

# **Taking Captive Every Thought: Theological Conversation in a Time of Crisis**

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Some conversations are hard to have. Dysfunctional families often avoid difficult issues and hope they go away. Of course, they just get bigger. Eventually the family has to confront them. By the time that happens, the problem may be impossible to solve. Even if it can be, there is a whole new crisis of hurt and loss of love to deal with.

A synod (like a congregation) has many characteristics of a family. Some conversations are hard to have. In a sinful world every family has moments when it is more dysfunctional and avoids important conversations. The same could be said for even the most doctrinally sound church body. We have moments of dysfunction.

We are in one of those moments now. We have a crisis looming before us. The financial realities of the twenty-first century are changing the dynamics of nearly everything that we want to do as a church body. We are making changes, sometimes in a piece-meal fashion, sometimes in a wholesale fashion, without having the open and theological conversations we need to have in order to preserve the unity of the Spirit and to move forward in serving the Lord and proclaiming the gospel. This lack of conversation threatens to create a new crisis that could ultimately divide our church body.

But in the church our conversation isn't just about relationships. And it is not just about practical realities. The church speaks another language because it exists on another level. The Church exists in the mind of Christ as the gathering of all believers of every time and place. The Church will exist in eternity as the Church Triumphant and the Church at rest.

Today the Church exists as the Church Militant. We are at war with sin in society and with death and with the devil. We are at war with the sin in our own hearts. The only way our conversation can provide healing is if that conversation revolves around the gospel. The only way our conversation can yield practical results that serve the mission God has given us is if the practical questions are set in the context of scripture and confession. That is true everywhere in the Holy Christian Church on earth, so it is also true in the little corner of the visible church that we call the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

This paper and the one that follows form a study intended to spark theological conversation based on theological thinking done with the word of God as our guide. To what end? At least three things come to mind:

- To encourage us to approach these issues as theologians, as men of God, approved to do his work.
- To preserve the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace, especially in an area in which there are going to be profound disagreements.
- To deepen our understanding of the scripture and to strengthen our trust in our Savior so that we can participate in these discussions as sanctified children of God.

The issue that is driving virtually all discussion in the WELS today is funding. How will we pay for the work God calls us to do? What impact will the current financial crisis have on the way that we do that work? We will address some of those issues in the second paper of this study.

But before we get there, we need to remember who and what we are. We may not like to say it in a forum this public, but there is a growing divide in our synod. To preserve the unity of the Spirit we have to seriously investigate how deep and how wide that divide is. Has a real difference in doctrine and practice slipped into our church body without us realizing it? Or are we simply becoming more creative in our application of Christian freedom? I hope that our bond of love is still intact. But do we still understand scripture and confession in the same way?

I submit to you that no one in the synod today is competent to answer those questions because we have not yet addressed the issues theologically. We really do not know where we stand relative to each other any more when it comes to doctrine and theological orientation. That is a statement I never expected to make in private, let alone in print, when I was ordained. That is a profound crisis in the WELS.

In the present crisis the number one thing we need is to talk theologically about our differences. Only when we discuss them openly and honestly and in the light of God's word and the Lutheran Confessions and our history as a church body will we know if we are still walking together. May the Lord of the Church prosper his people as we wrestle with the issues before us! May he extend the gospel throughout the world and may we grow in faith.

## **I. Theology Is the Lifeblood of the Church**

Everything is theological. Do you agree with that statement, or does it seem like an overstatement? Someone might challenge it and point out that there are many things that we can disagree about. In some quarters of our synod, there seems to be a feeling that we have gotten too caught up in theology and doctrine when we should "get real." When I was a world missionary I often heard doctrinal issues dismissed with a statement like, "Of course, we believe the real power is through the gospel, and all those other things we need to say, but let's talk about methodology." That kind of formula continues to be used in some discussions. It implies that we need to get out of our ivory towers and get back in touch with reality and make hard, practical decisions without pulling out our theological six guns.

But everything is theological. Pastors have a tendency to whip out labels like *liberal* or *pietist* or *traditionalist* to discredit another person's position. But that does not mean that the church exists on two planes, one theological and the other practical. The fact that we are free to make different decisions and even to disagree about matters where God's word does not speak *is* theology. The Lutheran understanding of Christian freedom is one of the greatest gifts God has given to us.

### **An Example from History**

Perhaps an example of applied theology from the time of the Reformation will illustrate the point. Luther came out with a radical proposition: God called Christians to lead holy lives by loving and honoring their spouses and by bringing up their children in

the discipline and instruction of the Lord. This was totally in conflict with the Catholic concept of the divide between priest and layman which dominated medieval thinking. The Catholic concept holds that monks and nuns earn forgiveness and favor and by their celibacy, they wage spiritual warfare for the salvation of the rest of the church.

