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The Sense of Church History in Representative Missouri Synod Theology

DAVID W. LOTZ

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BASED ON REPRESENTATIVE MISSOURI SYNOD WRITINGS FROM THE LATE 19TH century, the author describes and documents an "antihistorical bias" that has provided impediments to an appropriate appreciation of church history in Missouri Synod theology.

In chapter 6 of his widely acclaimed study of American Christianity, *The Lively Experiment*, Sidney Mead delineates six "formative elements" in the shaping of American denominationalism. These characteristic tendencies and traits were already in force during the colonial period and afforded an overarching structure and ideological framework for subsequent American Protestantism. The first factor noted is the "sectarian" tendency of each American denomination to seek to justify its peculiar interpretations and practices as more closely conforming to those of the early church as pictured in the New Testament than the views and policies of its rivals.¹

Mead labels this tendency a "kind of historylessness" or "antihistorical bias," itself having "long historical roots." The left-wing sects of the Reformation period particularly abetted this development by holding to a radical *sola Scriptura* which was in effect a theory of *nuda Scriptura*, heightened by an insistence on "private judgment" in Biblical interpretation. "In prac-

¹ Sidney E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York, 1963), p. 108.

tice," Mead continues, "this meant an appeal over all churches and traditions to the authority of the beliefs and practices of primitive Christianity as pictured in the New Testament."² And in the long run it was this left-wing view which prevailed on the American scene, resulting in the widespread loss of a sense of historical continuity and occasioning a type of theological "primitivism."³ Mead summarizes this development as follows:

² *Ibid.*, p. 109.

³ In his *What Is Church History?* (Philadelphia, 1846) Philip Schaff complained: "As a general thing, we are too much taken up with the present, to trouble ourselves about the past. Our religious relations and views are pervaded with the spirit of Puritanism, which is unhistorical in its very constitution, and with which, in fact, a low esteem for history and tradition has itself stiffened long since into as tyrannical a tradition as is to be met with in any other quarter" (p. 4). To be sure, "primitivism" did not go unchallenged by "churchly" elements within American Protestantism. In Presbyterianism, the Old Side—New Side schism of 1741—58 was largely a struggle between "churchly" and "sectarian" factions in the church, as also the Old School—New School schism of 1837—69. Leferts Loetscher considers this latter struggle "a part of a larger effort by the more churchly authoritarian elements in American Protestantism to push back the advancing wave of a democratic, unchurchly, and emotional sectarianism

The constellation of ideas prevailing during the Revolutionary epoch in which the denominations began to take shape were: the idea of pure and normative beginnings to which return was possible; the idea that the intervening history was largely that of aberrations and corruptions which was better ignored; and the idea of building anew in the American wilderness on the true and ancient foundations.⁴

Taking Mead's analysis as a cue, we intend to examine the sense of church history manifest in representative theology of American Lutheranism, particularly that of the Missouri Synod. Correspondingly, we also purport to test the general validity of Mead's analysis when applied specifically to the Missouri Synod variety of confessional Lutheranism. The theological writings to be examined derive largely from the periodical literature of the Missouri Synod dating from the close of the 19th

which was threatening to overwhelm them" (*The Broadening Church* [Philadelphia, 1954], p. 5). In the Protestant Episcopal Church the struggle was between the "high church" party under the leadership of Henry Hobart (bishop of New York) and the "low church" group under Alexander Griswold (bishop of New England). The high church cause was aided by the contemporaneous Oxford Movement in England. In Lutheranism, as noted below, the "confessional" element came to prevail over the advocates of "American Lutheranism." And Schaff and Nevin at Mercersburg, within the context of the German Reformed Church, became "the chief spokesmen in America for that traditionalist, 'churchly,' sacramental movement which swept across much of Christendom in the second generation of the nineteenth century" (J. H. Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology: Nevin and Schaff at Mercersburg* [Chicago, 1961], p. 3). Yet by 1850 "the most widely prevalent outlook in the denominations was that of evangelical and revivalistic Protestantism." (Mead, p. 134)

⁴ Mead, p. 111.

century. That period has been chosen by design. For during the last decade of the 19th century theological and ecclesiastical traditions were being increasingly set aside along the lines indicated by Santayana's bon mot: "We do not nowadays refute our predecessors, we pleasantly bid them good-bye."⁵ Henry Ward Beecher, the most influential of those "princes of the pulpit" in that age of great preachers, was warning theological students: "You cannot go back and become apostles of the dead past, drivelling after ceremonies and letting the world do the thinking and studying."⁶ In view of the supposed evolution of humanity towards moral perfection, the past was seen largely as a record of failures and thus had only negative value. There was little time or occasion for what T. S. Eliot has termed "the backward look behind the assurance Of recorded history, the backward half-look Over the shoulder, towards the primitive terror." This was Eliot's representation of "original sin." The mood of the age was that of Pippa's song: "God's in his heaven, All's right with the world!"

In large measure the revivalistic techniques and unbridled fervor of earlier evangelicalism were taking their toll. The direct appeal to the "heart," unhindered by restraints of creed or dogma, had bypassed the ancient intellectual heritage of the church catholic. In the words of Winthrop Hudson:

A century of revivalism with its progressive simplification of the faith and its

⁵ George Santayana, *Character and Opinion in the United States* (New York, 1920), p. 9.

⁶ Cited by Winthrop S. Hudson, *The Great Tradition of the American Churches* (New York, 1963), p. 174. See especially Chap. 8, "Princes of the Pulpit: The Preachers and the New Theology," pp. 157-94.

tendency to move in a Pelagian direction had largely dismantled the intellectual defenses of historic Protestantism, and the process was hastened by the impact of "romanticism" upon the later evangelicalism.⁷

The cumulative effect of the so-called New Theology was to empty the church's proclamation of its normative content, being in essence "compatible with every conceivable social attitude, with whatever stream of secular thought one might wish to support and consecrate, with whatever system of values might seem good in the light of one's own personal predilections."⁸ It was thus during the nineties that "Protestantism" became "Americanism" in decisive fashion.⁹ Against such a backdrop the material before us must be studied.

I

Even a cursory reading of early volumes of the *Theological Quarterly* (Vol. I dates from 1897) shows that the formal study of church history was not neglected in Missouri Synod theology at the turn of the century.¹⁰ In accord with the traditional

ordering of theological study, each issue of the *Quarterly* devoted a representative section to "Historical Theology." Topics considered under this rubric in the first volume include "Calvin and the Augsburg Confession," "Leo XIII and the American Liberties," "The Malum Pietisticum in Spener's 'Pia Desideria,'" "Religious Liberties in the Charters and Earlier Constitutions," "Random Passages from Pascal," and "The Tell El-Amarna Tablets."¹¹ Scrutiny of subsequent volumes shows a similar breadth of historical interest, although, as in the above, primary focus is consistently on the Reformation era and the period of Lutheran Orthodoxy; Reformed and Roman Catholic theology (in this continuing a long polemical tradition); and selected topics from American Lutheranism and American religious life in

¹¹ All but the last of these articles is from the pen of Graebner (1849—1904), who from 1887 until his death was professor of church history, dogmatic theology, hermeneutics, and liturgics at Concordia Seminary. Regarding his labors in the *Theological Quarterly*, the *Dictionary of American Biography* notes: "He was not so much the editor as the author, for the paucity of contributors compelled him to write the contents of each number practically unassisted. The seven volumes that appeared during his lifetime are a monument to his varied learning, unbudgeable orthodoxy, and literary power. He wrote excellently in both English and German, read avidly in thirteen languages, and seemed to aspire to universal scholarship" (VII, 462 [1931 ed.]). His chief work was *Geschichte der Lutherischen Kirche in Amerika* (Vol. I, 1892), of which the *Dictionary of American Biography* states: "Gräbner had all the requisites of a historian except fairness. Because of their alleged doctrinal aberrations he treated several venerable figures of the past with undeserved asperity, and he made a few minor errors, but the work as a whole is sound and even brilliant" (ibid.). See also K. Kretzmann, "The Reverend Doctor August Lawrence Graebner: 1849—1904," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, XX (July 1947), 79—93.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 160—61.

⁸ Ibid., p. 161.

⁹ See Hudson, Chap. 9, "The Church Embraces the World: Protestantism Succumbs to Complacency," pp. 195—225. See also Winthrop S. Hudson, *American Protestantism* (Chicago, 1961), Part II, "Shaping a Protestant America," pp. 49—127, especially Section 8, "A Protestant America," pp. 109—127. See Mead, Chap. 8, "American Protestantism Since the Civil War. I. From Denominationalism to Americanism," pp. 134—55; Henry S. Commager, *The American Mind* (New Haven, Conn., 1950), Chap. 9, "Religious Thought and Practice," pp. 162—95.

