

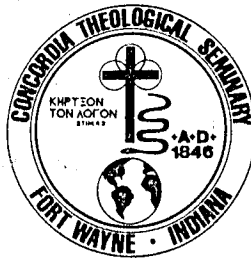
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The Symposia of Concordia Theological Seminary (January 1991)	1
Bach and Pietism: Similarities Today Robin A. Leaver	5
The Plague of Generic Preaching Donald L. Deffner	23
Theological Observer	43
Homiletical Studies	51
Book Reviews	67
Indices to Volume 54 (1990)	
Author Index	71
Title Index	74
Scripture Index to the Homiletical Studies	77



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Theological Observer

RICHARD JOHN NEUHAUS
AND THE PILGRIMAGE TO ROME

When Richard John Neuhaus reaches the age of seventy, he will have divided his ministerial career into three almost evenly divided parts: the LCMS, the AELC and ELCA, and the Church of Rome. Having been brought up in Canada in the home of a Missouri Synod pastor, his Lutheran years will predominate, but his final religious disposition as a Roman Catholic is determinative. Conversions between Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism are not unusual. Two alumni of this institution have recently switched to Rome. With no relaxation of the celibacy rule in sight, many former priests have switched to Protestant denominations, including ours. A clergyman moving from one church to another is often motivated by what he sees as an intolerable or hopeless situation in the church which he is leaving, rather than being drawn to a new church home by its claims to absolute truth. This seems to be the case with Neuhaus. It seems improbable that a man of Neuhaus's intellectual capacity would surrender freedom of thought to Rome. It was not so much a matter of joining Rome as it was a matter of leaving ELCA, whose forms, he felt, were stifling historic Christianity.

The item would scarcely be newsworthy were it not that, excepting Martin Marty of the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, Neuhaus has more name recognition than any other Lutheran theologian. Marty's fame has been built on the popularization of a general Protestantism. Neuhaus, in the style of Erasmus, was tilting with the leaders of the churches of which he was a member. Unlike the Dutch humanist, Neuhaus was serious. Erasmus stayed where he was. Neuhaus did not. In spite of the generous farewells from his former superiors, they may be breathing a little easier at his departure. The adjectives applied by Neuhaus to Missouri in the sixties and seventies have been forgotten, but his *Forum Letter* was to the end peppered with such words as "apostate" and "schismatic" in describing the newly formed Lutheran church. The words "nearly" and "almost" did little to sweeten his biting critique. His detractors in the LCMS, still fighting ancient battles, seemed oblivious to his critical posture towards the reigning authorities of ELCA. His *Forum Letter* turned "Higgins Road," the street address of the ELCA national headquarters near O'Hare Field, into a synonym for church bureaucracy. His message was clear: Higgins Road had *detheologized* the church body with a system of quotas strangely similar to the federal government's. Ecclesiastical affirmative action kept the newly mitred bishops in the bleachers. While ELCA was promised as the dawn of a Lutheran millennium, Neuhaus adopted the posture of a John the Baptist proclaiming that the church was in the Protestant desert.

Neuhaus has never concealed his attraction to Rome, which may have been as much for aesthetic reasons as for theological. A constant detectable theme in his writing was that the Lutheran Church was inadequately expressing Lutheran theology, which he for years understood as an expression of the *catholic* faith. He may not be the originator of the concept of Lutheranism as "a confessing movement within the catholic church," but he did popularize it. Missouri failed him by not allowing its members participation in the wider church. Its narrow fellowship practices, especially in regard to the Holy Communion, were too confining for one who saw the church and society in global terms. ELCA failed him in looking to him less like a church than a corporation enthusiastically complying with government regulations. If the early seventies could have been frozen in time, he might have found that Missouri allowed him the space he craved. Paradoxically the present Roman pontiff is closing some of the windows which Vatican II opened. It is questionable whether this twentieth-century council is the answer to the Lutheran concerns of the sixteenth century, as Neuhaus contends.

