

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY



Volume 65:2

April 2001

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Theological Observer

On Language and Morology: A Plea for the Language of the Church

At one time the whole earth had one language and few words. In their arrogance, the people of that time sought to build a tower that would reach to the heavens. The Lord's response was, "Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech" (Genesis 11:7). Without a common language, the people were scattered.

As it was in ancient Babel, so it is in the modern Babel of the church in general, which, indeed, can be heard even within the Missouri Synod. At one time, we spoke the same language or at least wanted to speak the same language. The last quarter of the twentieth century brought tremendous changes to The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. From the trauma of the explosion at Concordia Seminary in Saint Louis to the latest travails of a synod in search of its identity, it is truly by grace alone that a confession of biblical truth can still be heard among us. Only God knows what the next twenty-five years will bring.

According to its constitution (Article III), the first objective of the Synod is that "the Synod, under Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, shall conserve and promote the unity of the true faith (Ephesians 4: 3-6; 1 Corinthians 1:10). . . ." How are we doing? Not well, according to the Reverend Gerald B. Kieschnick, the president of the Texas District of the Synod. In a letter to the editor of the *Reporter* (August 2000), he describes the reality in this way: "our Synod appears to be, and actually is, far from united in some areas of doctrine and practice. . . ." That the president of a synodical district and the chairman of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations should make this observation is significant.

How did we arrive at the place where an eminent official of the Synod can make this claim? No single answer will suffice. But until we can identify and treat the causes of doctrinal disunity, we can never find a solution. And if we cannot find a solution, the Synod must be prepared to acknowledge the implications of its own *Brief Statement* (Article 29):

The orthodox character of a church is established not by its mere name nor by its outward acceptance of, and subscription to, an orthodox creed, but by the doctrine that is actually taught in its pulpits, in its theological seminaries, and in its publications. On the other hand, a church does not forfeit its orthodox character through the casual intrusion of errors, provided these are combated and eventually removed by means of doctrinal discipline, Acts 20:30; 1 Timothy 1:3.

Our beloved Synod is at a crossroad and must choose one of two paths. Either we will be an orthodox synod or we will be a unionistic fellowship. There is no third and middle ground.

When I became a member of a congregation of the LCMS in 1978, I was overwhelmed by the profound desire of the Synod to move forward again in unity of doctrine and practice. How refreshing that was to a refugee from the old Lutheran Church in America! When I began my studies at Concordia Theological Seminary in 1980 and sat in the classrooms of the finest theological faculty in existence, I began to understand the reason that I was so thrilled to be a part of the Missouri Synod. These teachers thought and taught with the words of Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions – in other words, with the language of the church. How powerful those words were then! How powerful they are today as my colleagues at Concordia Theological Seminary continue to endeavor to speak the language of the church!

President Kieschnick's letter, with heartfelt praise of district conventions as the ultimate expression of the Synod's voice, does more than merely bemoan a loss of doctrinal unity. He also pleads for honest discussion: "In this writer's humble opinion, such questions among us must be resolved, prayerfully and carefully, on the basis of our Scriptural-Confessional study, sharing, dialog and mutual conversation, informed by our constant focus on the mission of God's Church!" In my even more humble opinion, President Kieschnick is entirely correct on this point.

The problem is that many in the church no longer speak the language of the church, preferring instead that each person do what is right in his own eyes (Judges 17:6) or, more precisely, say what is right in his own ears. This preference seems to me to be at the heart of the doctrinal issues that divide us and keep us from truly walking together. The vocabulary and syntax of theology are important, and it is vital that we all speak the same theological language. After all, the work of a pastor and theologian is to speak and write so that eternal truth is communicated to human beings. To fulfill this calling we must use human words. We do not speak with the language of angels, but with the language of people, whether that language is English, Spanish, Russian, Sign, or any of the myriad of other tongues in this world. The Tower of Babel broke down the commonality of language, but not the commonality of a need to hear and understand the truth of the Creator whom the people of Babel thought that they could reach with their tower.

What theological languages, then, do we speak in the Synod today? While others could certainly be identified, several will suffice to characterize the modern Babel in our midst:

1. The Language of Foreign Liturgy

Every community of faith shapes and is shaped by any number of factors involving language. Among these is the liturgy of the community that arises from the language and thought that is its own. To superimpose the liturgy of one community on another that does not share its theological life is to impose a foreign culture on that community. Something will change, and more often than not that something is the doctrine of the community. To be more specific, a Lutheran congregation that adopts a Baptist liturgical form will eventually find itself more Baptist in theology as well and less Lutheran in both.

