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ARTHUR CARL PIEPKORN AND THE EVANGELICAL CATHOLIC
APPROACH TO ECUMINISM

A seminar paper done for Concordia Seminary, St. Louis in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the Master of Sacred Theology degree

By Paul Robert Sauer
May 2001
Approved by Dr. Charles Arand
Readers:

On Thursday, December 13, 1973 the Rev. Dr. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, mired in the midst of the controversy at Concordia Seminary and weary from the divisiveness of the battles, walked into a barber shop in Clayton and received eternal rest. He was a man who consistently declared Lutheranism to be the theological center of catholicity¹, and who himself arguably stood at the radical center of Lutheran catholicity. His passing would have a profound impact on the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod for years to come. A devoted student of his writes of his funeral, "That cold December day was sated by a sense of endings. Piepkorn. The seminary. The synod."²

These words of Richard John Neuhaus in a eulogy to his beloved professor and friend in the pages of *Lutheran Forum*, have proven to be prophetic. A majority of the seminary would go into exile and eventually leave the LCMS. The synod would achieve a stronger doctrinal and biblical identity, but it would come at the cost of ecumenical isolation, and charges of sectarianism. Tragically, following his death, Piepkorn and his writings would slide into the periphery of the theological landscape of the LCMS.

Yet, despite his absence from the mainstream theological discussions of the church body which he served so faithfully, it is nevertheless striking to observe the impact that Piepkorn has had both on Lutheranism and on other prominent theologians in this country. On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of his death *Lutheran Forum* published articles by Robert Wilken and Richard John Neuhaus concerning the legacy of Piepkorn.³ These articles, in turn, prompted a response by David Anglin, which criticized

¹ See for example his argument in "Public Relations for Lutheran Education: in Conclusion," in which he encourages the Church of the Augsburg Confession in America to reap the benefits of its educational programs which provide a unique position between Roman Catholicism and American Protestantism.

² Neuhaus, Richard John. "Arthur Carl Piepkorn 1907-1973" in *Lutheran Forum* Feb. 1974 p. 18

³ *Lutheran Forum* 33 (Pentecost/Summer 1999)

Wilken and Neuhaus because, “Both of them sought to take Piepkorn posthumously with them to Rome.”⁴ The question Anglin raises has implications for today: ‘Who owns Piepkorn’s legacy?’

Before his conversion to Roman Catholicism, Neuhaus observed, “There is a surprising number of theologians and pastors – many of whom were never students of Piepkorn – who call themselves Piepkornians.”⁵ This phenomenon can be seen in recent *Lutheran Forum* articles where individuals debate with great ferocity what Piepkorn would have thought about the *Concordat*.⁶ One senses that for many, a Piepkorn imprimatur is akin to certain truth. For an outsider looking in one can assent to the words of Neuhaus on the founding of the Arthur Carl Piepkorn Prize, “Let it be admitted, many who did not know Piepkorn personally are a bit puzzled by the fuss that some of us make over him.”⁷

However, a quick survey of the current theological landscape in no small way indicates the significance of Piepkorn for today. The issues that were dear to him – Liturgics, Ecumenism, catholicity of the church, Lutheran identity, the *una sancta* – these are still the issues which trouble the church now twenty seven years after his death. His carefully researched, confessional, and innovative approach to these questions has impacted not just the way that Lutherans think about themselves but also how others view

⁴ Anglin, David W. “Who Owns Piepkorn’s Legacy?” in *Lutheran Forum* 33 (Fall 1999) p. 41

⁵ Neuhaus, Richard John. “Remembering Piepkorn” in *Lutheran Forum* 18 #4 (1984) p. 16

⁶ see Reumann, John H. P. “The *Concordat* and Piepkorn on the Sacred Ministry” in *Lutheran Forum* 32 (Spring 1998) p. 32-5. And “Reumann and Piepkorn on Ministry: Letters of response” in *Lutheran Forum* 32 (Summer 1998) p. 59-62

⁷ Neuhaus, Richard John. “Remembering Piepkorn” p. 15

Lutherans. Thus, Eastern Orthodox Priest, Michael Plekon can compare Piepkorn favorably to Alexander Schmemmann.⁸ Likewise even after his conversion to Roman Catholicism, Neuhaus recognizes Piepkorn's importance, "To understand Piepkorn is to understand, in large part, the crisis of Protestantism at the edge of a new millennium-or at least those parts of Protestantism that claim the legacy of the sixteenth century Reformation."⁹

As the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod is confronted once again with 'church questions' it is perhaps time to rediscover the writings of one from our own past. Piepkorn would remind us, that one of the joys of being a part of the church catholic is the recognition that the events of our present day are in no way unique within the history of the church; as such our theological enterprise not only need not start from scratch, but should not. How then might Piepkorn's writings shape our understanding of the Lutheran Church Missouri-Synod and her relationship to the 'one, holy, catholic, apostolic church?' What does the Piepkorn legacy have to offer the church today? To answer these questions one must first seek to ascertain what the nature of Piepkorn's legacy is.

PIEPKORN AND LUTHERANISM AS

'A CONFESSING MOVEMENT WITHIN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'

Perhaps the most enduring legacy of Arthur Carl Piepkorn is his revolutionary assertion that the Lutheran church is best seen as a confessing movement within the church catholic. He was not the first to use the term 'evangelical catholic', nor was he the

⁸ Plekon, Michael and Wiecher, William. "Introduction: Arthur Carl Piepkorn Teacher and Father of the Church" in *The Church: Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn*. P. 5-15. Admittedly Piepkorn's impact on Eastern Orthodoxy remains to be seen, as Plekon is himself a former Lutheran.

