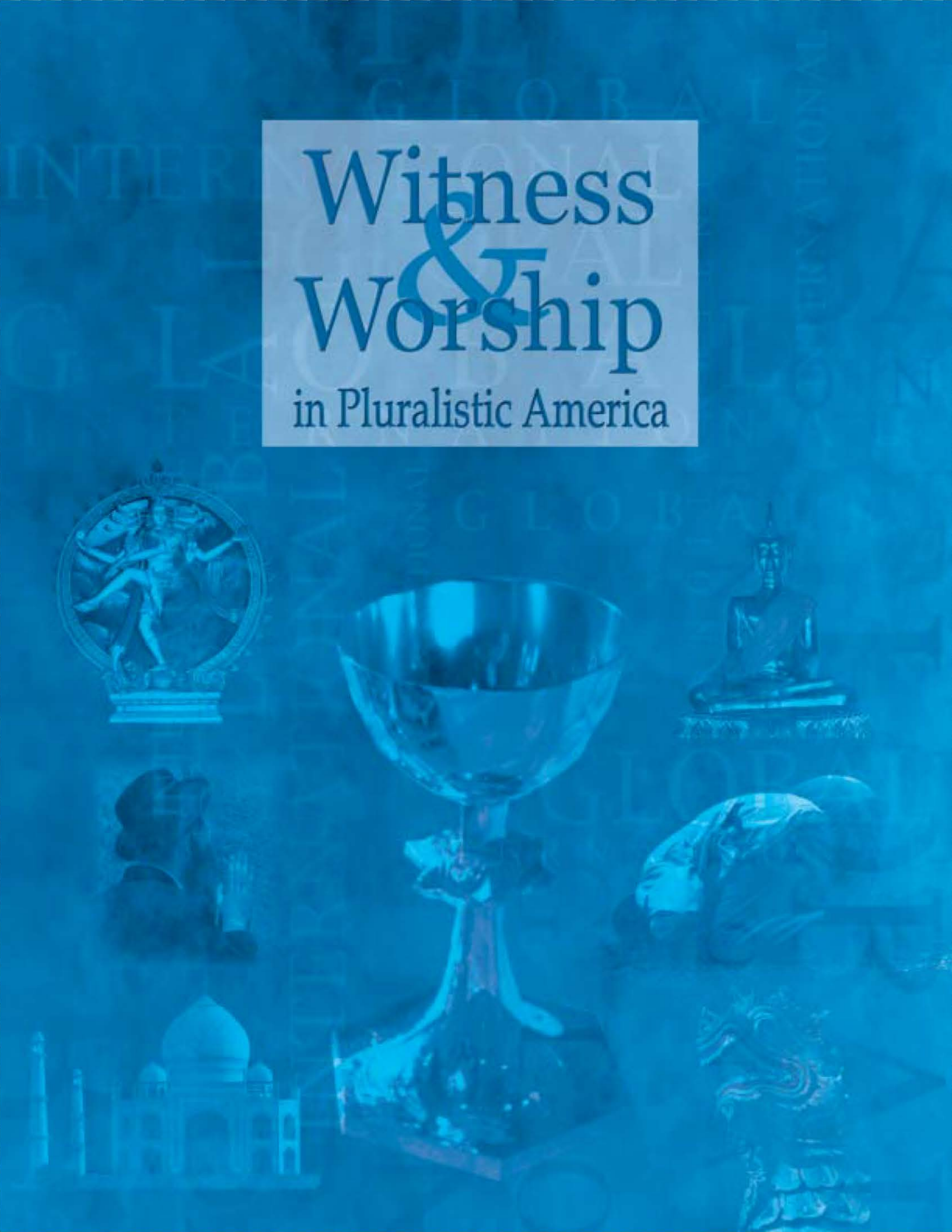

Witness & Worship in Pluralistic America

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Introduction

JOHN F. JOHNSON

The mission and ministry of our church now takes place in a more pervasively pluralistic context than ever before in its history.

American society in the twenty-first century poses a myriad of challenges for the church as it seeks to be an effective witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Among these challenges is an increasingly pluralistic cultural and religious context.

Until the last half of the past century—with the exception of missionaries and possibly business persons and government representatives—members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod had little direct contact with people of other faith traditions. After World War II, however, immigration from Asia and Africa to the West began to dramatically change the demographic character of most predominantly Christian countries, including our own. The most dramatic increase of Asians and Africans entering the United States came after the revised immigration laws in 1965. While it is not known exactly how many Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus there are today in our nation, most studies suggest that there are at least six million followers of Islam, two million Hindus, and only a slightly lesser number of Buddhists. Indeed, these faith communities continue to be among the fastest growing in the country, not only as a result of first-generation immigration but through the conversion of thousands of young adult Americans. Evidence of the presence of other faiths also abounds. In other words, the mission and ministry of our church now takes place in a more pervasively pluralistic context than ever before in its history.

This American pluralistic context impacts the church in two ways. First, of course, pluralism denotes sheer diversity. It is an indisputable fact that there are now many cultures, many ethnic groups, many traditions, and indeed, many worlds inhabited by our one humanity. Throughout this century, we will continue to experience the influence of a broad spectrum of people with all their attendant values and lifestyles. Missouri Synod Lutherans must recognize this reality and the fact that it will impact our witness. We do have an obligation to acknowledge the dignity and worth of cultures and beliefs other than our own. There should be no reason why we should not embrace pluralism in this sense and, indeed, celebrate it. In this sense, pluralism means that we live with each other and accept each other even in the face of real differences, including religious distinctions.

However, there is a second dimension to our pluralistic context. It is not simply the fact of diversity but the approach to diversity. This perspective transforms pluralism into an ideology. Philosophically, pluralism rests on the assumption that ultimate reality is many or multiple. This notion of pluralism often is extended today to the issue of the plurality of religions and the exclusive claims of biblical truth. The religious pluralism of John Hick, for instance, contends that divine truth is present in all religions and that hope of salvation takes place within these religions in a plurality of ways. That is to say, no revelation contains God or absolute reality. Rather, each revelation is only "real" as it is perceived or conceived by particular human beings in particular, and diverse, cultural contexts. Hick calls for a "Copernican revolution in theology" whereby Christianity must be displaced from the center of the universe of religious faiths to its periphery, along with all other religions which "circle equidistantly from God, the shared center."

It is this second orientation to the pluralistic character of our society—pluralism as ideology—that challenges

most acutely a biblical and confessional church body such as ours. How do we acknowledge the presence of other faiths in our society while understanding God's truth to be identical with Christ, the Word of God? How do we respond to opportunities to relate to other faiths in "the public square" while maintaining the distinctively Lutheran Christian perspective that no social order deserves the title of "Christian" and that no social order is, apart from the influence of Christianity, God-less? What do we wish to communicate regarding the absolute truth claims of our faith in a pluralistic society?

These fundamental questions, and their manifold variations, have prompted controversies, divisions, and debates in many church bodies. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has not been immune from such discussion. The purpose of the following essays from members of the Concordia Seminary faculty is not to definitively answer all of the questions or address all of the issues attending this churchly conversation. Rather, they are offered as resources for reflection and study in a time when all of us are called upon anew to exercise our witness and worship in pluralistic America.

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Christians and the Disestablishments of Religion in the United States

JOEL P. OKAMOTO

The United States made a revolutionary legal move when it made the disestablishment of religion part of its Constitution.

My oldest child is at the age when "antidisestablishmentarianism" enters the vocabulary. He knows it because it is a long word, but he has no idea what it means. I know. I asked him. If the definition in the Oxford English Dictionary is a reliable guide, he is typical: "Properly, opposition to the disestablishment of the Church of England (rare), but popularly cited as an example of a long word." I tried to tell him what it meant, but he wasn't interested. He is at that age.

"Disestablishment" may not be a more widely used word, but for Americans it is nevertheless a much more important idea. The United States made a revolutionary legal move when it made the disestablishment of religion part of its Constitution. Unlike the European Christendom from which many of the immigrants to the Atlantic coast came, the United States formally ruled out any legally recognized and established church and instead permitted the free exercise of religion. Consequently, these features have shaped the contours of American society and culture.

Americans often think about disestablishment in terms of the relationship between church and state. "Disestablishment" typically means the First Amendment and the separation of church and state. It regularly comes up in discussion and debates of such issues as school prayer and church participation in political campaigns. But some sociologists and historians have traced out the developments in religion in American life in terms of a process of disestablishment. This way of looking at religion in America considers the relationship between religion and society. According to this account, the legal disestablishment of religion mandated by the First Amendment is highly significant, but it only begins a process of shifts and changes in the place of religion in American society and culture.

I believe that this account of American religious life is helpful. In these remarks, therefore, I will sketch this story of multiple disestablishments of religion in the United States and then offer some reflections and draw out some implications to aid Christian thinking about life in America.

The Process of Disestablishment

The first disestablishment of religion comes with the First Amendment of the Constitution. It states that the Congress of the United States "shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." With this Amendment, the United States took a legal stand against the belief that the government should give the Christian church recognition and support (the "disestablishment" clause) and permitted freedom of religious belief and practice (the "free exercise" clause).

The belief that the government has a role in sponsoring the church is usually traced back to Constantine. It was widely held in the West until the seventeenth century, including colonial America. Contemporary Americans sometimes find this fact surprising, but, as historian Perry Miller explains, it was "really the spirit of the times. No nation of Europe had yet divided the state from the church; no government had yet imagined that religion could be left to the individual conscience. Society, economics, and the will of God were one and the same, and the ultimate authority in human relations was the ethic of Christendom. All the transactions of this world held their rank in a hierarchical structure, with salvation, to which all other activities ministered, at the apex" (*Errand into the Wilderness*, 105).

With the First Amendment,

Americans rejected the idea of a legally established religion. They did not touch, however, the underlying conviction about the place of religion—and more specifically, the Christian religion—in society. They continued to hold the conviction that Christian beliefs and institutions were essential to good order and moral character. Most Americans believed that religion should have an influence on social and civil life. What made America distinctive was the conviction that this influence should be maintained by voluntary action and participation rather than by legally establishing a religion. Colonial history, of course, had a great deal to do with this. In effect, the First Amendment allowed religion to be established, but voluntarily (through the free exercise of religion). So while the First Amendment assured that there never would be a legally established church in the United States, Christian churches, institutions, symbols, and values could and did enjoy a privileged status throughout American society.

The concerns of Jews about religion through much of American history sheds light on the way Christian beliefs and habits pervaded American life. It should be noted that Jews often did not oppose religion as such in public life. They were concerned about the specifically Christian character of religion in public life. For this reason, they challenged and opposed customs and laws that made Americans act like Christians, such as praying the Lord's Prayer and reading the Bible in public schools.

Moreover, it was Protestant Christianity that was socially and culturally established in the United States. The First Amendment guaranteed "free exercise" of religion for all Americans, along with legal disestablishment. But it turned out that the Protestant majority often set the tone and had the upper hand in social and cultural matters. Historian Mark Noll summarized the situation in this way:

"The national government would not sponsor any particular denomination and it would also try to ensure the broadest possible space for the exercise of religion. In turn, the churches as such were expected to give up overt political action. But both the founding fathers and major Protestant spokesmen appealed for the churches to strengthen the moral character required for a republican government ...In the United States' earliest decades, this republican-religious reasoning was usually applied by Protestants for Protestants" (*The Old Religion in a New World*, 86-87).

The history of cultural conflict in the United States supports this claim. For much of the nineteenth century, cultural conflict centered on differences in religion, particularly between Protestants and Catholics. As sociologist James Davison Hunter put it in his widely read book *Culture Wars*, "The memory need only be prodded lightly to recall that Protestant hostility toward Catholicism (and, to a far lesser extent, Catholic resentment of Protestantism) provides one of the dominant motifs of early modern American history. Understanding the American experience even as late as the nineteenth century requires an understanding of the critical role played by anti-Catholicism in shaping the character of politics, public education, the media, and social reform" (35).

Again, public education in the nineteenth century illustrates the nature of the conflict well. Most public schools did not simply have Bible reading, but they almost always read from the "Protestant" King James Bible. Catholics, understandably, objected repeatedly through the century. In time, however, the social and cultural establishment of American Protestants had eroded. Of course, the Protestant dominance in American life did not falter all at once. But over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,

the sense that America was Protestant had faded and was replaced by the more generic sense of a "Judeo-Christian America." Robert T. Handy called this erosion the "second disestablishment."

Over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the sense that America was Protestant had faded and was replaced by the more generic sense of a "Judeo-Christian America."

The Protestant dominance in the United States collapsed in part because of developments among Protestants and in part because of social forces. Conflict and division among Protestants contributed significantly. Perhaps the most apparent of these conflicts was that between modernists, who believed that Christians should adjust to the changing cultural situation (e.g., belief in evolution), and fundamentalists, who believed that Christians ought to resist pressures to adapt and instead to engage and refute unbiblical teachings and influences. The new Protestant movements that emerged and flourished at the same time further contributed to this collapse. The most important of these movements was Pentecostalism. Because they sprang up in response to trends and developments in the Protestant mainstream, their success tended to undermine further the sense of a unified Protestant America. On the civil front, it became clear that Protestantism was effectively the socially established religion. Once identified as such, this situation became untenable. In other words, American society realized gradually that Roman Catholics and Jews had a point legally when they objected to some social practices—they had a right under the First Amendment not to have the Protestant practices and beliefs imposed on them in places such as public schools.

This shift did not challenge the conviction that religion was central for the well-being of society. Through the middle decades of the twentieth century, Americans by and large still believed that religion was essential to unifying society and maintaining moral order. The new religious consensus, however, that emerged from the second disestablishment was more generic. It could be summed up as "Judeo-Christian."

But by the 1960s, it was clear that views about religion and morality were once again changing widely and radically. Sociologists Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, and after them, Phillip E. Hammond, have called this shift in views the "third disestablishment." In the third disestablishment, religion becomes largely a personal and private affair. Up through the 1950s, Americans often were religious because, and in the way that, their families and communities were religious. But by the 1960s, it was clear that attitudes and practices were beginning to change widely in matters of religion. People came to regard religion in personal terms and as a private matter. They came to regard their religious affiliations, and the nature of their affiliations, as matters of personal choice. They could choose to be religious just as their parents had, or to change their denominations, or to experiment with other religions. They could choose to make up their own religion or abandon religion altogether. The continuity of belief, practice, and community, which both church and society had formerly insured from generation to generation, had been broken.

We can see that Americans regard religion as an individual and personal matter in the way that "shopping," "marketing," "seeking," and "healing"

have become central metaphors for many of today's Christians and their churches. We also can see this in the growing diversity of religious communities over the past fifty years. The tendency to view religion as a personal concern is especially noticeable in the way new religious movements like Wicca have sprung up, proliferated, and attracted followers. We can discern this tendency still further in the growing number of Americans who, as Wade Clark Roof puts it, regard themselves as "spiritual" but not "religious," as "believers but not belongers."

Several factors seem to have contributed to the third disestablishment. The original legal disestablishment of religion is one factor. When they made religious belief and practice a voluntary matter, the founding fathers theoretically left open the possibility that people might choose to be religious in ways entirely of their own choosing, or not to be religious at all. I say "theoretically" because it would seem that they did not consider this a practical possibility. Legally, however, they left no way to forestall this move. By their legal action they set up a condition that would not only permit it but in some ways would actually foster it. As America became religiously more diverse, society in time had to follow the legal condition of disestablishment and free exercise. First, this led to a general Protestant consensus in America, which gave way to a general Judeo-Christian consensus, which in turn gave way to a general collapse of religious consensus with the third disestablishment.

Another factor was widespread social change. The third disestablishment occurred at the same time as the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution, and the emergence of feminism. These movements all reflected doubts about accepted wisdom, traditions, and institutions concerning race, sex, and family. But religious wisdom, traditions, and institutions were among the most widely accepted. Therefore, it is not surprising that the established place of religion itself in American life would be challenged when other attitudes and ways of life also were being challenged.

A third factor was modernization. The spread of modernization has led to life under what sociologist Peter Berger calls the "heretical imperative." In pre-modern societies, people lived in a world of fate. Life was to a large extent determined. In many areas of life, there were few choices to be made. In modern industrial societies, on the other hand, almost everything is a matter of choice. In fact, choosing itself is one of the very few things that seems determined. People in modern societies not only can make choices, but must make them. The modern person, as Berger puts it, lives under a "heretical imperative." (As Berger points out, the word "heresy" comes from the Greek verb *hairein*, which means "to choose.") This imperative applies in matters of religion as much as anything else. When one lives under this heretical imperative, it becomes natural to understand religion as a matter of personal choice or preference.

Reflections on and Implications of the American Disestablishments of Religion

What, then, does all of this mean for Christians in America? What are the implications of this account of disestablishment?

First, we might take stock of the present. Where do we stand now? To what extent religion is still important in public life? It certainly appears that religious expressions, teachings, and practices remain important features of American life at local and national levels. The President of the United States still says "God bless America" and defends faith-based initiatives. Prayers still are sought by legislatures, and chaplains still are recruited

for police and fire departments. School prayer continues to be pushed for, and a tax-exempt status continues to be granted to religious institutions. Such things show that religion is still important for American life. At the same time, however, the content of religious expressions in the civil realm has become quite minimal. For example, a recent court decision drew much attention to the phrase "one nation under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance. News reports and commentaries about this affair often pointed out that earlier courts had permitted such language because they believed that such language was largely empty.

How, then, should we regard the process of disestablishment? Has it been a good thing or not? Since disestablishment has been a process, running a course through American history and across American lives, the answer here is "yes" and "no." Christians ought to see it as a good thing to the extent that it helps to make clear the distinction between church and world. Christians in America often have confused what it means to be American and what it means to be Christian. These confusions stemmed partly from the voluntary establishment of religion that American life has simply assumed and so expected of all Americans.

Christians in America often have confused what it means to be American and what it means to be Christian.

But Christians in the United States should regard the process of disestablishment as problematic in the way that it has promoted theological indifference and religious pluralism. In his book *Religion and the Demise of Liberal Rationalism*, J. Judd Owen argued that American liberal democracy was not theologically neutral, as is often thought. By requiring the government to be theologically neutral in the disestablishment of religion, the American founders actually had a definite theological purpose—to promote theological indifference. According to Owen, "Theological indifference was thought to promote a hedge against that fanaticism which endangers the civil peace and is too easily mistaken for genuine seriousness. For the sake of the low but solid and politically necessary good of civil peace, early liberals encouraged what they understood to be a healthy or natural indifference to what Jefferson called 'metaphysical riddles'" (170). To substantiate his claim, he pointed to Thomas Jefferson's decision to permit seminaries at the University of Virginia, and to Jefferson's express hopes that Unitarianism would become the general religion of the United States. Owen acknowledged that one might dismiss Jefferson's hope. But he contends that Jefferson has in fact been vindicated. He explains:

"In assessing Jefferson's prediction, it is necessary to take a somewhat broader view of Unitarianism. Unitarianism places little importance on doctrine, creed, and theology, and a very high importance on toleration. By that standard, most Presbyterians and Methodists, for example, are much closer to the Unitarians of Jefferson's day than to the Presbyterians and Methodists of Jefferson's day. Ask a typical Methodist what the important doctrinal differences are between him and a Presbyterian that lead him to profess Methodism, and he will likely have very little to say. It seems that Jefferson's scheme has largely, if not entirely, succeeded" (197).

It is not hard, then, to see the leap from theological indifference to religious pluralism, that is, the view that differences in religious beliefs,

We should realize that we may cooperate with or contribute to the process of disestablishment, in particular to the third disestablishment that privatizes faith.

practices, and traditions are largely relative. That, in fact, is one way to characterize the third disestablishment.

One of the chief problems with disestablishment then emerges: it tends to promote moral relativism and/or conflict. To the extent that religion provides the basis and content for morality, the diversity of religions, and the option of no religious affiliation at all, means at least the possibility of moral relativism or of conflict about morality. Both are evident in contemporary American life. On the one hand, in such matters as abortion, the law of the land leaves it as a matter of private choice. On the other hand, on just such matters as abortion, Americans are divided and conflicted. The so-called "culture wars" have been brought about in part because of the third disestablishment. As suggested earlier, cultural conflict in America for much of its history took place within an accepted religious framework. Contemporary conflicts over such issues as abortion, the family, the arts, and public education do not.

What are we who are American Christians to do? First, we should realize that we may cooperate with or contribute to the process of disestablishment, in particular to the third disestablishment that privatizes faith. Much of this, I believe, is unwitting, but nonetheless it takes place. Churches ought to recognize that such activities as evangelism and contemporary worship, such programs as support groups, and such matters as communion admission practices may contribute to an individualizing of religion. This may happen when marketing concepts, principles, and techniques promoted for "church growth" are adopted uncritically. But we also are likely cooperating with this process where we leave matters of visitors communing up to their individual consciences and beliefs.

Second, we should recognize that it is often hard to disentangle ourselves from these confusions. We cannot simply say "This is American" and "This is Christian" about ourselves and with that take care of the problems. What, then, might we do? I believe that a more fruitful approach will be never to assume that we have "got it" with the will and ways of the Lord but seek constantly to learn faithfulness in all things.

