

A response to Lawrence R. Rast's "Are We Experiencing the Lutheran Reformation's Eve or Twilight?"

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Heinrich Bornkamm, a Luther scholar of the previous generation, once wrote:

(The) history (of the world) is the history of obedience and of rebellion, of long-suffering and of judgment, of the destruction of complacent pride and of wonderful help for an unswerving faith. God's message amid the tumult of history is the same as that preached in his revealed word: mercy and judgment.... *Without Jesus Christ, we could not understand the voice of God in history. Without him we would remain in search of those unknown rules of the game.... The cross of Christ is a pledge to faith that God's work begins where all is lost to the human eye.* (italics mine)¹

What is true for history in general is also true for the institutional life of churches in particular. Without the eyes of faith and apart from the vision of Christ, the story of the world and the stories of all churches would seem sometimes like a 'tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing.'

What a joy it is to sit, therefore, at the feet of a man who understands this and can unlock for us the mystery of history. Someone who knows that God's work begins where all is lost to the human eye. Of course Dr. Rast does not seek to unravel all the why's and wherefore's that lie hidden in God's secret counsel. But the Heart behind it all, that great burning Heart of love yearning to restore a lost humanity to himself, *that* he shows us very clearly. It's hard to come away from a paper like this without a sense of

satiety, as when one pushes away from a rich feast and says, "Ah!" in contentment.

Day's Twilight

Which is not to say that the subject matter is anything but grim. "Twilight or eve," was the question we posed to him. And in his reply he says, "Both!"

If it is twilight, the day has passed and the night is coming. If it is the eve, the preceding day has been preparation for the next. And--perhaps I'm being too much of the historian here--both are true, depending on the theological, historical, philosophical, geographical, and cultural context in which one finds oneself (p. 4).

No, Dr. Rast, you are not being too much of a historian, but rather a theologian of the cross who sees both wrath and mercy at work in the annals of our days. As Luther reminds us, only this kind of theologian can look unblinkingly at the human story and "call the thing as it actually is"² And as grim as that story may be, you never stopped reminding us (again, to quote Bornkamm):

Wherever individuals and nations [and we might add "churches"—ed.] crucify Christ anew, not only God's punitive justice awaits them but behind his angry countenance the Father's beckoning voice as well. For Luther Christ's cross was a pledge of God's wonderful hidden rule in history; and in it he found, as every Christian finds, the help not

¹ *Luther's World of Thought*. Translated by Martin H. Bertram. Concordia paperback ed edition. Concordia Publishing House, 1965, pp 216-217.

² Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 31: Career of the Reformer I*. Edited by Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999, p 40.

indeed to understand history but to bear it and to be victorious over it.³

Like Luther and Marquardt, you were ‘nerving and steeling us for the bedlam of the fray.’ From the very beginning you reminded us, in what became a leitmotif of your paper: *It is a miracle that confessional Lutheranism exists in any form today. Humanly speaking, it should not. But by God's grace it does.*⁴ And then you rehearsed for us—without happy talk—all the harbingers of doom that signal the demise of the Lutheran Church in Europe and America.

You pointed out the graying of our pews and the rising age of our demographic. You spoke of the Estonian piety that counts it a blessing to talk to trees. You told of the shrinking of our families and the post-confirmation attrition rate. You reminded us of how our seminary enrollments are declining and that many are closing, how sexual mores—built not only on natural law, but on the consensus of twenty centuries—are now up for grabs as feelings trump any allegiance to an external moral code. All this could lead one to conclude that we stand at the brink of an abyss and that not only evangelical Christianity but the western world itself is on the verge of collapse.

Unflinchingly, you made us look at the effects of spiritual torpor infecting the minds of the leaders of what became the ELCA. When a church body blithely gives away what Luther would not yield at Marburg, one wonders what doctrine is left to compromise? But the end is not yet. In an amazing return to Rome via Canterbury, the ELCA abandons its confession on church and ministry. If Paris was worth a mass, no doubt unity is worth a Bishop! Yet the end is still not yet. To see the ELCA cave-in to Rome over the doctrine of justification is to witness Esau selling his birthright once more to Jacob. Is there anything left still Lutheran in the public confession of such a church?