⁹ Neuhaus, Richard John. "While we're at it" in *First Things* 40 (Jan. 1994)

first to envision Lutheranism as the ‘reconciling center of Christendom.’¹⁰ However, his innovation was to stress the ecumenical character of the Lutheran Symbols, and to reinterpret them and the events of the Reformation era in the light of the 1500 shared common years of catholic tradition. For Piepkorn the Lutheran Reformation was not the beginning of a new church. Nether was it an attempted repristation of the church of the first few centuries. Rather, it was a part of the church catholic which, as a result of the Council of Trent’s codification of doctrine under the papacy, now found itself separated in schism. In short, Piepkorn’s impact on Lutheran ecclesiastical self understanding was that, as Neuhaus puts it rather wryly, “He confirmed the rumor that Lutheranism is a part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church”¹¹

The catholic history of the Lutheran church via the shared 1500 years of common Christendom has as its corollary position the recognition that Roman Catholicism is in a sense a denominational entity that came into existence during the Reformation era. This view takes form in Piepkorn’s *Profiles in Belief*. Here, Piepkorn organizes the churches under denominational headings. His treatment of Western Christendom starts with a chapter entitled “The Church in the West: the first fifteen centuries,”¹² affirming the unity of the Western Christendom for the First Fifteen Centuries. He then begins his discussion of Roman Catholicism with the Council of Trent, indicating that although it has a claim to being an inheritor of the common tradition of the church of the West, it is not to be empirically identified with that church.

¹⁰ The phrase ‘evangelical catholic’ appears in the writings of Soderblom, the understanding of Lutheranism as the ‘reconciling center of Christendom’ appears in the writings of Wilhelm Loehe.

¹¹ Neuhaus, Richard John. “Arthur Carl Piepkorn 1907-1973” p. 17

¹² Piepkorn, Arthur Carl. *Profiles in Belief: The Religious Bodies of the United States and Canada* New York: Harper and Row, 1977

Where did Piepkorn develop this innovative notion of Lutheranism? As far as can be ascertained¹³ Piepkorn's understanding of the church appears to have arisen through his own study, as he seems to pre-date even the European theologians who speak explicitly of Lutheranism as a movement within the church catholic. Elements of Piepkorn's thought may have been derived from the ecumenical writings of Soderblom and the writings of 19th century confessional Lutherans like August Vilmar and Wilhelm Loehe. However, Piepkorn's discovery likely has as its theological source the preface to the Augsburg confession which seeks to give an account of the "dissension concerning our holy faith and the Christian religion" and "to employ all diligence amicably and charitably to hear, understand, and weigh the judgements, opinions and beliefs of the several parties among us, to unite the same in agreement on one Christian truth, to put aside whatever may not have been rightly interpreted or treated by either side, to have all of us embrace and adhere to a single, true religion and live together in unity and in one fellowship and church, even as we are all enlisted under one Christ"¹⁴ (Preface 2.4) To these words he adds, "Those who today subscribe to the doctrinal content of the Augsburg Confession must regard this objective as a piece of unfinished business, to be worked at whenever the opportunity presents itself."¹⁵ The mandates of our very confessions, Piepkorn contends, do not allow us to settle into a comfortable

¹³ This is an area open to more study. No one as yet has been able to explicitly set forth from where Piepkorn derived his notion as Lutheranism as confessing movement within the Church Catholic. Dr. Klaen of SELK in Germany has indicated that the first descriptor of 'Lutheranism as a confessing movement' in Germany theological writings does not occur until the mid-1950's.

¹⁴ *Augsburg Confession* Preface 2.4 quoted from Piepkorn, Arthur Carl. "Conversation piece: a common heritage and a common separation impel Lutherans to talk with Roman Catholics" in *Lutheran Forum* (October, 1967) p. 6-9

¹⁵ *ibid.*

denominational sectarianism. Rather, Lutheranism is always to confess its faith, and continue moving and working toward reconciliation in the Western church.

For Piepkorn, Lutherans and Roman Catholics not only have a parallel history, but share a parallel problem: “Both are persuaded that they have access to the revelation of God in all its fullness and that the task of each generation in the church is merely to appropriate the inexhaustible treasure that is waiting for it.”¹⁶ This becomes problematic for Piepkorn because, “Each confessional tradition was right not only in what it shared in common with the others, but also in the insights which it particularly perpetuated, but each became increasingly wrong in its unbalanced (and sometimes absolutized) stress on its privileged insights as it continued in isolation from the other confessional traditions.”¹⁷ It is interesting to note that Piepkorn intends to include in the ‘confessional traditions’ not only Lutheranism and Roman Catholicism, but also Anglicanism and those traditions which follow Zwingli, Calvin, Knox and others.¹⁸ Each confessional tradition has something to contribute to ecumenical dialogue.