His joining the Church of Rome is more a transition than a real conversion. The ecclesiastical entities called churches changed, but he did not change, as he saw it. The Church of Rome expresses for him true Christianity, or at least it comes closer than modern Lutheranism. In Rome he finds an expression of the historical catholic truth which he could not find in organized Lutheranism. It appears that this problem haunted him since seminary days. At age fifty-four he gave into his long-term desires.

His move to Rome, as personally traumatic as it may have been for him, has wider repercussions. His mother, eighty-eight years old and the widow of a Lutheran pastor, is still vigorous enough to exercise her inherent maternal rights to voice opposition. He was aware that his turning to Rome could be interpreted as betraying or distressing the Lutherans whose communion he shared. For good or evil he rendered a judgment. He shook the dust from his feet. He surrendered his rights to walk again on Lutheran soil. It was like a grand excommunication. Lutherans have been placed under the ban. This has to be the understanding of the members of Immanuel Lutheran Church, on Lexington Avenue and Eighty-Eighth Street in New York City, a one time LCMS citadel now fallen into ELCA hands, where as a pastoral assistant, Neuhaus often occupied the pulpit, delivering sermons, it has been reported, with the firmest of Lutheran convictions. These people must face the question whether theirs is a true church or a church in any sense at all.

His decision to receive ordination from a Roman bishop can hardly be less than devastating to these parishioners and those who were his fellow pastors. This ordination suggests that his ministerial acts

and, by implication, theirs—especially the sacramental ones—may have been invalid or in some sense less than what they should have been. Should the reply be that this ordination is occurring only because it is necessary to membership in the organization which calls itself the Church of Rome, then Neuhaus has submitted to the very administrative tyranny against which he inveighed so eloquently for so long. His mentor, Arthur Carl Piepkorn, suggested a conditional baptism in cases where it was uncertain whether a valid one had been administered previously. Consistency would require that a conditional ordination be conferred on Neuhaus. He was one of several ELCA pastors who were attempting to awaken a dying Lutheran consciousness. *Forum Letter* and *Lutheran Forum* were their standards. His wide recognition in church and society gave that voice a bit more authority. Neither publication will be the same without him. For others the one who troubled Israel is gone, but no one could trouble Israel with so much wit.

Neuhaus has already produced enough articles and books to allow his theology to be analyzed and scrutinized in academic dissertations. Harping on his alleged liberalism is hardly appropriate to a man who was a guest of President Ronald Reagan in the White House and of William F. Buckley on *Firing Line* and has served as a contributing editor of *National Review*. Unlike those unequal to him in intellect, he made no use of an honorary doctorate awarded by a Roman Catholic institution in Connecticut and another by Jerry Falwell's Liberty University. His flirting with Rome did not prevent the Evangelicals (that is, the Neo-Fundamentalists) from seeing him as a fellow traveler. Religion belonged in *The Naked Public Square* and the Evangelicals were happy to help him put it there.

The Catholic Moment came closer to revealing what Neuhaus understood as ideal. The Roman Church, which has never entirely separated itself from its medieval roots, is not encumbered with Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms. ELCA has an agenda for society but it is hardly different from the socialistic manifestos of the mainline Protestant denominations. Evangelicals have rushed in to fill the political void, but the lack of a doctrine of the church eliminated this option for Neuhaus. Rome has tradition and continuity and thus commitment, dependability, and an institution which transcends centuries and continents. Where splintered Evangelicals can never speak a final word, the Roman magisterium can and often does. The ELCA attempt at historical respectability with its version of an episcopacy did not satisfy him, at least not in the sense which Rome finally did. Calling church leaders bishops did not necessarily make them so. The thought of ELCA bishops sharing in the apostolic succession through consecration by Anglican bishops did not tempt him to stay. It was to him either fraudulent or, if