Finally, we might consider what disestablishment means for Christians involved in the public religious life of America. First, we should recognize that while religion has long been legally disestablished, for just as long civil government has made use of religion for its purposes. This still holds today, when America is religiously diverse and theologically divided. The powers that be continue to look to religious institutions for help and prestige. Therefore, Christians should take care not to create a problem by leaving the impression that they and their God are servants of the United States of America.

To my mind, a clear example of this problem was Franklin Graham's prayer at the inauguration of President George W. Bush. The content of his prayer was appropriate, and he was explicit in praying in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (for which he was publicly criticized!). It would be quibbling to object to the words or the intent of the prayer. But by going to the Capitol and praying at this solemn public ritual and praying

on behalf of Americans, not Christians, he also left the impression that the Christian God was the God of America. Some might note that this was a way to witness to faith in Jesus Christ. Given the reaction to his prayer, I would agree that it was indeed seen as just such a witness. But this does nothing to diminish my point. To put it provocatively, Graham's prayer suggested that the God and Father of Jesus Christ was one of the American gods.

I raise this example and treat it in this way to underscore that we ought to be careful not to allow civil society to co-opt us Christians and our God. Perhaps none of us will be invited to pray at a national event, but we might be asked to speak or pray at a local civil event, or serve as a chaplain for the local police or fire department. Among other things, when considering such invitations, we should consider the situation. Put very simply, among our considerations, we should ask ourselves whether our participation will tend to show or tend to blur the distinction between the Christian church and society.

For Discussion

1. How might churches promote the radical individual autonomy that characterizes the "third disestablishment"?

2. How might churches speak and act to engage and resist the tendency toward radical individual autonomy?

Strategies for God-Talk in a Pluralistic Society

CHARLES P. ARAND

In the context of civil religion, public officials intentionally use the word "God" in a generic way.

In a society that is becoming ever more religiously diverse, Christians need to become more culturally astute and theologically savvy about their God-talk. They must recognize how people in society hear and use the word "God." Then they must develop strategies for their own speaking about God so as to subvert non-Christian understandings of God while conveying the biblical revelation of God. As Lutherans, we recognize that Christians live in two spheres and that their God-talk may have to take on different forms depending upon their purposes and goals. In the left-hand kingdom, we are interested in civil righteousness for the sake of creaturely life on earth. In the right-hand kingdom, we are concerned about spiritual righteousness. To that end, we first will look at God-talk in our society today, and then explore a particular Christian way of speaking about God that is appropriate for both spheres of life.

God-Talk in the Public Square

In today's public square, the word "God" often is used as a placeholder to set aside a range of specific issues (those that divide the various religious traditions) while allowing us to speak of a general faith (that which serves the unity of society). Here we will take a look at how this happens in three ways, namely, in the American civil religion, in the gnosticism that represents the unofficial religion of most Americans, and in the theology of pluralism found among mainline Protestant churches and the religious studies departments of our universities.

Sociologists Clifford Geertz and Peter Berger have argued that all organized societies operate from what is essentially a religious base. This means that every functioning society needs a common religion to provide an overarching unity capable of overcoming conflicts and cleavages within society. America's civil religion provides one solution to the radical pluralism resulting from the First Amendment. Civil religion provides an overarching religious arrangement under which most denominations and sects can thrive while at the same time participating or not participating in the public rituals with their religious and not-so-religious fellow Americans. Political leaders in this civil religion may assume the role of denominational clerics and may function as prophets (like Abraham Lincoln calling the country to repentance) or as priests (like Ronald Reagan reassuring the nation of its goodness).

In the context of civil religion, public officials intentionally use the word "God" in a generic way. No American President has failed to use the word "God" in an inaugural address. Politicians unfailingly conclude their speeches with "God bless you." The Pledge of Allegiance speaks of one nation "under God." Bible passages often are cited by public officials with significant omissions. Following the terrorist attacks on 9-11, President Bush, in his priestly role, quoted the apostle Paul, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God…" (Romans 8:38-39). But he deliberately omitted the next clause, "that is in Christ Jesus." Few would doubt that President Bush himself believes that God's love is found only in Jesus Christ. But in his priestly role as President, it had to be omitted.

Stephen Carter points out in his book, *The Culture of Disbelief*, that much of this "God-talk" on the part of public officials is ritualistic and perfunctory. That is to say, it is devoid of any theology. Nevertheless, what civil theology does exist provides a religious way of thinking about politics and supplies society with meaning and a

sense of destiny. It has at least four features. First, there is a God. Second, His will can be known and fulfilled through democratic processes. Democracy is the gospel that will lead humanity to freedom, fulfillment, and happiness. Third, America has been God's primary agent in modern history for the spread of the gospel of democracy. To put it bluntly, God is pro-American. Fourth, America is the chief source of identity for Americans in both a political and religious sense.

If American civil religion is the formal religion of America reserved for public occasions, ceremonies, and rituals, what is America's day-to-day religion? It is perhaps best characterized by "Sheilaism" in Bellah's *Habits of the Heart*. A young woman named Sheila describes her faith this way: "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice." In terms of tenets of beliefs, she says, "Try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think He would want us to take care of each other." Significant here is Sheila's reference to the "little inner voice" within her that serves as the source and guide of her faith.

Second, Harold Bloom, author of *The American Religion*, would probably cite the faith of Sheila as but one example that religion in the United States is something subtly other than Christianity. He argues that it is essentially gnostic in that it addresses the question, "How does one perceive one's inner being?" "American religion, for its two centuries of existence . . . by and of an uncreated self, or self-within-the-self, and the knowledge leads to freedom, a dangerous and doom-eager freedom: from nature, time, history, community, other selves" (49). Gnosticism describes the spirituality personified by Oprah Winfrey. In the language of spirituality, God is more an impersonal force that binds the universe together than a personal being who acts within history. In general, one can argue that people in our society do not want a particular and personal God with an identifiable name beyond the title "God."

Christians have not been immune to the influences of the wider society. To the extent that God is seen to be a personal being, He is identified as a benign benevolent being who loves us (i.e., tolerates or approves of whatever we want to do). In fact, it is of some interest that 97 percent of Americans are convinced that God loves them, while only three percent believe that they are not beloved of God (Bloom 53). What Reinhold Niebuhr affirmed in his description of American Protestantism over half a century ago still holds today as a description of many people's view of God: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross." Even among conservative Christians, it is not much different. The word "Jesus" often has provided little more than a way to name their personal experience of the divine.

Third, America can no longer be considered a Protestant nation or a "Christian nation"—if it ever was one. A variety of world religions have taken root and are flourishing. Diana Eck documents the sea change that is reshaping the American landscape in her best-selling book, *A New Religious America*. Here we must note that the world religions readily revere Jesus and provide a special place for Him within their hierarchy of sacred names and symbols. Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists can accept Jesus as one of the prophets, revelations, avataras, or bodhisattvas. Judaism and Christianity are both Messianic religions. For Islam, Jesus is a prophet and messenger of Allah. The Qu'ran declares Jesus to be the Word and Truth of God. It can even speak of Jesus as rising from the dead and taken up bodily

Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists can accept Jesus as one of the prophets, revelations, avataras, or bodhisattvas.

into heaven. Modern Hinduism shows the impact of Jesus on people like Gandhi, for whom the Sermon on the Mount endeared him to Jesus. Buddhists interpret Jesus and His message in the light of their own understandings of Buddha and draw striking parallels between them.

As a result of this religious diversity, David Tracy, of the University of Chicago, observes that pluralism is the chief characteristic of our present. So are we now one nation under many faiths? If so, how can we emphasize their unity for the sake of one undivided nation? One answer is to affirm that they all deal with God! Or that they all deal with a God who is known by many different names. The invocation at the National Cathedral following 9-11 affirmed as much when the officiant intoned, "O God of Abraham, of Jesus, and of Mohammed…" Among mainline Protestant churches and among the academics who populate the religious studies departments in public universities, a theology of pluralism has developed which argues that Christianity in America needs to be more theocentric and less Christocentric. Put another way, Christ must decrease so that God might increase. This theocentrism has been given important impetus by John Hick's book, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, and developed in Paul Knitter's book, *No Other Name?* As the pendulum swings from Christ to God, something other than Christ must define God.

It is not just among academics in religious studies departments or those involved in inter-faith dialogues that one will find such thinking. Among rank and file Christians, it will occur that as the children of Christian parents date and even marry individuals of other faiths, the temptation will be powerful to move from an assertion (with which parents comfort themselves) like, "at least they believe in Christ" (last century) to "at least they believe in God" (this century). In other words, the temptation will be to speak about God apart from Christ so as not to scandalize people of other religions. And when Christ is brought up, it will in a way that does not identify Him as the definitive, normative, and final revelation of God.

The Christian Discourse about God in Society and Church

In the midst of the cacophony of God-talk within our society today, Lutherans need to become more savvy when confessing the Gospel of Scripture. We can get away with shorthand talk about God within our congregations and Lutheran communities in large part because we can assume a certain level of catechesis. So when we use the word "God," we know that it is shorthand for a longhand version that refers to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ or that refers to the Godhead of the Trinity. But once we leave the doors of our congregations and enter into the harvest fields where the air is filled with the static of God-talk, we can assume nothing and thus can take nothing for granted. Here it becomes imperative that we discern how to speak of God in the two kingdoms in two different ways for different purposes. In the realm of the First Article and for the sake of creation, society, and culture, we need to speak of God as the Creator. But in the realm of Second and Third Articles for the sake of salvation, we must speak of the Savior that is identified exclusively with the Creator.

First, in the left-hand kingdom, Lutherans are eager to promote civil righteousness for the sake of peace, order, and civility within society. After all, this too is God's realm. This concern to promote civil righteousness is most prominent in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession where Melanchthon defended the Lutherans against the charge of undermining the stability of the empire. Civil righteousness refers to those habits of conduct that are identified by a society as contributing to the well-being or greater good of society. Societies often have found that reference to a transcendent being provided the basis and standard for behavior that contributed to civil righteousness. Though not pleased with idolatry, God can use it for the sake of civil righteousness and preservation of society and the human community.

In this connection, Lutherans have resources for speaking about God on the basis of natural revelation (Romans 1) even though the identity of that God cannot be known from the creation. In this connection, Lutherans often have rooted their understanding of the law as the non-negotiable requirements for human life woven into the very fabric of creation itself. For purposes of promoting civil righteousness within society then, Lutherans can find it possible to speak about God in a more generic way, such as found in the Pledge of Allegiance.

At the same time, God-talk for the sake of civil righteousness cannot be too generic so as to be identified with a pantheistic monism or a Platonic dualism. For Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, God is God because He and only He creates. In other words, being God and being the Creator are identical. His deity is defined by His creating activity. If one were to ask, "What must one be or do in order to be God?", one would have to answer, "be the creator of all things." It is the confession of God the Creator which serves as the basis for civil righteousness within the First Article of the Creed. Thus, God as Creator must be our starting point for discussions that promote civic righteousness. It allows for a transcendent standard against which our civic righteousness is measured. It allows for accountability to the divine being.

But God-talk that does not draw a sharp distinction between the Creator and creation (all forms of monism—like pantheism, panentheism, New Age theologies) tends to identify God with creation, or with ourselves, or with our plans and purposes. Accountability is ultimately owed only to ourselves. Without that distinction between Creator and creation—fundamental to the First Commandment, one cannot affirm certain values and themes (accountability, judgment, etc.) that are only possible with a theology tied to a creator. The emphasis on creator also allows for a theistic humanism or ethical monotheism. It gives rise to certain behaviors and values important for civil righteousness in America that cannot be derived from polytheistic or pantheistic religions.

Talk of God as Creator provides us with an important cultural link to the American Declaration of Independence, which states that all people have been "endowed by their Creator" with certain inalienable rights. Though not an official document like the Constitution, the ideals and values it articulates certainly underlie much of what we find in the Constitution and the laws made in accordance with it. This connection affords Lutherans an opportunity to speak of God the Creator for the sake of life within the left-hand kingdom. For example, when government officials or even some preachers use God in order to stress America's favored status and the American people as His chosen people,[1] Lutherans need to say that if God is the Creator of all things and if we are His creatures, then this

God-talk for the sake of civil righteousness cannot be too generic so as to be identified with a pantheistic monism or a Platonic dualism.

entails not only a gift on the part of God, but it also entails accountability and responsibility on our part. The very mention of God (especially as the Creator of heaven and earth and not only as the God of America) can serve to remind us that the state and our life within it are not ultimate. They do not possess a redemptive character. Instead, we stand beneath a Creator.

At the same time, such God-talk regarding the Creator will prove to be insufficient when it comes to speaking of God in the right-hand kingdom. For while we can affirm that the Creator exists, we cannot identify *who* that Creator is or how he regards us. Thus, when we come to the matter of spiritual righteousness, that is, to the matter of bringing people to God, comforting people with the Gospel, our God-talk must become distinctively Christian. Obviously, this means that we must mention Christ. But it is much more than that. It is not enough *that* we use the name of Jesus in the public square, but *how* we use the name Jesus. Once again, I would argue that often our talk about Christ is shorthand within our communities for a longhand conversation about Christ which identifies the God of the Gospel with the Triune God. Any talk about Christ or the Gospel apart from the Father and the Son is simply not the God of the Gospel. This is true in two ways.

First, Christology is the foundation of the Trinity. The question that Jesus put to His church ("Who do you say I am?," Matthew 16) can only be given in Trinitarian terms. Jesus appears in Galilee and makes it known that the God of the Old Testament is His Father. This bond is confessed in no uncertain terms by the Apostles Creed ("and His only Son,") and the Nicene Creed ("homouosios with the Father"). Jesus then reveals that He together with the Father will send the Spirit of God. In brief, the Father and the Spirit are not known apart from Christ. Apart from Christ we know very little of God. A Christ-less God is in the end a hidden God. The Reformation would uncover the depth of this insight. If the early church fathers looked at Christ and sought His divine nature, divine life, and divine significance, Luther looked and found God the Father Himself in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus and the Father are held so firmly together that we learn to think of God *only* in Christ who is the mirror of the Father's heart.

Second, the doctrine of the Trinity, in turn, answers the question, "Who is Jesus"? The Son is not known apart from the Father and the Spirit. Apart from the Father there is no Son. The Nicene Creed affirms that the Son finds His eternal origin in the eternal Father. He is placed on the Creator side on the divide between Creator and creation, that is, He is God. Just as the Son derives His being from the Father, so also the Son's mission only can be understood as one initiated by the Father and approved by the Father. Similarly, apart from the Spirit, there is no mission of the Son. After all, it is the Spirit who brought the Word into the world, it was the Spirit who pushed the mission of the Son forward in the wilderness, and it was by the power of the Spirit that the Son was raised from the dead. Similarly, apart from the Spirit, the message of Christ's death and resurrection would have remained hidden, and the gift of redemption would have remained undelivered. The bond between the Son and the Spirit is so tight that we can-

not speak of the Spirit revealing God outside of Christ.

It is in a Trinitarian context that two points must be made as essential to the Gospel—both which are scandals to those outside the faith. First, in Christ *alone* do we know God (contra all form of Arianism). Second, in Christ alone do we find God crucified in the flesh for us (contra all forms of gnosticsm-docetism). Herein lies the distinctively Christian witness deepened by Lutheran insights. It can't be said more succinctly and clearly than in the Smalcald Articles where Luther states that the first and chief article of the Christian religion is this: "That Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, 'was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.'" We must do everything we can to make sure that our talk about Jesus cannot be integrated or incorporated into a generic God-talk framework but, in fact, shatters it.

Conclusion

For purposes of civil righteousness and spiritual righteousness we must become more concrete in our speaking. It is not easy. Try the following experiment: For one week, avoid the use of the word "God." For the purpose of civil righteousness speak about the "Creator of heaven and earth." For the purpose of spiritual righteousness, we need to be explicitly Trinitarian in our speech. Instead of saying, "God loves you," try saying, "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ loves you." The latter forms of speech are more concrete because these names are embedded in history, that is, in an actual story centered on a cross. In our society, "God" is too easily detached and isolated from a particular person with a particular history. Such an experiment forces us to unpack the longhand version of what we mean by the shorthand word "God." It is hard, but at the same time it forces a person to consider things that we have taken for granted in the past, and that's not all bad.

For Discussion

1. Do most Christians in America identify "God" much differently than their non-Christian neighbors? Why do you say so?

2. How might Lutherans seek to shape God-talk in the public square?

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[1]During the War of Independence, it was not uncommon for preachers to compare King George with Pharaoh, George Washington with Moses, the Atlantic Ocean as the Red Sea, and America as the Promised Land.

The Challenges of American Civil Religion for the Church

DAVID L. ADAMS

The precise shape of American civil religion today is a result of the confluence of a variety of philosophical, religious, and historical streams.

When the sociologist Robert Bellah's famous article "Civil Religion in America" (the article that first drew the attention of the academic world to the notion of American civil religion) appeared in 1967, Bellah's "discovery" was greeted by some as the unmasking of a profound (and in the eyes of a few, disturbing) American cultural phenomenon, and by others with the yawn of those who find tedious the academic stating of the obvious. The latter reaction illustrates a common problem with discussions of civil religion: it all seems so self-evident once you have heard it that it appears to be belaboring the obvious. Perhaps that is one reason that most pastors, indeed most Christians, in America have never taken the time to consider the nature of American civil religion, its impact on American culture in general, and especially the challenges that it presents for the ministries of congregations that confess the biblical Christianity of the Lutheran Confessions. These are important matters for the church at the beginning of the twenty-first century. However obvious what we will have to say about civil religion may seem once we have heard it, it nonetheless bears saying, for it is all too often the case that in life, in marriage, and in the church, very important things often go unsaid simply because we believe them to be so obvious that they do not require articulation.

Defining Civil Religion

If the academic study of American civil religion can be said to begin with Robert Bellah, civil religion itself did not. Indeed, if the sociologist Emil Durkheim is to be believed, every community, every definable group of people, has a religions dimension. Before him, the French political philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) declared that, at the head of every political society, there stands a god. Indeed, from Plato onward, political philosophers have recognized the importance of religion as a factor in national—today we might say cultural—formation. The reason for such observations is clear: human communities are assemblies of beings seeking meaning. It is only natural that beings seeking meaning should seek it not only for themselves individually, but also for the communities that they form. Thus, it is very nearly inevitable that every culture has some form of a civil religion, at least a civil religion in the broad sense of a religious ideology that is both shaped by and helps to shape its collective consciousness.

The term "civil religion" occurs for the first time in Book 4, Chapter 8 of Rousseau's *The Social Contract* (1762). There, Rousseau argues that by teaching that the spiritual kingdom was separate from the political kingdom, Jesus instigated "those intestine dissensions which have never ceased to agitate the Christian peoples." It was to undo the mischief that the teaching of Jesus introduced into the body politic that Rousseau posited the need of the modern state for a civil religion, a minimalist religion that would meet the needs of the state. Rousseau describes these needs in the following words:

"It is of consequence to the State that each of its citizens should have a religion which will dispose him to love his duties; but the dogmas of that religion interest neither the State nor its members except as far as they affect morality and those duties which he who professes them is required to discharge toward others....There is therefore a purely civil profession of faith, the articles of which it is the business of the Sovereign to arrange, not precisely

as the dogmas of religion, but as sentiments of sociability without which it is impossible to be either a good citizen or a faithful subject."

For our purposes, then, the term civil religion is defined as a commonly-held religious ideology that is both shaped by and helps to shape its collective consciousness of a society, and which serves the interests of the state by promoting public morality, encouraging citizens to do their duty, and legitimizing the state and its laws.

The Doctrines of Civil Religion

Rousseau proceeds to define the four necessary dogmas of this civil religion:
(a) the existence of a powerful, wise, and benevolent Divinity, who foresees and provides for the life to come;
(b) the happiness of the just;
(c) the punishment of the wicked; and
(d) the sanctity of the social contract and the laws.

These "dogmas" serve the needs of the state in three ways. First, while Rousseau held that the modern state is grounded in a social contract between free and equal citizens rather than in the divine right of kings, he nonetheless understood that such a social contract needed (at least for the common man) to be rooted in some transcendent reality. Thus, the first (in the sense of the foundational) function of civil religion, for Rousseau, was to provide legitimacy to the state itself and for its laws. Flowing from the legitimacy thus established, civil religion, as Rousseau conceived it, would serve the need of the state in two other ways. The hope of a life to come, coupled with the happiness of the good and the punishment of the wicked, served the state by encouraging citizens to perform their duties rather than seeking their own individual will. For Rousseau, enlightened citizens would do this by nature; the less enlightened were likely to need some additional motivation. Finally, the existence of a god who hands out rewards and punishments based on behavior provides a similar motivation toward moral goodness, thus serving the interest of the state in preserving a moral order.