¹⁰ Upon synodical request in 1897, A. L. Graebner of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, undertook the editorship of the *Theological Quarterly*, a journal designed primarily for the Synod's English-speaking constituency.

general.¹² The early church and the medieval church are discussed at length only on occasion, more frequently in passing remarks and incidental book reviews. In any event, these volumes (which will be examined at greater length below) exhibit a genuine sense of historical responsibility in their regard for theology's "conserving" function.

A pervasive interest in historical continuity is, of course, native to the Lutheran Confessions. Article II of the Apology, for example, holds the evangelical teaching on original sin to be "correct and in agreement with Christ's church catholic" and to this end deems it "worthwhile . . . to list, in the usual familiar phrases, the opinions of the holy Fathers."¹³ Although the canonical Scriptures are designated "the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged," the three ancient ecumenical creeds are fully subscribed to as "the unanimous, catholic, Christian faith and confessions of the orthodox and true church."¹⁴

¹² Subsequent articles, for example, are the following: "An Autobiography of Martin Chemnitz" (III, 472—87); "William Tyndale" (VIII, 156—74, 204—14); "The History of the English Bible" (VII, 42—60); "Jesuit Obedience" (II, 321—38); "Specimens of Jesuit Moral Theology in the 'Provincial Letters'" (II, 46—61); "In Memoriam Leonis XIII Papae" (VII, 229—64); "Early Lutheranism in Missouri" (III, 319—53); "Historical Documents relative to the Lutherans in New Amsterdam" (VII, 162—200); "Lutheranism and Americanism" (VIII, 55—63); "Paragraphs on the School Question" (VII, 121—28).

¹³ Apology of the Augsburg Confession, II, 51, *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert in collaboration with Jaroslav Pelikan, Robert H. Fischer, and Arthur Carl Piepkorn (Philadelphia, 1959), p. 107.

¹⁴ Formula of Concord, Epitome, Comprehensive Summary, Rule, and Norm, 1, 3 (Tappert, pp. 464—65).

Other confessional statements and the writings of the Fathers are also accepted as "witnesses and expositions of the faith, setting forth how at various times the Holy Scriptures were understood in the church of God by contemporaries with reference to controverted articles, and how contrary theologies were rejected and condemned."¹⁵ As Jaroslav Pelikan has shown, the Lutheran Confessions opposed *in the name of church history* both the heteronomy of Roman institutionalism and the autonomy of "traditionless" spiritualism.¹⁶ The Roman doctrine of an absolute ecclesiastical organization was criticized as lacking historical legitimation. The depreciation by the *Schwärmer* of the church's ministry and sacraments in the interest of a "spiritual" church was scored as irreconcilable with the reality of the empirical church. In short, the Confessions manifest no contempt for tradition, but actually insist that the evangelical churches are restoring the true and ancient traditions of the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church."¹⁷

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8 (Tappert, p. 465).

¹⁶ Jaroslav Pelikan, "Church and Church History in the Confessions," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXII (May 1951), 305 to 320.

¹⁷ See the concluding paragraph of Article XXI of the Augsburg Confession: "This is about the sum of our teaching. As can be seen, there is nothing here that departs from the Scriptures or the catholic church or the church of Rome, in so far as the ancient church is known to us from its writers. Since this is so, those who insist that our teachers are to be regarded as heretics judge too harshly" (trans. of the Latin text [Tappert, p. 47]). For a partial assessment of the Reformation's impact on historical studies, see Karl Holl, *The Cultural Significance of the Reformation* (New York, 1959), pp. 117—28, and Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, I (St. Louis, 1962), 476—91.

Within American Lutheranism it was especially the "Old Lutheran" element which struggled to preserve a genuine confessionalism and thus, by implication, an abiding concern for historical continuity.¹⁸ The "New Measures" of such Lutheran churchmen as Samuel S. Schmucker, Benjamin Kurtz, and Samuel Sprecher threatened to "Americanize" Lutheranism at the expense of its confessional tradition.¹⁹ Among the Old Lutherans, C. F. W. Walther rose to prominence as the leading spokesman for historic Lutheranism. As Sydney Ahlstrom has noted, Walther's influence served to hold "the American Lutheran churches by a kind of invisible tether to the Reformation's Biblical and doctrinal heritage, above all in resisting the tendency of revivalists and liberals to augment the human role in salvation."²⁰ Furthermore, the sense of history permeated Walther's writings, "for he ranged

over the entire field of Christian dogmatics and brought to his pronouncements a depth of historical erudition and type of theological acumen which no survey can convey."²¹ Walther was ably seconded in his endeavors by Charles Porterfield Krauth, the distinguished theologian of the General Council. Krauth was not only an ardent confessional Lutheran but also thoroughly Americanized and therefore particularly effective in English-speaking circles. It may be said that Krauth's *Conservative Reformation and Its Theology*, his magnum opus of 1871, did for native American Lutheranism what Walther's labors in *Der Lutheraner* and *Lehre und Wehre* accomplished for German-speaking Lutheranism.²² The resultant long-term influence of such "churchly" theologians has prompted Ahlstrom to contend that the Lutheran Church "is the only evangelical church in America that is historically, confessionally, and liturgically part of the immemorial catholic tradition of the church."²³

In this context a second glance at Mead's original observations will prove instructive. It patently cannot be maintained that the "left-wing view" of church history

¹⁸ See A. R. Wentz, *A Basic History of Lutheranism in America* (Philadelphia, 1955), p. 133: "The great Lutheran immigrations in the nineteenth century, with their strong infusion of confessional elements into America, stamped the whole Lutheran Church here as indelibly evangelical and doctrinally conservative." Wentz also notes that the Old Lutherans did not themselves initiate the confessional revival among American Lutherans, but "helped to swell the tide of confessional loyalty that had its source earlier in a renewed study of the church's confessional writings." (Ibid.)

¹⁹ In *The Mystical Presence* (Philadelphia, 1846) John W. Nevin concluded that the American Lutheran Church had surrendered "the original genius and life of the Lutheran Confession" (p. 106, n. 1). See Vergilius Ferm, *The Crisis in American Lutheran Theology* (New York, 1927), and Wentz, pp. 137-44.

²⁰ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "Theology in America: A Historical Survey," *The Shaping of American Religion*, ed. James W. Smith and A. Leland Jamison, Vol. I of *Religion in American Life* (Princeton, 1961), p. 275.

²¹ Ibid., p. 273.

²² Wentz says of Krauth: "His theological position and his great personal talents pre-eminently fitted him to take the chief part in reviving conservative Lutheranism and placing it on a secure basis among the English-speaking Lutherans in America" (p. 244). Francis Pieper considered Krauth "the most eminent theologian of the English-speaking Lutheran Church in America" and called his masterful book "a classic dogmatical work" (*Christian Dogmatics*, I [St. Louis, 1950], 179, 180, n. 239).

²³ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "The Lutheran Church and American Culture: A Tercentenary Retrospect," *The Lutheran Quarterly*, IX (November 1957), 327.

came to prevail in or shape decisively the course of American Lutheranism. And yet the "constellation of ideas prevailing during the Revolutionary epoch in which the denominations began to take shape" were remarkably akin to those which later proved determinative in shaping Missouri Synod Lutheranism, subject to the following modifications:

1. "The idea of pure and normative beginnings to which return was possible" was not construed as a return to the primitive church *per se*, but to the Biblical teachings of Luther and the Lutheran Confessions (as contained in the Book of Concord of 1580). In the words of Francis Pieper:

We have returned, above all, to our precious Concordia and to Luther, whom we have recognized as the man whom God has chosen to be the Moses of His Church of the New Covenant, to lead His Church out of the bondage of Antichrist, under the pillar of the cloud and the pillar of fire of the sterling and unalloyed Word of God.²⁴

Here the dynamic of return to "normative beginnings" is obviously a powerful factor expressed in unmistakably religious sentiments, but the locus of return is significantly different.