genuine, not worth the wait. The historic episcopacy has not prevented the Anglican Communion from denials of the historic faith, as his periodicals have pointed out. The Eastern Orthodox communion (Greek, Russian, Antiochian) has historical claims equal to Rome; but, never having confronted the Reformation or the Enlightenment, its intellectual life is insufficiently developed for Neuhaus. Pannenberg, influenced by Hegel, is a favorite of his. The Eastern Church, like Missouri, would have been too confining for him. Rome, with its claim to historic orthodoxy and an umbrella wide enough for different theologies, was the natural and only option. Since Cardinal O'Connor, the Archbishop of New York, is allowing him to stay with his Institute for Religion and Public Life, he may have found just the mixture of historical tradition and freedom of thought for which he was looking. ELCA gave him the freedom but, without the historical tradition, it was less of a church than he demanded.

The parallel between Neuhaus and John Cardinal Newman, a leader of the Oxford Movement in the Church of England in the nineteenth century, cannot be avoided, even by Neuhaus himself. Each saw the *catholic* element in his own tradition, whether the Augsburg Confession or the Thirty-Nine Articles, as fundamental to his denominational faith. Not finding it to the desired extent, each left for Rome. Newman's Rome may have been his own romanticized vision of it and, for this reason, he was honored with a cardinal's hat but no real position of authority. Reformers, even those who would reform Protestantism with Catholicism, if placed at the helm, would likely sail the church into unfamiliar waters.

The most troubling issue in Neuhaus's theology is his unwillingness to reject universalism (the teaching that salvation without Christ is possible) with clarity. He comes to this position more from an extreme stress on divine grace than from a denial of human depravity. His role as a social critic on such moral issues as abortion indicates the seriousness of sin for him. But his role as a preacher to society may account for his universalism. To further public morality Neuhaus has had to work in a context involving Jewish leaders. Within this context it becomes difficult to accept another's moral companionship in this world and then refuse it to him in the next. Making this observation is not to sit in judgment on Neuhaus, but to provide an explanation of what is for many (but not for him) a discrepancy between his turn to Rome and his universalism. In any event his new superiors could not have been unaware of his position. Neuhaus's concept of the church's involvement in society is not simply a revival of a medieval pattern, with its alignment of pope and king, but is philosophically informed by Pannenberg, who does not see a sharp division between ordinary history and salvation history. God's activity in Israel, Christ, and the church is not qualitatively

different from what He has done in the rest of world history. Every thing, person, or event has revelatory significance—a position similar to Tillich's. The distinction between general and special revelation is lost, and the final consummation in glory must be universal. Neuhaus's newly launched periodical, *First Things First*, reflects this attitude by placing societal and theological issues, both Jewish and Christian, on the same plane. For lack of a better term, I once suggested to him "secular ecumenism" as describing this position. The Niebuhr brothers were taking just this position in the first part of this century.

Time will judge whether Neuhaus will have the freedom which ELCA membership allowed him to head the Institute of Religion and Public Life and to travel, lecture, and write at will. It seems unlikely that he will tweak the noses of Rome's bishops as he did those in the more tolerant ELCA. His transition to Rome makes any critique of his former brothers in the household of faith less effective. This development is unfortunate, because the church will never come to that time of perfection when its kings and bishops need no critics. Neuhaus's blend of theology and humanism suggests not a Luther, nor an Elijah, but rather an Erasmus. Not a gadfly, but rather an annoying mosquito, Neuhaus made life uncomfortable for those entrenched in positions of authority. They will not miss him. He stung like a wasp, but his sting was never mortal.