To this list of the positive teachings of civil religion, Rousseau adds one false doctrine that civil religion must unequivocally damn: intolerance. As noted in Rousseau's words quoted previously, the only interest of the state is in requiring those "dogmas" that serve the interests of the state. Beyond these requirements, no other dogmas may be allowed to be imposed by the state or its members upon others within the state. Thus, intolerance is the great (and only) heresy of Rousseau's civil religion.

The Development of an American Civil Religion

American civil religion has not developed in precisely the form that Rousseau envisioned that civil religion would, but it has very nearly done so. American civil religion is the interpretation of the uniquely American experience in the light of this specific culture's quest for transcendent meaning, and its exact form is a reflection of that distinctly American experience. Thus, the precise shape of American civil religion today is a result of the confluence of a variety of philosophical, religious, and historical streams. Among these are:
(1) the political and moral philosophies of the Enlightenment;
(2) Protestant Christianity;
(3) the national moral crises of slavery, the Civil War, and the legacy of racism;
(4) the quest to define an American agenda since World War II; and
(5) the exchange of "the melting pot" for "the rainbow" and the dominant self-conception of American society.

Under these influences, American civil religion has assumed its present form, its public expression having been shaped by its three greatest

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theologians: Thomas Jefferson (the American Moses), Abraham Lincoln (the American Jesus), and Ronald Reagan (the American Paul). It is perhaps not surprising that all three of these men share some significant similarities: they were all quite religious, but were not active adherents of any particular church body; they each had a strong moral sense and a strong sense of public duty; and they each had a significant role in shaping and articulating America's national direction during their era.

The Functions of Civil Religion in American Public Life

First, the basic functions of civil religion have evolved in a way that is close to, but not quite exactly as Rousseau envisioned. In practice, democracy in America has not needed to depend upon civil religion as a source of legitimacy: it has become self-legitimizing. So the legitimizing function of civil religion has decreased in America. Civil religion in America, especially in the last century, has become less a force for legitimizing the state and motivating public action (the roles that Rousseau envisaged) and more a force for providing coherence in a religiously diverse society. Thus, in the American experience, civil religion has come to serve the following four functions:
(1) securing the blessings of god for the state and/or society;
(2) contributing to the coherence of the society by establishing a fundamental aspect of the identity that connects the individual to the community;
(3) providing the society with a unifying rallying point in times of national crisis; and
(4) providing a least-common denominator for the national ideological and moral discourse.

Of these four, the first is especially shaped by the Christian ethos and is reflected in songs such as "God Bless America" and in the frequent application of 2 Chronicles 7:14 to America by evangelical Christians. The second provides a counter-balance to the prevailing American ethos of radical individualism. The third is a reflection of the fundamental religiosity of the majority of Americans. The fourth both serves as a unifying element in a religiously diverse society and reflects the American shift away from a morality-based ethics to a values-based ethics.

The Distinctive Doctrines of American Civil Religion

Not only have the functions of civil religion in America transformed as a result of the American experience, but its basic doctrines have developed as well. In addition to the four general doctrines of civil religion as articulated by Rousseau (the existence of a powerful, wise, and benevolent Divinity; the happiness of the just; the punishment of the wicked; and the sanctity of the social contract and the laws), two additions to Rousseau's minimalist confession have become a part of the specifically American brand of civil religion:
(1) the notion of America's manifest destiny, and
(2) the anonymity of God.

Together with Rousseau's doctrines, these constitute the chief teachings of American civil religion.

Manifest Destiny

From very early in our nation's history, people of faith in America have cultivated a sense of the unique, divinely appointed role of

America in the world. This quite common sentiment, often employing the biblical image of America as a "city set upon a hill," is found both in the sermons of early American preachers and in the pronouncements of American politicians and preachers today. In early America, there were also more explicit allusions to the special place of America in the heart of God. One of the most common of these was frequent comparison of the American experience with that of Old Testament Israel, to the point that colonial-era preachers referred to this nation as the "American Israel." Lincoln expressed a similar idea when he referred to America as "an almost chosen nation." America, at least in the minds of a great many Americans past and present, is perhaps not quite God's chosen people, but very nearly so, perhaps only one slight step below Israel.

One might argue that the view that America occupies a special place in the heart of God is merely the American version of Rousseau's principle of legitimization. It is clearly closely related. However, the fact that the chosenness and special-ness of America in American civil religion go far beyond serving to merely legitimize the state and its laws, and provide for America a uniquely religious identity suggests that it should be regarded as a separate principle.

The Anonymity of God

The anonymity of God in American civil religion is a more recent development. For most of America's history the common understanding of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment was that the federal government (and later the states) could not favor one Christian church body over another by designating one the state church or granting to it special privileges under the law. Christianity in general, however, did undeniably occupy a *de facto* privileged position in both the American consciousness and in the American legal system. Thus, when the term "god" was used in public discourse, the vast majority of Americans construed that term to mean the God who revealed Himself in the Old and New Testaments (or at least the Old Testament in the case of American Jews). There always have been some who did not share this concept of god, but their interpretation was largely on the fringes of American civil life.

To understand how this has changed, one must first apprehend an underlying general shift in American cultural attitudes. The American experience always has been rooted in the notion of inclusion. This notion of inclusion, however, underwent a dramatic change in the latter half of the twentieth century. For most of American history, inclusion meant integration. The United States stretched out her arms to embrace those who would come to her shores with the understanding that becoming American meant giving up something old to become a part of something new and better. Immigrants were expected to give up their former national identity and become a part of this new nation unencumbered by the prejudices and distinctions of the old world. Thus, Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919) reflected the common sentiment of his age when he called upon "hyphenated-Americans" to shed their hyphens and become one new nation and one new people. In response, German-Americans, Italian-Americans, Japanese-Americans, Chinese-Americans, and Irish-Americans came together in this new land to become one hyphen-free people: Americans. This is the spirit that the British playwright Israel Zangwill (1864-1926) captured so eloquently in the words of his character David Quixano, "America is God's Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming!"

During the course of the last half-century, this fundamental

American self-understanding changed. As Jesse Jackson (b. 1941) once said, "I hear that melting-pot stuff a lot, and all I can say is that we haven't melted." So, as a society we rejected integration as the basis of inclusion in the American identity and promoted diversity in its place. With this shift came the exchange of the melting pot for the rainbow as the dominant metaphor for expressing the self-conception of American society.

In practical terms, this shift has meant not merely the recognition of the equality of persons of different races and the value of non-European cultures, but the encouragement of the use of languages other than English, the invention of new culture-affirming holidays such as Kwanzaa, and even the active promotion of homosexuality as a legitimate alternative sexual lifestyle. More to the point, within the realm of religion it has meant that all religions and all gods—and in the term gods we include the devil himself today—are to be equally tolerated, if not honored and respected within American culture.

This active promotion of religious diversity has created an American pantheism. In the ancient world, the various gods each had a name, commonly related to some aspect of the god's supposed character or nature, and often simply the common noun related to the particular aspect of creation that was thought to be connected to the god's nature and under his sphere of influence. Since there are many aspects to nature, there are many gods. The subsequent panoply of divinities was most commonly conceived of in one (or often both) of two ways, as either an extended family—generally one which extended over at least three generations—in which the high god was the patriarch, or as a governmental council which the high god rules as a king. As the common mythology of the ancient world spread westward and eastward from its Sumerian roots and encountered other gods, those gods were incorporated into the pantheon either by adding them to the pantheon, as Baal, Anat, and Astarte were added to the Egyptian pantheon at the time of the Hyksos, or by identifying them with an existing god, as in the case of the Roman Jupiter being identified with the Greek Zeus, who was earlier identified with the Canaanite El, who was earlier identified with the Sumerian Enlil. Indeed, often both of these processes happened at the same time.

All of this is easy enough within the framework of a true polytheistic religion. A problem arises, however, when this process came to American shores. While there is evidence that this is changing, the common American public consciousness is still largely shaped by the Judeo-Christian concept of monotheism. Within the framework of a monotheistic conception of god, one cannot simply add gods; one can only expand the pantheon by way of association. Thus, in the new American pantheon, all the various names by which men call gods are identified with a single spirit-being, malleable (perhaps we should just be honest and say vague) enough to accommodate any and all religious conceptions.

But what shall we call this spirit-being? Neither Jesus, not Allah, nor Buddha, nor Krishna will do, though all of these may be identified with the spirit-being and with one another in the public consciousness. Indeed, to use any name for this spirit-being would be to run the risk of alienating the religious convictions of someone, for it would appear to show favoritism in one direction or another. So, we seem to have concluded, god is anonymous. He (or she or it) has no name. God is simply god. Calling the spirit-being god offends no one (we think), for it allows each person to define god according to his own religious understanding (what could be more generous than that?), and it preserves the First Amendment by showing no favoritism.

The anonymity of god in current American civil religion fits Rousseau's conception of civil religion very well. Rousseau's concern, as we noted, was to encourage people to respect the social contract that binds them together, to live moral lives, and to inspire them to choose duty over self-interest when those two conflict. As Rousseau noted, for those purposes a powerful and benevolent deity is useful, but anything beyond that is likely to cause dissension and conflict, and therefore is both unnecessary and undesirable. The doctrine of the anonymity of god goes beyond Rousseau's general conception of god as all-powerful, wise, benevolent, and providing for some kind of life after death. But it does so in a way that affirms his principle of toleration. For to give god a name in the public square of a religiously diverse society would be exclusionary, and therefore intolerant.

The Challenges of American Civil Religion

It is inevitable that there should be tension between a religious ideology that serves the interests of the state and the biblical Christianity of the Lutheran Confessions. The promotion of American civil religion by the broader society challenges certain aspects of this biblical Christianity. While the scope of this brief paper prevents examining these challenges in great detail, it is at least useful to identify the main areas of tension and the ways that pastors may be prepared to address them when they arise in our congregations.

Challenge No. 1: Confronting the False Sense of Security

The chief spiritual danger of American civil religion is the sense of being right before God that it may promote among those who do not know Christ. Fallen man is always tempted to think that his condition before God is better than it actually is. Far from embracing the Word of God that convicts us of our sins, we avoid and neglect it. Civil religion, with its many outward expressions of piety, reenforces in the lost the sense that they are right before God by defining religion in terms of general morality and civic duty. For civic ends, it promotes the notion that those who do good deeds are rewarded by God and those who do bad deeds are punished by Him. This civil righteousness is at odds with the righteousness that comes by faith in Jesus Christ, for it regards Christ's salvation as unnecessary.

By constantly telling people that religion consists of a general, vague morality, civil religion undermines the preaching of God's Law, and thereby undermines the preaching of the Gospel as well. For preachers, the temptation is to give way to this cultural pressure and reduce the Gospel to what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace," which he defined as the "forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth, the love of God taught as the Christian 'conception' of God." Such a gospel, disconnected from the Law and proclaimed to those who have not repented, is no gospel at all. "Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves," Bonhoeffer wrote. Had he been writing of civil religion, he might have said that cheap grace is the grace that society bestows upon us for being decent citizens. It is this false grace, this false sense that we are right before God because we are generally good citizens and good people, that the pastor must constantly confront in civil religion. The only way to confront it is through a genuine and authentic preaching of the Law with its call for true repentance.

Challenge No. 2: Affirming the Scandal of Particularity

The biblical faith affirms the existence one God and one God alone, who has revealed His name to His people and teaches them to call upon Him by name. Moreover, this one true God became man in Jesus Christ and died, was buried, and rose from the dead to

It is the nature of god-talk in civil religion to use words in such a way as to cover over differences between religious teachings for the sake of civic harmony.

become the only way that God has provided for fallen humanity to be saved from eternal death and damnation. The biblical claim to the uniqueness of the True God and the specific ways in which He has worked within history to accomplish our salvation, theologians sometimes call the "scandal of particularity." This scandal of particularity is an offense to American civil religion, for the claim that there is one God, one way to be reconciled to God, and one true divine teaching is the essence of the intolerance that Rousseau feared and American civil religion reviles. Yet without it there is no Christianity.

It is the nature of god-talk in civil religion to use words in such a way as to cover over differences between religious teachings for the sake of civic harmony. In civil religion, "god" is just the spirit-being and "Jesus" is just an especially honored moral teacher. The Christian pastor cannot be a party to the civil promotion of the anonymous God. If we were to use language in such a way as to allow the True God to be confused or identified with other gods, or Jesus to be regarded as simply a moral teacher, we would be breaking the First and Second Commandments and denying Christ as surely as if we were to do so directly and openly. Thus, it is incumbent upon us, when we speak in the public square, not to use the term "god" or even the name "Jesus" in such a way that our hearers may easily construe those terms according to their own framework of belief, but to fill out our use of those words with proper biblical confession of who the True God is, and what He has done in Jesus Christ.

Challenge No. 3: Not Confusing the Kingdoms

God has given the church and the state distinctive roles and means. Because it uses religion for the ends of the state, civil religion tends to blur those God-given distinctions in such a way that the state takes on some roles proper to the church, and the church may be in danger of becoming an adjunct to the state. American civil religion, with its teaching of manifest destiny, is especially prone to encouraging the blurring of these distinctions. In American churches, where faithful Christians are rightly reminded of God's teaching that we should be good and faithful citizens by the placing of an American flag in the sanctuary, there is a real danger of crossing over this line, especially in times of national crisis.

Pastors should take regular opportunities to promote Christian discipleship by teaching the balanced biblical understanding of the relationship between the church and the state. We should remind Christians of their God-given calling to be good and faithful citizens. At the same time we should emphasize that, like the saints described in Hebrews 11, we are citizens of a "city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God," (Hebrews 11:10), who are "longing for a better country—a heavenly one" (Hebrews 11:16).

Challenge No. 4: Seeing that Civil Religion Is Not Entirely Bad

Despite the challenges described above, civil religion plays a useful and important role in our nation. In the civil sphere, it does promote good citizenship and harmony in society. These are valuable social functions that contribute to the common good of our land, and they should not go unrecognized by us. Beyond that, civil religion

serves the interest of the church by creating a space in the public square for religious discourse to occur in a way that does not violate the First Amendment of our nation's constitution. It would be a harmful thing, to us and to society, if all religious speech were banned from the public arena. Civil religion keeps religious issues and religious language before the public.

Even though the god-talk of civil religion does not take a form that we can accept, it does provide an opportunity for us to engage others and teach the truth about God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ, much like the altar to the unknown god on the Areopagus in Athens created an opportunity for the apostle Paul to witness to Christ. Thus, while we cannot accept American civil religion as a substitute for orthodox Christian teaching, and we always must be wary of the challenges that it presents, we ought not dismiss it as a wholly undesirable thing with no merit whatsoever.

Challenge No. 5: Maintaining Engagement

In the face of the challenges that civil religion poses to the biblical Christianity of the Lutheran Confessions, and in view of the warning that God gave through the apostle Paul that in the last days there would come those who had a "form of piety, but denying its power," and cautioning the faithful to "have nothing to do with these," one might be tempted to withdraw from engagement with the broader culture altogether. This would be a great error. Paul's concern in writing to Timothy was that the danger that the outward appearance of piety might deceive and mislead the faithful. The proper form in which "having nothing to do with these" should take is not withdrawal from the world (a course that neither Paul nor the other apostles ever advocated), but an aware and faithful engagement with the world.

In sending the church into the world with the mission of making disciples, Jesus thrusts His people into an engagement with the cultures and states "to the ends of the earth." To proclaim the Gospel to those who do not know the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the church must be among unbelievers. The Great Commission obligates the church to be in the world without becoming of the world in order to witness to the world. The love of Christ for the lost compels us aggressively to seek out every opportunity to bear witness to the truth of God in Jesus Christ. Withdrawal into a safe corner can never be an option for the people of God. What we seek, and what we must not compromise is faithful engagement, an engagement with the lost and with our society that does not compromise the true and entire teaching of God in His Word, but boldly proclaims the whole Gospel in every culture to the ends of the earth.

For Discussion

The opening paragraph mentions Robert Bellah's 1967 article, "Civil Religion in America." In that article, Bellah suggested that American civil religion was undergoing a "time of trial." As he saw it, civil religion in America would have to find a way to "draw on religious traditions beyond the sphere of biblical religion alone."

1. Has Bellah's prediction about civil religion proven right? In what ways?

2. The essay argues that "civil religion undermines the preaching of God's Law." How might pastors reckon with this tendency and appropriately "preach the Law"?

The Pastor as Religious and Civic Leader: Breaking with Quietism

RICHARD H. WARNECK

The response of the pastoral office to hard questions put by the laity in their struggle as Christians in a non-Christian culture is frequently stone cold silence.

Significant for The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) was the closing of its Office of Government Information in Washington, D.C. The office had been the Synod's liaison with the federal government and a host of related entities in the nation's capital. It was shuttered in the year 2000. Though hardly noticed at the time, the loss of the Information Office, with no replacement, raises the question: Is the Missouri Synod on a path of retreat from the civic arena?

Not only the national church, but local congregations and pastors seem to be in retreat. For various reasons, pastors are reluctant to grapple with tough issues for Christians in society. A pastor may be unsure of his ground. He is hesitant, hardly inclined to break out and speak up in the public square. How may a churchman wield positive influence beyond his own element, the local congregation? The question eludes the pastor. Lacking confidence, he thinks it preferable and certainly more comfortable to remain "safe" within the accepted boundaries of the Lutheran Word and Sacrament ministry. No one will question preaching, baptizing, and serving before the Lord's altar. This is the regular Lutheran pastoral ministry. The pastor reasons he best stay put and be faithful in that ministry the shepherd is called to do. Removed and isolated within perceived walls of a kind, a pastor quietly may excuse himself from addressing issues which concern Christians as citizens of the nation, or even as members of the race in the twenty-first century. Meanwhile, the people who assemble for worship on the Lord's day yearn within their hearts unobtrusively, yet painfully because they miss even a hint of reflection on the question posed by the apostle Peter, and paraphrased by Francis Schaeffer, "How then shall we live?"

I. Quietism's Grip on Lutherans

Clearly, preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments and speaking the Lord's Absolution in the Name and in the stead of the Lord Jesus Christ is the "bread and butter" of the church's life. This is also true of the pastoral office! By faithful execution of this public ministry, the Holy Spirit works and strengthens saving faith in Jesus Christ (AC V; XXVIII, 8-10). The importance of this ministry of the means of grace which trained and qualified men are called to administer, and to which they are committed in ordination, we affirm without reservation. No question here. Without a doubt, this ministry is from the Lord, His institution and mandate, His design for His delivery of His gifts to His people! What is questioned is the notion that faithfulness in the pastoral office happens in comfortable isolation. This retreat mode affects preaching in the church, reducing sermons overall to a narrow program. There is little within the accepted liturgical preaching tradition that speaks beyond life in the church. If this program is rich with benefits for worshipers as is stated frequently, it surely may be further enriched when the pastor is aware that his hearers spend almost all of their lives, not in the church, but in the public square. Is preaching in our churches culturally specific with Gospel to help Christians with their confession in today's world? Or has ecclesiastical correctness all but paralyzed pastors and people in the Lutheran church?

The church's public ministry may be faithful in the right things—preaching the Gospel, administering the sacraments according to Christ's institution, following the prescribed liturgical calendar and rubrics

held in common by the *Una Sancta* through the centuries—and be seriously hampered by self-imposed privatization. The response of the pastoral office to hard questions put by the laity in their struggle as Christians in a non-Christian culture is frequently stone cold silence. The message is, "Repent and believe the Gospel!" That is the right message! But that message comes across as something like a putdown when heard repeatedly Sunday after Sunday by the lay Christian who pleads from his or her place in a hostile world, "I believe, help my unbelief!" Pastors themselves would just as soon avoid the fray, and they are hesitant to prepare and train for the contest, for the good fight of faith. Thus, an open invitation extended in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* to religious leaders to participate in training to become more effective civic leaders, a workshop offered by Coro Leadership Center, would expectantly receive only passing notice. What are we seeing? Has it come to this: Lutherans elect to withdraw into obscurity? If so, in the name of what authority, teaching, or confession?

This preference for isolation and its intellectual and spiritual comfort levels, the preoccupation with themes having no reach into the world today, and the silence of the pulpit on issues which draw thunderous divine outrage from the Word of God are signs in our collective Lutheran life that a grand pall has descended over the church. This is the pall of "quietism." Kenneth Hagen references this term from H. Richard Niebuhr's critique of Luther's two kingdom theology in Niebuhr's work, *Christ and Culture*. The foregoing lengthy analysis of the local Lutheran ministry and the pastoral office is one example of quintessential "quietism"! Five decades have passed since the publication of *Christ and Culture*. In that time, have we advanced beyond Niebuhr's criticisms? Not that we are accountable to Niebuhr or to any other religious or social-political authority. Still, we are surely accountable to the Lutheran Confessions, and indirectly we give account also to the larger heritage of Lutheran leadership, beginning with the giants of the Reformation era. The question before us may be put this way: Is faithful ministry in the Lutheran church tantamount to quietism and its nuances: isolation, silence, and passivity? Indeed, we should recast the question and ask, "How does the Lutheran ethos—theology, history, outlook—give rise to a proactive ministry which helps Lutheran Christians engage the present culture in dialog for the purpose of faithful witness to the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ?"