Two examples may be cited. First, during a Divine Service, I heard a pastor offer the following absolution: "Upon this your confession, I announce the grace of God to all of you who truly repent." It was, to be sure, a slight modification of the words, but it was a major redaction of the doctrine of justification! No longer does the objective justification of the world in Christ Jesus serve as the basis of absolution. Now repentance is its basis.

Second, several years ago, the Fort Wayne Lutheran Schools conducted a "worship celebration" entitled "Christ-Liked." In addition to some of the more shallow of contemporary choruses, the children were asked to participate in antiphonal readings. John 3:16 ("God so loved the world") was spoken by all, and response by all the students in the ninth through twelfth grades was "Fine." God loves the planet. But does He love us? Is not "humanity" the meaning of the word "world" in the text of John 3:16? How can truth be communicated if the clear language of Holy Scripture is obfuscated? Later in the "celebration" a Baptist minister gave his "testimony." I do not recall his exact words, but they did not help to clarify the antiphonal reading.

In the same service some students read these words: "God, through Paul, tells us in Colossians 3 to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience." Verse 13 also mentions that we are to forgive. To this sentence other students responded: "I think I can do that." In fact, however, we humans cannot "do that." We are incapable of fulfilling the law of God. It is for this reason that God sent His Son to fulfill the law for us. Whatever happened to the simple language of law and gospel?

2. The Language of Morology

As it is with liturgical language, so it is with the language of theological interchange. In some cases, it is quite obvious and borders on morology. A certain publishing house, with a staff of editors and writers who certainly possess at least one dictionary among them, advertises itself with these words

"We resource churches." This claim is certainly memorable and catchy in the fashion of Madison Avenue, but what does it mean? The word "resource" is a noun, not a verb. The slogan of this advertising campaign probably does not affect the theological life of the Synod. But it does illustrate the casual manner in which the English language is employed.

One generally intelligent and thoughtful Lutheran pastor fell into the habit of speaking of congregational size in terms of "they worship 100." I asked him how such worship was possible since the congregation that I attend worships only One Essence in three persons, that is to say the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. A hundred seems a great many to me, since "worship" is a transitive verb with a deity as its object. To say that a congregation worships "100" is to speak meaninglessly at best. While cute and trendy, such language does not indicate careful theological reflection, nor does it help us in engaging in serious dialogue. A trusted colleague tells me that such terminology is common among the Reformed. If such is the case, it illustrates the influence, not only of morological, but also of Reformed thought, on Missourians.

3. The Language of American Evangelicalism

More dangerous yet is the insidious reshaping of Lutheran thought through the unreflective adoption of the theological language of American evangelicalism. This phenomenon is easily identified. A Lutheran pastor once spoke approvingly of the "ministry" of a Pentecostal evangelist. He admired him because "he has saved thousands of people." I responded by stating that I knew someone who had saved billions, not just thousands. "Who?" he asked almost breathlessly. "Jesus Christ," I replied. I must say, in fairness to this pastor, that he certainly did not mean what he said. Yet his language betrayed his intentions. Few pastors in the Missouri Synod would speak as foolishly. Unfortunately, however, it is increasingly common to make words mean whatever the individual wants them to mean.

4. The Language of Corporate America

American evangelicalism is not the only force that undermines Lutheran theological thought through its linguistic influence. Too often the language of the secular American culture is allowed to dominate the language of the church. Some congregations, for example, now have a "Board of Directors" and a pastor who is designated as its "Chief Executive Officer" (CEO). These are good terms to describe an efficient business structure. They do not, however, reflect anything known from Holy Scripture or the Lutheran Confessions or the historic practice of the church. The use of such language recasts the church from her image as the Bride of Christ, a biblical "she" in

union with the Heavenly Bridegroom, to a secular "it" in union with corporate America.

5. The Language of Extremism

Not all destruction, however, of the language of the church comes from the outside. Often it arises from controversy among her children. In recent years, much debate has taken place over the doctrine of the ministry. This debate, tragically, has often been heated and has led to overstatements on both sides of the issue. Some, in the heat of debate and with a desire to defend the divine origin of the office, have said that "the pastor is Jesus." Others, in the heat of debate and with a desire to defend the priesthood of all believers, have spoken in terms of the pastor as merely performing the functions that rightly could be performed by any baptized Christian.