More than thirty years have elapsed since Neuhaus first admonished me for using the word "catholic" to describe the Roman Church. The standard lecture given us who have committed this transgression is that catholicism is more than Rome and is, above all, Lutheranism. I never took this admonition to heart, believing that Catholics are Catholics and Lutherans are Lutherans and that there is no need to confuse people. The Athanasian Creed presents enough problems on Trinity Sunday without the confusion which the reference to "the catholic faith" creates in most minds. Now I have become a convert. The headline in the *New York Times* should not have read "Citing Luther, a Noted Theologian Leaves Lutheran Church for Catholicism." It should have said that he left "for Rome." At the conclusion of the doctrinal articles in the Augsburg Confession appears this statement: "This is 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" (*The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert [Fortress Press], p. 47). Neuhaus is right in insisting that any church organization, including the Lutheran Church, be judged by how that organization gives expression to the more fundamental principle of that church which has been redeemed by Christ and sanctified by the Spirit and which, in all of its members, believes the truth. A church

which truly holds to the Augsburg Confession is the church which best fits this description. Traditional Rome, with its adherence to the sacraments and ancient creeds, was orthodox in a sense that the Lutherans could not allow to their Reformed opponents. By this standard Neuhaus has now found ELCA wanting and has joined post-Reformation Rome. Still he is neither so naive nor such a purist as to expect that any church, including Rome, can fit his standards all the time and in all its parishes. Indeed, if he applies, with the same rigor, the standards to Rome that he applied to the Lutheran Church, Neuhaus may discover that he has exchanged one set of problems for another—and perhaps a more difficult set.

David P. Scaer

AN INTERPRETATION

The following sentences are quoted from the official memorandum of the Reconciliation Committee appointed to deal with a case involving Dr. Waldo J. Werning and Dr. David P. Scaer: "Dr. Werning had charged that the last sentence of Dr. Scaer's essay 'Sanctification in Lutheran Theology' (*CTQ*, April-July, 1985, p. 194) was inadequate because 'it is an exclusive statement which excludes the Father and the Holy Spirit as part of theology.' At the suggestion of the committee Dr. Scaer offered to provide an emended interpretation, or change in wording, to read: 'Any attempt to make christology preliminary to theology, or even its most important part, but not its primary, central core in the light of which all articles of faith are interpreted, is a denial of Luther's doctrine and effectively destroys the Gospel as the message of a completed atonement.' (The underlined words replace '. . . its only part. . .') Dr. Werning approved of this change in wording, satisfied that no exclusion of the Trinity was intended or suggested in the original wording. In a spirit of collegiality Dr. Scaer agreed that notice of this change would appear in an upcoming issue of the *CTQ*."

The Editors

THE SYMPOSIUM ON EXEGETICAL THEOLOGY

This January 22 and 23 have been designated as the days on which the Sixth Annual Symposium on Exegetical Theology will take place under the auspices of the Department of Exegetical Theology of Concordia Theological Seminary. The topic to be explored from various angles is the "Order of Creation," a nexus of biblical concepts which relates to many questions currently controversial in society and in the church. The schedule of the conference is printed, with those of the accompanying confessional and liturgical symposia, at the beginning of this issue of the *CTQ*.

The Symposium on Exegetical Theology began rather spontaneously in January of 1985 as an appendix—or, chronologically

speaking, a prefix—to the well-established Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions (now in its fourteenth year). Dr. James Voelz (then an associate professor of New Testament in Concordia Theological Seminary) and Dr. David Scaer (then serving as academic dean) are to be remembered as especially vocal in urging the sponsorship of this symposium upon the department of exegetical theology. Interest in the conference both inside and, more importantly, outside the seminary quickly became apparent. As the attendance increased, so did the number of offerings, including papers by scholars of note from other institutions (whether orthodox or heterodox by Lutheran standards).