And while you pointed out that even the ELS and the WELS are no strangers to internal controversies, you reserved your most

penetrating gaze for your own church body, the LCMS. It too suffered from spiritual torpor as groups within it opted to make compromises in order to have a stronger voice in American Lutheranism. You traced the sad history for us once more of the breakup of the synodical conference. From negotiations with the ALC and the Statement of 44 and to the humbling of a once proudly confessional seminary—you set all of it masterfully before our eyes. And mourned:

I continue to grieve that the fellowship of the Synodical Conference was broken more than a half-century ago. And I am troubled by Missouri's role in that breaking. I find John Behnken's strident rejection of the claim made by Missouri's Synodical Conference partners that the LCMS was changing its theology and practice difficult to understand. (p.18)

Please then understand the following remarks as coming from the spirit of one who mourns with with you. We too in WELS and ELS deeply share that grief. Our synods were so close; our families, so intertwined. My own roots on my mother's side can be traced to the Graebner family in Missouri. My great-grandfather felt some pride in the distinction of having once held CFW Walther's horse! My uncles--my mother's brothers--are Dick and Dan and Ted Jungkuntz. On my father's side, it's WELS all the way down.

I can still remember as a young boy in the 1950s being aware of the strife that was going on during our family reunions, as the adults argued in the kitchen while us kids played in the living room. The verbal warfare was so fierce at times that one of my aunts felt as if she was forced to choose between her beloved husband and her beloved brothers--on opposite sides of a growing divide. Emotionally I don't think she has ever recovered fully.

I can remember sitting in my uncle Ted's home in Valparaiso, seeing the pain in his eyes, and hearing the pain in his voice as he kept on

³ Bonrkamm, *op.cit.*, p. 217.

⁴ p. 1 *et passim*.

asking, "What are you afraid of?" You see, I had refused to agree that it was an insignificant matter whether or not Paul had written first and second Timothy. I believed then and I believe now that such a denial involves implicitly a denial of verbal inspiration and the inerrancy of Scripture. It introduces the demon of skepticism into the life of the church.

My father's hesitancy to vote with the majority in 1961 in WELS' break with Missouri was due in part to the fact that, in southwestern Michigan, the conservative Missouri congregations were so intertwined and intermarried with the WELS congregations there. He felt that to make the break on the basis of fellowship would be a much more difficult position to articulate to the person in the pew than to break on the basis of the doctrine of the Word—and of course by this time, articles being published from the seminary in St. Louis made it very clear that many of its professors had a different spirit on that point.

So much for the view on the ground. To describe what it looked like from a higher, institutional level, perhaps I can draw this analogy. It was as if we were all sisters of one family. And we in WELS and ELS looked up to the LCMS as our much more polished, older sister. For many years we had basked in her love and leadership. Then there came a time where it seemed as if our big sister's yen for conversation with people outside our family was much stronger than her desire to speak to us. We kind of had the feeling that every time we talked to her, we just irritated her. We were a drag on her desire to go out into the world and bloom. We felt as if she were ashamed of us and her relationship to us. And it hurt.

You can hear the hurt in many of the resolutions, the expressions of outrage, and the harsh words that were said at the time. And maybe I just speak for myself, but I can say truly that there is nothing that I would like more than to have my

big sister back. That is one reason why I welcome our renewed discussions.

The real woe in all this of course is not so much the impact this has had on individuals and their families or even on our churches' institutions. No, the real tragedy is to witness how easily sin can lay us low and how quickly once staunch confessors can be moved 'from the hope held out in the gospel' (Col 1:23). There is something truly perverse about the fact that "people love darkness instead of light" (John 3:19). Small wonder we experience the wrath of "God's punitive justice" and feel the weight of his "angry countenance"!

Day's Eve

But that, to channel Paul Harvey, is hardly the end of the story, nor is it the sum and substance of our essayist's thesis. "God's work begins where all is lost."⁵ An arrogant triumphalism had proclaimed "a bright and glorious day,"⁶ detected in the "sound scholarship" and "courageous leadership" at St. Louis seminary. As we all know, this culminated in an implicit denial of the nature and character of not only the Scripture, but of the gospel itself.⁷

Yet, unexpectedly, unpredictably, the Daystar once again rose in people's hearts. "What had seemed to be twilight turned out to be the eve of a new age for Missouri," Dr. Rast tells us (p. 27). Our God, as Luther remarks somewhere, works by contraries and paradox: to make alive, he first kills. What is so remarkable about God's power is that he not only creates something from nothing; he creates peace out of chaos, reconciliation out of hostility. He brings life from death. Out of darkness, a new light dawns.

That's why you can say, "Twilight or eve—both!" and in the latter part of your essay, you point to some of the harbingers of dawn. You remind us that, "Confessional Lutheranism has always struggled" (p. 31). In addition to the

⁵ Bornkamm, p. 217.