Luther offered a theological concept. This theological realization set the church free from slavery to monasticism. Today we are still wrestling with all the implications for church and ministry and for the service of our members, but look at the practical results of that theology: premarital counseling, marriage seminars, Sunday school, Lutheran elementary schools, youth groups and youth rallies, and the list could go on and on. Not one of these things is commanded in the Bible. We are free to dispense with them all. But we have undertaken them because of our theological understanding that marriage and family are gifts of God.

The issue we want to address here is not marriage and family. It is the way we have chosen to fund the mission of the WELS (and to a lesser degree our congregations). There is a great deal of Christian freedom here. But that does not mean we can just dispense with theology and put our Bibles away.

Momentous decisions face us as a synod. What gifts of our fathers can we preserve? Which ones may we set aside? Which are in danger? What are we going to lose? All of these questions have an immensely *practical* dimension: how will we allocate funds for mission work in the U.S. and throughout the world? Will we preserve our historic *three tier* ministerial education system (prep schools, college and seminary)? Can we? Should we? Why or why not?

The Church exists to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, the only Savior of the world. That gives these questions a spiritual dimension. The Church exists because Christ paid for the sins of the world and the Holy Spirit brought that justification to each of us individually through the gospel in word and sacrament. Our synodical inheritance came to us because our spiritual forefathers believed that the only way for the Church to fulfill its purpose was by proclaiming the gospel. All our institutions, all our programs, all our decision making must revolve around those two central truths – the work of Christ and the power of the gospel. All our efforts must confess all the other doctrinal affirmations of the scriptures because they all eventually tie back in to the central teaching of the work and mission of Christ.

All of that is theology. Theology is the lifeblood of the church. Theology is simply “talking about God.”<sup>1</sup> In many people’s minds *theology* means some kind of academic discussion or philosophical treatment that has nothing to do with the everyday life. Nothing could be further from the truth. Theology is our day to day, real life talking about God.

Not just any God. True theology is talking about the only God who really exists, the only God who merits the name. The fact that Mormons talk about Jesus does not make them Christians. Theology is not about encounters with Islam or Judaism or any other false system of belief. It is studying and learning about the God who reveals himself in the Bible.

Theology is not speculative musings. In the last year, I have read two surveys of medieval theology. You know what? I still do not know what they are talking about. The

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<sup>1</sup> That would a *very* free rendering of the Greek words “theos” and “logia.”

categories and the terminology baffle me because they are not really talking about the Bible. They are talking about how their philosophical ideas would apply to God.

I do not have much time for that because theology is not about what I think. That is perhaps the greatest failing in what passes for theology today. To be taken seriously in the academic environment today, you have to challenge the past. You have to be creative. You have to come up with something new and different and, frankly, stimulating, or you are just rehashing the past.

None of that is going to help the Wisconsin Synod today. What we need is real, theological conversation. That means we need conversation informed by the scriptures about the God who reveals himself as Triune and who entered history in the Incarnation. Just as Luther's *God talk* led to centuries of application in the Lutheran Church, faithful theological reflection is the first essential step toward decision making and reaching consensus about the tough issues that face us.

### **The Central Issues of Theology**

Before we can wrestle with the issues, we need to state our unity. Before we clash over plans and programs and visions, we need to identify certain assumptions about our life of faith that we all agree to.

Those assumptions begin with the centrality of Christ to all that we do. Justification by faith alone, through grace alone, is the article upon which the Christian Church stands or falls. Scripture is the only authority and guide for matters of life and faith. We all confess those truths. But what implications do they hold for the decision making process and the enormous practical issues that lie before us?

This summer the synod will meet in convention and make momentous decisions about how we train pastors and teachers and about how we fund that training and our outreach to the world. This convention's work could rock our synod and our assumptions about what it takes to do our work. Is the enormous and expensive system of theological education which we have put in place really necessary? Will we look at the example of some world mission fields and determine that we could do all this for less money and fewer years of commitment? Do we even need colleges and seminaries, or should we adopt something like the LATTE program?

Faithfulness to Christ requires that we all ask ourselves searching questions: What is the best way to proclaim justification, the article by which the church stands or falls? What is the best way to keep the gospel at the center of all the work that we do? Will changes in funding distract us from our central focus, or will they draw our focus in tighter? Will keeping schools open maintain the doctrinal stand that we have taken, or will they actually reduce our convictions to mumbled assurances of loyalty to things no one understands or believes anymore? Will closing them enable us to proclaim the gospel to more people throughout the world, or will it reduce us to a poorly trained echo of American evangelicalism? These are the real issues that lie beneath the questions that our floor committees will address. The proclamation of the gospel is the basis on which the decisions need to be made.