The Reformers of the sixteenth century were hardly "quiet." They were boisterous at times, especially when addressing the emperor and the princes. What a contrast to Lutheranism today! Pristine quietism in our time all but ignores the civil authorities. It happens in our churches when celebrated moments in the nation's life—Memorial Day, Independence Day, Veterans Day—are passed over for rigid attention on the propers of the church year. The paucity of hymns and spiritual songs, bearing themes of God and nation or Christians living as citizens, says much about the influence of quietism. Notwithstanding, the Epistle, Romans 13:1-10, and the Gospel lesson, Matthew 22:15-22, were appointed readings in the church on the sixteenth and twenty-second Sundays after Pentecost, respectively. This is commendable. Yet, it is atypical to hear from a Lutheran pulpit: "Get out and vote!" In a democracy, the electorate is chief. One could say, the people are "Caesar." Honoring "Caesar," then, is casting that vote in the ballot box. "Write your congressman!" is another muted encouragement. This silence is inconsistent with Dr. Martin Luther's vocal overtures to the princes. Though he would not instruct the princes how they should live or rule, Luther always

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was prepared to help a prince to become a Christian, convinced as he was that rulers could not govern properly apart from the Word of God. And what about appeals to save the soul of America? A fair number of Lutheran divines shudder at the very idea. Such appeals warrant close scrutiny. Nevertheless, there is something to be said for speaking to the blatant flaunting of the Ten Commandments in society. From time to time, Lutheran pulpits may advocate a standard of morality for the populace that is consistent with natural law, or at least commensurate with basic human instincts. Who knows, such "boisterous" outbursts, as some would judge, may encourage a Christian in the pew to call others to moral integrity.

II. Quietism in Tension with Activism

Quietism has settled over the church. Most seriously affected are the leaders, the pastors. The terms "pastor" and "leader" may not be synonymous. But they are not antonyms. Pastors as leaders would be incompatible if leadership is the strategic movement of people and institutions. However, when leadership is understood as the formal exercise of any sharing of the Word together with its complement of public administration of the sacraments—the means whereby Christ is both feeding and leading His church—then the pastoral office is our Lord's gift of public leadership to His church.[1] Leadership, according to this understanding, is precisely what Melanchthon discusses in his comments on the statement in Hebrews 13:17, "Obey your leaders!" The apostle requires obedience to the Gospel; it does not create an authority for bishops (pastors) apart from the Gospel. Thus, the pastoral office exercises leadership in the church only by the Gospel (AP XXVIII, 20).

Does the principle of leadership under the Gospel and by the Gospel make the case for quietism air tight? Does it monitor and curtail what pastors may say in the public square? Finally, does this Gospel principle prevent pastors from exhorting congregations as both Christians and citizens? That a pastor could be a leader in both realms, the spiritual and the temporal, as the title of this essay suggests, may be unthinkable for proponents of quietism. Probably, they view such leadership as pure activism. They may point to Richard Hooker, the sixteenth-century Anglican. It was Hooker and Hadrian Saravia who argued that the same person could hold both the civil and the spiritual offices—that a single individual could simultaneously be an officer of the Crown and an officer of the church.[2] Such an arrangement was viewed by separatists as full-blown activism. It meant that the clergy, committed to the spiritual realm by their ordination, placed themselves in the position of using the office to exercise authority in the affairs of the state and government. They could bend the civil authority to advance the cause of the church. To advocates of quietism, this is reprehensible. Rightly so!

Valid concerns notwithstanding, quietism is not above close scrutiny. Is there a case to be made for privatization of the office, essentially keeping it cloistered behind ecclesiastical walls of one kind or another? Some of the tacit arguments for quietism seem respectable, at least on the

surface. First, the pastoral office is set apart by reason of its origin as God's gift through Christ's words and institution: Matthew 18:18-20; John 20:21-23; Luke 24:45-49. These Scriptures reveal that Jesus gave the office "according to the Gospel" (*iuxta evangelium*).[3] The apostles received the office as the Gospel ministry: Ephesians 3:8-9; 1 Timothy 1:12; Ephesians 4:7, 11-14; Acts 10:39-42. And the office functions with particular prescribed authority according to the Gospel by divine right (*de iure divino*). This authority is the power of order, to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments, and the power of jurisdiction, to excommunicate those who are guilty of public offenses or to absolve them if they are converted and ask for absolution (AP XXVIII, 12-14).

Second, isolation of the office befitting notions of quietism seems to have support because the power of order and the power of jurisdiction granted to bishops or pastors are exercised only within the spiritual realm where the Gospel rules. This realm is distinguished from the temporal realm where rule is exercised under God by the civil authorities with the force of the sword (Romans 13:1-8). Bishops do not possess this or any other temporal authority by divine right.

Third, ordination into the office commits a man singularly to preaching the Gospel, forgiving sins, judging doctrine and condemning doctrine contrary to the Gospel, administering the sacraments, forgiving sins, and excluding or excommunicating public sinners. This ministry is accomplished, not by human power, but by God's Word alone (AC XXVIII, 21, 5). Taken together, the office as gift from Christ, the office vested by divine right with the power of order and the power of jurisdiction, and the office to which a called pastor is committed by ordination, is a strong case by inference for quietism!

III. Quietism Reconsidered

But the case made tacitly, if not formally, for quietism is not the last word. Bishops (pastors) possess other authority, by human right. This story is seldom heard because called and ordained pastors are principally instruments to convey the Gospel and its blessings (AC V,1). The pastoral office is that vehicle through which the eternal things and gifts, namely, eternal righteousness, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life, are imparted (AC XXVII, 8-9). Yet, such authority under the Gospel by divine right does not in any way inhibit the office from exercising extended ministry by human right. A door is opened! We affirm that what bishops do according to human authority has nothing at all to do with the office of the Gospel (AC XXVIII, 20). But there is much to be done by human right that may edify the church.

The Augustana does not set forth the scope of this extended ministry in detail beyond the mention of such things as making judgments in matrimonial cases and in tithes (AC XXVIII, 29). Do the bishops have the power to introduce ceremonies in the church or establish regulations concerning foods, holy days, and the different orders of the clergy? The Confessions reserve judgment. They seem to be flexible on this point, except that they emphatically reject any initiatives which are contrary to the Gospel. For example, they reject church laws which require obedience in order to make satisfaction for sins and obtain grace, all of which effectively blaspheme the glory of Christ's merit (AC XXVIII, 34-35).

The bishops may name saints' days, designate canonical hours, and issue other regulations, as long as they do not burden consciences, e.g., when they attach to the discipline of fasting merit by which God is supposedly reconciled (AC XXVIII, 41). Indeed, the bishops even may receive the power of the sword granted

by kings and emperors for the civil administration of their lands (AC XXVIII, 19). Certainly, such authority is not by a commission of the Gospel (AC XXVIII, 1, 2). Such an arrangement is vulnerable for the reason that the devil never stops cooking and brewing the spiritual and temporal kingdoms into each other, as Luther has stated. Great care is essential here. Neither the church nor bishops may interfere at all with the government and temporal authority. For this reason, any role exercising civil authority may be ill-advised for bishops (cf. John 18:36; Philippians 3:20; 2 Corinthians 10:4, 5; The Treatise, 31). Yet, we are compelled to say, when properly understood, the two kingdom doctrine in Lutheran theology does not inhibit the pastoral office in matters beyond exercise of the office by divine right, namely, the administration of the Gospel (AC V). Christian pastors are at liberty to pursue ministry by human right.

Taking the liberty to engage in extended ministry was characteristic of Martin Luther. Kenneth Hagen observes how Luther lived consciously in both horizontal kingdoms: in the visible earthly kingdom as a citizen of Wittenberg and in the invisible heavenly kingdom as a Christian in the company of all the saints and angels. Furthermore, Luther was an instrument of God's left-hand government in the created order as professor, father, and civil judge; and he was an instrument of God's right-hand government in the church as priest and preacher.[4] How, then, might today's pastor be such an instrument? We are not suggesting something completely new. We have long recognized that pastors are such agents in the temporal realm when they marry people. They have that authority by human right, and they exercise this right within the worshiping community where spiritual rights are paramount. Also, by human right, pastors may serve as civic leaders in such capacities as members of local school boards or other civic commissions or agencies.

Three specific examples demonstrate kinship with Luther's engagement in the public square. First, when Christian students attending public schools must pursue prescribed studies of other religions, but are denied the opportunity in this same setting to study Christian teaching, much less to express Christian convictions, their pastor should register an informed objection; and he should offer positive counter-recommendations to school officials. Second, while pastors may not presume to be the moral conscience of the community, they may offer sound moral guidance to public officials. For instance, the pastor may speak words of caution when a local zoning commission receives from a proprietor an application for a business permit to open an adult store which sells pornographic materials. Third, pastors and theologians of the Synod may push for funds to reopen a public affairs office in the nation's capital for the express purpose of establishing a "think tank" staffed by theologians and possibly ethicists. At the invitation of government officials, these church professionals may provide responsible reflection on moral issues when it comes to formulating and passing legislation, interpreting existing laws, or executing the same.

In these and similar situations, pastors would do well to follow Luther's example in addressing civic concerns. He was convinced that it is God with whom we deal in both spiritual and temporal matters. Could it be that Luther had little patience with hair-splitting distinctions over these matters when initiatives were called for in either realm? Regarding such initiatives, there was not a more proactive Lutheran than Martin Luther himself. He got involved. He urged the Wittenbergers to drop their staves and put up their swords, open

their mouths and pick up their pens. They should follow the example of his own speaking and writing through which the Holy Spirit did more to correct pope, bishop, priests than all the emperors, kings, and princes by the power of the sword.[5] Against the outrage of man-made laws pressed by the papists, Luther voiced strong objection. He urged others do so as well, in order to preserve the purity of the Gospel.[6] Was Luther ever hesitant to step forward and address the civil authorities? No, when there was a problem, he took action. For instance, when the clergy were slow to initiate much-needed reforms, Luther wrote to Nicholas von Amsdorf, "The time for silence is past, and the time to speak has come, as Ecclesiastes says [3:7]." Attached to his letter was the stirring treatise, "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate."[7] Because rulers serve by divine authority, and Luther also was a servant of God, he spoke and wrote, exhorting the princes about their duty according to the Word of God.

Quietism holds the modern church under stress and inhibits initiatives which the church and its pastors may engage by human right. The LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations cited Robert Benne's four "possible connections" for the institutional church and politics.[8] When thinking about the church addressing the body politic, most Lutheran pastors do not move beyond the first level, indirect and unintentional influence. Essentially, this is quietism! Then reflect for a moment. If the Gospel approves governments and submits us to them, as Melanchthon argues persuasively against those who considered the Gospel a threat to the civil order (AP. XVI, 5, 6, 8), should not pastors be free to lead congregations to establish stronger "connections" of influence with the civil authorities? May pastors exercise civic leadership when there is a need to do so? That need for leadership is acute when legislative bodies press into law measures contrary to the will of God. When these things occur, pastoral leadership will be proactive.

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In the United States, the electorate has a voice in making laws which determine the course of the nation, the states, and local communities. But that voice is frequently silent in the churches for fear of commingling the two kingdoms, or meddling in the governance of the people, or pressing government into the mold of the church's agenda. These are valid concerns addressed by the Lutheran Confessions. Yet, these same Confessions permit the church's pastors and the people to be proactive in the public square, especially when the issues appear to be even more acute than in the sixteenth century. Perhaps this is the hour in America for Christians to shed timidity and hesitation and to shake off fears of doing it all wrong. It is quite apparent that certain initiatives on the part of Christians are essential if all citizens of this land shall continue to enjoy the blessing of a decent society, a God-pleasing populace.

We would like to be spared the details, but we cannot escape what some observers see in America. The election in November 2002 demonstrated how the nation is divided along one major fault, the protection of human life versus policies which tolerate careless and cruel indifference to life. The candidates lined

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up, pro-life or pro-abortion. At the heart were beliefs, also positions adopted by the candidates. But elections come and go, and the discussion does not happen in the churches where Christians might be urged to take courage and vote in support of positions which would deter the destruction of human life, the unborn child in the mother's womb. When the life issues hang in the balance, and other issues place personal and social morality on the line, then the collective vote of Christians is crucial. That vote could make a difference in the direction our nation takes.

How can Christians be silent when legislatures consider enacting bills which would legitimatize same-sex marriages, when school boards move to normalize homosexual and lesbian lifestyles, or require for public school children indoctrination in the basic teachings of the Muslim religion, or when educators are permitted to expunge from the curriculum every reference to creationism? In the face of such measures which are hostile not only to the Christian faith, but in some instances to the very natural constitution of human life, the pastoral office should lead the Christian community to take appropriate action. The alert pastor makes inquiries, secures reliable information, and prepares discussions for Christian groups who, with his guidance and encouragement, make overtures to lawmakers urging them to frame legislation consistent with natural law and the Ten Commandments. The pastor's plan for weekly sermons will include messages which are culturally specific as they expound faithfully the Scriptures. A sermon or two addressing the subject of the Christian family, in view of the twists and turns in the culture redefining "family," would be one example of culturally specific preaching.

Quietism has gripped the Lutheran church long enough to silence legitimate expression beyond the walls of the church and paralyze legitimate action for the welfare of society at large. Quietism is an outlook that should be short-lived! As an alternative to quietism, Martin Luther demonstrates what is proper religious and civic leadership. When Luther counseled preachers to make good Christians, who in turn would be the best of citizens, the Reformer was thinking about Christians in both realms, the spiritual and the temporal. Luther's outlook, we believe, encourages Lutherans to emerge from isolation, to end the silence, and to enter the public square and contribute to the good of society. This essay calls Lutheran pastors and people to break with quietism and step "out of the box!" Venture to speak boldly as the church in the world under Him who is Lord of all!

For Discussion

1. The Lutheran tradition has always confessed that Christians may participate in civil affairs (AC XVI). But under what conditions might a pastor, because he is a pastor, decline the opportunity to take a position of civic leadership?

2. When and how might a pastor respond and provide leadership when facing the following challenges:

a. Plans to open a gambling casino in the community.

b. Global warming.

c. Prayer in public schools.

d. Poverty and homelessness in the city.

e. Impending war.

f. Abortion.

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[1] Johnson, John F, "The Office of the Pastoral Ministry: Scriptural and Confessional Considerations." In *Church and Ministry: The Collected Papers of the 150th Anniversary Theological Convocation of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*, Jerald C. Joerz and Paul T. McCain, eds. (St. Louis: The Office of the President of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1998): 89.

[2] Hamburger, Philip, *The Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002): 35.

[3] Schrieber, Paul L, "Powers and Orders in the Church 'According to the Gospel': In Search of the Lutheran Ethos," *Ex officio*: Collected Essays on Church and The Holy Ministry, 5.

[4] Hagen, Kenneth, "Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms," *God And Caesar Revisited*, Luther Academy Conference Papers no. 1 (Spring 1995): 18.

[5] Luther, Martin, "A Sincere Admonition by Martin Luther to All Christians to Guard Against Insurrection and Rebellion, 1522." Trans. W. A. Lambert. Revised by Walther I. Brandt. Luther's Works, Vol. 45 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962): 67.

[6] Ibid., 71.

[7] Luther, Martin, "To The Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate, 1520." Trans. W. A. Lambert. Revised by James Atkinson. Luther's Works, Vol. 44 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966): 123.

[8] "Render unto Caesar . . . and Unto God: A Lutheran View of Church and State." A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1995): 67.

No Other Gods

ANDREW H. BARTELT

There is to be no other God because no other God has ransomed and redeemed His people, saved them by grace, through faith.

I

God's Word is unequivocal in its assertion that there is only one true God, and that through Him is the only way of salvation. The First Commandment puts it clearly and simply, "You will have no other gods besides Me." Any witness or worship that would identify other gods is not only false and vain, it is idolatry. As Luther notes (Large Catechism, Explanation to the First Commandment), "From the beginning he [God] has completely rooted out all idolatry, . . . just so in our day he overthrows all false worship so that all who persist in it must ultimately perish."

Thus, for Old Testament Israel, worship of other gods was excluded. Israel knew that the God of creation was also the God of their redemption, and that worship of any other gods was false. Still within the context of receiving the Ten Commandments at Sinai, the worship of the molten calf was condemned and punished as idolatry. Particularly heinous was the mixed worship and immorality in worshiping the Baal of Peor (Numbers 25:3). On the threshold of the Promised Land, Moses exhorts Israel that their identity as God's holy people was to avoid spiritual contamination with the gods of Canaan. "For thus you will do to them, their altars you will break down, their sacred stones you will smash, their Asherah poles you will cut down, and their idols you will burn in the fire. For you are a people holy to Yahweh your God. You He has chosen to be for Him a special people from all the peoples upon the face of the earth" (Deuteronomy 7:5-6, author's translation).

That this exclusive claim of the one true God ran counter to the culture of their day was as much of a concern to Old Testament Israel as it is to the church today. In his extremely helpful and insightful article in the October 2002 *Concordia Journal*, colleague David Adams observes that ancient religions were inherently syncretistic and inclusivistic, from the Sumerians on through to the Roman pantheon (*CJ*, 28:4, 371f.). He relates this same underlying principle to that which informs American civil religion. For those of us who confess that Jesus Christ is the only "Way, Truth, and Life," and that "salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12), such a scandal of particularity only highlights the gap between the culture of Christian belief and a culture of unbelief, even when the latter disguises itself as a culture of belief—in anything and everything!

So how does the First Commandment relate to our work and our words, to our witness and our worship in the midst of contemporary American culture? How can the public ministry have an appropriate presence in the public realm, when the public realm endorses other gods?

II

First of all, it is important to remember that the command to have no other gods is grounded in the Gospel. This is not an exclusive claim by a God interested in protectionism or isolationism, nor is it simply a show of force to assert absolute power and authority. To be sure, there is no other God. This is the God of all creation and thus the only God of all creatures, whether they know Him or not. The book of Exodus presupposes Genesis. The Second Article of the Creed presupposes the First. But the First Commandment, at least as we have come to number it, seeks to preserve the focus of salvation where it alone can be found. It is certainly worth observing that the traditional Jewish reckoning of the

Decalog begins with this first "word": "I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of a house of bondage" (author's translation). This is a Gospel word: there is to be no other God because no other God has ransomed and redeemed His people, saved them by grace, through faith. To put this into New Testament terms, "you will have no other gods" because "there is no other name under heaven . . . by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Luther catches this in his Large Catechism when he notes that the "greatest idolatry" is not necessarily putting one's trust in power, or in exalting a false god. It is, rather, that conscience that seeks help, comfort, and salvation in its own works and presumes to wrest heaven from God. It keeps track of how often it has made endowments, fasted, celebrated Mass, etc. It relies on such things and boasts of them, unwilling to receive anything as a gift of God, but desiring to earn everything by itself or to merit everything by works of supererogation.

False worship of even the true God, or false trust in something other than God's grace, and grace alone, is, indeed, a form of having other gods and thus of losing the Gospel of salvation.

Thus, secondly, the First Commandment is given to those who know God's grace, who already are the Israel that has been redeemed from captivity and oppression by all that would prevent us from true worship and holy living. To be sure, Luther understood the Ten Commandments as paradigmatic for God's Law upon all hearts. But in both historical context and doctrinal formulation, the understanding of the Decalog for those at the foot of Mount Sinai is what Lutherans call the "Third Use" of the Law. It would be unthinkable, or so one might think, for those who had experienced God's redemptive grace to have any other god. They were the "you" of the Decalog, a "you" that is singular in the text. The pronoun may well highlight the individuality of each believer's life of faith, but the singularity certainly extends to the corporate unity of all Israel. So it was "with one voice" that Israel exclaimed, "All that Yahweh has spoken, we will do!" (Exodus 24:3, author's translation). And then they formed and fashioned and worshiped the calf.

That might well be our third observation—that from the beginning, God's people, despite all good intentions, fell victim to false worship. And God's anger was kindled. Yet God in His grace would not let His anger be the last word.

A fuller explication of the theology of the "glory of God" (Hebrew *kabod YHWH*) goes beyond the intent of this essay, but this biblical motif is closely connected with that of the presence of God (literally, the "face" of Yahweh, in Hebrew *pne YHWH*). The theological problem is clear: sinners cannot stand in the presence of the holy God. In Exodus, Moses stands out as one with whom God would speak "face to face" (Exodus 33:11), but in this regard Moses is the exception that proves, if not probes, the rule. Once reconfirmed in their sin of idolatry, God seems to have little choice except to withhold His presence from them, lest He "destroy [them] on the way" (Exodus 33:3).

But such abandonment by God is not His proper work. Israel could do nothing to atone for their personal and corporate sin, so God, in His mercy and grace, established a place where God's presence would be found, right in the midst of His people. That was the tabernacle, the place where God's "glory" dwelt, which was accessible only through the sacrificial system of atonement. So the Decalog and the Book of the Covenant in Exodus 20-24 are followed by a much longer description of the construction of the tabernacle and the institution of the sacrifices mediated through the priesthood. In the

Although an unholy people should not stand in the presence of the holy God, the Creator/Redeemer finds a way to accomplish the otherwise impossible.

middle of the instructions for building the tabernacle, between the "prescriptive" instructions in Exodus 25-31 and the "description" of the actual construction and dedication in Exodus 35-40, is the sorry story of the horrible breach of the First Commandment, the idolatry of the calf, with the result that God's presence and glory might be taken away.