⁶ O.A. Geiseman, as qtd. by our essayist, p. 27

⁷ When I read "*Faithful to our Calling*," and other products of these professors' scholarship, I am

reminded of a phrase from George Orwell's, *Politics and the English Language*. So often, it seems, the gospel in their writing dissolves into "sheer cloudy vagueness."

miraculous rebirth in the 70s at St. Louis, you point out how God's grace has had its way in the history of the visible church when every sign pointed to its defeat.

You point out how the "American Lutheran" movement of S.S. Schmucker and Benjamin Kurtz at one time appeared to be headed towards an inevitable triumph as it tried to reimagine Lutheranism to make it conform more closely to the spirit and culture of America. Yet within 20 years from its heyday in 1840, the movement lay prostrate and discredited. Benjamin Kurtz (undoubtedly intoxicated by the Enlightenment myth of progress) had weirdly turned the fathers into children and the children into fathers (p. 34). He died repudiated. What hand of man could do such things? We confess it was by grace and grace alone! God created this rising confessional spirit not only out of nothing, but out of its exact opposite: out of the spirit of torpor and hostility toward the so-called old Lutheranism.

You remind us of those other harbingers of dawn. That there were those who made good and faithful confessions of God's unchanging truth despite knowing that they were living in a century that "would compel us to ambiguity" (p.35). That despite the collapse of Lutheranism in Europe, there are still "small pockets of faithful, confessional Lutherans who are doing their best in almost impossible circumstances" (p. 37). You point us to the Global South where, far from being in decline, churches are growing rapidly and are unwilling to submit to the imperialism of Western sexual ethics.

But as a true theologian of the cross, you will not allow us to indulge ourselves in a frothy triumphalism "where never is heard a discouraging word and the skies are not cloudy all day." Challenges remain. The LCMS is still struggling to find a unified confessional identity. Around us all, societal norms are being lost in a sea of postmodern relativism. In its response the

visible church seems all too willing to cave into culture and to abandon its historical roots. And as you put it so well, "By losing a sense of its history, the church [is] in danger of losing its mission....In so accommodating the culture, the church [is] in danger of losing its identity" (p. 39).

As a case in point, one example that I found particularly interesting was your comment regarding the individualization of belief in which you cited Robert N. Bellah's work on *Civil Religion*. In 1967 he observed that only a generic god was allowed in the public square; specific confessions were banished to our closets. It occurs to me that this too is a sad index of our decline. Whereas Bella in his day could assume a willingness to acknowledge this BOMFOG⁸ god in our civic spaces, now societal forces seek to banish even him (she? it?) from any public mention at all. How progress marches on!

As a personal example of how America in the past few decades has changed in fundamental ways, I might just point out a generational shift I have observed in my own family's reaction to homosexuality. For my grandfather, sexual matters in general--including homosexuality--were simply not mentioned at all. For my father, the mention of homosexuality and lesbianism evoked a visible and visceral reaction. He would shudder. For myself, the reaction was still visceral, but interior. I knew in my bones it was wrong. As for my son, he knows it's wrong in an intellectual way, but the visceral reaction is almost entirely gone.

Yet even given the obvious decline in our religious and cultural context, our essayist can still affirm:

Despite ourselves, God remains faithful to his church and wherever the word is preached and the sacraments are administered according to Christ's

⁸ An acronym for the basic confession of Civic Religion, "the Brotherhood of Man; the Fatherhood of God." For its history, see <http://www.urantiabook.org/daniel-love->

[glazer/bomfog- or brotherhood of man-fatherhood of god-from the new language of politics-by william safi .](http://www.urantiabook.org/daniel-love-glazer/bomfog- or brotherhood of man-fatherhood of god-from the new language of politics-by william safi .)

institution, the Holy Spirit continues to call, gather, enlighten, and sanctify the whole Christian church on earth. But if, as I am arguing, we are still in the Reformation's eve, then we need to wake up our compatriots to work in the new day.⁹

Specifically, Dr. Rast urges us to hold fast to our confession (p. 40) and to recover for ourselves—as each generation must—the centrality of the gospel: “justification for Christ's sake, sola gratia et sola fide” (p. 41). In the spirit of that call (with which I am in hearty agreement), I would like to offer the concluding unscientific postscript. I believe there are three key areas where the Lutheran church has a unique identity and a distinctive voice that needs to be heard. When any of these is lost, we have forgotten who we are. We are uniquely Scriptural, uniquely confessional and uniquely evangelical.

Uniquely Scriptural

Scripture is the supreme and final authority for a Lutheran in all matters of Christian faith and life. To find out what our God has to say to us, we go back to the Scriptures. They alone are inspired by God. They alone are without error. They alone are the “pure, clear fountain of Israel...the one true standard by which all teachers and doctrines are to be judged and evaluated” (FC-SD, preface). What is Scriptural, that is Lutheran. What is Lutheran, that is Scriptural.