Only by proclaiming law and gospel will we accomplish our mission in the world today. But there are many ways to proclaim law and gospel. Is it possible for us to discuss the merits of proclamation when we wrestle with hard decisions? Is it possible for

us to put the numbers aside and agree on what is most important and then work through the options that lie before us?

### **What Are We Trying to Accomplish?**

It may seem like the time for theological reflection is long past and now is the time for action. Someone might argue that this kind of discussion now will “bog us down.” But this study is offered *because* this is the time for action. When the people of God act without reflecting on the theological implications of what they are doing, it is difficult to keep our faith and our confession in the forefront. The devil wants us to be so focused on practical issues that we fail to carefully consider scripture and confession and Lutheran history before we move.

We do need to be able to move quickly. But organizations can adopt an illusion of *agility* when they put reaction time ahead of open communication. Organizations accomplish their missions more effectively and more creatively when individuals are allowed the freedom to question and discuss issues and then are entrusted with doing what needs to be done. It may take longer on the front end, and it certainly limits the ability of people *on top* to dictate the course that should be followed (even when they are right), but the end product is far superior and ultimately more efficient.

We need to take this observation to a deeper, theological level. The church exists because we all are bought and paid for by the blood of Christ. All that the church does is accomplished by proclaiming that message in the context of sin and grace. By a miracle of God’s redeeming and sanctifying grace, the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of all his people – not just in the hearts of pastors and teachers. How many of us pastors and teachers have been overwhelmed by the faith of parents at the funeral of a child? How many of us full time church workers wonder at the hours our members commit to meetings and programs, after putting in a full day’s work and without abandoning their responsibilities as parents and spouses?

*Agility* as a corporate model increases speed by removing the ability of people *to put on the brakes*. When it is applied to the Church it limits the ability of the Christian in the pew to participate in the necessary discussion about the life of the Church. Speed does get you somewhere more quickly. But speed also kills. That is true in theology because our sin infects our brains and our hearts. We usually need time and conversation to recognize threats to our faith and to identify how best to proclaim the gospel in a given time and place. Most of the time the easy way out is the devil’s way out. But it often requires maturity and instruction and pastoral counsel to enable people who are sinners and saints to see that. Talking with our members forces us pastors and teachers to consider the word as it applies to this situation even more carefully.

Grass roots theological reflection applied to the practical issues before us will yield pastors and members who are committed to working toward realistic, Scriptural solutions. Failure to address these issues will result in frustration and a greater sense that *the synod* is the leadership in Milwaukee and not the man in the pew or his congregation or his called workers.

### **Theology Is Our Heritage in the WELS**

Dave Barry once noted that the male brain is basically an analytical, problem-solving instrument. When it comes to relationships he is like an ant on top of a tire. When

the tire begins to move, it is vaguely aware that something important may be happening but it is not really capable of determining what that is in time to avoid being squashed.

That fine-tuned, problem-solving instrument makes it difficult for us to be theological in times of crisis. We don't want to sit around and talk about minute points of doctrine. We want to act! We want to frame a solution and move! We want leaders to get out in front and focus us on a goal and lead the charge! But in the Church, even the most concrete crisis exists because of theological realities. We would never be persecuted if the gospel were not offensive to unbelievers – that is a theological truth. We are not faithful if the world thinks highly of us (see John 15:18-19 and Luke 6:26). We would not need pastors or teachers or seminaries or missionaries if the gospel were something that could be discovered in this world. Theology changes the way we act every single day.

Almost fifty years ago, theology and practicality seemed to collide in the WELS. After decades of fellowship with the Missouri Synod, the WELS faced a theological reality: Our old sister synod and companion in the good fight had changed. Her theology no longer matched ours, and faithfulness to God demanded that we break with her. But on a practical level that seemed like a recipe for disaster. We leaned on Missouri for so many things – publishing, campus ministries, world and home missions. Many people outside the WELS were convinced it would only be a matter of time before we came back to Missouri with our tails between our legs. Many pastors, teachers and laymen within wondered how we could ever make it on our own.

What happened? After the split the WELS enjoyed an unprecedented period of growth in missions and offerings. Our school system became stronger than it ever was before. We expanded our home missions into every state of the union, and our world missions multiplied. Our publishing house gained a new level of respect throughout the Lutheran world.

How did all that happen? God blessed us, of course. I do not want to say that it was a reward for us because we are so good. Rather God blessed a church that trusted him and did what theology demanded when it seemed impractical. God did not allow the forces that seemed so overwhelming to crash over our little synod and sweep us away.

It takes faith to do the theological thing. It often seems impractical. When Abraham offered Isaac, it seemed like the best way to end his dream of having biological descendants who would inherit the Promised Land. But he did the theological thing – the thing that was faithful to God and his word. God did not punish him for that. Hebrews 11:1 says, “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” It should not surprise us that it seems hard – even impossible – to put theology first in our present crisis. But faith does just that.