2. "The idea that the intervening history was largely that of aberrations and corruptions which was better ignored" does not refer to the period between the primitive church and the present reconstruction of primitive traditions (as, for example, in the viewpoint of the Disciples of Christ),

²⁴ *Christian Dogmatics*, I, 166. Pieper also gives here a "detailed description of the state of our Lutheran Church in America," pp. 167 to 186.

but particularly to the "decline and fall" of "true Lutheranism" during the 18th and 19th centuries in the *Vaterland*. True Christianity did not cease with the primitive church. As noted above, confessional Lutheranism claims to be the heir of catholic Christianity, prompting one astute interpreter of the Lutheran Confessions to declare: "All the Symbols stand in a continuous chain of Catholic witness. . . . We are Catholic Christians first, Western Catholics second, Lutherans third."²⁵ Of course the period of papal dominion (dating primarily from the 12th century) was generally viewed as the great apostasy, but the Saxon fathers were especially condemnatory of developments within their own lifetimes. Pietism and Rationalism, the so-called *malum pietisticum* and the "harlot reason," were the specific "aberrations and corruptions" which must not only be ignored but every vestige of which must be eradicated. Indeed this very reaction against Pietism and Rationalism may well have helped preserve the sense of historical continuity among the Old Lutherans. For, as Mead has argued, both these developments were at root antihistorical and as such had adverse effects on embryonic American "Protestantism." "Both reached the same conclusion that the forms, practices, and traditions of the historic church were neither binding nor pertinent to their day."²⁶ Such considerations suggest that

²⁵ Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "Suggested Principles for a Hermeneutics of the Lutheran Symbols," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXIX (January 1958), 5. It will be argued in the course of this present study, however, that the traditional Missouri Synod *modus vivendi* has scarcely measured up to Piepkorn's criteria and that at times it has bordered on an actual "primitivism."

²⁶ Mead, p. 111.

the founding of the Missouri Synod (as well as that of other Old Lutheran synods) may have transpired in implicit opposition to several movements and tendencies which had proved significant in the formation of earlier American "Protestantism."

3. "The idea of building anew in the American wilderness on the true and ancient foundations" was preeminently true for the Old Lutherans.²⁷ The Saxons in particular came to the wilderness and built their "Zion on the Mississippi," taking as their "ancient foundations" the prophetic and apostolic Word as summarized in Luther's doctrine and the Book of Concord.²⁸ The motto of Walther's paper, *Der Lutheraner*, succinctly expressed this dual commitment:

Gottes Wort und Luthers Lehr
Vergeheth nun und nimmermehr.

In sum, Mead's "constellation of ideas" is strikingly applicable even to 19th-century immigrant Lutheranism in its "Missouri" form (which could scarcely be called "typically American"), save that the inner dynamic of this particular denomination derives from an inflexible adherence to its Reformation and confessional heritage rather than from the "primitivism" of the Revolutionary age. To a great extent this latter distinction has marked its "uniqueness" on the American religious scene and has also occasioned its theological "growing pains."

The foregoing considerations indicate that Missouri Synod theology in the late

19th century (and indeed most of Lutheran theology on the whole) certainly exhibited little "historylessness" or "anti-historical bias" in the customary sense of those terms. Ecclesiastical traditions and the entire history of doctrine were widely studied and the theological past was considered normative for the present theological enterprise.²⁹ In this respect, at least, Mead's analysis of the characteristic traits of American "Protestantism" must be modified somewhat. American Lutheranism has persistently stood in tension with the rest of American denominationalism owing to its confessional bias.³⁰ The fact that an influential and numerically large segment of Lutherans did not arrive on the American scene before mid-19th century and was isolated from American life in varying degrees until the second decade of the 20th century suggests that the Lutheran churches

have been less subject to the theological erosion which so largely stripped other denominations of an awareness of their continuity with a historic Christian tradition. Thus the resources of the Christian past have been more readily avail-

²⁹ At the same time it is evident that "classical" Lutheranism was not always maintained in many areas of the church's life and order. Ahlstrom has labeled the last decades of the 19th century an "Age of Definition," a time "when Lutheran doctrine came to prevail in the Lutheran Church, but also . . . a time when, much more than we usually realize, Reformed and Methodistic practice came to prevail." ("The Lutheran Church and American Culture," p. 333)

³⁰ Ahlstrom writes: "I would argue . . . that Lutheranism is best understood when it is seen not as something indistinguishably blended in with the luxuriant foliage of American denominationalism but as a tradition living in a real but fruitful state of tension with American church life." (Ibid., p. 326)

²⁷ See Ralph D. Owen, "The Old Lutherans Come," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, XX (April 1947), 3-56.

²⁸ Walter O. Forster, *Zion on the Mississippi* (St. Louis, 1953), is an exhaustive study of the Saxon immigration and settlement.

able to them, and this fact suggests that they may have an increasingly important role in a Protestant recovery.³¹

At the same time, however, it must be acknowledged that Mead's overall conclusion holds true as well for Missouri Synod Lutheranism. For in spite of its depth involvement with the life and thought of the church catholic and its active sense of responsibility for the church's doctrinal heritage, synodical theology has evidenced a discernible "antihistorical bias," along with its own peculiar brand of "historylessness." The remainder of this study will be devoted to an investigation and elucidation of this claim.

II

The meaning of this claim may first be indicated by a brief critical examination of C. F. W. Walther's treatise *The True Visible Church*, published in book form in 1867.³² In a series of 25 theses Walther sets forth the conditions which must necessarily obtain if any particular denomination is rightly to be designated "the true visible church of God on earth." Theses 1—11 consider the nature of the one spiritual or invisible church comprised of all true believers; the "infallible outward marks" (that is, the "unadulterated preaching of the divine Word and the uncorrupted administration of the holy Sacraments") by which this true church is rendered visible; the sense in which the various communions or denominations can legitimately be considered "churches"; and the specific character of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Theses 12—24 primarily

center on the Evangelical Lutheran Church's fidelity to Scripture as God's written Word (theses 14—20 outlining the principles of Biblical hermeneutics), and on its subscription to the historic Lutheran Confessions, as faithful exponents of Scripture. This dual commitment, which insures that the Word is preached in all purity and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, authorizes Walther's conclusion that "the Evangelical Lutheran Church has all the essential marks of the true visible church of God on earth, as they are found in no other denomination of another name."

Of particular concern here, however, is the book's structure and methodology, not its specific content or conclusions. Each thesis is supported first by "Scripture proof" and then by selected "witnesses," namely, the Lutheran Confessions, Luther's writings, and pronouncements of the old Lutheran dogmaticians (Gerhard, Calov, Quenstedt, Baier, et al.). Scripture and the "witnesses" are usually cited with a modicum of interpretive comment. The tacit suggestion is that total agreement obtains at every point along the line. In other words, there is no explicit recognition of mutations in concepts or fundamental shifts in meaning from apostolic times to the Reformation and from the 16th century to later Lutheranism. As a result of his *modus operandi* Walther frequently fails to pose those questions which are integral to his argument.—Does the New Testament in fact operate with a visible-invisible dialectic in its ecclesiology? What is the genesis of the term "visible church," since it is manifestly not of Biblical coinage, and what is the history of its usage? Has the concept of the visible

³¹ Hudson, *American Protestantism*, p. 176.

³² See the recent translation by John Theodore Mueller (St. Louis, 1961).

church (granted its legitimacy) remained precisely the same throughout, more particularly, in Luther and the dogmatists? Have historical factors, such as 17th-century polemical requirements and the admission of a scholastic methodology into evangelical dogmatics, perchance conditioned the dogmatists' use of the concept in such a fashion as to alter its original function and "placement" in the theology of Luther?³³ What is significant for present purposes is that the historical "conditionedness" of theological statements is simply not treated. Luther and the Confessions evidently repristinates the Scriptural position (since it is assumed that there is one uniform Biblical ecclesiology); the dogmatists repristinates both Luther and the Confessions and also, by logical extension, the original apostolic witness.

Thus Scripture is interpreted through Luther and the Confessions, and these sources in turn are approached through the medium of 17th-century Orthodoxy. This is the line of "true Lutheranism," if not also of "true Christianity": Holy Scripture, Reformation doctrine, Orthodox dogmatics. Operative here is what might be termed a "static" or "frozen" historical perspective, namely, a partial rather than

absolute "historylessness." A historical period or sequence of periods is elevated to normative status, to the exclusion of other periods in church history. These other periods are then read and judged in the light of the normative periods. In effect rigid historical "priorities" are established, with pervasive implications for denominational thought and practice. And the very establishment of such priorities suggests that even while church history is being taken seriously, by virtue of a confessional concern for continuity a narrow "perspectivalism" (or "traditionalism") develops which severely constricts the more comprehensive sense of tradition and threatens to obscure theology's critical functions. Various segments of the church's tradition are "canonized," so to speak, and thereby effectively removed from the realm of historical change and mutation and, on the whole, rendered impervious to an intensive criticism.³⁴

³³ See F. E. Mayer, "The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel and the Terminology Visible and Invisible Church," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXV (March 1954), 177—98. Mayer shows that the 17th-century dogmatists, owing to their immediate polemical needs vis-à-vis both Roman and Reformed theology, often obscured the original emphases of both Luther and the Confessions through their rigid distinction between the visible and the invisible church. See also Herbert Olsson, "The Church's Visibility and Invisibility According to Luther," in *This Is the Church*, ed. Anders Nygren (Philadelphia, 1952), pp. 226 to 242.

