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Homiletics
The Sense of Church History in Representative Missouri Synod Theology

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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-

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 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 goodbye." 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

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4 Mead, p. 111.


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 Pieristicum 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

7 Ibid., pp. 160—61.
8 Ibid., p. 161.
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.
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. Ketzermann, "The Reverend Doctor August Lawrence Graebner: 1849—1904," Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly, XX (July 1947), 79—93.
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 "conserv­ ing" 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." 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." 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." 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. The Roman doctrine of an absolute ecclesiastical organization was criticized as lacking historical legitimation. The deprecation 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."

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" (VII, 55—63); "Paragraphs on the School Question" (VII, 121—28).


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

Ibid., 8 (Tappert, p. 465).

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

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. 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. 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." 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." Walther was ably seconded in his endeavors by Charles Portersfield 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. 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."

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

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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.


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).

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), 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

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.

25 Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "Suggested Principles for a Hermeneutics of the Lutheran Symbols," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XXIX (January 1958), 8. 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. 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. The motto of Walther's paper, Der Lutheran, succinctly expressed this dual commitment:

Gottes Wort und Luthers Lehr
Vergehet 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. 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. 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-


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

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)
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 "anti-historical 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 dogmaticians? Have historical factors, such as 17th-century polemical requirements and the admission of a scholastic methodology into evangelical dogmatics, perchance conditioned the dogmaticians’ 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 repristinate the Scriptural position (since it is assumed that there is one uniform Biblical ecclesiology); the dogmaticians repristinate 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 dogmaticians, 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 dogmaticians 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.

Walther represents the "locus" method of doctrinal-historical exposition. But what has been a representative syndical 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.36

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-reaching 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, 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 historic a* (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” (inculation 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. 

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. 

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

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."

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.

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, intertwined with various 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." 

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 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 spake 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

44 Ibid., p. 55.
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 repristination, so be it. "The theology of repristination 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

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)
This study has thus far endeavored to show that traditional Missouri Synod theology, in contrast to the "primitivism" widely embraced by American denomi-
nationalism in the colonial period and early 19th century, has sought to maintain a genuine concern for church history, thereby both emulating and preserving its con-
fessional heritage. In this very process, however, it has also displayed its own brand of "historylessness" and "antihis-
torical bias," in short, its own failure of the historical sense. This latter contention obviously requires further amplification. On the basis of the representative formu-
lations 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 Ortho-
dox, which is initially projected on both the Scriptures and the Reformation teach-
ing and then employed as the overarching critical norm or axiological category. Hence the various periods of church his-
tory are not approached on their own terms, within the bounds of their own his-
torical 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 oth-
ers, 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 doc-
tr in 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 caden-
tis 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 inter-
pretation of the early church's total life and thought.

2. The use of the doctrine of justifica-
tion as sole critical norm, together with the stereotyped periodization which de-

ergy that which derives from it, further results in an immense impoverishment of church history. The Middle Ages, for example, become uni-
formly 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 Loev-
gren, A Church History for the Use of Schools and Colleges (1906), in Theological Quarterly, XI (1907), 55—63. The reviewer initially re-
marks that "the development of the Church might be shown in the three aspects of Forma-
tion, 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 implere 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.\textsuperscript{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 it 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

\textsuperscript{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 "sub-
stance." But can the "content" (or doc-
trine) 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 for-
mulations simultaneously new interpreta-
tions? The Biblical approach to the person
of Christ and to the Divine Triad is
expressed in personalistic, dynamic, histo-
rical terms, the later formulations in essen-
tialistic, static, metahistorical terms.
Regardless of one's conclusions regarding
the adequacy of the later formulations, the
sense of history demands a thorough in-
quiry into the acute problems occasioned
by the transition from Semitic to Hellenis-
tic categories, from a theology of "act"
without the historical sense. 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
divine nature. Even if this shifting of empha-
ses was necessary against certain heretical views, the
discussion of "natures" is none the less ultimately a Greek,
not a Jewish or biblical problem.

5. Similarly, there is a repeated insen-
sitivity 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 for-
mulations. In place of the multiform New
Testament language about Christ there is
one definitive Christology expressed uni-
formly in Hellenistic philosophical lan-
guage. The New Testament Christologi-
cal titles are themselves temporarily con-
tioned (Zeitgebunden) by their associa-
tion with earlier formulas and by their
entrance into a new historical matrix. But
by unfailingly assessing and interpreting
them through a developed Orthodoxy their
individual historical peculiarities and
unique strands of meaning are largely
overlooked. History is given a consis-
tency which it does not possess. Indeed,
history, is again overcome by doctrine at
the expense of the historical sense.

58 Compare the following remarks by Oscar
Cullmann, The Christology of the New Testa-
ment (Philadelphia, 1959), pp. 3-4: "As a
result of the necessity of combating the heretics
. . . the Church fathers subordinated the inter-
pretation of the person and work of Christ to
the question of the 'natures.' In any case, their
60 See the article by Graebner on "Chris-
tology" 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 fea-
ture 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 historicality, 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 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 historicality in relation to the hearer's present historicality) 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 "uncatholic" 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." 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 nonconfessional 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. 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 "Americanized," 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 religiousus above all, directing an unqualified optimism toward God alone.

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.

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.

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

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."

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)


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-}

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 . . . ."