## **II. Every Christian Is a Theologian**

My first call was to serve as a missionary in Colombia. The World Mission Board sent my wife and me to study Spanish at a university in Mexico. There were a number of American college students there (they referred to us as “the old people”). One young man was the son of a Missouri Synod pastor. He was attending a Bible study at a non-Lutheran church. When I asked him if that agreed with what he was taught about fellowship, he dismissed the question as “pastor stuff.”

God calls his people to search the scriptures. He is not just talking to church professionals. For as long as this sinful world endures we will need to be on guard against an attitude that makes theology *pastor stuff* instead of *Christian stuff*.

### **Theology Is Who We Are**

We need to be careful that we do not relegate theology to the study of doctrines or of propositional truths. Theology certainly includes that, but it is much more than that. Theology is being a “man of God,” as St. Paul told Timothy, “But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (1 Timothy 6:11,12).

Being a man of God means more than knowing the doctrine. Now, we could never be men of God if we do not lay hold of the deep truths of scripture (doctrine). The scripture is God breathed and useful for all the knowledge we need. But it is also the source of wisdom. The man of God flees from “the love of money” and all the traps of Satan. He fights the good fight of faith. His heart is renewed by the constant application of the gospel so that he is able to make sound, Christian judgments in all things.

J.P. Meyer called this “an active aptitude” (*habitus practicus*). He said,

Theology is not a cold knowledge, or insight, or science, which may lie idle and dormant in the mind; it is a living, a powerful active force, which grips the heart and converts it into a seat and source from which emanate powers of a new life. (*Our Great Heritage*, Vol. 1, p. 3)

As we struggle with difficult decisions, we may feel a temptation to put all this theology and doctrine aside and just deal with the practical issues. But that would set up a false antithesis. Every practical decision we make is informed by our theology. It is transformed by the New Man that the Holy Spirit has placed inside us. Only when we struggle with difficult issues prayerfully and theologically can we arrive at decisions that may be of benefit to the church.

### **Our Limitations**

Of course, the decisions we make could still be wrong. We labor under two limitations: 1) We are still sinners, and 2) We do not see the big picture. The Formula of Concord says that Christians will need the law as a guide

. . . until the sinful flesh is completely stripped away and people are perfectly renewed in the resurrection. Then they will need neither the proclamation of the law nor its threats and punishment, just as they will no longer need the gospel, for both belong to this imperfect life. Instead, just as they will see God face-to-face, so they will perform the will of God by the power of the indwelling Spirit of God spontaneously, without coercion, unhindered, perfectly and completely, with sheer joy, and they will delight in his will eternally. (Solid Declaration, Article VI)

Once we see God as he is, decision making will be easy. But for today we are sinners and saints at the same time. The mind of the natural man does not care what God wants. His influence is pervasive enough to make us think that we want what is best for our church body, when we really want what is most enjoyable for sinful me.

Our sinful minds are easy to delude. Last summer, one of the students in my catechism class had surgery at a clinic in Grand Rapids. His mother told me the clinic was located at the intersection of I-96 and Leonard Street. But in my mind, I pictured a different intersection – US 131 and Leonard Street. I did that because I used to pass that intersection regularly. Even though I looked up the address on the internet and actually called and got directions, each time I saw or heard I-96, my brain changed it into US 131. Not surprisingly the clinic was not located at the intersection I went to. Our sinful brains will tend to see the answer they expect to see, even in vital issues like the work of our church body.

Even if we could approach every decision with a perfectly sanctified heart, we still would not have the perspective God has. We can only see up to right now. We have to guess at tomorrow. On September 10, 2001, even though there had been indications that it could happen, 99 percent of all Americans would have considered destroying the World Trade Center with passenger jets to be the implausible plot of a summer action movie. But God knew on that day the way our perspective was going to change. God knows what we do not know about the future of the Wisconsin Synod.

James said, “Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that’” (James 4:14-15). James was warning against the sin of pride. But there is also a comfort in his “If it is the Lord’s will.” The Lord is the one who sent Jesus to die for us. The Lord is the one who has already erased the record of the new sins we have racked up today. The Lord is the one who is going to overcome our flesh so completely that in heaven, we will not even be bothered by the memory of our sin – a memory that often torments us today.

The Lord is ruling over all things for the good of his Church. We will make the best decisions we can. We will try to invoke the *active aptitude* and approach these things as children of God. But the Lord knows whether our school system and our way of financing our ministries is a blessing or not for the next decade and the next century. He will ultimately work things out.