³⁴ To be sure, the establishment of "historical priorities" is a characteristic feature of practically all Christian thought, as expressed in the normative significance attached to the original apostolic (canonical) witness. In Missouri Synod Lutheranism, however, several additional factors are involved. The confessional writings contained in the entire Book of Concord are also elevated to their normative status; this is the basic meaning of a *quia* subscription to their content. This subscription, of course, purports to be nothing else than a renewed affirmation of the original Biblical norm *because* both Confessions and Scripture are deemed equivalent in their fundamental content. At the same time the Confessions commit their subscribers to a generally positive estimate of (and serious concern for) the entire course of Christianity since apostolic times, thus repudiating any type of "primitivism" or "historylessness." In traditional Missouri Synod theology, however, another determinative factor has also been in force. The formulations of the old dogmatists have similarly been received as at least quasi-authori-

In all this there is also evidenced an "antihistorical bias." For history by its very nature involves change, mutability, modifications under the pressure of new ecclesiastical situations, new theological contexts, new religious language. Although such change does not necessarily preclude a genuine continuity of teaching or "pure doctrine," the sense of history does necessarily rule out any a priori methodological rejection of or insensitivity to such change, thereby committing the historical theologian to a patient scrutiny of the relevant texts in search of possible modifications. Walther's approach in the above treatise is simply the citation of authorities without an attendant historical criticism. It exhibits an impressive outward uniformity among these authorities, but fails to substantiate such uniformity by an internal criticism of the various formulations based on a sensitive historical awareness. This failure is indeed a characteristic feature of the "citation" method.

tative (on the assumption that they are generally of one piece with Luther and the Confessions) and the old dogmatic systems, particularly that of Johannes Quenstedt, have shaped the structure and methodology of the Synod's "dogmatic standard," Francis Pieper's multivolume *Christian Dogmatics*. While such a development cannot a priori be rejected, it nonetheless introduces a host of historical complexities into the picture which, in turn, cannot a priori be discounted. A developed Orthodoxy, cast into a neoscholastic framework, has thus provided an overarching perspective from which to view Luther and the Confessions. Until recently, within the Synod at least, the adequacy of this perspective for such a task has not been seriously challenged in concentrated theological fashion. The publication by Concordia Publishing House of such works as the English translation of Elert's *Structure of Lutheranism* (1962) and Pelikan's *From Luther to Kierkegaard* (1950), a book much indebted to Elert, may be said to have signaled the advent of such a critique.

Walther represents the "locus" method of doctrinal-historical exposition. But what has been a representative synodical understanding of church history per se? Volumes II and III of the *Theological Quarterly* (1898—99) contain a two-part essay entitled "The Study of Church History," written by A. L. Graebner. This essay significantly begins with a consideration of historical theology, the latter being defined as

that practical habitude of the mind which comprises a knowledge and theological discernment of the rise, progress, and preservation of the Christian Church and of its institutions, and an aptitude to utilize such knowledge in the promulgation, application, and defense of divine truth.³⁵

It will be noted that the study of church history is preeminently a *theological* study, predicated on a specific "theological discernment." If such discernment were lacking, "divine truth" itself would be jeopardized. What, then, is the nature of this discernment? How does the student acquire it? And what criteria enable him to apprehend divine truth? Graebner certainly does not delineate any substantive methodological procedures whereby the "appropriation of true historical concepts" is to be accomplished.³⁶ But methodolog-

³⁵ *Theological Quarterly*, II (October 1898), 425.

³⁶ Historical study has as its goal "the acquisition of historical truth, or, more explicitly, the appropriation of true historical concepts, in themselves and in their historical relations, by the student's mind" (ibid., p. 426). In order to determine what really happened or to grasp true historical relations, the student is enjoined to "get as near as possible to the first sources, always remembering that no number of derivative sources can be more reliable than their

ical considerations are largely discounted here because the center of attention lies elsewhere. Since church history is first and foremost a theological study, the student's root concern should not be with particular persons, events, or institutions in themselves, but rather with these phenomena as bearers of the true church, more specifically, with the eternal Gospel, which constitutes the church:

The subject concerning which the theological student of church history must endeavor to make himself familiar is the Church of Christ from its origin to the present time. . . . And since it is the Gospel of Christ by which the Church is built and preserved, the theological student will endeavor to learn in what measure the preaching of the Gospel, and especially the promulgation of the doctrine of justification, the *doctrina stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, was carried on at various times and in the various parts of the earth.³⁷

To say, therefore, that church history is a "theological" study means that it is nothing more nor less than "doctrinal" study. Church history as a theological discipline focuses on the "Gospel"; that means basically on the "doctrine of justification."³⁸

common origin, and that historical evidence must not be counted but weighed" (ibid., p. 435). The possibility that the original sources may themselves exhibit pervasive *Tendenzen*, or "biases," is not considered.

³⁷ *Theological Quarterly*, III (January 1899), 51—52.

³⁸ This equation of "Gospel" with "doctrine of justification" is explicitly made in Pieper's *Brief Statement* (adopted 1932), sub "Of the Church": "No person in whom the Holy Ghost has wrought faith in the Gospel, or—*which is the same thing*—in the doctrine of justification, can be divested of his membership in the Christian Church . . ." (italics added). This is a fateful identification, with the most far-reach-

"Theology," "doctrine," "Gospel" hereby become virtually synonymous. "Historical

ing consequences for both theology and life. The dynamic of the Gospel as the *viva vox Dei*, which breaks into human history as a disrupting force, is hereby obscured and even obliterated. This equation means that the church (or individual) that has the correct doctrine of justification simultaneously has the Gospel. It means that history (viewed here as the arena or locus of God's ever-present, ongoing action through His Word) is transformed into security, faith into "assent," and the Word of God into a *Schriftprinzip*. History is no longer seen as the imminent *possibility* of a person's faithful response to that Word which confronts him as demand and promise and calls for venturesome trust; rather history now becomes a *guarantee* (for if one has the right doctrine in the present, as he has held it in the past, he "has" the Gospel and thus the present preaching is no "threat"). The Gospel of God's free grace is no longer an incalculable "gift" but is subtly transmuted into a permanent "possession." As a result faith largely becomes a *fides historica* (as one is called on to actualize in the present the atoning death of Christ for him in the past through contemplation of the past event presented in doctrinal terms). In short, the speech of God ("Gospel") by which He even now acts in history (my history and that of my fellow believers, even as He has acted heretofore in the history of all the saints) becomes primarily speech *about* God ("doctrine"), recounting what He has done in history (the past history recorded in the Scriptures). Thus the Gospel loses its "eventlike" character and becomes merely a "transcript" of past events. Little wonder that so much synodical preaching has taken the form of either bald "narrative" (a recounting of creation, fall, and redemption in story form) or "doctrinal theology" (inculcation of the church's teaching about sin, God, Christ, and so on). These lamentable developments might have been thwarted if Luther's keen understanding of the Word as God's present action in history had not been transformed (under the pressure of 17th-century polemics on behalf of *sola Scriptura*) into a doctrine about the divine action. Implicit in this equation is a failure to distinguish properly between Law and Gospel, for, by becoming identified with a doctrine or proposition, the Gospel has in effect become Law (the demand for right belief). This topic demands a full-scale treatment.

truth," in short, is "theological truth," i. e., truth in conformity with doctrine.³⁹

It is thus the doctrine of justification by faith which is the abiding content of church history and the cardinal principle whereby its entire course is to be scrutinized and judged:

Knowing and considering this, the theological student of church history cannot but be eminently interested in whatever the sources of History may have to say concerning the doctrine of grace in Christ, its preachers and teachers, its promulgation and dissemination, its struggles with heresies and sin in all their multitudes of forms and phases, its victories and conquests, its decadences and adulterations, its restorations and ascendancies throughout the periods of History.⁴⁰

Coupled with this central doctrine is the further conviction that the Bible is the

For a more complete exposition of some of the points adumbrated here, see John M. Headley, *Luther's View of Church History* (New Haven, Conn., 1963), and Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator* (Philadelphia, 1953).