God announces judgment, but the last word is a word of God's grace. Although an unholy people should not stand in the presence of the holy God, the Creator/Redeemer finds a way to accomplish the otherwise impossible. He promises that "My Presence (literally, "My face") will go with you, and I will give you rest" (Exodus 33:14). Moses asks to see God's "glory," and God responds by showing Moses His goodness and mercy. But as His "glory" passes by, Moses is not allowed to see God's "face" (Exodus 33:18-23). Then Moses prepares a second set of tablets, and God writes again the words that were on the first tablets. And so God declares His name ("Yahweh Yahweh") as one who is "compassionate and gracious, . . . slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6). This is the God who is both forgiving and "jealous," maintaining love to the thousandth generation yet punishing the wicked unto the third and fourth generation. Exodus 34 continues with rubrics for restored worship, the exclusive worship of the God "whose name is Jealous" (Exodus 34:14), but who nevertheless will continue to be present in the midst of His people.

What does all this have to do with the First Commandment itself? To summarize what we have observed so far: (1) The First Commandment is grounded in the Gospel: we will have no other gods because there is no other God who can save. The Creator is also the Redeemer. (2) Those who receive this commandment and follow it are those who know that Gospel, God's people who have been saved by grace through faith, and who recognize the presence of God, and no other god, in their midst. (3) In the Old Testament, this presence is the "face" or "glory" of God in tabernacle and temple. This holy God can be approached by sinners only through the atonement of sin, accomplished through the sacrificial system. Isaiah 6 is a personal example of a sinner who found himself in the presence of the holy God, only to confess and receive the touch of absolution from the divine messenger/mediator (Isaiah 6:5-7). In the New Testament, God's presence comes incarnate in the person of Jesus, the Messiah. As Paul notes, God has given us "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6). The "no other gods" claim of the First Commandment corresponds to the "no other name" of Acts 4:12. (4) But to come full circle, God is a God who is both "jealous" of His exclusive claim and yet patient and merciful, slow to anger, and forgiving of those who repent, even when they break the First—and any and all—commandments. The one true God is the God of Law, and above all, of Gospel. There is no other god.

III

We now turn from the general exegetical context of the First Commandment to deal with specific issues of translation. We already have noted that the "you" of the commandments is a singular "you," emphasizing both the

individual and the corporate holistic understanding of God's people. It also might be noted, for the sake of some Hebrew review, that the form of the statement is a textbook example of the Hebrew possessive idiom, "there will be to you" = "you will have."

A bit more problematic is the translation of "other gods" (Hebrew *'elohim 'acherim*). As is well-known, the plural form "Elohim" can be translated as either "God" or "gods." To be sure, either choice would make the same point, and in Exodus 34:14, the singular is used. But in both Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, the plural form of the adjective ("other") corresponds to the plural form of the noun, and would suggest a plural understanding. Further, the following verse lists the pantheistic possibilities of other gods according to the "three-storied" cosmology of the ancient world (gods in the heavens above the earth, on the earth itself, and beneath the earth, in the underworld), and God declares that you will not worship them. That is, you will have no other gods.

Finally comes the prepositional phrase "besides Me." This might appear as an afterthought, and the meaning seems clear enough without it. Luther omitted this phrase in both catechisms, though he included it in the preface to the Large Catechism. Frankly, the meaning is not as clear as may seem. Many critical commentators suggest that Israel did acknowledge other gods at this point in the development of their religion, and the "besides Me" indicates a claim of Yahweh to be the chief god, the head of the pantheon: "You may have other gods, but no other gods next to me."

What is striking in the Hebrew is that this is not the normal expression for "besides" or "before." One would expect the very common Hebrew preposition, *lipne*, which is almost universally the preposition for "before," usually spatial but sometimes also in the temporal sense. But what the Hebrew text has, both in Exodus and Deuteronomy, is the unusual expression "upon My face" (Hebrew *'al panay*). One might even suggest the contemporary idiom "in my face." In light of the significance of the "face" or "presence" of Yahweh in the larger context of Exodus 32-34 already discussed, in which God deals in judgment and grace with the important issues of worship and of His presence in the midst of a sinful people, it is likely that the point should be stressed even in our translation of the First Commandment. David Adams makes the same point: "God says that we must not have other gods 'before My face' or 'in My presence.' The point here is that Yahweh is not claiming the right to be first in our affections . . . , He is prohibiting us from allowing any other god into His presence" (*CJ*, 28:4, 384ff.).

IV

So what are the implications of this insight for our public worship? Adams asserts, "The First Commandment is a demand for a radical and absolute exclusivity in our relationship with the realm of divine beings" (385). This is absolutely clear within the context of the worship of Yahweh by the people of Yahweh. To have any other god present, presented, or represented in the tabernacle or temple was a heinous offense indeed. Yet the mixture of "other gods" into the worship practices of Israel was a chronic problem, from the golden calf at Sinai to the apostasy at Baal Peor in the plains of Moab, and on into the incomplete conquest over the Baal worship of Canaan. King after king was chastised for failing to remove the "high places." Solomon was praised for building the temple but judged for bringing in pagan gods and goddesses (1 Kings 11). The text summarizes, "Although [God] had forbidden Solomon to follow other gods, Solomon did not keep the Lord's command" (1 Kings 11:10). One could also cite such abominable

things as the bronze snake now worshiped as an idol (2 Kings 18:4), the grave apostasy of Manasseh, who "took the carved Asherah pole . . . and put it in the temple" (2 Kings 21:7), the Tammuz cult that Ezekiel observed (Ezekial 8), and, by way of contrast, the reforms of Hezekiah (2 Kings 18) and Josiah, whose removal of idolatrous worship practices is catalogued in a long list in 2 Kings 23. Perhaps the greatest desecration was the altar to Zeus set up in the temple by Antiochus Epiphanes, the "abomination that causes desolation" of Daniel 11:31, cited by Jesus Himself as a sign of the final apostasy (Matthew 24:15).

This exclusivistic claim of no other gods in the presence of the one true God obviously has implications for worship today. God's sacred space is no longer confined to tabernacle or temple or the land of Israel, yet wherever the body of Christ is found in Word and Sacrament, God's space is reserved for Him alone, and for no other gods. But the exclusivity of the biblical concern focuses on worship within the people of God gathered around the presence of God, in New Testament terms, where the body of Christ gathers around the body of Christ. It is quite a different situation when one seeks to give witness to the presence of God outside of such a context, outside of Yahweh's sacred space, outside of "Israel" as it were, in the world where "other gods" must be acknowledged as also being present.

It is not terribly helpful to debate whether other gods truly exist or not. In light of the biblical truth that there is only one God, other gods do not exist, not ontologically or in an absolute sense. But within the reality of a fallen creation, other gods are claimed and worshiped. St. Paul recognizes exactly this situation in 1 Corinthians 8:4-7. Luther acknowledges the "existence" of other gods. His comment in the Large Catechism, written from an anthropological point of view, provides a very helpful definition of a "god": "to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart. As I have often said, it is the trust and faith of the heart alone that make both God and an idol."

So how do we remain faithful to the First Commandment in the public realm of contemporary America, where the existence of "other gods" is not only recognized but even celebrated under the dominant themes of pluralism, inclusivity, and tolerance? Is any interaction with that public arena a violation of the First Commandment, a selling out of the biblical scandal of particularity to the pervasive influence of the Sumerian syncretistic religion even today?

Here our insights into the First Commandment may not prove as helpful. First, the "you" of the First Commandment is clearly not the "you all" of the entire pagan world. To be sure, all people, whether true believer or not, whether Jew or Greek, whether male or female, must come to know the one, true God, either as the God of salvation in this lifetime or as the God of the Final Judgment at the end of time. But the specificity of the First Commandment is directed to those whom Yahweh has "brought . . . out of bondage," who are children of His salvation by grace. To make the claim as a first premise, as a *sine quo non* to be universally accepted before any interaction in the world of "other gods" would mean little interaction indeed.

That does not mean, of course, that one who represents the Christian faith may, in fact, have other gods, or may give any witness that affirms other gods. But it does allow for one to recognize that other people do have "other gods," and that we have a most important truth to share about the one God who alone is the God of salvation.

But what about "sharing the

presence" of God with the presence of other gods, precisely that insight provided by careful exegesis and translation? Can one who gives witness to Yahweh publically "share the stage" with those who might name other gods? Would that be having other gods "in His presence" and therefore an idolatrous breach of the First Commandment?

In response, we first must be careful in making too great a claim upon an exegetical insight that may not be recognized, understood, or even known within our fellowship of faith. Luther, it is clear, did not understand the phrase "besides Me" in that way. In fact, he makes little of it. While we must remain open to new exegetical insights, this understanding is not articulated in our confessional writings and not within our "subscription" to them.

But even if, by consensus, we agree that this interpretation is clear and correct, this exclusive claim of Yahweh to have no other gods "in His presence" applies to the realm of proper, exclusivistic worship and witness by God's people to the God of their salvation, and not, strictly speaking, to the public realm where other gods, like it or not, are likely to be present. It is important to distinguish both context and action between the specialized context of *worship* amidst other gods and even amidst various mixed confessions of the true God, where we rightly would have no other gods and, on the other hand, the larger context of *witness* within the realities of public life, where others do.

What Scripture also asserts, whether those outside of Israel knew it or not, is that the God of Israel is, in fact, the God of all nations.

What Scripture also asserts, whether those outside of Israel knew it or not, is that the God of Israel is, in fact, the God of all nations. In the ancient world, this was a remarkable claim. Like kings and human powers, gods were understood to be limited by borders, or by other expressions of political or military power. The gods of Egypt were, quite simply, the gods of Egypt. The gods of Babylon were the gods of Babylon. If the sons of Israel were slaves in Egypt, or destroyed by Babylon, then the gods of those countries, it would be obvious, had extended their power, like their borders, into the territory of another god.

Into this world of national gods and goddesses (which, as David Adams has pointed out, were all connected anyway in the Sumerian deep structure of syncretism and inclusivism), the prophets of Israel were sent to proclaim an astounding message: the God of Israel, whose temple is in Jerusalem, is the God of all nations. He has power over all, He has jurisdiction over all, He is, after all, the only true God. The long lists of Gentile oracles in the prophets attest to this truth. Solomon's temple, even though it became home to other gods of other nations, was intended to be Yahweh's house of prayer for all nations, "for men will hear of Your great name . . . when [one] comes and prays toward this temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place, . . . so that all the peoples of the earth may know Your name and fear You" (1 Kings 8:42-43).

Like the First Commandment, the emphasis of Solomon's prayer is not simply one of power and might, that all might stand in fear before the only true God. The concern is one of understanding—and proclamation—of the Gospel. Even the prophetic Oracles against the Nations, as colleague Paul Raabe has long since pointed out, have as

their motive not simply the judgment and destruction of the nations but the hope and even expectation that they might recognize the true God, turn to Yahweh, repent, "come to Zion," and be saved. Into this context, even where other gods are present—especially because other false gods are present—one must assert that the name of the one true God must be presented, and thus, must be present in "the presence" of other gods.

To be sure, one cannot be naive about the mischief, the mixtures, and the misunderstandings in the public square. But to give no witness to the true God because we are afraid of giving a false witness or of mixing His presence with the presence of other gods can hardly be the intent of the God who would seek to make disciples of all nations. To use the words of Isaiah, God would "gather all nations and tongues," so that "they will come and see My glory," and would send survivors to declare His "glory among the nations" (Isaiah 66:18-19).

In terms of the constant, if not chronic, tensions within the doctrine and life of the holy catholic church, and especially among our synodical fellowship in these gray and latter days, this issue seems perhaps another manifestation of the unfortunate tendency to separate concern for pure doctrine from a zeal for evangelistic mission, to forget that "getting the message straight" is for the purpose of "getting the message out." These can never be played off against each other; both must be vigorously maintained. But if anyone can manage such tensions, even hold theological paradoxes in proper balance, Lutherans should be able to do this. On the one hand, within the household of faith, no other gods should be recognized or even tolerated. In our worship, teaching, and living, we will have no other gods. That same exclusivity also follows us into the public realm, but, on the other hand, we recognize that in that domain there inevitably are going to be "other gods." How do we give witness to the one God in the midst of other gods?

Here I might reach a slightly different conclusion from that of my colleague David Adams. He quite rightly asserts that "As Americans we may (and do) have to tolerate the worship of other gods within civil society; as Christians we violate the First Commandment any time we tolerate or encourage the worship of other gods in the presence of Yahweh" (*CJ*, 28:4, 385). He goes on to deal with the difficulties of public appearances—and really of public "appearance" (i.e., what our actions are "seen as" expressing), especially in contexts that betray the syncretistic and inclusivistic characteristics of American civil religion, and his analysis is insightful and extremely helpful.

But given the inevitably difficult choices surrounding prayer in a public context in which prayer to the true God might occur "in the presence" of other gods, even recognizing the distinction between praying "with" and praying "among" them, Adams concludes that we should decline to participate, lest we be put into "a compromising position or run the risk of creating controversy in the church or congregation over an issue not directly related to the Gospel." This is an important concern, and his biblical model is the "willing self-limitation of Christian freedom" as suggested in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8. His other options would have been (1) to offend the others present by witnessing to the exclusive claims of Yahweh or (2) to offend God by participating in an event in which we bear false witness.

Certainly we dare not offend God by offering false witness or mixed worship, but is it possible to give a faithful witness to the exclusive claims of Yahweh, perhaps even risk offending others, but to do so as a mission strategy, with honesty and integrity but preferably also in a way that

might actually be winsome? In short, how else does one give witness to the God who is both judge and savior in the "mixed company" of American society, where the rules of engagement include at least the recognition of other gods? Is it better to present the true God with integrity or to abandon the public square to the presence of only the other gods? Might our presence at least be a witness "of presence," lest we concede the public square to universalists, syncretists, and multiculturalists? Why should Oprah be allowed to speak for "religion" in the public realm, with no one there to speak for the truth of God?

V

Finally, let us consider some other biblical texts that may help our understanding of the First Commandment as it pertains to the public realm. First of all, we cannot, and will not, mix the worship of other gods into the worship of the true God. This was the situation on Mt. Carmel, when Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18). The problem was clear: Baal worship was not only still tolerated but even promoted under King Ahab of Israel. This was Yahweh's land, where Yahweh alone was to be worshiped. There would be no other gods. But this was not the "public realm" by American standards; it was worship within "Israel," in the land of Yahweh by the people of God. Elijah clearly controlled the agenda and set the rules of engagement. Yet he did allow the prayers to Baal to be offered "in the presence of" Yahweh, even though the situation was set up as a contest, as it were, and the outcome was clear. Yahweh alone was God in Israel (1 Kings 18:39).

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An example of a public context external to "Israel," outside the "church" and beyond the control of the people of God, would be the witness given in the book of Daniel, both by Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and by Daniel himself. Here, a powerful witness was given by not praying to the false idols of the gods and king of Babylon, with dramatic consequences. But again, the situation is not really analogous to the public realm of contemporary America where there is no restriction against praying to the true God. David Adams makes another good point, however, in suggesting that the generic false "god" of American civil religion may, in fact, embody such a restriction, so that prayer to any specific god may well be excluded by the "rules" of civil religion. In such a case, the witness of Daniel not to join in such public prayer should indeed be our model. Of course, we are free to take the consequences of breaking such "rules" in a situation where we must "obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). But within a society that does not prohibit us from speaking openly of the truth, why wouldn't we, even "in the presence" of other gods?

Perhaps a helpful parallel is found in the mission of Jonah, who marched right into Nineveh, as though the God of Israel was also the God over Assyria. It might be noted that the prophet initially declined to participate in such a mission and then even avoided praying amidst the false prayers of the sailors on deck, when, perhaps, he should have been there to give public witness to the God "who made the sea and the land" (Jonah 1:9). To be sure, once in Nineveh, Jonah did not participate in public worship or even in a "civil ceremony," and his message was one of proclamation

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without direct reference to Yahweh ("forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned," Jonah 3:4). Yet he boldly gave witness as a Yahwist in the territory of other gods. If one dare never pray to Yahweh "in the presence" of pagan gods, how might one offer any public prayer beyond the "borders of Israel?"

Finally, we consider the strategy of St. Paul on the Areopagus (Acts 17:22ff.). Here Paul gave witness to the one true God right in the midst of the Greek pantheon, "before other gods." He avoided any false worship or mixing the identity of the true God. Instead, he gave testimony to the "God who made heaven and everything it," and he managed to do so without offending them, without offending God, and without declining to be there. He started by recognizing even a false religion, but he met his hearers on their own terms, on their own turf. Utilizing the pagan altar to "an unknown god," he entered their world of worship and gave witness to the one true God. He even spoke of judgment and the need for repentance, and referenced the resurrection of the dead. To be sure, some sneered, but others wanted to hear more, and some believed. This was a mission strategy in the public realm that not only honored the First Commandment but also brought others to know the truth about Him who is the only Way, Truth, and Life.

Is it possible to present the public ministry in the public realm and still honor the First Commandment? There are important issues to confront, but one fundamental and helpful distinction would seem to be the Lutheran concept of the two realms. Within the realm of those who know and worship the one true God, there will be no other gods "besides" Yahweh, whose plan of salvation was accomplished for all in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ. Perhaps the English preposition "besides" works well after all, as it allows for both the exclusive, relational sense ("except for") and for the spatial, local sense (upon "My presence," "beside").

In the public, "left-hand" realm, however, there will be the presence of other gods. And in the American public domain, we respect the authority of government to allow such diversity and pluralism, recognizing at the same time that this realm is not the kingdom of grace. Nevertheless, it is ours to declare God's glory among the nations, and we seek to do so, boldly and with integrity and conviction. Any witness, any worship, any work or word that confuses the true God with other gods is, indeed, a breach of the First Commandment. So is any witness to anything less than the Trinitarian God that we know as the God of our salvation in Jesus, the Christ. No generic, American "god" will do. No synthesis or synthetic and syncretistic definition of God will do.

But given such concerns for a right and proper understanding of the First Commandment, we should be bold to speak the name of God, the one true God, clearly and without equivocation in the public realm. We might seek to do so in a way that meets the unbeliever in a gentle understanding of that false and confused public world, so that we might bring into that darkness the Light of Christ.

As for ourselves, if we should err, either in giving offense or

in taking offense of another's actions, if we should find ourselves breaking the First, or any or all of the commandments, let us turn to the God who is slow to anger and abounding in love, confess our sin, be reconciled to God and to one another in Christ's forgiveness, and together, with joy and thanksgiving, enter into His glorious presence, the holy "presence" of His "glory," where there are no other gods.

For Discussion

1. Do the governing authorities break the First Commandment when they invite leaders of non-Christian religious communities to participate in religious events that they (i.e., governing authorities) sponsor?

2. With the First Commandment in mind, when and how might Christian pastors appropriately appear and participate with leaders of non-Christian religious communities?

Proclamation, Intercession, and Praise in Mixed Company

PAUL R. RAABE

As the United States becomes ever more religiously diverse, company becomes increasingly mixed.

On occasion, a pastor finds himself in mixed company. It might be something as simple as giving a prayer at a wedding reception. The occasion might be the opening of a Rotary meeting, a public school graduation, or a session of the local legislature. Perhaps the minister has been invited to speak to an assembly of students at a public university. In cases of local or national crisis, a representative of a church and a religious leader of the community might be invited to speak at something like a National Day of Prayer convened by the government.

While the invitation might come from members of the congregation or other Christians, the assembly itself could very well be mixed, including Muslims, Hindus, or even Wiccans and worshipers of the mother-earth goddess. As the United States becomes ever more religiously diverse, company becomes increasingly mixed.

Religious diversity raises a host of important questions for us to consider. One of the questions is this. How does one talk in mixed company? Here I will present a few theological considerations that can inform a pastor's discourse when there are followers of non-Christian religions present in the assembly, mixed together with Christians and members of the pastor's own flock.

Ministers of the Gospel speak not as private individuals but on behalf of the church as called and ordained servants of the Word. Since they are servants of the Word, they are committed to speak in ways that conform to the Word of God. In this regard, it is helpful to distinguish among three types of discourse found in the Scriptures: proclamation, intercession, and praise. Each one has its own distinctive conventions, characteristics, and purposes. The Scriptural quotations are based on the English Standard Version.

Proclamation

The divinely appointed means for the church to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to non-Christians is proclamation. If the goal is to witness to the Gospel, then the appropriate way of speaking is proclamation. This is the church's evangelistic type of discourse. However, we should not move to the Gospel too quickly. First, we should speak in terms of the general revelation of God and the Law of God.