But that does not mean we can just ignore these issues. Until Jesus returns, God hides himself behind weak and ordinary seeming things like baptism and the Lord’s Supper and the printed and spoken word. He gathers us, his children, into his own Church, but he does not allow us to indulge in a theology of glory. We are believers and we want the gospel to go forth. But that does not mean it will be easy. The devil rages against us. The forces of unbelief in this world will not go quietly. The sin in our hearts will undermine our efforts at every turn.

### **A Radical Separation**

It is my belief that the greatest tragedy to befall the WELS is our integration into the culture at large of the United States. Do not misunderstand me – I think the second greatest tragedy to befall the WELS was its integration into German culture (even before



our synod as such was born). The gospel cannot be identified with culture of the United States or of Germany.

But today, the real challenge is not coming from our being too German. The real challenge is coming from adopting the American view of life and morality and God. The spirituality of our day has much more in common with Methodism or with the Evangelical movement than it has with Lutheranism (and therefore with the Bible). We need to separate being Lutheran from being American.

Let me illustrate the point: What would happen in your congregation if the pastor asked the elders to remove the American flag from the chancel? I did that when my last congregation built a new church. I explained that I didn't want to remove it from the grounds nor did I want to dishonor the United States (I am a veteran). I simply wanted to limit the symbolism within our chancel to things that focus on Christ. In the very heated debate which followed it was stated that we won World War II because we have flags in our chancels.

Americans are practical people. They do not like debates about abstract topics. They do not want to bog down in *pastor stuff*. Today, *diversity* is the supreme social norm pushed by nearly every educational institution, government entity, and media outlet. Spiritual diversity is an anti-Christian value. Yet, how many of us struggle against a live-and-let-live mentality? How many of us look forward to defending close communion or our refusal to join in joint prayer or scouting?

As we wrestle with funding issues we need to clearly analyze when our thinking is theological and when it simply reflects the prevailing mood of America today. We need to walk a fine line between speaking a language that American Christians understand so that God's message of law and gospel convicts and pardons them, and allowing American secular thinking to determine who we are and what we will do and not do in the name of Christ.

### **III. Theological Conversation Is Our New Native Language**

Every missionary can tell you horror stories about language problems. My worst case experience had to do with confusion about the Spanish word for sand (*arena*). By inserting the wrong vowels I made a sermon about the "sand on the seashore" a bit off color. I once heard a missionary preach a Lenten sermon about Pontius the airplane pilot.

As a missionary I had to learn a new language. Now, as a pastor in the United States I have the joy of preaching and teaching in my native language. But you know what? As a Christian I have also had to learn a new language – the language of faith. It is not so much that I have had to master big, scary, theological words. Rather, the Holy Spirit has changed who I am. As he nurtured my faith, he has taught me to see and understand the world and my place in it differently.

St. Paul said of his own ministry:

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge

of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (2 Corinthians 10:3-5)

We Christians have a new way of *thinking*. Personally I do not remember when the change came. Like most of you, I was baptized as an infant. But I had to learn to speak and talk *and think* as a child of God. While I still do that in English, it is a different language because it is a language in which every thought must be taken captive by the word of God.

St. Paul reminds us that the heart that belongs to the devil cannot understand the things of God. They are foolishness to the unbeliever (1 Corinthians 2:14; see also 1 Corinthians 1:18-31). Unbelievers do not understand what we are wrestling with. People who are theologically uninformed about the scriptures have little to offer us when we wrestle with what God's word says. When I was in college, I worked with a woman who later went to Eden Theological Seminary (in St. Louis) to study for the ministry. She told me once that her fellow students gazed with a kind of awed wonder at "all those intensely doctrinal studies" that the Missouri Synod had produced in its past. When she told them that she knew of a college in Watertown, Wisconsin, where the students thought that the Missouri Synod was rife with liberalism – well, their mouths fell open.

Even though her fellow students claimed to have faith, theology – scripture – did not inform their conversation. Like most liberal seminarians, instead of the language of sin and grace, she spoke the language of feminism and empowerment, even when she used specifically biblical language and references. We must be different.

### **The Need for Discussion**

Because God hides himself and because we are sinners and saints at the same time, we need theological study of the funding issues and the institutional issues before us. We will not all agree about everything and we do not always have to. Sometimes, we will not agree because we have not listened carefully to the other side. God forgive us that sin! May he lead us in repentance to listen more attentively. Sometimes, we will not agree because we really do not understand where someone is coming from or why they think the way they do. May the Holy Spirit lead us to study together and communicate so that we can understand.

But sometimes, we will understand perfectly well what the other person is saying and why. We simply will not agree with it. When that moment comes, we need to resist the temptation to keep saying the same things over and over again. We have communicated our position. Brothers who share the same work of the Holy Spirit through the gospel see things differently.