The situation in which the church of the Reformation era found itself, was not one of heresy, for Piepkorn. Rather, it was the further schismatic rending of the church in the West begun with the mutual excommunications of the Bishops of Rome and Constantinople in 1054. The Reformation schism was a regrettable event; yet Piepkorn argues, the Lutheran theologian “feels that the breach was not something which the

¹⁶ Piepkorn, Arthur Carl. “What We Can Learn From the Roman Catholic Church in the Present Dialog” in *Lutheran Witness* 84 (Oct. 1965) p. 358

¹⁷ Piepkorn, Arthur Carl. “A Lutheran Theologian Looks at the Ninety-Five Theses in 1967” in *Theological Studies* 28 (Sept. 1967) p. 528

¹⁸ *ibid.*

Lutheran Reformers designed or for which they were exclusively or even extensively responsible.”¹⁹ In maintaining this he is able to affirm that Lutheranism is a confessing movement within the church catholic. It has never left the church, rather, it stands as a *via media* between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism - confessionally catholic and historically Protestant.

As the *via media* of Western Christendom, Lutheranism’s confessional task becomes apparent. It is to encourage those within Protestantism to recover a greater degree of its catholicity, and also those within Roman Catholicism to impart a more evangelical aspect to their denomination.²⁰ It was for a greater reclamation of Lutheranism’s catholicity (and by extension all of Protestantism’s reclamation of its catholicity as well) that Piepkorn was greatly involved in the liturgical renewal movement.²¹ On the other hand, he could celebrate the movement toward the Lutheran center made by Roman Catholicism at Vatican II,²² for this is the very task of a Lutheran theologian – to unite Christendom under the banner of catholicity regardless of their ecclesiastical starting point. However, there is never to be a spirit of triumphalism in this confessional task, for “The Lutheran Church does not equate any ecclesial community –

¹⁹ *ibid.* 520

²⁰ The most explicit statement of this principle by Piepkorn occurs in an article written by him as the editor of *Una Sancta* “Preface to a New Volume” in *Una Sancta 10 #1* (Advent 1950) p. 2

²¹ Piepkorn writes, “Thus, conscious of the Catholicity of the Lutheran position, the Lutheran Liturgical movement seriously seeks the fullest implementation of that position in the Church’s liturgical life and practice, in conviction that the recovery of this practical expression of its Catholicity is a necessary prerequisite to the Lutheran Church’s full contribution to the ecumenical conversation of Christendom.” in Piepkorn, Arthur Carl. “The Protestant Worship Revival and the Lutheran Liturgical Movement” in *The Liturgical Renewal of the Church* Massey Hamilton Shepherd Jr., ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1950. p. 97

²² Piepkorn, Arthur Carl. “A Lutheran Theologian Looks at the Ninety-Five Thesis in 1967” p. 529

its own, the Roman Catholic (SA III, 12, 1) or any other large or small – with the one holy catholic and apostolic church.”²³

PIEPKORN AND THE SYMBOLIC BOOKS

To fully appreciate the innovative perspective of Piepkorn, it is necessary to recognize that he labored in an age where the Luther Renaissance had elevated Luther to the point where Lutherans could appeal to ‘Scripture and Luther.’ Piepkorn nuances this into the alternative ‘Scripture and the Lutheran Symbolic books.’ Without denigrating the significance of Luther, Piepkorn observes that Luther is appealed to rarely in those Symbolic books which he did not author.²⁴ Likewise, he observes that what is traditionally observed as the founding document of the reformation – Luther’s penning of the 95 thesis – does not find a place in the Symbolic books.²⁵ In short, “there is no one-for-one equation of Luther’s teaching and the divine self-disclosure.”²⁶ Rather, Luther’s importance is as a theologian “in the catholic tradition under the Word of God.”²⁷

For Piepkorn the merit of *any* theologian was that he represented the catholic tradition under the Word of God. Likewise, any confessional statement or writing, had value only as a witness to that, and within that, catholic tradition. Thus, he maintains that the Lutheran Symbols are to be subscribed to on account of their claim to being a catholic witness to the Scriptures, and all other writings and writers stand merely as witnesses “to

²³ Piepkorn, Arthur Carl. “Ministry and Ordination in the Symbolical Books” in *Concordia Theological Monthly* 40 (Sept. 1969)

²⁴ Piepkorn, Arthur Carl. “The Lutheran Symbolic Books and Luther” in *Luther for an Ecumenical Age*

²⁵ Piepkorn, Arthur Carl. “A Lutheran Theologian Looks at the Ninety-Five Theses in 1967” in *Theological Studies* 28 (Sept. 1967)

²⁶ Piepkorn. “The Lutheran Symbolic Books and Luther” p. 259

²⁷ *ibid.*

the conviction of those who promulgated or subscribed to it.”²⁸ Piepkorn adds, “[The Symbolic Books] stand as a demonstration of the essential catholicity of the Lutheran Church, and constitute a necessary standard of doctrine and practice for those who profess to be Lutheran.”²⁹

He further emphasizes the catholic nature of the Symbolic books in his article “Suggested Principles for a Hermeneutics of the Lutheran Symbols”, where he refers to them as “a catholic interpretation of the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testament.”³⁰ The confessions are seen to “participate in the normative character of the Sacred Scriptures in that they reproduce the doctrinal content of the latter. . . that is, as a norm the Symbols are to give form to, to inform, our theology.”³¹

It is in this article that Piepkorn spells out the implication that the catholicity of the Symbols have for those who hold to them. Because they stand in a continuous chain of catholic witness, a Lutheran theologian is able to properly prioritize his standing within the church: “We are catholic Christians first, Western catholics second, Lutherans third.”³² Corollary to this proper ordering of self-identity is a proper ordering of the Symbolic writings themselves:

The later Symbols are to be interpreted by the earlier Symbols, not vice versa. The Formula of Concord and the questions put to candidates for Holy Ordination and for installation as professor establish a clear hierarchy of symbols: the Catholic

²⁸ Piepkorn, Arthur Carl. “The Protestant Worship Revival and the Lutheran Liturgical Movement” in *The Liturgical Renewal of the Church*. Massey Hamilton Shepherd, ed. New York: Oxford Univ., 1960 p. 92

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ Peipkorn, Arthur Carl. “Suggested Principles for a Hermeneutics of the Lutheran Symbols” in *Concordia Theological Monthly* 29 (Jan. 1958) p. 2

³¹ *ibid.* p. 3

³² *ibid.* p. 5

Creeds are *summae auctoritatis*; the creed par excellence of the Lutheran Reformation is the Augsburg Confession; the other Lutheran Creeds are not new and independent documents but have relevance only as interpretations of the Augsburg confession.³³

Although Piepkorn offers no explicit commentary on why the *Formula* and the liturgical rites of the church suggest this hierarchy of the symbols, it is likely that the creeds, being the more universal of the documents as such are *summae auctoritatis*. The Augsburg Confession, then, serves as the catholic confession of a particular segment of the church, and as such, though not being in any way less catholic than the creeds, possesses less of a universal authority. Finally, the remaining Symbolic writings may be seen to be ‘in house’ documents of Lutheranism, and as such have less of an ecumenical significance than even the Augsburg confession.

What Piepkorn seeks to guard against with his hierarchy of Symbols (in addition to being faithful to the Symbolic writings themselves which call for such a hierarchy) is a tendency on the part of later Lutherans to read the Dogmatic insights of the Orthodox fathers into the confessional texts.³⁴ The most striking example of this occurs in the common practice of reading later descriptions of the church back into the Symbolic writings. Thus, he rightly recognizes that paradoxical notions of the church as visible/invisible, *improprie dicta/ proprie dicta*, Church Militant/Church Triumphant, are alien to the Symbols. Piepkorn notes, “There is one casual passing reference to an ‘eternal church (ewige Kirche)’ in the *Formula of Concord* (SD II 50) but otherwise the

³³ *ibid.* 19

³⁴ Piepkorn, Arthur Carl. “What the Symbols Have to Say about the Church” in *The Church: Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn* Michael P. Plekon and William S. Wiecher, ed. New York: ALPB Books, 1993 p. 20

only church that the Symbols concern themselves with is the church that exists on earth in time.”³⁵

As a result, one who is faithful to the confessions themselves and not later glosses or alien dogmatic interpretations of those confessions discovers in the Symbols a strong concern for what Piepkorn repeatedly refers to as the ‘empirical church.’ It was likely as a result of his strong sense of the empirical church catholic that Piepkorn became a major figure in the ecumenical dialogues of his day. Likewise, it no doubt contributed to his abiding interest in the confessional communities throughout this country, which culminated in his opus magnum - *Profiles in Beliefs: The Religious Bodies in the United States and Canada*.

PIEPKORN AND ECUMINISM

Piepkorn, has much to offer the contemporary Lutheran Church in terms of rediscovering the catholicity of her roots. His insights into the very nature of the existence of the Lutheran Church were innovative to be sure, but they were grounded in the Lutheran Symbolic books, which in turn are to be seen as “a catholic interpretation of the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testament.”³⁶ The catholicity of Lutheranism has implications for its involvement in ecumenical dialogue. It is in this area that Piepkorn may offer the greatest aid to contemporary Lutheranism.

Because we share a common 1500 year history with Western Christendom, it stands to reason that there would be much in common between churches that claim a catholic heritage. For Piepkorn, one of the areas of greatest promise for ecumenism lay in

³⁵ *ibid.* Piepkorn also notes here that modern conceptions of church as a denominational entity are alien to the Symbolic books.

³⁶ Piepkorn. “Suggested Principles for a Hermeneutics of the Lutheran Symbols” p. 4

the rediscovery of the shared liturgical heritage of the church. In addition to serving as editor of *Una Sancta* – a journal of liturgical renewal, he also served as the Ecclesiastical Arts editor for *The American Lutheran* (later *Lutheran Forum*), editor of the Lutheran Liturgical Calendar, was Chairman of Theology for the Lutheran Society for Worship, Music and the Arts, and was a member of the commission on worship of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America. Among the many articles on liturgics which Piepkorn authored, *Conduct of the Service*³⁷ and *The Survival of the Historic Vestments in the Lutheran Church after 1555*³⁸ are his most significant.

In *Conduct of the Service*, Piepkorn emphasizes the good catholic usage of current Lutheran rubrics. He seeks to better educate Lutheran clergy on the importance of proper liturgical form and of implementing the rubrics as they read. Where the rubrics are ambiguous or unclear, Piepkorn “proposes a mode of procedure that accords with the best liturgical tradition of the Church of the Augsburg Confession.”³⁹ Ultimately the goal of Piepkorn is to stress the importance of implementing the rubrics as the read, so that “our church [can] achieve the degree of uniformity in our services that practical experience indicates is so desirable.”⁴⁰ However, such a unity is not unity for unity’s sake. Rather, it is unity designed for the furtherance of the catholicity of the church.