³⁹ This means, by Graebner's own admission, that only he "who is thoroughly familiar with Christian doctrine is fully equipped for the theological study of church history. . . . No one but a Lutheran theologian can write a life of Luther as it should be written, and it just as truly takes an orthodox theologian properly to perform the task which no Calvinistic theologian could properly perform, to write a theological biography of Calvin or John Knox. And thus in general it is not presumption to say that only an orthodox theologian possessing the remaining requisites for historical research is thoroughly furnished for the study of church history." As an object study it is then shown that Harnack's treatment of the Arian controversy proves him deficient in "the chief equipment of a theologian and a theological student of church history, the knowledge and acceptance of even the rudiments of Christian doctrine." *Theological Quarterly*, III, 62, 64, 74.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

written Word of God and the source and judge of all doctrine:

And thus throughout the various periods of Ecclesiastical History the theological student will best succeed, or, in fact, can only succeed, in making clear to himself and others the real character of historical persons and the true significance of historical events, if he pays proper attention to the presence or absence of the light of truth as it beams forth from the everlasting word of God. This is for all time the only infallible source of Christian doctrine and rule of life, and also the polar star by which the theological historian can at all times determine, even in the most intricate maze of historical phenomena, where he is, and whom or what, theologically considered, he has before him in the historical personages, institutions, and events set forth in the sources of historical information. Without this light he will find himself all at sea amid a bewildering confusion of really or seemingly conflicting historical evidence.⁴¹

In brief, the study of church history is the study of the church's adherence to the Bible as the sole source of doctrine and to the *materia* of the Bible, namely, the doctrine of justification. Doctrine is the key to history and not vice versa; indeed, history with all its "bewildering confusion" is *overcome* only by doctrine. Doctrine is the unchangeable constant in history. Particular persons, events, or institutions are but the incidental embodiment or vehicle of doctrine and their "truth" or "falsity" is determined by their conformity to "pure doctrine."⁴²

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁴² This understanding of history approximates in many respects the "substantialism" of Greco-Roman historiography as analyzed by R. G. Collingwood in *The Idea of History* (New

Such a conception of church history inevitably leads to a stylized periodization of history. There are periods of great light and great darkness, interwoven with vary-

York, 1956), pp. 42—45. "Substantialism," according to Collingwood, involves a distinction "between act and agent, regarded as a special case of substance and accident. It is taken for granted that the historian's proper business is with acts, which come into being in time, develop in time through their phases, and terminate in time. The agent from which they flow, being a substance, is eternal and unchangeable and consequently stands outside history. In order that acts may flow from it, the agent itself must exist unchanged through the series of acts: for it has to exist before this series begins and nothing that happens as the series goes on can add anything to it or take anything away from it. History cannot explain how any agent came into being or underwent any change of nature; for it is metaphysically axiomatic that an agent, being a substance, can never have come into being and can never undergo any change of nature" (p. 43). The "agent," it should be noted, can be an institution, a city (for example, *Roma aeterna*), or a body of knowledge. In the present instance the immutable "agent" is doctrine, and the "acts" are various persons, events, concepts, and so forth. This doctrine is immutable and eternal because it has proceeded directly from the "mind of God" to its present written form in the Scriptures (a process guaranteed by the doctrine of plenary verbal inspiration). (Witness further the old dogmatic distinction between "archetypal" and "ectypal" theology.) Such doctrine is thus truly *doctrina divina* because it has its origin outside of time and has accordingly *come into existence without the intrusion of any historical factors*. (This rejection of history tends to explain the Missouri Synod's extreme conservatism in isagogical questions. To admit, for example, a multiple authorship of the Pentateuch would really be to admit a host of historical factors which would threaten the concept of uniform inspiration.) History can in no way ever touch the doctrine in its timeless essence; it remains forever identical with its Scriptural "deposit." Such is the logic which lies behind the viewpoint that the inexorable flux of history can be overcome only by *doctrine*; in other words, history can only be overcome by *metahistory*. Here the "antihistorical bias" of the

ing shades of gray, in accord with the degree to which the formal and material principles are apprehended and clearly set forth. The period of the apostles, particularly Paul, is one of intense light. But already among the apostolic fathers, "very soon after the apostles of Christ had gone to their reward," there sets in "a deplorable decadence of the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith in Christ." The light of the Gospel is obscured but not extinguished owing to the labors of such defenders of the faith as Irenaeus, Athanasius, the Cappadocians, and Augustine. "The struggle of light and darkness continues through the ages," the light being kept burning through the "fearful struggles of the Culdees on the British Isles, of the Waldensians and Wycliffites, of John Hus and his friend Jerome," all militating against the darkness of "antichristian Rome and its secular and ecclesiastical champions and serfs." Even the rise of humanism was but "darkness resuscitated from the tomb of antique heathendom," lamentably "not to make war against, but to join hands with, antichristian Rome."⁴³

At last the light of the Gospel dawns again in all its pristine brilliance:

And then, after a long reign of darkness, all the more hideous in its contrast with such rays of light as beam forth from the writings of that remarkable preacher, the best and greatest man of the Middle Ages,

Synod's theology becomes especially manifest. Here too, incidentally, the pervasive "substance philosophy" undergirding Lutheran scholasticism receives crystal clear expression—a fact which should give serious pause to those who claim that theology is possible without an implicit metaphysics or that the glory of Lutheran theology is that it is uniquely free from "contamination" by "vain philosophy."

⁴³ *Theological Quarterly*, III, 53—54.

Bernhard of Clairvaux, the theological student of church history will behold the glorious victory of the everlasting Gospel in the days of the Reformation, when, to the dismay of antichristian Rome and under the frowns and scowls and vociferations of Humanism, God himself restored to his church, so long enthralled in darkness, the light of the Gospel and made the doctrine of justification to gladden the hearts of thousands and millions as it flooded forth with richness and purity unknown to the nations since the days immediately succeeding the Apostolic Age. And yet, after so glorious a victory, the struggle did not cease.⁴⁴

The struggle rages on against Pietism and Rationalism until once more the ancient light breaks forth from the writings of Dr. Walther:

For what he was to the Lutheran Church of our time and country, he was chiefly and primarily as the greatest teacher of the doctrine of justification in the present century, and perhaps since the days of the Reformation, who was never more eloquent than when he proclaimed Christ our righteousness and the grace of God in him.⁴⁵

Paul, Luther, Walther, these are the greatest teachers, respectively, of the apostolic, postapostolic, and post-Reformation times, the greatest advocates of justification by faith, the poles around which the study of church history properly orients itself.

Inextricably conjoined with this understanding of church history is the absolute rejection of any "evolution" in church history, that is, any legitimate development of doctrines or institutions beyond their original exhibition in the Scriptures. "The

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 55.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 61.

theory of evolution is one of the fundamental errors of modern science, not only of Biology and Geology, where it has made the saddest havoc, but also in other sciences," including religion in general and theology.⁴⁶ The whole theory of evolution is simply one "huge, thoroughly unscientific swindle" in its application to the organic and inorganic world, to secular history, and especially to ecclesiastical history:

What has been termed the evolution of dogmas is from beginning to end an empty fiction. Christianity is not an evolutionary, but a revealed religion, and the doctrines or dogmas of this religion are revealed in the word of God, not only in rudiments or germs, but in all their parts. All that remains to be done is to gather under certain heads, in chapters and paragraphs, what the Spirit of God has laid down in his store house, and no one will call that a process of evolution. But we defy the world to point out one Christian dogma which is not in all its parts to be found in the holy Scriptures.⁴⁷

Not only has doctrine not developed *outside* the Scriptures, but *within* the Bible itself there is no such development:

Nor have these doctrines found utterance in the Scriptures in or subsequent to a process of evolution; for holy men of God did not speak out thoughts and concepts evolved in their own or other men's minds, but *spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost*.⁴⁸

Pieper concurs in this rejection of doctrinal development:

There can be no development of the Christian doctrine, because the Christian

⁴⁶ A. L. Graebner, "Evolution in History," *Theological Quarterly*, II (April 1898), 180.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 187.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

doctrine given to the Church by the Apostles is a finished product, complete and perfect, fixed for all times. It is not in need of improvement and allows no alteration.⁴⁹