As we discuss the issues that lie before us, let us remember the importance of honesty. In the great defense of his apostleship recorded in 2 Corinthians, St. Paul gives a long list of the ways in which "as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way." One of the items on that list is "in truthful speech and in the power of God" (2 Corinthians 6:7).

When we care deeply about an issue and when we debate with people who disagree with us, there is a temptation to overstate the benefits that our practical solution could offer and to understate the potential problems it brings. That tendency seems to be very pronounced in the WELS today.

As children of God, we have a moral obligation to speak the truth and to acknowledge the truth, even when we are passionate about issues. Hyperbole is a very effective debating tactic. But most of the time, it is not spiritually beneficial. Limiting it would go a long way to helping us reach decisions that will benefit the work God has called us to do.

When we reach the time to make decisions, we will need to work extra hard to preserve the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. May God give us the love that covers over a multitude of sins so that we can work together to reach a God-pleasing course of action, even if it means that we do not get what we want. If we as a synod engage in a course of action that we as individuals are certain spells disaster for the WELS, may the love of Christ comfort us and motivate us to still regard one another as brothers.

In the next presentation, we will address the practical issues of funding. But even there we will place those issues in a theological context. Instead of simply asking, “What will generate the most money?” we will continue to focus on the issues of motivation, of gospel proclamation, and of Christian love for each other.

We will consider a massive shift in our approach to funding. Behind the concern lies the fear that blessings we have enjoyed for generations may be imperiled. Let us openly admit what we are afraid will happen to our synod through the current financial struggles and through the discussion of the issues.

There is no guarantee that God will allow us to keep our prep schools, our college or our seminary. There is no guarantee that we will preserve the structure of the WELS as we know it. God did not promise us anything in regard to the way we organize our denomination. We may honestly believe that we are going to lose something extraordinarily precious. May God comfort us with his love as we fear those things. May we trust that he will always do what is best for his Church on earth.

### **Anti-theological Bogies**

In order to keep our conversation theological and brotherly let us avoid several anti-theological bogies, which I personally perceive in our discourse today. First of all we need to avoid emotionalism. Now we all have emotion. The classic Lutheran definition of our character is that we are made up of intellect, emotion, and will. It is not wrong to feel deeply about the issues before us. But we cannot argue on the force of our emotion. Emotional appeals that lack theological or even logical force ultimately discredit the argument. The Michigan District in particular struggles with credibility in the rest of the synod. To a certain extent I believe the emotional tenor of our conversation contributes to an anti-Michigan bias among us.

In this district I see emotionalism coming to the fore particularly in connection with MLS. At our last district convention when President Gurgel gave his reasons for moving the synod convention from Saginaw to New Ulm, the discussion took on a decidedly emotional tone. But what purpose did that serve? In the final analysis the synod president acted within his constitutional authority. We did not like or agree with his decision, and he knew that would be the case before he made it. He laid out his reasons, which we also disagreed with. But did we hurt our cause by the emotional tenor of the discussion? It was my view that we did.

We care deeply about our school system. We believe that it has been one of the primary ways that God has kept us theologically sound for over one hundred years. We have a very strong argument to make on that basis. We have excellent theological points to make regarding the qualifications that God lays down for ministers. But emotion is going to cloud our thinking. If we succeed in saving our schools with arguments that tug at our heartstrings but which do not hold water theologically, have we gained anything?

We also need to avoid institutional preservation at the expense of clear preaching of the word. In order to preserve certain institutions, we may find ourselves expanding their mission because we perceive that we could get more revenue if we do X, Y, or Z. I see this happening on three levels: the ministerial education system, the structure of the synod itself and in the local congregation, especially in regards to Lutheran elementary schools.

The process is furthest along with the local schools. Again and again we hear encouragements to make our schools outreach tools. All by itself, I think that requires serious theological discussion. But the central question I have is this: Is this just a ploy to come up with enough money to keep those schools open? In most congregations that I know of,<sup>2</sup> non-member students pay a higher rate of tuition than member students do. We all realize that if you have more non-member students in class, you have more money for salaries and health insurance and computers and so forth.

But is that approach theologically sound? What is the purpose of a Lutheran elementary school? It is to proclaim the gospel so that believing children grow in their faith and unbelieving children come to faith. Do we ever ask unbelievers or Christians outside our fellowship to pay for our preaching of the gospel? If we really want our schools to be means of bringing the lost to Christ, would it not be theologically more sound to offer two years of free tuition to non-members with the understanding that, during that time, the parents should be involved in membership classes and visiting worship? At the end of that time, if they have become Christians and convinced of the mission of the WELS, they will take up the financial burden and help pay for the congregation's school. If not, then we would ask them to make room for another prospect.