Likewise, catholicity stands behind Piepkorn’s meticulously researched *Survival of the Historic Vestments in the Lutheran Church after 1555*. In it he seeks not only to

³⁷ Piepkorn, Arthur Carl. *Conduct of the Service* St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Print Shop, 1965.

³⁸ Piepkorn, Arthur Carl. *Survival of the Historic Vestments in the Lutheran Church after 1555* St. Louis: Concordia Seminary School for Graduate Studies, 1956.

³⁹ *ibid* p.1

⁴⁰ *ibid*

show how Lutheranism, in many parts, maintained the historic (catholic) vestments, but also preserves them in one form or another in modern times. The significance of this observation is to note that “The vestments worn, like the rite and the ceremonial employed, should symbolize and attest the unbroken continuity of the church today with the church of the Apostles.”⁴¹ Although vestments themselves are included among the things adiaphora, they nevertheless have the important function of visibly asserting Lutheranism’s catholicity.

In his article describing the history and aim of the Lutheran liturgical movement, Piepkorn describes the importance of liturgical renewal:

Thus conscious of the catholicity of the Lutheran position, the Lutheran liturgical movement seriously seeks the fullest implementation of that position in the church’s liturgical life and practice, in the conviction that the recovery of this practical expression of its catholicity is a necessary prerequisite to the Lutheran Church’s full contribution to the ecumenical conversation of Christendom.⁴²

Liturgical renewal was not for Piepkorn just a matter of ascetic preference. While maintaining with the Symbols that liturgical form is of itself a matter of adiaphora⁴³, Piepkorn recognizes that all liturgies are not equal in terms of their adherence to and furtherance of the catholicity of the church. For Piepkorn, liturgy was just one aspect of the shared common history of the church. The task of the ecumenical theologian was to rediscover other commonalties through a shared re-discovery of one another’s

⁴¹ Piepkorn, Arthur Carl. “The Life of God in the Parish” in *The Church: Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn* Michael P. Plekon and William S. Wiecher, ed. New York: ALPB Books, 1993 p.115

⁴² Piepkorn. “The Protestant Worship Revival and the Lutheran Liturgical Movement” p. 97

⁴³ See for example his introductory comments in *Conduct of the Service* where he writes “Those less ‘liturgically’ inclined may depart from the norm suggested as widely as their vagrant fancy and their Christian liberty dictate, and they will unquestionably do so. These things are not matters of faith, and their doing or omission is neither mortal nor venial sin.” p. 2

ecclesiastical communion. A dialogue between two churches, each setting forth positive theological positions was viewed by him as the ideal way to achieve this rediscovery.

In an address to clergy of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Ft. Wayne, Indiana, Piepkorn outlines his hopes for what dialogue can accomplish. In addition to laying the foundation for what “lies beyond the horizon of immediately imaginable possibilities,”⁴⁴ he describes how “we can erase ancient animosities through dialogue, we can build the bridges of mutual understanding and respect and affection that will enable us to be Christians and ‘little Christs’ to one another.”⁴⁵ Practically speaking this may even eventually lead to a sacramental sharing in ‘emergency circumstances’.⁴⁶ Although limited in scope, emergency sacramental sharing has the greater theological significance of affirming one another’s catholicity.

Central to Piepkorn’s understanding of dialogue is that churches have the opportunity to represent themselves truly and honestly to one another. This counteracts the tendency that theologians and churches alike have to ‘homogenize’ other confessional traditions. Dialogue circumvents this problem and allows us to address even fundamental problems of terminology: “When we talk in our special Lutheran language, we cannot expect members of other religious communities to understand us. Nor can we blithely assume that we really understand what they are saying when they are talking in their own

⁴⁴ Piepkorn, Arthur Carl. “Living With Brothers in the Lord” in *Concordia Theological Monthly* 39 (March, 1968) p. 172

⁴⁵ *ibid*

⁴⁶ *ibid*

denominational tongues.”⁴⁷ To truly dialogue with one another, it is important to recognize that there need not be uniformity in theological categories or terminology.

Piepkorn’s hermeneutical principle of dialogue, if it may be described as such, is honesty. This is most apparent in the painstaking care given to his treatment of other Religious Bodies in *Profiles in Belief*. Professor Martin Marty describes the care that Piepkorn took in his foreword to *Profiles in Belief*: “Here we have something coherent and believable, the voice of a single informed observer. He establishes the ‘side view’ and then invites criticism and approval by a member of each group to check on the accuracy of the portraits. This process assures evenness in tone and consistency in proportion without sacrificing either fairness or immediacy.”⁴⁸ Piepkorn takes great care to allow the various traditions to tell their own stories, unconstrained or falsely molded by Lutheran dogmatic categories. That this was his favored approach is confirmed in various book reviews in *Concordia Theological Monthly* where he extols authors who likewise seek to allow the respective ecclesiastical traditions to speak for themselves.⁴⁹

Polemics have no place in an ecumenical dialogue for Piepkorn⁵⁰. This is especially true of those polemics that are just a mere rehashing of the Reformation era condemnations. To engage in such activity ignores the fact that “Four centuries of time,

⁴⁷ Piepkorn, Arthur Carl. “Guidelines for Dialog: A Sermon” in *Concordia Theological Monthly* 36 (March 1965) p. 175