A good biblical example is recorded in Acts 17, the apostle Paul's discourse at the Areopagus. Paul sought to bring the Gospel and extend the church into Athens, a city full of idols. Christ's mission sends us to all nations, including worshipers of idols. One cannot reach them by staying at a distance. So everyday Paul made his case both in the synagogue and in the Agora, the marketplace or civic center of Athens. Some of the Athenian philosophers known as Epicureans and Stoics took Paul and led him to the Areopagus (also called Mars Hill). There Paul addressed the Athenians.

The apostle began on the level of his hearers with their interests and concerns. He even commended them for being religious: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious" (Acts 17:22 ESV). He noticed that among all of their religious objects was an altar dedicated "To the unknown God." Paul then identified this unknown God with the God he was about to reveal. Notice that Paul did not equate a named Athenian god, such as Zeus or Ares, with the true God. One cannot equate an idol with the true God. Instead, Paul referred to what the Athenians called the "unknown God." This is the God of general revelation, the Creator who reveals His eternal power and divine nature through the

things of creation (Romans 1:19-20).

Paul proceeded to discuss the truths of the First Article of the Creed. There is one God, the maker of the heavens and earth, who cannot be confined in a building or appeased by religious rituals. The Creator does not depend on us but we depend on Him for life and breath. The Creator made from one man, Adam, every nation and determined their times and places so that they should seek Him. He is not far away, for we exist in Him and we are His offspring. Therefore, we should not think of Him as a man-made image. God overlooked the times of ignorance but now He commands everyone, even the Athenians, to repent of their idolatry and turn to Him. They should repent now, for the one true God has fixed a future day of judgment by the man whom He appointed, the one whom He raised from the dead.

Paul began with general revelation and the First Article of the Creed. In connection with general revelation, he was even able to quote approvingly from non-Christian Greek writers (e.g., Aratus). Against polytheism Paul first of all tried to establish that there is one God who is the Creator of all things. He also stressed that all people share humanity in common even though they have different genealogies and different national backgrounds. We all belong to the one human race stemming from the one original ancestor, Adam. Finally, Paul emphasized the future day of judgment, when the Creator holds everyone to account through Jesus whom He raised from the dead.

Unfortunately, Paul's proclamation was prematurely cut off. One may infer from his other speeches recorded in Acts and from his letters that had he been permitted to continue, he would have spoken about the person and work of Christ for the salvation of all. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy how he began with general revelation, the First Article of the Creed, the unity of the human race, the call to repentance, and everyone's accountability to the Creator who will judge the world through Jesus of Nazareth. These elements constitute essential prolegomena to the Gospel itself. Unless set within a discourse about an idolatrous human race accountable to its Maker and facing judgment, the gospel of justification is unintelligible. When proclaiming in mixed company, we should not lead off with the Gospel. Begin with the First Article of the Creed and the Law of God.

Paul's goal was to lead worshipers of idols away from their vain idols to the true God. As he wrote in his first letter to the Thessalonians: "you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1:9-10 ESV).

With the Old Testament prophets and the other apostles, Paul presupposed a future, final day of judgment, when the Creator will execute His wrath against all worshipers of idols and against all sinners. In fact, that future wrath of God already is being revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness (Romans 1:18; cf. 2:5; John 3:36).

Paul admitted that, like everyone else, he too needed to be delivered from the wrath to come. In and of ourselves we Christians are guilty just like everyone else before the righteous and holy Creator. When we proclaim to a mixed group, we should not speak as if our "religion" is better than other "religions," as if we are smarter than others. On the contrary, we are all in and of ourselves in the same boat before the holy God, rebellious against our Maker and facing God's righteous wrath. Our only hope is that God Himself would take the initiative and do something about our plight. The good news is that God has freely done just that. In His great mercy, He

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sent His only begotten Son into the world to deliver all sinners from the wrath to come. Jesus of Nazareth rescued us by His life, death, and resurrection. Moreover, God sends His Spirit to turn idolaters away from vain idols to the living and true Creator of all things.

Jesus Christ is the one and only mediator between God and men. But we should not lead off with that point when speaking to a mixed assembly. It is better to follow the practice of the apostle Paul and the order of his letter to the Romans by starting with general revelation, God's righteous judgment, and the accusing Law of God against all sinners. From there we move to Gospel proclamation.

In times of national crisis, the church has important things to say, but, as Professor Joel Okamoto has emphasized, we have no comfort to give Americans simply as Americans. The Creator is not an American nor does He favor America. The church has comfort only for despairing sinners, and the only comfort the church has is the Good News of Jesus Christ and Him crucified for all sinners. So we invite all sinners to join us as fellow sinners in confessing our transgressions to God the Father and turning to His Son Jesus Christ for forgiveness and the comfort He gives.

Intercession

Regarding prayer, our Lord warns: "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others" (Matthew 6:5 ESV). God-pleasing prayer does not glorify self but the true God. The expression "To God alone be the glory" applies to Christian prayer as it does to everything else said and done by the church: "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16 ESV).

Under this rubric, the church's intercessory ministry takes place. God has commanded the church and her ministers to pray for others, and God has attached His promises to it. Intercessory prayer is a great privilege God has given us, a gift to be cherished and practiced. It is one of the important ways in which Christians serve their neighbors in love. In fact, the New Testament refers to intercessory prayer more often than any other kind of prayer.

Consider, for example, the apostle Paul's exhortation to Pastor Timothy: "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time" (1 Timothy 2:1-6 ESV).

Notice the emphasis on the word "all": prayers are to be made for all people, including all governmental officials; God desires all to be saved; Christ gave Himself as a ransom for all. Because God seeks all and Christ died for all, the church cares for all in her intercessions. We want God

to bless America and all other nations. The good news is for all, the church's mission is to all, and her intercessions are for all.

This universal concern includes enemies, both those who oppose the mission of the church and those who make war against a nation and her citizens. Unlike those who say "love your neighbor and hate your enemy," Christians are to love both neighbors and enemies (Matthew 5:43-48). Jesus Himself interceded for His enemies, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34 ESV). Thus, for example, we pray that the Lord forgive the terrorists, thwart their murderous designs, help them practice civil righteousness, lead them to repentance, and bring them to faith in Christ Jesus their Lord. The church is unique in interceding for all people and for every type of person.

The immediate purpose of intercessions for governments and nations is "that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life." The church is not indifferent to the government and society. We pray for external tranquility, civil righteousness, and external freedom for the citizens of every nation. Such intercession reflects the church's penultimate concern. But the church's ultimate concern is with her mission.

Notice how Paul moves to the issue of salvation. Civil righteousness and civil order allow the church freely to spread the Gospel so that through the Spirit all people might come to the knowledge of the truth, to faith in Christ Jesus the one mediator. Thus, in our intercessions we pray for both penultimate concerns and ultimate concerns.

It is right for Christians to desire the intercessions of the church and to ask pastors on behalf of the church to lead prayers. When the prayer takes place in mixed company, the pastor should explicitly invite the Christians present to pray with him. For Christian prayer is faith talking to God. It flows from faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and in the specific promises attached to prayer. Only prayer that flows from faith has the promise of being "heard" by God. The word "hear" in this connection has a technical usage. It does not refer to God's omniscience, according to which God "hears" the meow of the cat or the moo of the cow. Rather, it means that God favorably receives the prayer and favorably responds. Since God promises to "hear" only prayers of faith, we should not invite non-Christians to pray with us. Such an invitation would unintentionally encourage them to offend God as hypocrites who "heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do" (Matthew 6:7 ESV). Prayer is not a means of grace, and it is not the appointed instrument for leading non-Christians to conversion.

Christian prayer is Trinitarian. It is a good practice to begin prayer typically with the Trinitarian invocation. For unlike proclamation to non-Christians, which begins with God's general revelation and the Law, prayer is the church's discourse to God in response to the Gospel. Therefore, Christian prayer presupposes the Trinity. Jesus Christ is the only mediator to God the Father, and the Holy Spirit brings us to faith in Christ and moves us to pray. Thus, we pray to the Father through His Son in the Spirit, as Ephesians 2:18 (ESV) states: "For through Him [=Christ] we both [=Jew and Gentile] have access in one Spirit to the Father."

This Trinitarian character of prayer needs particular emphasis when praying in mixed company. For example, during times of local or national crisis, Christians within the government rightly desire the prayers of the church. Hopefully, as Christians, they are committed to the First Commandment, but as governmental officials they operate on the basis of the First Amendment. Herein lies a complicating factor, for the

Many people have the notion that all Americans, whether Christians or followers of non-Christian religions, pray to the same god, each in a different way.

First Amendment gives place to non-Christian religions. Thus, in times of crisis when the government convenes a type of National Day of Prayer (or National Day of Repentance and Prayer), the representatives of the church during such an event can expect to find themselves in the company of representatives of non-Christian religions.

Here, caution is called for. We do not pray to some generic deity or worship the same deity as all other Americans. In a pluralistic context, the church and her ministers need to stress the particularities of Christianity. For especially in the United States there prevails a sort of popular universalism. Many people have the notion that all Americans, whether Christians or followers of non-Christian religions, pray to the same god, each in a different way. The church's discourse in public places should intentionally seek to subvert such a notion. When the church speaks, the unspecified deity of American civil discourse should not take precedence over the church's peculiar Trinitarian speech. And if the express purpose of an event is for all Americans to show that they worship the same god and have religious unity, then Christians should not participate. The truth of the Gospel must not be compromised or co-opted to serve some false universalistic agenda.

Praise

A third kind of discourse is praise. Faith extols the true God and His works of creation and redemption. It loves to "brag" about God and His mighty deeds. It boasts in the cross of Jesus Christ. It desires to give the One who sits on the throne and the Lamb who was slain all "blessing and honor and glory and might" (Revelation 5:13 ESV). Christians cannot keep their glorifying of the Triune God secret. We do not espouse a "mystery religion." Faith simply bubbles over with doxology before others. The church's doxological song appropriately takes place in public and even in mixed company, such as a church choir singing hymns in a public place. Doxology to God at the same time reaches out to others in an effort to enlarge the choir. Instructive in this regard are the psalms.

Consider, for example, Psalm 96:1-9. "Oh sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth! Sing to the LORD, bless His name; tell of His salvation from day to day. Declare His glory among the nations, His marvelous works among all the peoples! For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; He is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens. Splendor and majesty are before Him; strength and beauty are in His sanctuary. Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength! Ascribe to the LORD the glory due His name; bring an offering, and come into His courts! Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness; tremble before Him, all the earth!" (ESV)

Psalm 96 reveals some characteristic features of doxology. Praise is by definition a public discourse. It does not honor God in secret but openly and unashamedly before others. Moreover, doxology speaks to God and to outsiders at the same time. It has an outward orientation. Not only is it done before others, it constantly invites them to add their voices to the choir.

The church praises Yahweh (the Lord) by summoning all nations to join us in praising Him. "Sing to Yahweh, all the earth!" Come into His courts and sing with us.

The summons to praise Yahweh requires abandoning false gods. Honoring Yahweh necessitates at the same time dishonoring idols. Ancient Israel lived in a pluralistic environment where every nation had its gods and goddesses. But the true God will not share His glory with another. Therefore, doxology also has a polemical accent.

In doxology, all attention turns away from self toward God. Only Yahweh, the God of Israel deserves to be feared, worshiped, praised, and extolled. It is good, right, and salutary to praise Him because He alone is "greatly to be praised." For He is the One who made the heavens and the earth, while the gods of the nations are man-made idols. To worship an idol is to worship yourself and what you have constructed, but to worship the God of Israel is to worship your Maker.

We praise Him by extolling His marvelous deeds, not only of creation but also of salvation. We glorify God by praising His narrative, a narrative that recounts His deeds in history, in space and time where we live on planet earth. In the Old Testament, this narrative would include the exodus from Egypt and the deliverance from exile. The narrative does not stop there but reaches its fulfillment and climax in the work of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, God's eternal Son made flesh who by His death and resurrection reconciled the estranged world to its Creator. Thus, the church's doxology honors God by honoring the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This honor takes place in public so that a great multitude from every nation might shout: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Revelation 7:10 ESV).

Conclusion

The church lives in the world but is not of the world. This two-fold existence pertains to everything about the church including our discourse. Christ calls us out of the world to belong to Him and then sends us back into the world to reach the lost. Accordingly, our discourse takes place in the world amidst the religious plurality that characterizes the United States. But our discourse is not of the world; it is not to conform to the standards and expectations of the world. Rather, it is to be normed and determined by God through His Holy Word. Such discourse operates under the motto "To God alone be the glory." In our context of growing religious diversity, may all of our discourse, be it proclamation, intercession, or praise, serve the glory of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

For Discussion

1. A disaster strikes your community. A local newspaper or television reporter interviews you. What kind of discourse would you use and what would you say?

2. A church choir is invited to sing "God Bless America" at a baseball game. How would you characterize that discourse? Should the invitation be accepted and why or why not?

Unionism and Syncretism in the LCMS Constitution: Historical Context and Interpretive Development

WILLIAM W. SCHUMACHER

In general, our American situation has been more prone to the danger of doctrinal compromise than to the danger of government meddling.

The present constitution of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod contains a number of conditions for "acquiring and holding membership in the Synod." These comprise Article VI of the constitution in its current form, but the salient points can be traced all the way back to the wording of the second article of the original 1847 constitution. In that original form, these provisions were designated as "unalterable." The wording of the pertinent section in the present constitution is as follows:

"2. Renunciation of unionism and syncretism of every description, such as:
a. Serving congregations of mixed confession, as such, by ministers of the church;
b. Taking part in the services and sacramental rites of heterodox congregations or of congregations of mixed confession;
c. Participating in heterodox tract and missionary activities."

This corresponds very closely with the original 1847 constitution:
"Repudiation of all mingling of churches and of faiths, such as: service of mixed congregations *per se* by servants of the church; participation in the worship service and sacramental activities of heterodox and mixed congregations; participation in all heterodox tract and mission agencies; etc."

[*"Lossagung von aller Kirchen- und Glaubensmengerei, als da ist: Das Bedienen gemischter Gemeinden, als solcher, von Seiten der Diener der Kirche; Theilnahme an dem Gottesdienst und den Sacramentshandlungen falschgläubiger und gemischter Gemeinden, Theilnahme an allem falschgläubigen Traktaten- und Missionswesen u.s.w."*]

It is worth noting that the words "unionism" and "syncretism" are not actually used in the original text of the *Verfassung*, although they were terms in rather frequent use in conservative Lutheran circles around that time. The English terms are used in today's constitution as translations for "*Kirchen- und Glaubensmengerei*," or as I have more literally translated: "mingling of churches and of faiths." These terms appear to have been coined by Lutherans who were part of the nineteenth-century confessional revival (including especially those involved in the founding of the Missouri Synod) to describe what they saw as a great danger facing the church in their day. More than two years before the Missouri Synod was founded, one of the leaders of the Saxons in Missouri lamented the efforts by government and church leaders to impose a union between the Lutherans and the Reformed in Prussia, while observing that some Lutherans were resisting any union which was based on anything other than the truth of God's Word (*Der Lutheraner*, vol. 1, no. 2, September 23, 1844). These efforts toward such an illegitimate union are cited as a reason why "thousands" of Lutherans had emigrated from the fatherland.

The danger of such a forced and improper union was, therefore, prominent in the minds of those who would found the Missouri Synod. We may helpfully distinguish between two distinct components of that perceived danger: (1) the danger of losing the true Gospel through doctrinal compromise or indifference, and (2) the danger of confusing God's two kingdoms through government interference in the life of the church. Both of these elements were originally intertwined in the development of the Prussian Union, in which the secular government united the Lutheran and Reformed churches into a single "united" church by royal decree. Such a union obviously had nothing to do with a shared confession of the doctrine of

the Gospel, and, in fact, allowed mutually contradictory teachings to coexist side by side in the new church.

In the minds of the founders of the Missouri Synod, the Prussian Union was synonymous with the danger of doctrinal compromise, and "unionism" was their term for practices which embodied the same kind of error. The Prussian Union also exemplified the abuse of government power inserting itself into the life of the church. Both the matter of church-to-church relationships and the question of government interference in the church continued to operate in the Synod's history.

But they have not always been directly connected with each other because of differences between the American context and the German background. (One important point at which the two themes have always been, and still are, closely intertwined is the military chaplaincy. But that is a topic deserving special treatment on its own, and it will not be considered here.) In general, our American situation has been more prone to the danger of doctrinal compromise than to the danger of government meddling. A word or two about the church-and-state aspect will suffice for our present purposes, before turning to the question of how different confessions get mingled improperly in "union" churches.

Church and State

The American context, which was still very new to the Missouri Synod's founders in the late 1840s, offered an obvious hedge against the danger of government interference in the affairs of the church. The First Amendment of the United States Constitution includes two religion clauses which helped define the religious environment of the young republic. The first of these clauses ("Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion . . .") prohibits anything like a "national" or official church in the United States, which rules out the sort of official coercion associated with the Prussian Union.

The second religion clause (". . . or prohibiting the free exercise thereof") promises groups and individuals freedom to practice their religion in whatever way they see fit. We needn't be bothered for the moment by the fact that neither of these religion clauses ever has been applied with absolute literalness but that both have been subject to certain limitations. It is, of course, not true that absolutely *every* self-identified religious group receives the same preferential tax status from the government (I cannot simply declare my home to be a temple and immediately be exempted from property taxes), nor does the government permit any and every practice which someone associates with his or her religious beliefs (practices such as human sacrifice and smoking peyote come to mind). But the Missouri Synod has, so far, fallen well within the very broad spectrum of religious groups and practices which are recognized as legitimate, both legally and socially, in America.

In popular accounts, the second of these freedoms, enshrined in the free exercise clause, is typically identified as the prime attraction which drew oppressed religious minorities (including confessional Lutherans) to America's shores. But surely the self-limitation of government expressed in the second ("non-establishment") clause was at least as important for the founders of the Missouri Synod. It also provided a particular challenge not only to the Saxons in Missouri but to all Lutheran immigrants, who had to construct new church orders and structures which could operate without state or government involvement. An important example of this adaptation is Walther's "The Proper Form of an Evangelical Lutheran Local Congregation Independent of the State," first delivered as a

district convention essay in 1862.

However, the First Amendment of the United States Constitution did not simply solve all the problems of the relationship of church and state, nor did it remove the threat of government interference in the church's life from the minds of those conscientious Lutherans. In 1850, a few short years after the founding of the Synod, the Chicago district conference considered the question of whether it was permissible for Lutheran pastors and congregations to honor a call from "non-Lutheran, or even openly godless Presidents, governors, and other secular officials" to observe a day of repentance and prayer.

The difficulty about such a day of prayer, of course, was not that the call came from a non-Lutheran or even an unbeliever, but that Presidents, governors, and secular officials, as such, had no authority to impose any religious observances on the church. Nevertheless, the Chicago conference concluded that such observance could be permitted, and even suggested that the refusal to do so could be considered offensive and unloving to one's neighbor. This discussion and the resulting opinion were reported to the Synodical Convention, where they were accepted and approved, with the added stipulation that if the government were to command such observance or insist that churches comply, the churches would have to refuse. The "separation" of church and state was apparently not as absolute as some would like to make it today.[1]

The discussion about such government-proclaimed observances in the early 1850s seems to have set the pattern for how the Synod would react to subsequent events and situations of this kind, so that there seems to have been little or no synodical reaction when President Lincoln issued the first national Thanksgiving Day proclamation in 1863, an event which on its face might seem to open the door to the kind of governmental meddling in the church's work which was fundamentally rejected by the Missouri Synod.

It is instructive to compare and contrast the Missouri Synod's fundamental suspicion of government interference with the positions espoused by another Lutheran leader of the early nineteenth century, Samuel Schmucker. Schmucker did not share Missouri's experiences with the Prussian Union, and he was much more self-consciously "American" than the Saxons, Franconians, and other immigrants who were settling in the West. Schmucker was much less reluctant than most German-speaking Lutheran leaders to call for government enforcement of religious duties, such as outward observance of the Sabbath.[2] He was also a vocal abolitionist who supported the Union's war against the states which seceded. In addition, Schmucker was far more interested than the newer immigrants in finding ways to bring American Christianity together. Thus, Schmucker's views diverged from those of the founders of the Missouri Synod on the two points we are considering—whether Lutherans should be involved in churches of mixed confession, and whether it is appropriate for secular authorities to involve themselves in specifically religious matters.

"Mingling Churches"

As mentioned above, the danger of government interference in the church was generally less acute than the other kind of danger, that of obscuring or losing the truth of the Gospel through practices or arrangements which compromised or mixed together different confessions. One of the most basic concerns of the founders of the Missouri Synod was that congregations should be based on a clear and united confession of the Gospel. In this they would have agreed with the memorable formulation by

the great G. K. Chesterton (even though he was a "papist"!): "If some small mistake were made in doctrine, huge blunders might be made in human happiness." At its best, the diligent care for pure doctrine was born out of a care for human souls.