You might find all kinds of things to disagree with in that approach. But the central question remains: Are we perpetuating institutions or are we using institutions as tools to proclaim the gospel? If the synod is no longer going to fund MLS or LPS, and if the handwriting is on the wall for MLC and even WLS, do we need the synod as it currently exists? Or could we pare the whole thing down to a couple of mission boards and a conference of presidents? Could we replace even the mission boards with voluntary mission societies and get rid of all full time synod employees?

What is the theological reason for our synod's existence? The Church exists to proclaim the gospel. We do that so that our own members grow in their faith and so give glory to God. We do that so that those outside our walls may hear the gospel and through the power of God move inside. The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod is a specific expression of the Universal Church. It does not exist so that we can maintain a publishing house. We operate a publishing house so that we can continue to exist and fulfill our mission. We do not exist to operate schools. We operate schools on the local level so that

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<sup>2</sup> In the interest of full disclosure, I will state that I do not serve a congregation with an LES; although, God willing, I will be installed at one on June 24.

we can teach our children in an environment that reinforces the gospel. We operate them on the synodical level so that we can properly train pastors and teachers to do the work God has given us to do.

The public ministry must exist wherever the Church exists because Christ commanded it. It is not something we do merely for convenience or because it works better to have a guy like me up in the front on Sunday morning. The public ministry is God's plan for the preaching of the gospel in every time and place.

Synodical structure is different from our ministry – as is congregational structure. The way we organize our synod and our congregations *is* a matter of convenience, within certain theological parameters. God's word speaks to the roles of men and women in the church, to the issues of order and of brotherhood and to many other things that do apply to organizational questions. But synods, boards, church councils, constitutions, by-laws, resolutions, memorials – all these things are things we have created in the American church to do our business. All of them reflect our American mindset more than they reflect any specific instruction God gives us.

There is nothing wrong with that. In Christian freedom we can set up our synod and our congregations in whatever way best serves the proclamation of law and gospel in the time and place God has called us to work in. But structure and organization are secondary questions. Important to be sure. But the real work of the ministry is not to go to meetings, nor is it to write by-laws. The real work of the ministry is to share law and gospel with sinners. All our bureaucracy, all the endless wrangling and constitutional changes that we have been subjected to year after year, only serve a purpose if we have a theological discussion about how these things further the proclamation of sin and grace.

I am concerned about the amount of time we spend on structural issues both at the congregational level and at the district/synodical level. In 1997 the WELS adopted a new constitution which created the Synodical Council to “be responsible for the possession, care, control, and management of the property and activities of the synod in pursuit of its mission, including but not limited to planning, programs, budget, operations, and legal and fiscal matters” (*Constitution of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod*, Article VIII, section 2). This constitution was amended in 1999, 2001, 2003 and 2005. According to the *Book of Reports and Memorials*, there are proposed constitutional amendments on the agenda for the convention again this summer. If any version of the Independent Panel's recommendations for restructuring are adopted, further constitutional revisions will be necessary.

I am sure that a great many of the changes that have been made were necessary. I do believe that how we govern ourselves is important and worthy of our time and attention. But this constant recreating of ourselves is a very twenty-first century American phenomenon. It can give the man in the pew (and perhaps the man in the pulpit or the classroom) the impression that programs and conventions and meetings are the real work of the ministry. These “nuts and bolts” questions easily overwhelm theological concerns. Amending our constitution is not ministry. At its best it only makes it easier for us to do ministry.

### **Is There a Division Among Us?**

For the fourteen years that I have served in the ministry of the WELS, financial issues have been taking on an increasingly urgent aspect. But sometimes surface issues

hide deeper concerns. Money is easy to talk about. People get excited about it. Even Luther began the Reformation with a critique of a money issue – the buying and selling of indulgences. But after a certain point that issue faded from his writing and his critique of the Catholic Church. The money issue was really only a symptom of far deeper theological concerns.

I wonder if the same thing is true today. Our synod is polarizing into at least two armed camps. We seem to be dividing over a host of what could be thought of as practical issues: organization of our synod, funding for our schools, styles of worship, and more. But do these divisions reflect a deeper theological rift?

There are voices in our synod that believe that at least two different theological outlooks exist among us and we should cast out those who espouse an aberrant theology. But there are also those who believe different factions are simply exercising their freedom to do different things in the service of the gospel. Each side is trying to win the synod as whole over to its position. Each represents its perception of the other side as if that were factual. It is my belief that neither really knows for sure where we stand.

On the one side, you have people who believe that they represent the essence of the historic strengths of the WELS. They believe that we have wandered from our moorings and that they are trying to retain the gifts God has given us. They view the other side as threatening the gospel itself.

If I understand this side's concerns correctly, they tend to view the other side in the following terms:<sup>3</sup>

- As dabbling in or embracing Church Growth methodologies and theologies;
- As dismissing or attacking liturgical worship;
- As emphasizing a “how to” approach that devalues theology;
- As having no real interest in catechizing;
- As willing to sacrifice Lutheran doctrine, practice, and discipline in the name of getting more people in;
- As wanting to import marketing strategies and a business model into the church;
- As committed to concentrating power in the hands of a small number of people in Milwaukee.