⁴⁸ Marty, Martin “Foreword” in *Profiles in Belief* p. xi

⁴⁹ See for example his reviews of *Oecumenica: an annual symposium of ecumenical research* in *CTM* 41 (Feb. 1970) or *American Church of the Protestant Heritage* in *CTM* 28 (Feb. 1957)

⁵⁰ It is interesting to note, though perhaps coincidental, that the harshest polemical writing that occurs within the pages of *Una Sancta* by the editorial staff occur on those issue during the period in which Piepkorn’s name is not on the letterhead, beginning with *Unca Sancta* in 1955. Piepkorn’s name re-appears on the letterhead when Richard John Neuhaus takes over as editor in 1963, and *Una Sancta* becomes more ecumenical in outlook.

plus such events as the Council of Trent, the Counter-Reformation, the ‘Modernist’ controversy, the two Vatican Councils of 1870 and of 1961-1965, and the Mariological definitions of 1854 and 1950, have brought changes.”⁵¹ Indeed, these changes may have been for better or for worse, but because of these changes Reformation era polemics cannot be the modern theologian’s source of information about the Roman Catholic Church.

Likewise, other forms of polemical writings do not contribute to a greater understanding of one another by different ecclesiastical communions. Consistently an irenic writer, Piepkorn reserves his harshest criticism for those who engage in misguided polemics. In a review of *Ecumenicalism and Romanism, Their Origin and Development: A New History of Dogma* he takes author Peter Doeswyck to task for “unwarranted inferences, indefensible generalizations, extensive oversimplifications. . . . the wrong kind of Anti-Roman Catholic polemics.”⁵²

Part of his reluctance to engage in interdenominational polemics was likely a result of his awareness of the shortcomings within his own Lutheran tradition. Piepkorn recognized that Lutherans had lost a considerable portion of their catholic heritage in the de-liturgizing of the church, the loss of a *healthy* Marian piety, and the disappearance of a strong sense of connectedness with the saints triumphant. Thus, in his critique of *The Saints Who Never Were* by Lancelot Sheppard, he writes, “Let those Christians whose

⁵¹ Piepkorn, Arthur Carl. “What Lutherans Contribute to Dialog with Roman Catholics” in *Lutheran Witness* 85 (Jan. 1966) p. 5

⁵² Piepkorn, Arthur Carl. “Review of *Ecumenicalism and Romanism, Their Origin and Development: A New History of Dogma*” in *Concordia Theological Monthly* 33 (April 1962) p. 250 See also his review of Stanley Stuber’s *How We Got Our Denominations: A primer on Church History* (in *Concordia Theological Monthly* 31 (May 1960) p. 332-3) where he criticizes Stuber for misrepresenting various aspects of the different denominational stances.

defect is that they have neglected the proper veneration of the saints sedulously refrain from sitting in judgement on the Roman Catholic Church for its past excesses. As the Roman Catholic Church is today seeking to remedy its excesses, let them consider how they may repair their defects.”⁵³ It is only through a spirit of openness, humility and commitment to truth that ecumenical dialog can bear fruit.

An apophatic theology, which merely caricatures and then critiques differences between denominations has no place within Piepkorn’s understanding of the true nature of dialogue. It is not the place of one denomination to tell another what they do or must believe.⁵⁴ Piepkorn writes, “The conclusion that I may draw from another’s position may be impeccable in its logic, but it may not be legitimate in the light of the premises with which he is operating.”⁵⁵

In the place of this style of theologizing, Piepkorn encourages a ‘positive theology’: “[The Lutheran theologian] does not conceive of his task as his bringing about a change in the minds or in the faith of those with whom he engages in dialogue. He does see his task to set forth, with the meekness and reverence that St. Peter enjoins, the position which he believes to be in harmony with the Word of God.”⁵⁶ Piepkorn demonstrates a practical application of these principles in his essay “The Lutheran

⁵³ Piepkorn, Arthur Carl. “Review of *The Saints Who Never Were*” in *Concordia Theological Monthly* 41 (June 1970) p. 372-3

⁵⁴ In this regard it seems likely that Piepkorn would have been greatly troubled by the newspaper articles taken out by Al Barry concerning the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. Not only is this not the way that dialog occurs, but it is not proper for the Lutheran Church to tell Roman Catholics that they do not believe what they say they believe, even if the words as written logically necessitate that they do not believe it.

⁵⁵ Piepkorn. “Living with Brothers in the Lord” p. 172

⁵⁶ Piepkorn. “What Lutherans Contribute to Dialog with Roman Catholics” p. 7

Doctrine of the Sacrament of the Altar Ecumenically Considered,”⁵⁷ in which his opening subsection is entitled “The Lutheran Doctrine in Positive Terms.”