The implications of this for our identity are obvious: God in his grace still permits us to stand on this firm, high ground amid other churches that are drowning in seas of hermeneutical relativism of various types, from the historical critical method to postmodern ways of “reading” the Bible. These deadly floods are not confined to Europe and America, but are found in every country under the sun. It is simply naïve to pretend otherwise. Lutherans

will be contending for sola Scriptura wherever they may live!

As we train our catechumens, we want them to be saturated with the gospel and armed with the Spirit's sword. As we train our pastors and other church leaders in any place, we are committed to help them gain all the skills necessary for searching the Scriptures diligently and thoroughly.

Uniquely Confessional

Confession is natural for a believer (Ro 10:8-10). We confess the unique nature of our God: “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God the Lord is one” (Dt 6:4); “Christ is Lord” (Php 2:1). We “remember the wonders he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he pronounced” (1 Chr 16:12). We recall Paul's solemn words to the Corinthians, “Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Co 15:1-4).

But though the truth of the gospel is objective, we do not confess it in a cold, dispassionate way as if we were running down a list of inventory items from some doctrinal warehouse. That's because for us doctrine is life. We know that “man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Mt 4:4). As faith rejoices and says of God's promises, “For me!” so in confessing them, we joyfully proclaim them “for you”¹⁰—to the praise and glory of our God! Convinced of “the profound seriousness of truth,”¹¹ we know that truth saves, that lies kill, and that our God will hold us accountable for every idle word we

⁹ p. 39.

¹⁰ As Luther once remarked, “Religion is in the pronouns.”

¹¹ Hermann Sasse, *Here we stand : Nature and character of the Lutheran faith*, Theodore G. Tappert, trans. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1938), viii.

speak (Jn 6:63; 2 Ti 2:17; Mt 12:36).¹² Whatever we teach as a doctrine for the Church to believe, we teach as those profoundly aware that we stand before the judgment seat of God. We will have to answer to him if we presume to speak where he has not spoken.

A confessor also understands that if you “take away assertions and you will take away Christianity”¹³ We are not seeking to create a fellowship of “more and more who believe less and less.” In making our assertions, our hearts are bound by all that God has said.

Because Lutherans are convinced from Scripture of the truth we confess, we are a church that freely binds itself to the Lutheran Confessions as utterly faithful and completely reliable witnesses to that truth. The Confessions express what the Scriptures have to say with respect to every doctrine they affirm. They also speak an authoritative and Scriptural “no” to false teachings that rob Christ of his glory. Far from being “paper fences,” they breathe with the living gospel and its power. If you want to claim a Lutheran identity, you will embrace the Lutheran Confessions.

Uniquely Evangelical

Finally, our Lutheran identity is bound up in the unconditional gospel of justification. In their desire to reform the church, the early confessors were not driven by any impulse to begin a new denomination. Lutherans were not on a campaign to restore the ancient forms and the purer morality of the New Testament church. What drove the evangelical movement was the gospel. The Reformation was “in its essential

nature, nothing less than a rediscovery of the gospel.”¹⁴

This gospel is unconditional because forgiveness comes to us by grace alone, and not because we have earned or deserved it. “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them” (2 Co 5:19). Christ died for all, for a whole world of sinners just like you and like me (2 Co 5:14; 1 Jn 2:2; Jn 1:29). This is the pure gospel, the gospel with no strings attached. We receive this gospel righteousness not by any good works that we have done, but by faith and by faith alone (Ro 1:17; Php 3:9; Ro 3:23-28).

The rediscovery of the gospel means more for a Lutheran’s identity than simply to give him a personal understanding of sin and grace. It is the hermeneutical key that unlocks the Scripture. Only in Christ is the veil preventing a true understanding of Moses “taken away” (2 Co 3:14-16). When Christ “opened up” his disciples minds so that they could understand the Scripture, he said, “This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem (Lk 24:46-47).

When Luther rediscovered this truth, he said, “The whole Bible looked different to me.”¹⁵ Previously he had seen Jesus as his Judge and Lawgiver, prescribing the higher ethical righteousness demanded in the gospel. Now he saw righteousness as a gift of God’s grace, won for him by Jesus, his loving Savior. Now he saw that everything in the Scriptures revolved around this understanding of Christ, “Take Christ out of the Scriptures, and what have you left?”¹⁶

¹² Sasse, “[The orthodox Lutheran dogmaticians] knew one thing that modern man does not know and does not care to know. They knew that as individuals and nations, we literally live by truth and die by falsehood. Hence they never shared the cold skepticism and wearied resignation of modern relativism” *op. cit.*, 89.