If this be scored as a theology of re-creation, so be it. "The theology of re-creation is the theology of the Church; any other theology has no right of existence."⁵⁰

What is true regarding doctrine also holds good for practices and institutions: "We find that here, too, the genesis of things has not by any means been a process or series of processes of evolution."⁵¹ Of course, the rejection of "evolution" is not to be construed as a denial of all change, of "the relation of cause and effect between historical phenomena, the increase of historical quantities, and the degeneration and gradual decay of historical organisms or institutions."⁵² All these latter factors may be amply demonstrated at work in particular historical contexts. It is specifically the idea of change in "substance" (the "thing-in-itself") which is deemed spurious:

If a process the beginning and the end of which exhibited the same thing, though, perhaps, in different forms or states, were to be called evolution, we would not seriously object.⁵³

⁴⁹ *Christian Dogmatics*, I, 129.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁵¹ *Theological Quarterly* II, 188.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 193. Graebner's understanding of church-historical study, as outlined in his various articles in the *Theological Quarterly* can profitably be compared and contrasted with the view set forth in a contemporaneous essay by Arthur Cushman McGiffert, "The Historical Study of Christianity," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, I (January 1893), 150—71. McGiffert's leading theme is contained in the following paragraph: "To study an organism in its antecedents and

This stricture means that all change is necessarily "accidental" and not the result of any process of evolution or alteration in "substance." For example, a given dogma (such as that regarding Christ's status in the Trinity) may be expressed in non-biblical terms (such as the Nicene *homoousios* formula), but the dogma itself, in its self-contained totality and meaning, is precisely the same as that entailed in Scripture; only the "accident" of language has changed.⁵⁴

in its genesis, to trace the course of its growth, to examine it in the varied relations which it has sustained to its environment at successive stages of its career, to search for the forces within and without which have served to make it what it is; to do it all, not with the desire of supporting one's own theory or of undermining the theory of another, but in order to understand the organism more thoroughly, in order to enter more fully into its spirit, in order to gather from its past new light to shed upon its present and its future; to do it all with the humble, docile spirit, and with the eager, inquiring mind of the true student—this is the historic method, and this is the way we study the church today. This is the way the modern scholar studies all the factors of Christianity in all their varied phases." Such was the "credo," one might say, of 19th-century "historicism."

⁵⁴ The absolute rejection of any doctrinal "development" would seem to derive from a number of factors. First, as indicated above in note 42, both the doctrine of verbal inspiration and the attendant "substantialism" militate against the very notion of historical change. In addition, "development" would also connote "Romanism" in theology, that is, the Biblical doctrine is neither complete nor sufficient in itself but requires the agency of the church to supplement and define it. Thus Pieper quotes an article by Walther to the following effect: "Walther calls the theory that the dogmas are the result of a gradual development a 'sister of Romanism in a Protestant mask,' a theory which turns the church 'into a school of philosophy, whose task it is to search for the truth eternally, while the Church, according to God's Word, is the bride to whom the truth has been entrusted as her most precious treasure.'" (*Christian Dogmatics*, I, 133, note 186)

III

This study has thus far endeavored to show that traditional Missouri Synod theology, in contrast to the "primitivism" widely embraced by American denominationalism in the colonial period and early 19th century, has sought to maintain a genuine concern for church history, thereby both emulating and preserving its confessional heritage. In this very process, however, it has also displayed its own brand of "historylessness" and "antihistorical bias," in short, its own failure of the historical sense. This latter contention obviously requires further amplification. On the basis of the representative formulations outlined above, it now becomes possible to detail and explicate this failure at length.

1. It may be noted, in the first instance, that the synodical reading of history has been at root antihistorical because it has adopted *a static, one-dimensional, indeed basically anachronistic perspective*. The whole course of church history is studied in the light of a fully developed Orthodoxy, which is initially projected on both the Scriptures and the Reformation teaching and then employed as the overarching critical norm or axiological category. Hence the various periods of church history are not approached on their own terms, within the bounds of their own historical settings, but are interpreted and judged on the basis of later developments and perspectives. From these later vantage points, earlier periods, such as the time of the apostolic fathers, necessarily seem doctrinally defective. Especially is this true when the doctrine of justification becomes the criterion par excellence for all historical assessment. Thus A. L. Graebner writes:

We can never read the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, of Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Cyprian, and others, without experiencing a pang as we turn page after page and many a page before we meet one of the comparatively few passages which speak of the great cardinal doctrine of Christianity, the doctrine of justification by grace through faith, in more than a passing way, and in a manner which clearly indicates, that the writer knew that he was then and there setting forth the *doctrina stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, the doctrine by which pre-eminently Christianity is distinguished from all the false religions.⁵⁵

The fact that the doctrine of justification did not become a dominant theological issue until the Pelagian controversy is here thoroughly obscured by this Procrustean attempt to fit history to a preformulated base. The doctrine of justification, taken by itself, is simply inadequate for a sympathetic and historically meaningful interpretation of the early church's total life and thought.

2. The use of the doctrine of justification as sole critical norm, together with the stereotyped periodization which derives from it, further results in *an immense impoverishment of church history*. The Middle Ages, for example, become uniformly the "Dark Ages," marked by the absolute triumph of "Antichrist."⁵⁶ The

⁵⁵ Review of Lucius Waterman, *The Post-Apostolic Age* (1898), in *Theological Quarterly*, III (January 1899), 112—13.

⁵⁶ See the unsigned review of Nils Loevgren, *A Church History for the Use of Schools and Colleges* (1906), in *Theological Quarterly*, XI (1907), 55—63. The reviewer initially remarks that "the development of the Church might be shown in the three aspects of Formation, Deformation, and Reformation" (p. 56). He continues: "Like most modern historians the

catholicity of the Lutheran Confessions (which unabashedly evoke the testimony of such thinkers as Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Hugh of St. Victor) is threatened with dissolution by an unremitting anti-Roman polemic that accords to medieval "heretical" movements an exaggerated significance. In the name of the doctrine of justification, the "glorious company" of the *true* teachers is virtually limited to the likes of Paul, Luther, and Walther, undoubtedly a restriction prompted by *pietas* rather than *superbia*, but nonetheless destructive of catholicity. Openness to diverse traditions hardens into a narrow traditionalism; the approach to church history thereby becomes denominational and "sectarian."

3. This persistent anti-Roman polemic itself occasions a *blindness to the manner in which Catholicism became Roman*, well-nigh attributing to this development an immanent "malice aforethought" which is historically spurious. Thus Graebner complains:

author estimates the merits of the Roman Church during the Middle Ages too highly. . . . The Church of God existed also under popery, and sinners were saved also in those dark ages. True, but the historian who studies ends and means, causes and effects, cannot but regard these matters partly as accidental, partly as a cunning deception, as lying signs and wonders. The Roman Church of the Middle Ages, viewed from the standpoint of the historian, is simply the papal hierarchy with all that that implies. Whatever this hierarchy lays its hands on becomes tainted. Hence we loathe also its comelier aspects, its Francis of Assisi and its St. Bridget, its monkish learning and its missionary zeal. The era which began with the passing of Romulus Augustulus and closed with the Diet of Worms has preserved what good traits there are in spite of Rome. . . . The world still has reason to heed Luther's solemn warning: *Deus vos impleat odio papae.*" (P. 60)

We are provoked every time when we read what Ignatius has to say concerning the episcopate of his day, and the correspondence between Cyprian and the Roman clergy, who are also laboring under the prevalent perversion of the ministerial office, which . . . finally resulted in a full-grown antichrist.⁵⁷

The pressing historical need in the second and third centuries for an "apostolic organization" (in company with an "apostolic canon" and an "apostolic rule of faith") to combat developing heresies is here uncritically condemned from the perspective of the Reformation polemic against the Renaissance papacy. Likewise the absolute denunciation of the papacy as "Antichrist," which has its own reasons in the 16th century, now becomes consistently employed in later Lutheranism as a perpetually valid historical judgment, so that the Roman Church is invariably prejudged on a 16th-century basis and deemed virtually incapable of "reform." The establishment of "historical priorities," via an exclusive focusing on the "material principle" of Lutheran theology, has resulted in a demonstrable "historylessness," a surrendering of catholicity, a "static traditionalism."