Despite the positive emphases, and ecumenically optimistic nature of Piepkorn’s writings, it is a misunderstanding to think that genuine differences were unimportant to him. In his published sermon entitled “Guidelines for Dialogue” he rejects patterns of agreement that do not take the real causes of separation into account:

There are scores of bad reasons for encouraging the responsible encounter of Christians across denominational lines and for trying to unite or to reunite the divided communities that are the visible segments of the one holy catholic and apostolic church. The tragedy of our separation is not to be measured in terms of these reasons.⁵⁸

For Piepkorn, ecumenism is not to be organized on a “pragmatic lust for bigness for bigness’ sake or power’s sake”⁵⁹

Also rejected in this sermon, is a minimalist approach that is, “aspiring only to a less than Christian and catholic minimum of agreement.”⁶⁰ At the heart of the insights is the recognition that a true unity may only exist when true differences are better understood. Piepkorn has no patience for the extremes of a minimalist approach to ecumenism, “And while Lutheran synods and Lutheran theologians [in the United States] have differed from one another, what kept us apart was generally our zeal for our

⁵⁷ Piepkorn, Arthur Carl. “The Lutheran Doctrine of the Sacrament of the Altar Ecumenically Considered” in *The Church: Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn* New York: ALPB Books, 1993 p. 119-138

⁵⁸ Piepkorn. “Guidelines for Dialog: A Sermon” p. 172

⁵⁹ Piepkorn. “The Protestant Worship Revival and the Lutheran Liturgical Movement” p. 81-2

⁶⁰ *ibid.* p. 173

respective orthodoxies rather than the European indifference that would tolerate even sub-Nicene theology if it were presented in a scholarly enough fashion.”⁶¹

The importance of doctrine in ecumenical agreements, for Piepkorn, may be observed elsewhere in his writings. In an otherwise positive assessment of the agreement reached on Baptism by Roman Catholics and Lutherans in the Philippines, Piepkorn nevertheless offers what on the surface amounts to a quibble, “the use of ‘Protestant’ in paragraphs 1 and 2 of the ‘Background’ section, especially with the parenthetical explanation, ‘including Lutherans’ is regrettable. Except in the purely negative sense of ‘non-Roman Catholic Christians,’ Lutherans are not Protestants.”⁶² However, for Piepkorn, such a designation amounts to a matter of doctrine, for it addresses the very ecclesiastical identity of Lutherans, and with a faulty identity, Lutherans have no claim to catholicity, and therefore, little hope for a positive contribution to ecumenical dialogue.

Seemingly trivial objections to terminology reveal the theological perceptiveness that characterizes Piepkorn’s thought. Where distinctive aspects of the various Christian churches can be grounded in the catholic tradition of the church, he can recognize that these differences are of a far different sort, than those which seek to rebel against the shared catholic faith:

The theological position of the Church of the Augsburg Confession is clear. The *Book of Concord*, with its Ecumenical Creeds, the thorough-going catholicity of its particular Symbols, and its Catalog of Testimonies, expresses her mind unmistakably. Yet her position is not without peril. She is by no means uninfluenced by the thinking of contemporary Christendom. There is Rome, where an often exaggerated emphasis upon our Lord’s Deity has peopled Heaven’s court

⁶¹ Piepkorn. “The Protestant Worship Revival and the Lutheran Liturgical Movement” p. 87

⁶² Piepkorn. “Theological Observer” in *Concordia Theological Monthly* 41 (August 1970) p. 426-7

for Latin Christians with a host of mediatorial intercessors. There are the Protestant denominations, where rationalism often rejects the ancient Faith or where an impatience with theological issues belittle the significance of the dogmas that the Ecumenical Councils defined. There are the Fundamental enthusiasts, whose naively undeveloped theology stands in perennial danger of perversion. In an age when not only the thought-world but the very terminology of the Ecumenical Councils is strange and foreign, the task of making a document like the Creed of Chalcedon meaningful to the faith and to the problems of our time is incalculably difficult. Yet we cannot dispense with these dogmatic definitions, if for no other reason than that we have devised nothing better.⁶³

For Piepkorn, those elements of Roman Catholicism which were grounded in the catholic tradition were not problematic, It is precisely those elements of Roman Catholicism that are alien to the catholic tradition which, for Piepkorn were the cause of the continued separation between the Lutheran and Roman Catholic communities. The first of these is “the identification of the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church of the creed with the empirical Roman Catholic Church.”⁶⁴ Second, is “the validity of non-Roman Catholic ministries.”⁶⁵ The third and most challenging barrier is “the Roman Catholic position on the infallibility and primacy of jurisdiction of the incumbent of the See of Rome for the time being.”⁶⁶

Where these differences are not grounded in the catholic tradition of the church, there is, for Piepkorn, an imperative toward unity. Thus, his editorial “Will the Decision on Fellowship at Denver Make a Difference?”⁶⁷ reads more like an exhortative piece of

⁶³ Piepkorn, Arthur Carl. “The Council of Chalcedon” in *Una Sancta* 10 no. 5 (St. Lawrence, 1951) p. 23

⁶⁴ Piepkorn. “Living With Brothers in the Lord” p. 170

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁶ *ibid.* p. 171

⁶⁷ Piepkorn, Arthur Carl. “Will the Decision on Fellowship at Denver Make a Difference?” in *Concordia Theological Monthly* 40 (May 1969) p. 260-264

oratory than a theological treatise. In a sense, this document seems out of place when compared to the other writings of Piepkorn. He offers no theological arguments for fellowship. Rather, he describes the numerous pragmatic benefits fellowship would bring, and even seems to argue that fellowship should be approved on the basis of the “de facto fellowship” that is already being practiced!⁶⁸ Yet, in the background of this editorial is a recognition that there is a catholic agreement between the two church bodies “in their understanding of the Gospel.”⁶⁹ Piepkorn is not advocating an agreement in spite of significant doctrinal differences, rather, he urges visible agreement on the unity which the President of the Missouri Synod, Oliver Harms, had already recognized as existing.⁷⁰ To do anything less would have “merely reinforced and raised higher the walls of a ghetto of our own building and will have thrust us farther and more irreversibly in the direction of sectarianism.”⁷¹