Last year (1990) the symposium had attained to sufficient maturity to cut its maternal apron strings. That is to say, a central theme was chosen which did not depend on the topic to be addressed by the Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions. Thus, the Fifth Annual Symposium on Exegetical Theology was dedicated to the "First-Century Milieu of the New Testament." The renowned British scholar C.S. Mann delivered two lectures—one beginning and one concluding the conference: "The Economics of First-Century Scroll and Codex Production" and "Some Thoughts on the Early Christians and Roman Civil Law." James Voelz (now associate professor of New Testament Exegesis in Concordia Seminary, St. Louis) addressed questions relating to the "Linguistic Milieu of the New Testament." The following papers were provided by members of the seminary faculty here: "Eschatology in the Qumran Community: Reflections on the War Scroll" by Dean Wenthe, "The Jewish-Gentile Partition and Its Destruction—Ephesians 2" by Walter Maier, and "Enoch and the Bible" by Douglas Judisch. In this last entry the undersigned argued that the words of Jude 14b-15 had been handed down orally from prediluvian times and constituted the seed from which Enochian pseudepigrapha sprang in intertestamental times.

An occasion which deserves special mention was the lecture of Dr. Raymond F. Surburg: "The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Text of the Old Testament." The essay demonstrated that the biblical texts of Qumran substantiate the Massoretic Text of the Old Testament, rather than requiring substitution or modification (as many have asserted). Dr. Surburg's colleagues in the department of exegetical theology had declared this occasion a special doctoral lecture and sat on the dais as he delivered it, all members of the department wearing the appropriate academic garb. This departmental action was a corollary of the action taken by the faculty as a whole on the preceding graduation day in honoring Dr. Surburg's thirty-five years of teaching in synodical institutions of higher education—including twenty-nine years in this seminary, first in Springfield and now in Fort Wayne. The faculty, with the concurrence of the Board of

Regents, took the highly unusual step of conferring an honorary doctorate on a man from its own ranks. To be sure, the man already possessed two earned doctorates (as well as two master's degrees). He had received the degree of Doctor of Theology from American Theological Seminary (Wilmington) in 1942 and the degree of Doctor of Philosophy from Fordham University (New York) in 1950. Nevertheless, the faculty of Concordia Theological Seminary conferred upon him in 1989 the degree of Doctor of Divinity *honoris causa*.

This unique action was justified by the unique contribution made by Raymond Surburg to the theological welfare of his seminary and his synod as a whole. During the years of the liberal-conservative controversy he rendered his church signal service in lectures and writings defending the inspiration and infallibility of the Bible and refuting the claims of higher criticism. Indeed, in the specific area of Old Testament studies, Dr. Surburg was the primary advocate of the biblical-confessional views traditional in the LCMS—the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, the eighth-century unity of Isaiah, the sixth-century provenance of Daniel, the centrality of messianic prophecy, the historicity of the creation and fall, the fifteenth-century occurrence of the exodus, and the like. By virtue of his theological consistency and literary productivity Dr. Surburg emerged as the leading Old Testament exegete of the Missouri Synod and, indeed, of confessional Lutheranism throughout the world. It is especially appropriate here to note the numerous articles and book reviews which he has contributed to the *Springfielder* and subsequently the *Concordia Theological Quarterly* during the past two and a half decades. For fifteen years he served on the editorial board of this journal—with specific responsibilities as book review editor.

The citation which was read when Concordia Theological Seminary conferred the doctorate of divinity on Raymond Surburg was reread before he delivered his doctoral lecture to the Fifth Annual Symposium on Exegetical Theology. After noting his service in parishes in New Jersey and New York and on the faculty of Concordia Teachers College in Seward (Nebraska), this citation continued as follows: "He came to Concordia Theological Seminary in 1960. . . His literary work in one year equals the output of most of us in a lifetime. Since his retirement in 1982, he has continued with a full teaching-load in some terms and a nearly full teaching-load in other terms. His eye has not dimmed; his strength has not abated, nor has his desire to serve this school." As to his literary work, one might note that, although quite incomplete, a select bibliography of Dr. Surburg's writings appeared in this journal a decade ago, together with a special tribute to him by its editors (*CTQ*, 44:1 [January 1980], pp. 41-45).

Douglas McC. L. Judisch