4. The antihistorical bias of this approach also becomes evident in its *insensitivity to the problems of "form and content,"* a problem raised by historical transitions and their resultant impact on conceptual frameworks. In keeping with the rejection of any doctrinal development, it is asserted that all "the doctrines or dogmas of [Christianity] are revealed in the word of God, not only in rudiments or germs, but in all their parts." What does

⁵⁷ *Theological Quarterly*, III (1899), 113.

such a claim really mean, particularly the stricture "in all their parts"? Are the Christological formulations or the dogma of the Trinity, in their fourth- and fifth-century garb, present "in all their parts" in the Scripture? Graebner and Pieper evidently would so assert, with the proviso that only the "language" has changed while the doctrines remain identical in "substance." But can the "content" (or doctrine) remain completely unchanged when cast into a new "form" (or language)? Are there not at least corresponding shifts in emphasis and therefore also possible shifts in meaning? And are not new formulations simultaneously new interpretations? The Biblical approach to the person of Christ and to the Divine Triad is expressed in personalistic, dynamic, historical terms, the later formulations in essentialistic, static, metahistorical terms. Regardless of one's conclusions regarding the adequacy of the later formulations, the sense of history demands a thorough inquiry into the acute problems occasioned by the transition from Semitic to Hellenistic categories, from a theology of "act" to one of "being."

5. Similarly, there is a *repeated insensitivity to the problems of "historical conditioning."* By reading the Scriptures through later dogmatic formulations, the Christology of the New Testament, to take a crucial example, is simply flattened out to be of one piece with these later formulations.⁵⁸ In place of the multiform New

⁵⁸ Compare the following remarks by Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (Philadelphia, 1959), pp. 3—4: "As a result of the necessity of combating the heretics . . . the Church fathers subordinated the interpretation of the person and work of Christ to the question of the 'natures.' In any case, their

Testament language about Christ there is one definitive Christology expressed uniformly in Hellenistic philosophical language.⁵⁹ The New Testament Christological titles are themselves temporarily conditioned (*Zeitgebunden*) by their association with earlier formulas and by their entrance into a new historical matrix. But by unflinchingly assessing and interpreting them through a developed Orthodoxy their individual historical peculiarities and unique strands of meaning are largely overlooked.⁶⁰ History is given a consistency which it does not possess. Indeed, history, is again overcome by doctrine at the expense of the historical sense.⁶¹

emphases, compared with those of the New Testament, were misplaced. Even when they did speak of the work of Christ, they did so only in connection with discussion about his nature. Even if this shifting of emphases was necessary against certain heretical views, the discussion of 'natures' is none the less ultimately a Greek, not a Jewish or biblical problem."

⁵⁹ See the article by Graebner on "Christology" in *Theological Quarterly*, IV (1900), 1—24. Graebner summarizes his findings as follows: "Concerning the person of Christ the Scriptures teach that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, very God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, conceived by the Holy Ghost, and born of the Virgin Mary, in the fulness of time, the divine nature and the human nature being from the moment of his conception for ever and inseparably united in one complete theanthropic person." (P. 2)

⁶⁰ Perhaps the best illustration of this feature is the consistent interpretation (as in the article just cited) of the Christological title "Son of Man" as synonymous with "human nature."

⁶¹ The same insensitivity shows itself in the parallel failure to determine the precise impact of neoscholastic categories on the theology of Luther and the Confessions, as well as in the disregard for the historical factors which prompted Lutheran Orthodoxy, for example, to focus attention on the "supernatural" origin of the Scriptures.

6. The antihistorical bias of the traditional view becomes at once most acute and apparent in its *failure to comprehend the so-called hermeneutical problem*, namely, the problem of Word and exposition, of text and meaning. The Word of God, apart from its anchorage in its own historical context, does not address its hearer in a vacuum. It encounters him in *his* historicity, his existence in a particular time and place, removed at varying lengths from the original events to which the Word bears witness.⁶² "Historical" man, in turn, puts to this Word questions which are constantly being informed by his particular *Sitz im Leben*. History thus poses most dramatically the problem of meaning (or "relevance"), these two factors being inseparable. Accordingly it is theology's perennial task to "translate" the Biblical modes of speech and patterns of thought into the specific language and thought forms of the present, therewith posing the dual question: What *did* the Word mean (the descriptive task)? What *does* it mean (the hermeneutical task proper)?⁶³

The traditional Missouri Synod view of theology's function has been limited almost wholly, in the name of *sola Scriptura*, to the descriptive task. The Biblical theologian is to determine what Scripture says and then reproduce it, in accord with the axiom: *quod non est biblicum, non est theologicum*. In actual practice the difficulties of this latter task have themselves

⁶² See Gerhard Ebeling, "The Significance of the Critical Historical Method for Church and Theology in Protestantism," in *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia, 1963), pp. 17—61.

⁶³ Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, I (New York, 1962), 418—32.

been greatly minimized by the locus method of exposition. For one thing, it has been generally assumed that "Biblical theology" and "doctrinal theology" are identical, for all the doctrines of Christianity have been revealed in Scripture in propositional form, and "all that remains to be done is to gather under certain heads, in chapters and paragraphs, what the Spirit of God has laid down in his store house." The Biblical material is thus initially lifted out of its own historical setting. Furthermore, as indicated previously, the "chapters and paragraphs" are then ascribed "headings" taken largely from later Orthodoxy, so that the descriptive task itself, in both theory and practice, is unhistorical *in toto*.

Most importantly, however, the locus method of exposition completely neglects the hermeneutical task, with the result that history (that is, the Word's original historicity in relation to the hearer's present historicity) is systematically excluded from the entire theological enterprise. This neglect of the hermeneutical problem, in turn, has meant that an all-important inner dynamic of church history—the ongoing struggle of Christian thinkers constantly to *interpret* the Biblical message with continuous reference to contemporary needs and problems—has not been grasped. Instead church history becomes the story of the "formation, deformation, and reformation" of Orthodoxy, the study of how correctly the *one definitive interpretation* of the Bible has been received throughout the ages.⁶⁴ Church history is thus a call to polemics, scarcely an invitation to witness the progress of the Spirit in leading His church into all truth.

⁶⁴ See note 56 above.

IV

The general conclusion to be drawn from the foregoing considerations may be expressed as follows: American "Protestantism," inasmuch as it has largely been shaped by the "left-wing" view of church history, has been characterized by an *undogmatic historylessness*. That is to say, it has displayed neither a prevailing interest in dogma nor a persistent concern for doctrinal continuity. Its "historylessness" has been shaped by nondoctrinal factors, for example, the American pattern of "free churches," the influence of an "unlimited frontier," revivalism as an evangelistic technique, and so forth. Insofar as it regards the Bible as in some sense "normative," it undertakes (in theory at least) to return "immediately" to Biblical practices and institutions without regard for any intervening historical tradition.

In contradistinction to this phenomenon, the Missouri Synod form of American confessional Lutheranism has displayed a *dogmatic historylessness*. Doctrinal concerns have consistently dictated the thought and practice of this denomination. The preservation of doctrinal continuity or "orthodoxy" is viewed as one of the church's primary tasks. To this end the study of church history has been seriously enjoined on the theologian and theological student. Precisely in this concern for doctrine, however, especially for *the* doctrine of justification, church history is forced into stereotyped patterns which themselves lack historical authentication. Whole centuries of ecclesiastical life and thought are passed over or hastily characterized with sweeping generalizations. This "monogamous passion" for *the* doctrine thus entails a tendentious periodization which is both "uncath-

olic" and "unconfessional." In addition, the correlative interpretation of all doctrines through subsequently developed Orthodox formulas leads to an unhistorical (because anachronistic) perspective, a drastic foreshortening of the church's doctrinal history.

Compounded with this failure of the historical sense itself is a parallel *methodological* insensitivity anent various theological operations. Historical interpretation becomes in effect doctrinal *evaluation*, and the "theological student of church history" requires no particular methodology for this task, only a thorough knowledge of Orthodox dogmatics and perhaps a penchant for polemics. Biblical interpretation becomes a matter of cataloging selected passages under their appropriate doctrinal headings, without due regard for their immediate historical contexts and their particular meanings. Therewith the original meaning of a given passage is not only in danger of being overlooked, but the problem of determining its present meaning is methodologically excluded, for "meaning" in fact becomes synonymous with Orthodox "formulation."⁶⁵ The whole process is a closed circuit, undisturbed by any pressing historical considerations (namely, by the text's own "historicality" in relation to the reader's present "historicality").