The paradigm for ecumenical agreement that emerges in the writings of Piepkorn, can best be seen as a reliance not on the fixed dogmas of the church and attempts to achieve an agreement in dogmatic formulation. Rather, it seeks an agreement that is based on the common catholic tradition of the church through 1500 years of shared history. This innovative approach attempts to reach an accord not by finding a middle ground, or a dogmatic formulation that is acceptable to both parties. Instead, it is a reexamination of history to reach a historical consensus. Most illustrative of this

⁶⁸ *ibid.* p. 262

⁶⁹ *ibid.* p. 261

⁷⁰ *ibid.* p. 261. Here Piepkorn quotes from A release of the Department of Public Relations of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod claiming a consensus of agreement between the two churches.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 264

approach is Piepkorn's article concerning the validity of Lutheran orders for the Lutheran Catholic Dialogue Number IV⁷². In the place of the traditional polemical argument with Roman Catholics claiming the necessity of Episcopacy, and Lutherans rejecting such a claim, Piepkorn offers a different approach by contending that in the early history of the church 'bishop' and 'presbyter' were indistinguishable from one another and that there are historical evidences that ordinations occurred without bishops present. In this way Piepkorn offers an alternative to the dogmatic impasse, by appealing to the historical tradition that both churches claim as their own.

CONCLUSIONS AND APPLICATIONS FOR TODAY

A rediscovery of Arthur Carl Piepkorn and his theological writings can benefit the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, by adding helpful correctives and principles to current approaches to church related questions which have become all too static in today's theological climate. Piepkorn's approach, while not using traditional Missouri-Synod categories and dogmatic definitions, seeks to remain faithful both to the confessions and to sacred Scripture. It does, however, offer innovative insights that can lead to new methods of overcoming theological differences and difficulties.

The first thing that Piepkorn reminds us of is our identity as a confessing movement within the church catholic. Lutheranism, is a *via media* which seeks to be the reconciling center of catholicity for all Christians. This attitude shapes our identity as a church, by not allowing us to become too comfortable with a denominational identity. Likewise, with the confessions, it focuses our attention on the empirical church. By not

⁷² Piepkorn, Arthur Carl. "A Lutheran View of the Validity of Lutheran Orders" in *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialog IV: Eucharist and Ministry* New York: USA National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation, 1970 p. 209-226

being lulled into the consolation of knowing that God has an invisible church, Lutherans can focus on efforts to visibly better live out our lives as Christians of one faith, one Baptism, one hope, one Christ.

Secondly, Piepkorn offers a ‘catholic corrective’ to the way that theology tends to be done today. In age where pragmatics tends to dominate the practice (and even the theology!) of the church, he reminds us that the church is not our own to do with as we see fit. Rather, it belongs to the millions of saints who have gone before us and will come after us. We may offer our own unique insights, but never such insights as will tear down the structures that our forebears labored so long, and shed so much blood, to establish. A catholic theologian must always remember that what he does effects not only himself, his local congregation, or his synod or ecclesiastical body, but that it effects the church throughout the world, throughout time.

Finally, in today’s ecumenical climate Piepkorn provides a helpful balance between a sectarian hyper-critical, apophatic ecumenism, and the extremes of the reconciled diversity approach which ignore the real differences which threaten the catholic identity of the church. In the place of these two extremes he emphasizes the importance of churches to be students of one another – to truly know what one another believes. In order for this to happen, non-polemical dialogue must take place, in which churches are allowed to set forth their own theology on their own terms. The differences between the churches are serious enough without exaggerating and caricaturing the beliefs of others.

Catholicity also has its importance within the ecumenical dialogue. Piepkorn, demonstrates how appealing to the shared common history of the church can provide a

third alternative to dogmatic stalemate or uncritical acceptance of one another's positions. By seriously and honestly examining the fifteen centuries of shared common tradition, attempts can be made to circumvent the rehashing of the same dogmatic arguments that have been made for the past 500 years. Another benefit is that such an approach forces each tradition to examine its catholicity, and to defend or correct those elements of its doctrine and practice that are at odds with that catholicity.

An appeal to shared catholic tradition has the added benefit of allowing churches to implement changes within their own tradition without the stigma of public conversion. It is much more acceptable, for example, for a Lutheran to say that we are returning to our catholic heritage by affirming the apostolic succession that exists among us by virtue of the fact that in the catholic tradition there was no difference between a bishop and a presbyter, than it is for the Lutheran to say that we have converted to the Roman Catholic position on Episcopacy. Through an appeal to our shared catholic tradition, compromise, such that it is, can be seen not as compromise per se, but rather a rediscovery and reemphasis of the catholicity that already exists among us.

Arthur Carl Piepkorn was a giant, among the theologians of his day. The sheer number of articles which he authored, the numerous journals that he edited, the diversity of topics which he mastered, the numerous commissions within the church catholic on which he served, all affirm this. He was a meticulous catholic theologian of the Western and Lutheran traditions, and he was a faithful servant of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod until his death. As the issues which were central to him, continue to gain ascendancy in the church once again, the time has come to move Piepkorn from the

periphery of mainstream Lutheran theology, back the catholic center where he rightly belongs.

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