This approach spells doom in their minds.

But the other side has a different perspective. They believe they represent the true love for souls that Jesus had. This side believes that it has Christian freedom to make changes and a real commitment (perhaps the only real commitment) to involving the priesthood of all believers in the work and life of the church. It believes that it has found (or is at least much closer to finding) the key to translating confessional Lutheranism from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first.

If I understand their concerns correctly, they tend to view the other side in these terms:<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I would welcome correction if I have misrepresented this point of view.

<sup>4</sup> Again, I would welcome correction if I have misrepresented this way of thinking.

- As unoriginal in their thinking and, frankly, uninteresting and disconnected from the life of the people they serve;
- As “out of touch,” a concern they have for the entire synod;
- As more interested in tradition than in faith;
- As more interested in preserving doctrine than in reaching out;
- As doing no more than *maintenance ministry*;
- As obstructionist and concerned with defending their local concerns over the concerns of the synod as a whole.

They argue that doing the same thing will produce the same results – in the case of the WELS, the same unproductive results.

Do either of these groups have a clear picture even of themselves? Do they really understand what the other side is doing or saying? The leadership of our synod has stated repeatedly that we can be thankful that we do not have any doctrinal problems to deal with. There are only practical differences. But I submit to you that we cannot tell if that is true or not because there is no real theological discussion going on in our synod about these issues. Much of what passes for theological discussion is not between these two points of view but among the adherents of one side or the other.

That is a recipe for disaster. Two different factions with different philosophies *will* eventually embrace different theologies. I propose to you that this division is the real burning issue in our synod. If it were resolved, we would go a long way to resolving the tension and difficulties we face on many other levels. Money will always be a problem in a sinful world. But our members are perceptive enough to recognize that we as a synod no longer speak with one voice. Much of what is going on probably seems like politics to them.

What is the solution? First of all, we need to admit that this polarization is taking place. Then we need to honestly investigate how deep it really is. If we find that a real theological gulf already exists among us, faithfulness to God’s word will demand that we separate from those who are not faithful to his word. But you know what? We may find that such a divide does not exist or that it is exaggerated among us.

How will we know? I propose that the Conference of Presidents sponsor a series of theological conferences designed to get to the bottom of where we stand. They should follow the methodology of a free conference. That is, presenters who are recognized as leaders in different schools of thought among us would be asked to come and clearly and openly present what they think about specific issues. Then we would invite them to identify where they see differences from the presenters on the opposite side of the issue.

I propose that we discuss the principles of stewardship, fellowship, church and ministry with special attention to the role of the synod in the local congregation, the role of the laity, church polity, and the efficacy of the word. Other issues could be added, but this list would keep us busy for a while.

Now, does that seem trite and unnecessary? Maybe. But we must heal the growing divide before it becomes a breach. The only way to heal is to speak clearly and openly and to confess what we believe the scriptures teach. If we cannot do that, then we have a far greater problem than our finances or the preservation of our ministerial education system.

## **The Value of *God Talk***

Theology is God talk. It is talking about our Savior. It is seeing every question from the perspective of its connection to the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Theology is not something only pastors and teachers can do or should do. Every time a member speaks up in Bible class and shares an insight into the word of God, that is theology. Every time a parent prays with a little child before bed, that is theology. Every time a pastor comforts the grieving, shares the gospel with a prospect, teaches a confirmand or counsels a person in a moment of decision, every time a teacher opens the eyes of children to understand their Savior better, teaches them to sing praises to their Lord or comforts them in the confusing world of playground politics, that is theology.

We cannot be afraid of theology, even though it may mean that we separate from those who do not share our conviction of the teachings Christ gave us. Faithfulness to the word and to our Lord means a willingness to do things that are difficult.

In this world it often seems as though theology divides us. That is not true. Sin divides us. When we refuse to hear God's word, we are dividing ourselves from those who remain faithful. But in our experience of that process, it often feels as though it is theology that divides us and those who remain true to the word of God are cold and unloving. It takes faith to see things the way that God sees them.

The source of faith is the gospel. Jesus died and rose even for our weakness and our fear and our unwillingness to confront theological issues. God has forgiven us. He will give us the strength we need to address these issues as true men of God, recreated in the image of our Lord.

The gospel even promises that God will heal our divisions. In heaven all those who trusted in Jesus will be one, even though we all cannot be one in this life. When we see the Lord, then our theology will be perfect and complete. And our unity will be without flaw or imperfection. May God give us the strength we need to live in faith now until we live by sight in heaven.