Such extreme language leads either, on the one hand, to a near deification of the pastor or, on the other hand, reduces the office to something only necessary to good order and thus a function of the law. The genius of the Missouri Synod in maintaining a balanced and biblical view of the pastoral office is lost in the ensuing debate. Nowhere is this balance clearer than in two nearly contemporary documents. The *Brief Statement* of 1932 asserts that the pastor executes his office by virtue of the call that he has received through his congregation: "By the public ministry we mean the office by which the Word of God is preached and the Sacraments are administered by order and in the name of a Christian congregation" (Article 31). The *Lutheran Hymnal*, published in 1941, balances this statement with the assertion that the pastor executes his office by the virtue of the mandate that he has received from Christ:

Upon this your confession, I, by virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

Does the pastor serve as the representative of Christ or of the congregation? The answer of the Missouri Synod in the 1930s was not one or the other, but both. On the other hand, the language used in debates today is often such that an unbalanced view of the office is implied.

6. The Language of Unreflected Repristination

Some theological language is perhaps less recent and yet just as imprecise. It is not uncommon, for example, to hear that one is saved "by faith." But is that phrase what we mean to say? Is faith the cause of salvation, or is it the

receiving instrument through which one apprehends the salvation offered in the gospel? Are we saved *by* faith or *by* grace *through* faith? There is a difference and that difference is critical to any serious discussion of soteriology. Propositions have meaning and their meaning shapes our understanding.

In a similar way we customarily speak of the pastor's call coming *from* a congregation. This phraseology is certainly true in a secondary sense. Yet ultimately, the call comes from God. For this reason we refer to it as a divine call. The congregation is a necessary part of the process as the Holy Spirit works to place a particular man into the public ministry in a particular place. To speak, therefore, of a call *through* a congregation would more accurately reflect the divinity of the call and the divinely mandated role of the congregation in mediating that divine call.

One may also ask how helpful some traditional theological terminology really is. If, for example, both law and gospel have a "narrow use" and an overlapping "broad use," how do we know what a speaker or writer really intends in a given context? Precision in language is difficult to attain. I have no doubt that I too can be criticized quite fairly for my own imprecise use of the English language. Yet, before we can begin the process for which President Kieschnick calls, we must rediscover a common theological language. We must, in other words, reclaim the language of the church and commit to speaking this language to each other in the process of scriptural and confessional study, sharing thoughts with others, in dialogue with others, and in mutual conversation.

Daniel L. Gard

Ex Oriente Lux—Light From the East

Of enormous importance for world Lutheranism are the recent actions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Lithuania and of the Belorussian Evangelical Lutheran Church. The latter's "Declaration" is reprinted following.

The Lithuanian Church held its last synod—the event occurs once every five years—at the end of July 2000 in Tauroge. On December 2, the Belorussian Church held its constituting synod in Vitepsk. Four times since its foundation in the sixteenth century the Lutheran Church of Belorus experienced suppression by its enemies—lastly by the recent, unlamented Soviet regime. Now once more this long-suffering church has been raised from the dead. The event was fittingly celebrated the next day, which was the First Sunday of Advent, the beginning of the new Year of Grace. Present were Bishops Kalvanas and Roth, of the Lithuanian and the Independent German

Lutheran Churches, respectively. Also represented were the Polish, Ukrainian, and Missouri Synod Lutheran Churches.

What these two synodical gatherings had in common was an understanding of church fellowship that took the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions seriously. Both churches made it clear that while they could have all sorts of relations with all sorts of other churches, actual church fellowship was possible only with churches that stood firmly on the same biblical-confessional ground of the one evangelical, apostolic truth and doctrine. Both churches confessed the Bible as the inspired, inerrant word of God, and the Book of Concord as the true presentation of that word. This is in marked contrast to the soggy opportunism of the "Lutheran" World Federation, where historical criticism has for decades been corroding biblical authority and all Christian dogma.

The Lithuanian and Belorussian synods did not hesitate to make their professions of church fellowship quite concrete in terms of today's issues. Both churches specified four aberrations with which no church fellowship was possible. The four specifics named were compromise in the article of justification, surrender of the sacramental presence of the Lord's true body and blood, ordination of women, and approval of homosexuality. The first point clearly aims at the feckless "Augsburg Concession" to the Vatican on justification on the part of the "Lutheran" World Federation. The second point takes seriously the Sacrament of the Altar as confessed in the Book of Concord, but surrendered in church-political compromises with Reformed churches, like the Leuenberg Concord and the Formula of Agreement. This again involves many member churches of the "L"WF, including the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The last two points, ordination of women and approval of homosexuality, though at first seemingly unrelated, really form two sides of the same high-profile coin of modern feminist ideology. As also the ELCA is beginning to find out, one cannot consistently deploy Galatians 3:28, "there is neither male nor female," in favor of women's ordination, without surrendering to the "interchangeability of the sexes" all along the line, including same-sex "marriages"!