Such a passionate care for pure doctrine underlies the language we find in the Synod's constitution which rejects "all unionism and syncretism." As the explanatory comments in the LCMS constitution itself indicate, such a "mingling of faiths and of churches" was particularly envisioned in the context of "mixed congregations *per se*." In the 1846 publication of the Missouri Synod constitution, an additional note at this point further details what is meant by "serving mixed congregations" with the following words:

"These are those which are put together out of Lutherans and Reformed or so-called Evangelicals (or United, Protestants), and which are not infrequently served by so-called Lutheran preachers, who must thus, of course, behave in a double manner, i.e., they must be Lutheran to the Lutherans and Reformed to the Reformed."

["*Das sind also solche, die aus Lutheranern und Reformirten oder sogenannten Evangelischen (Unirten, Protestanten) zusammengesetzt sind und nicht selten von sogenannten lutherischen Predigern bedient werden, die also dann natürlich doppelartig, d. i. den Lutherischen lutherisch und den Reformirten reformirt sein müssen.*"]

The "mingling of churches and of faiths" envisioned in the original Missouri Synod constitution was something primarily located in the regular ministry of a local congregation which had a deficient, erroneous, or ambiguous doctrinal foundation.

"Mixed congregations *per se*" were local churches which were explicitly constituted to accommodate two mutually exclusive confessions. Such congregations were actually rather common in early nineteenth-century America, and so-called "united" ("*unirt*") German-speaking churches were established in many communities to serve both Reformed and Lutheran Christians. It is not hard, perhaps, to understand some of the reasons for such arrangements. No doubt the *Zeitgeist* encouraged a certain indifference to doctrinal distinctions, and the mood in America placed more emphasis on spiritual experience than on orthodox teaching. There were also practical considerations in the scattered and underdeveloped settlements of the American West, where German immigrants from differing church backgrounds (mainly Lutheran and Reformed) found themselves thrown together in new ways, and it often seemed like a practical solution to pool their resources and form a single German church. Wilhelm Loehe noted how the poverty and small numbers of scattered settlers on the frontier led them to build but a single community church, and even have a single "union pastor" too. Such things he regarded as "that confusion of everything, which is characteristic in America" (*Moving Frontiers*, 102f.).

Advocates of such "mixed congregations" were encouraged by the example of the Prussian Union. An American "union" church was to include (and in a sense replace) both confessions. One such union church may well have been specifically in the minds of the founders of the Missouri Synod. The

From its beginning, the Missouri Synod has included stipulations in its constitution to exclude "mingling of churches and of faiths" by its members.

Evangelical Union of the West had been formed at the Gravois Settlement near St. Louis in 1840, based explicitly on a Lutheran-Reformed compromise. This group and others like it from various states eventually formed the German Evangelical Synod of North America (1877), and found their way into today's United Church of Christ. At the time of the drafting of the Missouri Synod's constitution, of course, all of these future developments could hardly even be guessed at, but the so-called Evangelicals had been the subject of a series of articles in *Der Lutheraner* in its first year of publication. But the Missouri Synod's founders were less worried about the long-term danger of "union" *denominations* than they were about "mixed" *congregations* which often called Lutheran pastors. Serving such a congregation would put a conscientious Lutheran pastor in an untenable situation because he would be required to teach, preach, and generally conduct his ministry according to two differing (even contradictory) confessions.

The Missouri Synod's rejection of such arrangements was by no means unique. A century before the Missouri Synod was formed, Henry Melchior Muhlenberg worked to maintain a Lutheran identity (rather than a compromised or mixed position) in the German-speaking congregations of Pennsylvania. Wilhelm Loehe sent his *Notprediger* into the mission field of North America with explicit instructions to avoid getting entangled in "mixed" congregations. He told them: "for conscience' [*sic.*] sake you cannot accept a mixed [Lutheran and Reformed] congregation. You would rather choose only a small church which is devoted to your confession and the old regulations than a large mixed congregation which would lay the claims of various confessions on you." (Of course, Loehe also warned his men against another kind of "mixed congregation": one that made room for English as well as German—a caution which also was reflected in the Missouri Synod's original constitution.)

The wording of the Missouri Synod's constitution regarding unionism may well have come from C. F. W. Walther. He certainly promoted the idea of such a paragraph long before the Synod was formed. In an 1845 letter to Adam Ernst, Walther discussed the possibility of forming a new orthodox Lutheran synod. Among his other suggestions for the form and structure of such a body, he voiced his desire to include specific safeguards against such calls which would involve mingling confessions. He wrote: "I would wish, in the second place, that all syncretistic activity on the part of members of the synod would be ruled out and excluded according to the constitution through a special paragraph." (A portion of this letter is translated in *Moving Frontiers*, 143.) What Walther here calls "syncretistic activity" is nothing else than the mingling of different confessions in a single local church. "If a Lutheran synod is not going to take into itself the seed of [its own] dissolution," argues Walther, "it must make such fine syncretism impossible for its members through its basic rules."

Denominational Context

The "mingling of churches and of faiths" envisioned in the original Missouri Synod constitution was something primarily located in the regular ministry of a local

congregation which had a deficient, erroneous, or ambiguous doctrinal foundation. That is to say, the primary danger was not seen as unusual or unique occasions or isolated events which were not connected to any particular congregation, nor was "unionism" understood in terms of *denominational* membership or fellowship. The application of this section of the constitution to events and settings not directly connected with the ministry of a particular local congregation came somewhat later, as a logical extension of the original meaning. In his widely-used *Pastoral Theology* (1932), J. H. C. Fritz included in his definition of unionism "any religious exercises . . . *whenever members of different denominations take part*" (222-223). He is also careful to warn against public events which include religious elements, since these are "the result of a failure to understand the doctrine of the separation of Church and State."

Without quibbling with the venerable Dean Fritz about whether the American principle of the separation of church and state can properly be called a "doctrine," it is significant to note the two original components of the danger of unionism (church-and-state questions and church-to-church questions) coming back together in his pronouncements. But the difference between the original Missouri Synod constitution and Fritz's position is equally interesting and significant. Fritz understands the danger of unionism as primarily a question of *denominational* membership, not something located in a specific congregation where differing confessions are accommodated. Where the 1847 constitution spoke of "mixed congregations *per se*," Fritz speaks of "members of other denominations."

The denominational, as opposed to congregational, focus which Fritz exhibits in his treatment of church fellowship is echoed in the Brief Statement. In that important document, a paragraph which explains that local churches (congregations) are true churches in the fullest sense of the word (§27) is followed immediately by a paragraph on "Church-Fellowship" (§28) in which fellowship is conceived of in strictly denominational terms:

"[A]ll Christians are required by God to discriminate between orthodox and heterodox church-bodies, Matt. 7, 15, to have church-fellowship only with orthodox church-bodies, and, in case they have strayed into heterodox church-bodies, to leave them, Rom. 16, 17. We repudiate *unionism*, that is, church-fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine . . ."

The Brief Statement does not explain the connection between local congregations and the "church-bodies" with which Christians are said to have fellowship. As in Fritz's application of the warning against unionism, the Brief Statement shifts the focus from local ministry which allows for mixed or false confession to improper association of denominations or church-bodies. The assumption in the Brief Statement is that church-fellowship—and by implication unionism (which is simply *improper* church fellowship)—is a thing which is necessarily "located" at the church-body or denominational level. This is an important—and not necessarily obvious—extension of the ideas in the original synodical constitution, yet it was assumed rather than argued in the Brief Statement.

It also is not spelled out precisely in the Brief Statement what is meant by the term "church fellowship," whether proper or improper. That, of course, is very much to our point. What sort of activity or association constitutes "church fellowship"? We already have heard Dean Fritz's answer to that question: He regarded essentially *any and all* religious elements (including prayer, singing a

hymn, address with a religious theme, etc.) involving members of different denominations in any context as expressions of illegitimate fellowship, i.e., unionism. If Fritz meant this to be as categorical and absolute as it sounds, then a wide variety of events fall under the category of unionism which we may not associate with the term today. For example, mere attendance (by clergy or laity) at an American Presidential inauguration would surely match the description Fritz provides, draped as they are in a variety of religious elements (such as invocation, prayers, and frequently strong religious themes in the inaugural address itself—Lincoln's second inaugural address is probably the greatest "sermon" in the history of American civil religion!). Although such sweeping implications would seem to be consistent with the position by Fritz, the Missouri Synod has not always taken such a strict view of participation or attendance at all such events.

A Famous Case

Apparently, there have been very few cases in the history of the Missouri Synod of individuals being removed from the Missouri Synod because of one act which was judged to be "unionism." Specific cases do not always help us decide what the "rules" are—let alone what they should be—but looking at particular incidents in our history certainly can shed light on how people understood and applied the principles in their day. One of the most famous cases in Missouri Synod history involving charges of unionism was a matter involving a foreign missionary. Adolph Brux was a 1917 graduate of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. During his initial ministry at the prep school in Milwaukee, Brux began graduate work in Arabic Studies at the University of Chicago, where he completed his Ph.D. in 1923. He was, thus, highly qualified for the call by the Synod's Mission Board for work among Muslims in southern India. He arrived in Bombay on January 1, 1924, traveling with several other Missouri Synod missionaries.

In Bombay, these new missionaries took advantage of inexpensive accommodations at a Protestant missionary guest house, where guests were routinely invited to join in evening devotions of Scripture reading and prayer. Brux and his wife accepted this invitation, and the other Missouri men excused themselves and went for a walk. Later, the missionaries took Brux to task for taking part in the prayers, which they argued constituted unionism. Brux defended his actions, claiming that under certain circumstances, Christians can and should pray together, and that not every instance of joint prayer constituted an expression of "church fellowship." At issue was precisely whether every instance of prayer involving members of different denominations must be regarded as unionism.

The ensuing controversy became acute when he returned to the United States on his furlough in 1931. At that time, he shared with the Mission Board an essay he had written on the subject of unionism and joint prayer, in which he argued that the Synod needed to rethink its application of Romans 16:17 to every instance of joint prayer among Christians of different denominations. The Mission Board was unconvinced, and decided in 1932 not to send him back to India. He appealed to the Synod in convention, which met in 1935. A committee assigned to study the issue recommended that Brux be returned to India, but this initial report was not accepted. Convention action eventually supported Brux, but the Mission Board added the stipulation that he would have to admit his guilt before being allowed to return to the field, which he refused to do. The matter dragged on until the 1938 convention, which reaffirmed the earlier convention's vindication of Brux, and directed

the Mission Board to pay him his back-salary—which they also declined to do. Brux left the Synod in 1940, before his challenge of the Synod's very general application of Romans 16:17 had been echoed in the "Statement of the Forty-Four" (1945) and a St. Louis faculty opinion in his favor (1946).

The sad tale of Adolph Brux illustrates two things for us. First, it shows how the attitude formulated by Fritz was applied in a concrete case of that time: any and all prayer together with Christians of other denominations was viewed by some as a violation of the Missouri Synod's constitutional rejection of unionism. Second, the case illustrates that this view was by no means the genuine consensus of the Synod, even in 1935. Two conventions decided in Brux's favor, but he was nevertheless unable to continue his mission work in India. For some in the Synod, what he had done was absolutely and clearly wrong; for others, the Mission Board's refusal to return him to the field was the result of unscriptural legalism. What was being tested were the kind of boundaries which Fritz (and to some extent also the Brief Statement) attempted to draw, boundaries which primarily corresponded to denominational membership.

When "mingling of churches and of faiths" was proscribed in the Missouri Synod's constitution, no one was imagining an America in which Christianity was only one of many religions vying for space in the pluralistic public square.

Conclusion

From its beginning, the Missouri Synod has included stipulations in its constitution to exclude "mingling of churches and of faiths" by its members. Although originally wrapped up with questions of the relationship of church and state, the American First Amendment largely (but not entirely) protected the church from government interference, and the prime danger came to be seen as doctrinal confusion or mingling. Against the background of the Prussian Union, the concepts of "unionism" and "syncretism" focused primarily on the untenable situation of a Lutheran pastor called to serve a congregation of mixed confession. That local focus reflected the ecclesiology of the early Missouri Synod, which understood the congregation as the primary embodiment of the visible church, with the Synod seen as a less important, secondary, man-made organization. By the 1920s and '30s, the institutional, organizational existence of the Synod was largely taken for granted, to such an extent that some tended to shift the "location" of the danger of unionism from a local congregation to a framework of denominational membership. In other words, denominational membership had come to be taken as precise and reliable shorthand for doctrine and confession, and relationships between denominations had become the only way to talk about church fellowship.

"History," according to a popular song by Sting, "will teach us nothing." That's not quite true. But the kind of historical examination undertaken in this essay provides us with no easy answers to the questions we face today. Our ancestors in the faith faced different questions—and, of course, we must consider that they occasionally may have been wrong. When "mingling of churches and of faiths" was proscribed in the Missouri Synod's constitution, no one was imagining an America in which Christianity was only one of many religions vying for space in the pluralistic

public square. The question of whether "unionism" in today's ecclesiological context is adequately described by denominational membership (as Fritz and the Brief Statement did in the early 1930s) is an urgent one—but a question that is ultimately beyond the scope of this essay. At least our engagement with that urgent question should be framed with a clearer understanding of our past.

For Discussion

1. Walther applied the terms "unionism" and "syncretism" to congregations. Pieper and Fritz expanded the application of these terms to Synod. Today's interfaith gatherings and civic events raise further questions and issues of confusion and compromise. Should we follow the example of Pieper and Fritz and seek to expand the use of these terms to deal with these situations and issues? If so, how can we do so responsibly? Or should we seek other terms and retain the established uses of "unionism" and "syncretism"?

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[1] The Synod added the comment in the case under consideration here that, "One should be all the more willing to comply with such governmental recommendations when we at times recognize *a certain religious interest of the government*" [emphasis added]. *Ibid*., 29. Just exactly what that "certain religious interest of the government" might be was not described or discussed in detail at the time. The Missouri Synod was certainly not out of step with the times when it allowed this kind of ambiguity to remain in the relation between religion and the government. In his very important contribution to our understanding of this issue, Philip Hamburger describes how "Republicans [in the early nineteenth century] demanded the separation of religion and politics but simultaneously introduced religious aspirations into their own politics," in *Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2002): 143.

[2] See Paul A. Baglyos's intriguing essay "One Nation Under God? Schmucker's Theology and the American Public" in *The Papers of the Schmucker Bicentennial*, ed. Norman O. Forness (Gettysburg College, Pa., 2000).

"What Am I Doing Here?": The Semiotics of Participation in Public Gatherings

PAUL W. ROBINSON AND JAMES W. VOELZ

Not every event that might include clergy representation necessarily signifies fellowship among the participants.

"What am I doing here?" That question is at the center of any discussion about the presence of lay people and clergy at events that are not within their normal sphere of activity. Whether it is a routine civic event with religious elements such as a high school graduation or a gathering of the community for prayer in extraordinary circumstances such as a natural disaster, we all would recognize that the purpose of involvement in such a gathering, especially when it is official involvement by a church leader, needs to be weighed and pondered before the event and kept in view during the event.

The starting point should be a consideration of the event itself and the nature of the proposed participation. Both need to be thought through carefully because there is no simple checklist of items that determines the meaning of events and actions beyond any doubt. Yet there are appropriate ways to think about what actions might mean as performed by a particular person in a particular context. Consider, for example, how an event might be determined to be civic or religious. No single item or action causes a gathering to cross the line from worship to civic exercise. The presence of a flag in the church building does not mean that worship is not taking place any more than a single prayer brings a civic gathering into the realm of worship. This rather obvious point demonstrates a more subtle and significant principle, namely, that we interpret actions not in and of themselves but in reference to other actions, objects, and words.

A single action gains meaning from its relationship to the whole act of which it is a part. Most of us would be hard-pressed to create a definitive list of items that would inevitably make an event worship. In fact, a complete service of worship staged as part of a film could not be called worship in any real sense. Yet we are convinced that we know worship when we see it. In fact, we recognize completely dissimilar activities—particularly thinking across the boundaries of world religions—as worship. The twirling dance of the Sufi mystic of Islam is recognized as worship in that context; we might be less likely to call it worship were it to occur in a Lutheran church. Context is key, and human beings naturally respond to and recognize contextual cues. This is the case because the human mind does not work by recognizing the one-to-one correspondences between a specific action and its single, invariable meaning but grasps the complete system of relationships of which that action is a part.

Thus, an action has no intrinsic meaning of its own but relies on the context in which it takes place and the person performing it. How meaning is determined is the question central to the discipline of semiotics. Although semiotics often concerns itself with the study of linguistic signs, its insights are applied to other disciplines as well, and are certainly helpful in discussing the meaning of actions. Each sign, in our present case an individual action, can be considered to give meaning on several levels. The action is itself a sign.

For example, I grab my son by the arm and pull him toward me. On the level of significance we ask, "What does this action mean?" I grab my son by the arm and pull him toward me to keep him from running into the street. The action means, "Don't run into the street without looking because you might get hit by a car." In another context, it might mean, "You know you're not supposed to tackle your brother." Another level is the level of implication. It explores what meaning the

Those who are eager to act in the public square and those who stand ready to criticize such action should make haste slowly.

action might convey with regard to the person performing it. So, I grab my son by the arm and pull him toward me to keep him from running into the street because I love him. The relationship between us is implied by the action.

Yet, without a knowledge of that relationship, the action conceivably could be read in other ways. We are always tempted to assume that the significance or implications that we intend as producers or discern as receptors are inevitably and unambiguously communicated by our actions. For example, I might choose to perform a funeral for someone who was not a member of my congregation or any other. My reason for doing so might be concern for the family and a desire to proclaim the Gospel. Yet my presence also could be interpreted as an indication that I believed the individual was a faithful Christian who deserved a proper Christian burial.

Because words and actions have meaning in relation to other words and actions as part of a system, synchronic interpretation is more important than diachronic. What an action is generally considered to mean is more important than what it might have meant in a previous era. Current convention is more important than historical information. We have two clear examples of this with regard to common actions in celebrating the Lord's Supper. The celebrant lifts up a large host during the consecration. By the late Middle Ages, the meaning of this action was that the bread had become the body of Christ and could now be adored by those wishing to receive the grace available in the Mass. When Luther wrote his "German Mass," he was convinced that the elevation could be retained without misunderstanding and be used to communicate the real presence of Christ in the sacrament. Today, the host can be elevated in Lutheran congregations without fear that the late medieval understanding will assert itself.

Another example is the fraction or breaking of the host. In the Middle Ages, breaking the host during consecration usually was explained as signifying sacrifice. Under the Prussian Union of 1830, breaking the host was mandated as countering belief in the real presence. In Lutheran congregations today, the host can be broken without either of these previous meanings being elicited. Despite the long history behind these actions, the actions do not remain tied to that history but are capable of other meanings. What is important is not how those actions were but how they are understood.

The question must be posed, "What am I doing here?" A final significant part of the process of answering that question is another question, "Who gets to decide?" It might seem obvious to some that the individual participants are the final arbiters of what their participation in an event means. The individual actors serve as judges concerning the meaning of their words and actions in a specific context. What I did and said means what I say it means. We will refer to this approach as producer-oriented. The advantage to this approach is that it takes into account the intention of the actor. The producer-oriented approach does not leave us in doubt as to what the words and actions of an individual were meant to convey. The disadvantages to this approach are two assumptions it requires to function properly. The producer-oriented approach

assumes that intentionality is communicated more or less unambiguously by the words and actions of the producer.

Yet we all have had the experience of having our words and actions misunderstood; we all have said or done things that require explanation. Such problems are compounded in a public setting where the actor may not have a chance to explain explicitly his intention or where there is no speech at all and actions are left to speak for themselves. This leads to the second problematic assumption of the producer-oriented approach. It assumes that communication is a one-way street. The actor considers in his own mind what an action means, does it, and considers the task completed. There is little room here for the ambiguity of actions or for the recognition that those on the receiving end are deciding for themselves what an action means.

The second way of answering the question, "Who gets to decide?," takes these problematic assumptions into account. This approach focuses on those who will be observing an event and asks how they will understand and interpret the event itself and the individual actions within it. Their understanding is authoritative no matter what the actor might have intended. We will refer to this approach as receptor-oriented. The advantage to this approach is that it takes the flow of communication seriously. Actions do not exist in a vacuum but are understood within a particular frame of reference. To use a basic example, a wave might mean hello, good-bye, or "I'm over here." In this case, the same gesture in different situations has a meaning that has been generally agreed upon for that situation.

What it means to receptors, however, is what they perceive it to mean. A sender may intend to say "I'm over here," but if a receptor understands the wave to be saying good-bye, he may turn to leave instead of engaging in a conversation. So we begin to see the difficulties inherent in the receptor-oriented approach. A strict receptor-oriented approach does not consider the intention of the actor. It may, for example, understand a male opening a door for a female as a demeaning and sexist act, whether or not that is actually intended by the actor. Furthermore, such an approach may prove to be majority rule—what most people understand an action to mean is what it means. If this is the case, how do you determine what most people will understand by an action? Which people should you be most concerned about? What about the minority? The complexities of being receptor-oriented could well paralyze us into inactivity. (These complexities also raise the possibility that some actors who would claim to be receptor-oriented are simply projecting their intention on the majority of observers. In other words, they are, in fact, producer-oriented.) Obviously, both producers and receptors need to be considered as we determine the meaning of actions within public gatherings. Neither those who participate nor those who observe can naively assume that actions are unambiguous or that the setting makes no difference.