Hence it appears demonstrably true that in spite of profound differences both non-confessional American "Protestantism" and Missouri Synod confessional Lutheranism

⁶⁵ In other words, if one first learns the proper dogmatic categories, he may then read a given Scriptural passage and for all practical purposes apprehend its "meaning" instantly by "matching" the various Scriptural terms with their appropriate systematic categories.

have together in times past surrendered a genuine historical sense, albeit for divergent reasons and in varying degrees.⁶⁶ The "historylessness" of the synodical position, to be sure, has been less radical by virtue of its explicit commitment to historic confessions (for example, the catholic creeds as well as the Lutheran Symbols). The Synod at times has approached, but never adopted, a thoroughgoing "primitivism." It is particularly when measured by its own confessional standards that Missouri's surrender of catholicity seems so drastic. On the other hand, the Synod's doctrinal bias has not been without historical significance and import. For while the doctrine of justification (especially in its Orthodoxist form) is undoubtedly an inadequate criterion for interpreting and evaluating all periods of church history, the primacy accorded it has consistently served to give Missouri Synod theology a definite "normative content." It might be argued that the Synod was able to withstand certain disastrous theological developments at the turn of the century only because of its massive emphasis on "justification by grace through faith alone." The late 19th-century gospel of wealth, of moral perfectionism, of inevitable cultural and spiritual progress, in short, the gospel of divine-human cooperation as the religious fundament *sine qua non*: this "Amer-

⁶⁶ The term "confessional" has been employed throughout this study in a somewhat ambiguous fashion. It should be taken to mean simply that the Missouri Synod has traditionally upheld the historic Lutheran Confessions by requiring its pastors and teachers to subscribe unconditionally to them. However, as this study has endeavored to show, the Synod's "historylessness" has often led it into a real tension with the "catholicity" of the Confessions and thus it has frequently been less than truly "confessional."

icanized," acculturated version of the "good news" was presumably not to be heard from synodical pulpits. The Synod's almost monotonous emphasis on *sola gratia* and the *satisfactio vicaria* rigorously insured an abiding pessimism about the natural man, and about the *homo religiosus* above all, directing an unqualified optimism toward God alone.⁶⁷

The Synod's relentless stress on *doctrina divina* may well have prevented wholesale theological erosion. Describing religious life in the nineties, Henry Steele Commager has written:

It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that during the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, religion prospered while theology went slowly bankrupt. . . . Never before had the church been materially more powerful or spiritually less effective.⁶⁸

And Winthrop Hudson has similarly noted:

Few Protestants were aware of possessing a comprehensive, coherent, and clearly defined intellectual structure which would help to preserve their identity within the general culture and provide them with an independent perspective of their own.⁶⁹

Whatever one's attitude toward the Synod's monolithic character, it must be ac-

⁶⁷ Sydney Ahlstrom has said of Walther: "[His] influence was especially significant in that he stood almost alone in the nineteenth-century American theological scene as one fully aware of the crucial importance of the problems of Law and Gospel to the Christian faith. In his insistence on their importance he anticipates the emphasis of Karl Barth and the 'Luther renaissance' of the next century, but by the same fact he doomed himself to attack and misunderstanding in his own time." ("Theology in America," p. 275)

⁶⁸ *The American Mind*, pp. 165, 167.

⁶⁹ *American Protestantism*, p. 134.

knowledged that it pursued theological concerns with existential passion and its vast educational system continuously provided its members a "clearly defined intellectual structure."

In retrospect it is also evident that the Synod's antihistorical bias, particularly its methodological insensitivity, has itself been in part historically conditioned. The development and use of the historical-critical method in assessing church history, especially the history of doctrine, was primarily the work of 19th-century liberal theologians.⁷⁰ At the hands of such a brilliant practitioner as Adolf von Harnack, the method was employed to question the continuing validity of the ancient dogmas and to support a return to the "historical Jesus." Thus, when the fathers of the Missouri Synod appraised the "historical method," they judged it predominantly by its current results. Rejection of its specific conclusions simultaneously entailed rejection of the method. The unqualified denial of any doctrinal "development" was also in part derived from this hostility to the historical-critical method.⁷¹ For example, one supposedly "assured result" of Old Testament criticism—that Israel's faith had gradually "evolved" from polytheism to ethical monotheism—was so repugnant to synodical theologians that any sympathetic appraisal of the "method" was precluded. So also the Synod's failure to take seriously the hermeneutical problem was in part because, in the name of "relevancy," theological liberalism often went about reducing the faith of the fathers to a limited number of "timeless truths" (fre-

quently little more than truths in conformity to the times). Once again the methodological values implicit in the "questions" about "meaning" were passed over because specific "answers" were unacceptable.

V

It is possible to discern a new leaven at work during the past two decades or so both within American Christianity at large and Missouri Synod Lutheranism in particular. Perhaps it may be said that both have been seeking a recovery of "catholicity," and that for a variety of reasons. The contemporary ecumenical and liturgical movements—not to mention the dual impact of Vatican II and of a massive theological polemic against denominational "triumphalism"—have especially stimulated a deepened awareness of the universal church as a historic reality, as the age-old fellowship of believers confessing and worshipping a common Lord. In opposing an anachronistic, moribund "Christendom mentality" numerous theologians have called for and helped articulate an "exodus theology" based on a dynamic view of the church as necessarily *in via* and *semper reformanda*: a view which certainly requires a subtle and sensitive appreciation for the central historical issue of "continuity" and "discontinuity" between past and present. Indeed the development of a suitably complex "sense of history" has become so imperative today precisely because the theologians of every Christian denomination must wrestle with (and agonize over) the cardinal problem of how to unite "criticism" with "conservation," how to maintain the requisite fidelity to the Christian theological heritage without giving way to a sterile, unquestioned traditionalism.

⁷⁰ See Oscar Cullmann, "The Necessity and Function of Higher Criticism," *The Early Church* (Philadelphia, 1956), pp. 3—16.

⁷¹ See note 54 above.

In keeping with these newer forms of religious sensibility there has been a discernible tendency among many denominations to return to their own historical antecedents and thus to regain a sense of "tradition" and of continuity with the past, not to repeat that past out of an antiquarian interest but better to comprehend present challenges and potentialities, and in the process, perhaps, to "exorcize" some evil spirits of generations past. (This latter impulse discloses the authentic "psychoanalytic" function of historical study.) The renascence in Luther and Calvin studies, as well as in the area of the radical Reformation, has definitely encouraged such a return *ad fontes*. And undoubtedly the very rootlessness of the modern age has served to emphasize the profound existential need for roots on ecclesiastical and theological as well as personal and cultural levels.

Within the Missouri Synod it is also evident that there have been some noteworthy developments, some new stirrings of the Spirit. Synodical theologians have accorded the Lutheran Confessions an increased prominence in at least a twofold manner: as a "springboard" to a more vital concern for the pre-Reformation centuries of the church's thought and practice; and as a "foil" apropos of subsequent developments in Lutheranism (for example, the later failure to distinguish consistently between Law and Gospel at all points and to preserve genuinely Lutheran liturgical practices). So, too, it appears that the Confessions are being deemed fully adequate summaries of doctrine *in place of* 17th-century dogmatics or more contemporary formulations. At the same time recent exegetical theology within the Synod

has dissolved the old, unqualified "identification" of Biblical theology with the doctrinal theology of Lutheran Orthodoxy and, significantly, has done so primarily by a renewed appreciation for the historically conditioned context of Biblical thought.⁷² Indeed the Synod's theologians have for the nonce apparently all become *historical* theologians. All have been challenged in one way or another (whether consciously or not) to come to terms with the diverse problems enunciated in the course of this essay, that is, to develop the "sense of history."

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⁷² See, for example, Martin H. Scharlemann, "God's Acts as Revelation," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXXII (April 1961), 214—15: "Since the Biblical authors sometimes made use of certain written materials on the subjects presented, we can assume that they did not hesitate to employ oral sources. In fact, we have already pointed out that Luke says that he did just this. A close study, moreover, of Judges or of the Gospel of Mark will reveal a strong likelihood that some of the matter there presented was first shaped orally by kerygmatic, didactic, or liturgical needs and practices within the community of God's people, and then reshaped by the individual author to conform to his particular purpose and style—all under the special guidance of God's Spirit, of course! . . . It may be useful in this context to point out that the sacred authors wrote as particular individuals of their own age. . . . Serving as the authoritative instrument of God's revelation, each one wrote as a distinct personality living at a certain time and in given circumstances. Each author, therefore, gives his own peculiar testimony. . . . God chose to reveal Himself just in this kind of particularity, through men who stood at given points within history and wrote within the framework of their respective times. This is why not only their language but also their manner of presenting historical information at times differs from ours. These factors belong to their specific background and personalities"