¹³ LW 33:20

¹⁴ Sasse, *op.cit.*, 58.

¹⁵ as qtd. in Sasse, *op. cit.*, 62.

¹⁶ WA XVIII, 606, 29. Lutherans down through the centuries have borne witness to this same truth. Hermann Sasse emphatically restates it, “But the Bible can only “instruct us to salvation” because it contains the gospel, the message of the forgiveness of sins for Christ’s sake. Without this gospel, the Scriptures would be either an unintelligible, fragmentary document of a chaotic history of religions, or a revelation of the incomprehensible wrath of God. Only the witness to Christ makes a Bible out of the Bible, just as it is the sun which turns

This is more than simply an insight of Luther's. This Scriptural truth is the clear testimony of our church:

Since this controversy deals with the most important topic of Christian teaching which, rightly understood, illumines and magnifies the honor of Christ and is especially useful for the clear, correct understanding of the entire Holy Scriptures, and alone shows the way to the unspeakable treasure and right knowledge of Christ, and alone opens the door to the entire Bible.¹⁷

Justification is the beating heart of the Scripture and God's last and final word to humanity. "The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17).

When Lutherans approach the Holy Scriptures, then, we expect to see—both in the Old and in the New Testament—the record of God's love for poor sinners. We interpret the Scriptures from the standpoint of the gospel.¹⁸ Yes God acts mightily in judgment, and his wrath over all impends (as we are by nature and as we are viewed apart from Christ). But the law and its condemnation are not God's final word to us. His mercy in Christ is—whether promised in the Old Testament through prophecy and type, or fulfilled in all its glory in the New. The entire Bible is the account of God's love come down to save us. This is the key hermeneutical insight of the Lutheran Church.

A Parting Word of Praise

Dr. Rast teaches us church history the way it was meant to be taught, redolent with language that convicts of sin, consoles with grace, and that summons us to be what God made us!

After gazing at so many examples of human presumption and intransigence, we know why you say, "It is a miracle that confessional

Lutheranism exists in any form today. Humanly speaking, it should not. But by God's grace it does!"

We hear your challenge in the twice repeated quotation from Kurt Marquardt, "God will see His 'right doctrine and church' through. Shall we, by God's grace, have a part in this survival?" We are energized by your gospel summons, "If we are still in the Reformation's eve, then we need to wake up our compatriots to work in the new day."

We are filled with the same spirit of grace and supplication, "Stay with us, Lord, for it is evening" and are encouraged by your parting words of reassurance, "So he went into stay with them."

Thank you, dear brother! God's grace was with you!

daytime into day. It is for this reason that the doctrine of justification...is truly the key to the whole Bible" *op. cit.*, 115-116. Martin Franzmann calls justification the "res" (essential subject matter) of the Scriptures. Martin Franzmann, "Scripture and

Interpretation," (Springfield, Illinois: Concordia Seminary Print Shop, 1961), 337.

¹⁷ Apology of the Augsburg Confession, IV, 2-3 Kolb et al., *The Book of Concord*, 120-121.

¹⁸ Sasse, *op.cit.*, 142.

Questions for The Essayist

1. You mention the spirit of triumphalism that one could detect in the *American Lutheran*. Would you say that at least to some degree that the synodical conference break up could be traced to theologians and leaders being far much too imbued with the spirit of the age? What I mean is: in the 40s and 50s, men had drunk too deeply of the prevailing myth of progress of the builder generation. And in the 60s they were intoxicated by the self-righteous liberalism of the left. False doctrine sounded like gospel freedom. If so, what are some of the prevailing powers and principalities of this age that we should be aware of and contend against in our own theological work?
2. Do you see a distinction between intra-church differences--even differences over doctrine--that do not directly or implicitly involve the spirit of skepticism over the nature of the word itself as opposed to those that do? I say this in connection with your listing of the controversies that have existed in Missouri in the past and in the ELS and WELS (p.17).

Our controversy over translations, for example, we have always believed was over a question of wisdom in the use of *adiaphora*, and not a matter of doctrine. In the ELS controversy over the Church's ministry, I do not believe that either 'side' would have charged the other with a lack of trust in God's Word. They were both committed to the Scriptures as inspired and inerrant. This would not necessarily be true of the controversies in Missouri. Gilbert Thiele's paper on the immortality of the soul, for example, made use of an interpretative model (the Historical Critical method) that embraced a hermeneutics of suspicion over against the Divine Word.

So my question is: do you perceive a difference *in kind* (in terms of divisiveness and destructiveness to a church body's Lutheran identity), or do you see them all as occupying merely different spaces on a continuum of woe?