Both in Lithuania and in Belarus, liberal German and "L"WF forces were represented and made themselves felt. It struck this observer as particularly arrogant when an official German Church representative criticized the Lithuanian Church constitution and expressed the hope that his previous suggestion that synods be held annually and not every five years would now be enacted! And of course there were dire warnings against entanglements with Missouri's "fundamentalism." There was hand-wringing even over the homosexuality issue, with the plea that this should not be declared to be "contrary to the word of God," since others were also seriously "wrestling"

with this issue, attempting to be true to the word of God, but not adopting simple solutions! In Belorus Archbishop Kretschmar himself pleaded for a unionistic foundation for the new church, so as to embrace also Reformed congregations in principle!

In the contrary case he threatened division, that is, support of dissidents who would stand on a unionistic basis. The "L"WF camp showed what it really stood for: "tolerance" and "inclusion" for all and sundry – except for churches faithful to the Bible and the Book of Concord! The attitude towards such "fundamentalists" was clear: intolerance and division!

In nineteenth-century North America another set of "Four Points" played a decisive role among Lutherans. They were chiliasm, mixed communion ("open communion" today), pulpit exchanges with sectarians, and secret, anti-Christian societies. Eventually confessional and anti-confessional forces united and divided over those issues. Our East European brothers have now raised the standard of the Bible and the Book of Concord with unmistakable clarity and courage in respect of four points that go to the heart of today's confessional crisis in world Lutheranism and beyond. Our Synod and its sister churches worldwide must not miss this unique KAIROS of truthful confession and CONCORDIA!

K. Marquart

**Declaration of the
Constituting Synod of the
Belorussian Evangelical Lutheran Church**

2 December 2000

City of Vitebsk

We, the representatives of the Evangelical Lutheran congregations of Belorus, delegates of the Constituting Synod of the Belorussian Evangelical Lutheran Church, confess [our] belonging to the one, holy, ecumenical and apostolic church, which our Lord Jesus Christ founded, and confirmed through His disciples-apostles for all nations until the coming of the Lord's Kingdom, and which is called to preserve and propagate His message – the gospel – in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

We confess that the cornerstone of the church is Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, Who has redeemed us from the power of sin, death, and the devil by His holy, precious blood.

We confess, that the only source and firm, inerrant norm of churchly teaching and action are the canonical books of the Holy Scripture (the Bible)

of the Old and New Testaments, inasmuch as they are the inspired and infallible word of God as a whole and in each part of it. As the true expression of the biblical doctrine of faith we accept the symbols of faith of the Lutheran Church, set out in the Book of Concord and comprising the ancient catholic (worldwide) symbols of faith (the Apostolic, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan, the Athanasian), the unaltered Augsburg Confession and its Apology, the Smalcald Articles, the Treatise of the Power and Primacy of the Pope, the Large and Small Catechisms of Dr. Luther, and the Formula of Concord.

We desire to have church fellowship with churches that are one with us in our confession of faith, are grounded on Holy Scripture as the infallible and inerrant word of God; regard as the true expression of the biblical doctrine of faith the Book of Concord; do not permit compromises in doctrine on the matter of justification; believe that during the sacrament of Holy Communion there are really present, distributed, and received in the bread and wine the true body and blood of Christ; do not ordain women and do not support the ordination of women; regard the practice of homosexuality as sinful and impermissible in the church.

On the basis of this confession we, the delegates of the Constituting Synod of the Belorussian Evangelical Lutheran Church, having voluntarily assembled here in the unity of spirit and faith, expressing the will of our congregations, proclaim the unification of the Lutheran congregations of Belorus into the Belorussian Evangelical Lutheran Church, being the successor of the Lutheran Church which existed on the territory of the Lithuanian Grand Duchy from the sixteenth century, and of the other Lutheran churches which existed in the territory of Belorus in subsequent times.

[This declaration, accepted unanimously, was translated from the original Belorussian by Kurt E. Marquart.]