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Table of Contents

"Preach the Word" in the Old Testament Walter A. Maier III	3
Eschatological Events in New Testament Perspective Walter A. Maier	17
The Concept of διαθήκη in the Letter to the Hebrews Scott R. Murray	41
Eucharistic Overtones Created by Sacrificial Concepts in the Epistle to the Hebrews Daniel J. Brege	61
Theological Observer	83
<i>Passing Through Rockville, Connecticut</i>	
Book Reviews	87
<i>Historical Atlas of Christianity.</i> By Franklin H. Littell. Lawrence R. Rast Jr.	
<i>Exodus 1-18.</i> By William H. C. Propp.	Chad L. Bird

Jerusalem and Parousia: Jesus' Eschatological Discourse in Matthew's Gospel. By Jeffery A. Gibbs.

..... Paul Beisel

Every Day I Will Bless Thee: Meditations for the Daily Office.

By Burnell F. Eckardt Jr. Lawrence R. Rast Jr.

Education in Ancient Israel: Across the Deadening Silence. By

Jonathan Wells. Chad L. Bird

Books Received 93

Theological Observer

Passing through Rockville, Connecticut

With a son in New Hampshire and a mother and sister in New York City, we pass by Rockville, Connecticut on Interstate 84 several times a year. This is not astounding, but there is some emotional involvement, since I served as pastor of Trinity there before coming to the seminary in 1966. What makes passing through Rockville so bittersweet is that ten years after I left, Trinity left Missouri for the AELC and then the ELCA. A few members found their way into nearby Missouri congregations, but the bulk remained with the revised ELCA Trinity. Since then we have stopped to visit the faithful remnant, but not the church itself. Trinity began as a society for Protestant German immigrants and was transformed into a Lutheran congregation in 1864 by a Otto Hanser, a Missouri Synod pastor who went on to head the gymnasium in Fort Wayne. It was the first Lutheran congregation in the state. Masons were taken into the membership, but later it was agreed that no more would be received. This resulted in a split in the congregation in 1880s. Upon returning from a district convention, the pastor discovered that Masonic faction had changed the locks on the doors to keep him out. At a meeting he had to defend himself with a chair. Incidentally, he was the secretary of the Eastern District and hardly a radical. Some times congregations are in the wrong!

Many New England town have two Lutherans congregations which share the same roots but which later divided over the lodge issue. So in Rockville, First Lutheran Church accepted lodge members and Trinity did not. After the split, First Lutheran retained the building in the town center and was called "the lower Lutheran church" and Trinity retained the pastor and built another building up on the side of the valley and was still known as "the upper Lutheran church." It was not a matter of social status, liturgy or doctrine, but of geography. By the time I arrived, "the lower Lutheran church" had moved to higher ground, but the name stuck among the old timers. Some members in the congregations were related to each other, but Trinity's pastors made the issues clear which separated them. My predecessor was the Reverend Erich Otto Pieper, son of *the* Missouri Synod dogmatician and president. Another predecessor was the father of Berthold von Schenck, another well known name in the Synod. Soon after arriving in Rockville, I assembled the extant data which appeared in an article, "The Centennial Celebration of

Lutheranism in Connecticut," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 38 (July 1965), 95-102.

Into the mid-1960s, many New England towns maintained their nineteenth-century character which was shaped by the woolen mills driven by the area's fast moving streams. Here America first was industrialized and when the excess farm population could no longer provide the necessary labor force, entrepreneurs looked to Europe. Italians and the Irish each had their own Catholic church. Germans found their way into one Catholic church and or one of two Lutheran ones. Congregational churches had their roots in colonial days and were state supported into the nineteenth century. They had an upper class status—or so it seemed to Lutherans. Even poorly informed Lutherans knew that they had little in common with the Congregationalists, whose congregations may have been members at one time or another of Baptist and Unitarian associations. This is the complexity of New England Christianity.

During my short tenure in Rockville, it was obvious the congregation had to move from the center city. Church and parsonage were on a steep hill and there was no room for parking, especially during the long, snowy winter months. A nineteenth-century congregation walked between their homes, the mills and the church, but the mills were no more and the members had taken flight to the suburbs. Enterprising members found a large piece of property on the Hartford Turnpike, right off entrances to Interstate 84. "Church growth" had not been invented then, but we figured out the parking lot opportunities by ourselves. My successor saw to the building of the church on the new property and I returned for the dedicatory sermon. There was another visit for a wedding, but after the congregation left the Missouri Synod, there were no more visits. My name appears in the congregation's annals as the pastor who had the foresight to relocate the church and I receive appropriate invitations for anniversaries. It hurt too much to accept. Of course, there were confessional reasons. One woman went on to seminary and was ordained. This was the congregation of a *Pieper!* A church which was once the backbone of the Missouri Synod in the Connecticut River Valley had been taken into the ELCA, a fate of about thirty-five other congregations in New England.

In returning from New York for New Hampshire on December 27 last year, we stopped at a gas station near Trinity, now in Vernon and

curiosity got the best of me. I stopped in at the church and was greeted warmly and courteously by the ELCA pastor. Thirty-six years had passed, but he knew my name. The two chancel chairs and the baptismal font from the old church had found a place in the new building. In that font I had baptized many children including our youngest son. Since the church had been built around 1970, a huge social hall was tacked on to front in which was a conference room. At one end was placed the stained glass window which stood over the entrance of the old church on which was written "Trinity Lutheran Church, U.A.C.," letters which stands for "Unaltered Augsburg Confession," but this is a part of history and not what that congregation believes. ELCA congregations are in fellowship with the Reformed, which is a direct contradiction to this document's article ten on the Lord's Supper. Hermann Sasse notes that churches do not remain the same. The church before and after Constantine was not the same. This is also true of Trinity, Rockville. Not only was it now Trinity, Vernon, but in spite of the stained class window with "U.A.C.," it was no longer the church of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. The ELCA now claims both of Rockville's two Lutheran churches. Missouri was eased out. I remember no Reformed or Presbyterian churches in the area, but four Congregational churches flourish. Fifty years ago any contact between Trinity and a Congregational church would have been an impossibility, now they are in communion with one another. After our short visit, we headed to the old wooden church at 87 Prospect Street. In place of the stained glass over the entrance where "Trinity Lutheran Church, U.A.C." had once stood was another stained glass, "Grace Bible Church." Typically such Bible churches are legalistic and know little of grace. The red paint on high bell tower had been worn away so that only the white undercoat remained. Old wooden structures are hard to maintain. So are confessional ones.

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