"What am I doing here?" We can begin to answer that question as we consider meaning on different levels, undertake synchronic analysis, and recognize the relationship between producer and receptor. Legislation, however, is not an option, at least in the real world. We cannot possibly create a comprehensive list of events in which clergy and laity should and should not take part. Such a list would inevitably fail to anticipate future events and would also invariably forbid an activity that might be harmless in another context. For this reason, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod always has recognized that exceptions to the rules are possible within responsible pastoral practice. The question, then,

There may well be forums in which mere presence does not immediately signify agreement.

is how to understand and interpret participation in an event in a responsible way. The following brief listing raises some of the issues that might be considered in determining how presence and actions at a specific event will be understood.

Who are you? The "I" in "What am I doing here?" is important. The meaning of an action is determined, in part, by the actor. Participation by a lay person will be seen as different from participation by a member of the clergy. The presence of a synodical officer is conceivably different from that of another clergyman. The participation of those who have planned an event will be understood differently from the participation of those who are simply in attendance.

Who else will be there? This traditionally has been the area of greatest concern in the discussion of unionism. The desire is, of course, to avoid the appearance of agreement with those whom we do not agree. But does simple presence with representatives of other Christian denominations or other faiths mean agreement? Not every event that might include clergy representation necessarily signifies fellowship among the participants. The suspicion that every such event signifies fellowship and the fear of consequent misunderstandings seems to suffer from a deficient understanding of association, as if it works in only one direction. In other words, we tend to assume that it is our position that will be misunderstood and compromised rather than anyone else's. Yet the religious situation in America holds out the possibility that this is not necessarily the case. (When a Methodist comes to a Lutheran altar, e.g., just who is compromising whose position semiotically?) There may well be forums in which mere presence does not immediately signify agreement.

Where will it be? Space is obviously important in determining meaning. To be sure, worship can take place in an auditorium, and church buildings can be used for concerts or lectures. But space does alter the way people respond to an event. For example, Lutherans in the Midwest tend to be reluctant to applaud inside a church building, even when they are there for some reason other than worship. Especially when dealing with events on the boundary between civic and religious, the connotation of space dedicated to use for worship can be difficult to overcome.

What will you be doing? Not only can presence and participation be distinguished, but we might conceivably list several levels of each. Again, the point is not to be exhaustive about the various possibilities but to be cognizant of how each possibility might be understood. A pastor might wish his participation in an event to communicate the love of God, but he also must be open to the possibility that it will communicate nothing of the kind to those who observe. Similarly, if prayer is part of an interfaith gathering, the participant should consider the possible distinction between "praying with" and "praying among." The event might be constructed so that everyone seems to be praying together, which would indicate an unacceptable level of agreement, or it might be constructed so that each participant prays on his own or only with those who share his beliefs. As previously noted, the religious situation in America makes the latter a real possibility.

Who will be observing? Because the importance of receptors already has been discussed, it remains only to

consider different categories of receptors. For public gatherings, those present are, of course, the principal receptors. For events that generate any publicity or media coverage, however, the wider community also must be considered. In addition, membership in Synod commits us to consider other members as receptors in some sense. The difficulty is in the relationship between these different groups and in deciding whose interpretation should be privileged.

As even the brief listing above indicates, the decision to participate in a public gathering requires an intricate and complex process of analysis. Those who are eager to act in the public square and those who stand ready to criticize such action should make haste slowly. Neither the assumption that the message comes through clearly in actions nor the assumption that actions have a clear and obvious meaning that can be analyzed from afar hold. Without being paralyzed into inactivity or fearing to make any decision about the value of an act, we must recognize that rushing to act and rushing to judgment are both naive tendencies that should be mitigated.

For Discussion

1. When considering the opportunity to speak as a Christian before a religiously mixed audience, when should priority be given to the speaker? To the community that the speaker represents? To the audience?

2. How might the audience or the event compromise the integrity of the speaker or the community he represents?

That God's Kingdom May Advance with Power Throughout the World

ROBERT A. KOLB

Lutherans have used formal and pronounced separation from other faiths as one way of confessing the truth of the biblical message.

Prayer in the public arena and confessing the faith in the public square—snowbird participation in Missouri Synod worship services—involvement in theological education programs of other churches—proper pastoral care of extended family of members of our congregations—selective fellowship practiced against members of the Synod and with those outside our church body: these are but a few of the problems that suggest that the traditional expression of the doctrine of the church in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is not serving the purposes for which it is needed. The inability to discuss openly the challenges that C. F. W. Walther and Wilhelm Loehe never had to face has hindered our taking our tradition and fashioning it for rendering the help we need at the beginning of the twenty-first century in meeting a number of problem situations. Nineteenth-century toolboxes are of some—but limited—use in fixing twenty-first-century products. The changeless biblical truth regarding the body of Christ, the church, must be applied to the new situations of the twenty-first century, and the proper formulation of that truth to these situations requires hard theological work and honest exchange devoid of jockeying for political advantage within the Synod.

Lutheran ecclesiology is properly rooted neither in speculations searching for the Hidden God under the guise of Trinitarian theology, nor in passing vogues of sociological theories that we sometimes let wag our understanding of worship and ecclesiastical organization. Both are departures from the road that runs between Wittenberg and Augsburg. Lutheran ecclesiology is grounded in the biblical teaching regarding God's Word and how it works in the world. It begins with the presupposition that the church exists to give witness to its Lord.

Each of the evangelists brought his gospel to a close by recalling that at the end of His earthly ministry, Christ emphasized to His disciples that they were being sent as the Father had sent Him (John 20:21) into the world to bring life and salvation to the peoples of the earth. As He prepared to leave His disciples in the care of the Holy Spirit (John 14:15-27, 15:26-27), Jesus sent His disciples to preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:47). He sent them to make disciples by baptizing and teaching (Matthew 28:18-20, Mark 16:16), to forgive and retain sins (John 20:21-23). Not only at the end of His ministry but during it, Christ had demonstrated this sending mode of operation. The disciples were sent to places where they would be welcome and to places where they would not be welcome but would have to shake the dust from their feet (Matthew 10:5-14). They were sent like sheep into the midst of wolves, to be dragged before rulers (to say nothing of their subjects) in order to testify to the name of Jesus (Matthew 10:16). God has poured out His Spirit upon the church so that people may call upon the name of the Lord and be saved (Acts 2:17-21). There can be no doubt that God calls His church and all its members to exercise the responsibility for conveying the Gospel to those within our reach.

That is naturally God's way of doing things. It accords with His own nature and with the nature He designed for and in His human creatures. The God who has revealed Himself to His human creatures by coming among them as the Word Made Flesh wants His people to carry His Word to Jew and Greek so that all may call upon the name of the Lord (Romans 10:12-13). But they cannot call upon Him if they do not hear His Word. He does not act in

some magical fashion through enchanting formulae. He communicates through human language with human beings, whom He created to reflect His own image in their reasoned use of this gift of communication. That means that the relationship of trust between God's people and their Lord depends on speaking and listening. For faith comes from what is heard—not through paranormal emanation of religious cant (even if couched in Bible words), but through conveying of the love of God in the words He gives us, the Word of Christ (Romans 10:14-17). They cannot hear if someone from His people does not approach them and engage them with the Word. This Word must be delivered in ways that make God's message understandable. Paul went so far as to engage the learned philosophers of Athens, on their own turf on Mar's Hill, speaking of their own false approaches to the God they denied in their agnosticism. Some of them were interested (Acts 17:22-28). Paul's teaching into their world with the Good News of Christ was making disciples.

Throughout Acts, we hear of God at work, building His church. Even a superficial reading of the New Testament confirms what Luther and Melanchthon knew about the church. It lives from the Word of God, and it lives to deliver the Word of God to others. The reformers defined the church through a "confession" at Augsburg. Melanchthon consciously rejected the title "defense" or "apology" because he understood that this concept better reflected Luther's understanding of the power of the Word of God and the calling of believers to announce it to the world.[1] Although the dogmatics textbooks of Lutheran history did not always place it immediately after the topic "means of grace," from the standpoint of the function of our dogma, the doctrine of the church is a sub-chapter in the topic "on the Word of God" in Lutheran thinking.

Throughout the history of the church, believers have carried out the responsibility created by Christ's calling, command, and commission to go with the Gospel to the peoples of this earth in different ways. In some situations, they have given their witness by propelling themselves, as Paul did, into the center of a society; they have sought opportunities on every street corner, in every marketplace, to listen and then to speak the Word in specific situations. H. Richard Niebuhr's historical study of how Christians have related to the world around them enumerated several strategies that have been formulated by theologians and employed by believers. He distinguished Luther's approach (which he suggested was also Paul's approach) from those approaches which conform the church to the world—cultural Christians of various sorts—and from those which separate the faithful from the world—Anabaptist and monastic forms of life.[2] For individualist Americans, even within the Lutheran tradition, this separation from the world appears to offer a kind of security that is very attractive when we look at the might of the waves of unbelief instead of listen to the power of the Word of the Lord.

Indeed, Lutherans have used formal and pronounced separation from other faiths as one way of confessing the truth of the biblical message. In the sixteenth century, they were cast out of the Roman communion, and formal separation at altar and pulpit gave witness to the mutual conviction that falsehood dominated the opponents' teaching. The Lutheran witness was understood by both sides, even if rejected by Roman Catholics (and in similar fashion by Reformed Christians, who had no desire to pollute themselves with the remnants of paganism they believed practiced at Lutheran altars). In the nineteenth century, as political forces imposed a union of confessions upon Lutherans in some parts of Germany, this witness

The pluralism and relativism that have permeated many societies, particularly that of North America, make the communication of God's truth today more complicated than ever before.

through formal separation, through the breaking of fellowship at altar and in the pulpit, clearly gave witness to the intention of confessing the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For the vast majority of people in the historical cultures of Lutheranism were Christian, and all shared a common view of the existence and nature of truth, even though they defined elements of God's truth in different ways. There were, practically speaking, no other options for witness in the public square in their world apart from formal worship services.

The thought-world of Luther and Melanchthon and those of Wilhelm Loehe in his Bavarian Lutheran people's church and of C. F. W. Walther in his American free church have disappeared. What it means to confess the Word of God before rulers and subjects has not changed in its core content, but in its manner of delivery it has become different than it was even a generation ago in most Western societies. There are now many more than one stage on which confession can be made in the public square, more than one situation in which the church's voice as the message of our God can be projected. In addition, the expectations of our hearers and the points of view which evaluate what we do (both actively and passively) are now manifold. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the decline in the Christian consciousness in historic lands of the faith—particularly in those in which the Lutheran church has been strong—and the advance of other systems of belief impose special responsibilities on those called to confess Christ's name. At the same time, God has richly poured out gifts on the church of our time, in resources, technology, and access to neighbors near and far. Christian confession has become easier in many ways through these means, but it has become more difficult because the ways in which our contemporaries think about themselves, God, truth, and acceptable behavior among social people have multiplied.

The rapidly changing public perceptions of truth and public "values" in North America at the beginning of the twenty-first century pose a dilemma and a challenge for the church. How can it best give witness to its Lord and bring those outside the faith to trust and life in Christ? One option is to abandon the Wittenberg tradition of public confession and to retreat into a haven protected from the world, muffling the Word of God but avoiding the risk of sullying it. Another is naively to ignore the real temptations to compromise our confession in the face of ever more virulent threats to the faith. Still another is to acknowledge certain levels of consensus on certain issues with those with whom we have fundamental agreements and hope that such acknowledgement gives license to ignore differences in doctrine. Since none of these options is God-pleasing, we must work to find new ways of defining how best we confess our faith in our Lord and Savior in the public square of North America, where God has placed us and called us to give testimony to His name.

The pluralism and relativism that have permeated many societies, particularly that of North America, make the communication of God's truth today more complicated than ever before. For we must take into account that the people to whom God sends us, sinners like Paul's and Luther's hearers, receive and

process the message we share with the apostles and the reformers in vastly different ways than the message was received by their hearers. (And sixteenth-century Germans heard the Word in different ways than first-century citizens of the Roman Empire.) As always must be the case among God's people, the Word of Scripture is the only source for our understanding of how we are to confess. But because human communication takes place in settings that determine different ways of hearing our message, Christians always have strived to translate the Word of God in Scripture appropriately for their hearers. God's truth alone determines our practice; the cultures into which He calls us to exercise responsibility for proclaiming His Word demand a variety of ways of communicating that truth. How do we give witness in a public such as ours, in the forums and "squares" or marketplaces of our land?

The dilemmas are manifold. We have fashioned some problematic situations and solutions into test cases for use in pursuing political agendas; others we have simply ignored as situations in which confession and compromise dance with each other at the precipice of opportunity to witness to Christ and potentially to deny His truth. For instance, professors of theology write for journals in which Christians of other theological confessions (or religious or philosophical thinkers who are not Christian) express their ideas. The editor writes, "Can you help us out? We'd like a Lutheran perspective!"—one perspective among several, and let the reader judge, or synthesize from all the contributors. This kind of fellowship in public teaching is not a problem that Luther or Walther faced, and so there is no guidance in the book. As long as we ignore the parallels to fellowship in other teaching situations, the implications do not disturb us. In the last half of the past century, Missouri Synod professors have not hesitated to give witness to their faith in the pages of a variety of journals and collections of essays even though that was not the practice of earlier generations in our church. But one might refuse such an invitation if it were a journal sponsored by a sect or cult. What criteria govern decisions such as these?

When I was growing up, my pastors never would have graced a meeting of the local ministerial association. The other clergy in my hometown could have learned a lot from my pastors, but they never had the chance. Today, the language-laden preparation for biblical study and the disciplined pursuit of theology that our pastors bring to Bible study groups of clergy and to civic discussions of other kinds provide opportunities for expanding the Holy Spirit's spreading the Word. Confidence in the Spirit overcomes fear of contamination, but how can we judge the propriety of all the possibilities for relating to other clergy in our local situations?

A lively issue forty years ago on the Iowa prairie was the public high school's baccalaureate service, and within the period of my memory, a shift was made from our pastors' refusal ever to participate in such services to participation, if preacher and liturgist were from our church body. That the people of the community saw leadership in the baccalaureate, not in the isolation of a single year's exercise of preaching and praying, but in the regular repetition of the service—with Missouri Synod leadership this year, Baptist and Methodist clergy next year, Presbyterians and Episcopalians the next—was not allowed to cloud either our assuming this responsibility in the community or our doctrine of fellowship. Most of the people in the community found this attitude strange rather than a clear testimony of our faith. If that was true forty years ago, it is true today. How do we strike the proper balance between our perceptions of how we confess our convictions concerning

Christ and their perception of what we are trying to say?

To answer these and a host of related questions about public confession of the faith for which God has given us responsibility, we are called upon to make up for lost time in doing the hard theological work of determining how we confess the faith in the situation in which God has actually placed us and called us. That discussion must begin with certain fundamental observations.

1. Christians always are confessing the faith, by what we do and by what we do not do.

As individuals and as groups, believers always are conveying something to the world around them about themselves and about their Lord. They may not be confessing effectively, but everyone who knows of the existence of a believer or a group of believers is getting some kind of impression of the God who commands their interest. Christians may be conveying an accurate reflection of the biblical message, or they be cultivating the idea that their God is not very important for the adherents of His name, or that He is indifferent to the needs of the world, that He is a God of whims of one sort or another. Believers cannot be held totally responsible for the impressions others form, but they are called to take into consideration as far as possible what others hear, given their presumptions about life, so that the Word of the Lord may sound forth clearly.

2. Christian confession of the faith is a two-way street.

The agendas and conceptual frameworks of those to whom we witness and confess are different than those of Christ's disciples. Because our hearers outside the faith play a part in determining the ground rules of our communication of the Gospel to them, we must be sensitive to the way they think. Most human beings presume other people think as they do, but believers know that by definition the unbelievers about whom we are called to be concerned cannot understand the message the Spirit gives us to bring to them (1 Corinthians 2:14). Therefore, the plain and simple words we bring them must be couched in modes of communication that actually express the demands of our God and the love He demonstrates in Christ. We cannot expect them to understand all that we say at once, and we cannot dump the whole load of biblical teaching in initial encounters. God came into our world to bring us into His realm, and He sends us into the worlds of unbelievers around us so that we can bring them into His realm too. That means inevitably that some dust from their world clings to our feet. We shake it off only when we are sure that they will not be walking into Christ's kingdom with us.

3. The traditional distinction in our circles between situations in which the faith itself is being confessed and "cooperation in externals" has become blurred, if not obliterated, in a culture in which the content of doctrine is not taken seriously by many, even by those who thirst for spiritual nurture but who define religion—that which binds life together—largely in ethical terms.

God made human beings without such compartments. While the distinction does reflect the dual dimensionality of our relationships with God and with His creation, we actually convey significant elements of our doctrine through our practice, as the authors of the Formula of Concord knew well when they wrote on "neutral matters" of practice (Article X). Significant initial witness is given about our God through the way we address the dilemmas facing those created in His image, fallen as they are.

4. The Word of the Lord and the Lord Himself can take care of themselves.

God does not need us to protect or defend Him. He needs us to broadcast His means of grace. His seems to be a weak and foolish Word (1 Corinthians 1 and 2) anyway, but its power and its wisdom prove themselves from the very fact that His Word establishes, determines, and reflects reality. He commands us to strive for pure teaching because both the milk and the meat of the Word are His instruments for giving life, and we do not want to be serving up infected nourishment to our neighbors. Pure doctrine is a matter of proper and good hospitality. Therefore, His Law imposes upon us the responsibility to prepare our teaching so that it is faithful to His biblical revelation.

God's Law also imposes upon us the responsibility to teach—not to bury His treasure until He comes again in our silence or our formulations so finely coded that they convey and confess little to the world that needs to hear. The Gospel gives the confidence and the power to refuse to "circle the wagons" in defense of God's truth; instead, we recognize it is the Spirit's sword in our mouths and our lives, and we know from Christ's resurrection who has the most effective weapons in this battle. So we plunge into the world around us, confident in our God and in the instrument, His Word, that He has given us to use in extending His kingdom.

The problems confronting us in formulating strategies for carrying out the God-given responsibility to confess our faith in meaningful, genuinely communicative ways are manifold and complicated.

God is calling all believers to give witness to their faith—lay people with a wide variety of contacts with those who need to hear the Gospel at work or in the neighborhood; pastors, teachers, and other public representatives of the congregation involved in speaking for the church in civic situations; seminary professors who are charged with teaching and testifying, also in ecumenical and professional circles. The problems confronting us in formulating strategies for carrying out the God-given responsibility to confess our faith in meaningful, genuinely communicative ways are manifold and complicated. They thus demand hard theological labor to produce proper and effective ways of exercising our responsibilities for witness in our place and time.

The following questions may help in beginning to focus on the problems that confront us in public witness to the faith. These or similar questions we might formulate will offer no easy answers in many cases, and the answers may create contradictory advice for specific situations. These questions are presented as a way in which to begin the hard process of thoughtful struggling with the challenge of confessing the faith to God's glory and for the welfare of the lost whom God has entrusted to our witness.

For Discussion

1. Does this opportunity to speak publicly offer an opportunity to lay the foundation for speaking the biblical message? In some instances, public appearances will not be suitable for blurting out "Jesus loves you" but will convey the love and concern of Christ in other ways. What "other ways" permit such public speaking, and which do not?

2. Does this opportunity to speak publicly inevitably deny the message of Christ by giving false impressions of its uniqueness or its content? Paul's hearers, of course, also had a variety of impressions, but some were intrigued

enough to want to hear more. How can determinations of this sort be made when assessing specific opportunities for public witness?

3. Appearing and speaking on the public stage conveys certain messages, but when the opportunity is offered and refused, our refusal also conveys messages. How do we sort out and assess the impact in a specific situation of confession through presence and of confession through absence, of confession through speaking and of confession through silence?

4. What is the effect of specific acts of confessing upon those who walk with us, and how do we walk together when contexts and situations differ to the extent they do in North America today?

In a society in which the Christian faith has ever less cultural support, our clear and forthright confession of the biblical message is as important as ever in the church's history, and thought consideration of how "confess" is becoming ever more urgent. The Lord is still sending us to bring His saving Word to all those whom He has placed within earshot of His church. We pray "Thy kingdom come" "both in order that we who have accepted [God's holy Word] may remain faithful and grow daily in it and also in order that it may find approval and gain followers among other people and advance with power throughout the world. In this way many, led by the Holy Spirit may come into the kingdom of grace and become partakers of redemption, so that we may all remain together eternally in this kingdom that has now begun" (Large Catechism, Lord's Prayer, §52). The Holy Spirit is extending God's kingdom among us, and He is doing so through our public confession of our faith in Christ.

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[1] Robert Kolb, *Confessing the Faith: Reformers Define the Church, 1530-1580* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991), 13-42.

[2] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).

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