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Please direct queries to
journaloflutheranmission@lcms.org.

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RESPONSE TO WALTER SUNDBERG

by Lawrence R. Rast, Jr.

How can we understand the tension-filled relationship of Evangelicalism and the Lutheran tradition in America?

I'D LIKE TO THANK the organizers of this conference for the opportunity to respond to my colleague Dr. Sundberg's excellent and thought-provoking paper.

First of all, let me commend Sundberg for putting his finger on a key tension in the Lutheran confession and, particularly, its practice. He captured that tension in both the statements and stories we just heard.

The question, it seems to me, surrounds the extent of accommodation. Years ago John Tietjen wrote: "Certainly we cannot simply transfer Reformation theology from the 16th to the 20th century without accommodating it or applying it to 20th-century conditions." There is a wondrous little slight of hand in this short quotation, whether intended or not: Tietjen conflates accommodation and application. That has been the nexus of the arguments regarding our life together in God's mission: Can one apply without accommodating? To what degree can we, must we, contextualize? No doubt you can add your own questions to these brief examples. These are not new questions; they have been present throughout the history of Lutheranism.

"The only thing constant in life is change," François de La Rochefoucauld is said to have quipped. Those of us involved in missions — whether national or international — certainly know the truth of those words! Whether it is at a seminary, a denominational headquarters, the mission field or anywhere else, all of us continuously experience the shifting realities of this changing world.

The challenge to the Church is to understand and adapt to that change, yet in such a way as to maintain without any slipperiness the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3). Because we humans are parochial beings, God's Word challenges us to lift our eyes up beyond our immediate circumstances to the ultimate reality that is our life in Christ.

Still, if I've heard it once I've heard it a thousand times. Someone says, "We've never experienced change like this before; the challenges we face today are greater than any time in world history." Yes, I'll grant that there's a certain truth in this statement; history never absolutely repeats itself. And, yes, we do find ourselves today in rapidly changing circumstances. Yet such a perspective reveals a restricted understanding of the richness of the experience of those who have gone before us. Worse yet, it cuts us off from learning from them the imaginative ways in which they faced the unique character of their times.

Nevertheless, I believe it is a perfectly natural response. For we human beings are by our very nature tied to

time. Personally speaking, world history begins with the day of our birth and ends with the day of our death. As a result, to engage the past is something that we must *work* at; it does not come naturally.

This is where Dr. Sundberg's paper is so helpful in identifying the tension-filled relationship of Evangelicalism and the Lutheran tradition in America. Indeed, the Evangelical tradition is an "awkward companion" to Lutheranism, present

with us from the first (after all, we were the first Evangelicals!). A few points are in order.

First, his careful historical and theological distinction between the awakening and revival is extremely important, particularly in what this means for conversion. The great distance between Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) and the robust Calvinism of the First Great Awakening and the Arminianism of Charles G. Finney (1792-1875) and the Second Great Awakening is sometimes lost on American Lutherans who simply lump the two together into an unrecognizable mush that we label "Reformed." Here Sundberg's point that "Charles Grandison Finney's 'new measures' turned the phenomenon of awakening into a method calculated to produce results" is spot on.

Nearly all of the Lutheran confessionalists of the 19th century — whether in Europe or in the United States (or both) — were sifted through the sieve of this stream of Pietism.

This is particularly important and must be recalled in any conversation regarding evangelism and missions, particularly given the fact that the missional theology and practice that the United States has exported (see especially Africa) is of the type that compromises the biblical and confessional witness to the working of the Spirit through Word and Sacrament.¹ Nothing could be more at odds with the affirmation of Luther's explanation of the Third Article of the creed than the following quote from Finney.

The church has always felt it necessary to have something of the kind to answer this very purpose. In the days of the apostles baptism answered this purpose. The gospel was preached to the people, and then all those who were willing to be on the side of Christ were called on to be baptized.²

Finney was not content with merely disparaging what Baptism effected; here he undercuts the divine institution of God's saving action itself. In light of this, it is exceedingly curious to see Finney and none other than C. F. W. Walther connected as though their theology and practice were complementary in a Missouri Synod publication.³ Simply noting that both men had a "passion for souls," the article makes no distinction between the two men in respect to how their radically different theological commitments actually framed their mission and evangelistic practice.

Second, his nuanced reading of Pietism is important in a setting where the multifaceted character of Pietism is often presented in an overly simplistic way, as though all expressions of Pietism are the same. They are not, and Sundberg does well to alert us to this reality.⁴ At the same time, his tradition holds certain expressions of Pietism more highly than is typical for Missourians. Though Sundberg argues that Heinrich Muhlenberg (1711-1787) is "is the one Lutheran pastor whom all Lutherans in America revere," I have to admit that when we commemorated Muhlenberg's death in our chapel at Fort Wayne

this past October 7, the preacher (who was not me) noted that while "we Missourians *like* Muhlenberg, we don't *love* Muhlenberg." Still, I think the point holds.

That said, Sundberg is correct to note Muhlenberg's confessional form of Pietism, which proceeded from a Law/Gospel dialectic and had its understanding of conversion rooted in the Word and Sacraments.⁵ Indeed, nearly all of the Lutheran confessionalists of the 19th century — whether in Europe or in the United States (or both) — were sifted through the sieve of this stream of Pietism. Löhe, Walther, Krauth, Sihler and others all were affected by early 19th-century Pietism. In a familiar section of *Law and Gospel*, Walther writes:

The second requisite for effective preaching is that the preacher not only himself would believe the things he preaches to others but also that his heart would be full of the truths that he proclaims, so that he would enter his pulpit with the passionate desire to pour out his heart to his hearers. In the best sense of the word, he must be "high-spirited" regarding his topic. Then his hearers will have the impression that the words dropping from his lips are flames from a soul on fire. However, that does not mean that the Word of God must receive its power and life from the living faith of the preacher.

But when a preacher proclaims what he has often experienced in his own heart, he will easily find the right words to speak convincingly to his hearers. When his words come from the heart, they, in turn, penetrate the heart of his hearers, according to the old saying: "It is the **heart** that makes eloquent." This is not the fake eloquence gained in speech lard, but the healthy *spiritual skill* of reaching the heart of hearers.

For when the hearers feel that a preacher is deadly serious, they feel drawn by an irresistible force to pay the closest attention to what the preacher is teaching in his sermon. That is the reason sometimes many simple, less-gifted, and less-learned preachers accomplish more than the most highly gifted and deeply learned men.⁶

¹ Lawrence R. Rast, Jr. "Charles Finney on Theology and Worship." *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 68 (January 1998): 63-67.

² Charles G. Finney. *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Leavitt, Lord, and Co., 1835), 248.

³ "A Passion for Souls," *Evangelism News: The Newsletter of the Department of Evangelism Ministry, Board for Congregational Services* (February 1998), 3.

⁴ For examples of the different varieties of Pietism, see Heinrich Schmid and James Langbartels, trans. *The History of Pietism* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2007) and Hans Schneider and Gerald T. MacDonald, trans. *German Radical Pietism* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2007).

⁵ See A. G. Roeber and John W. Kleiner, eds. "Henry Melchior Muhlenberg: Orthodox Pietist," *Henry Melchior Muhlenberg: The Roots of 250 Years of Organized Lutheranism in North America* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998), 1-15.

⁶ C. F. W. Walther. "Thirteenth Evening Lecture" in *Law & Gospel: How to Read and Apply the Bible*, Christian Tiewes, trans. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 125-26. Emphases in original.

At the same time, Walther recognizes that this “does not mean that the Word of God must receive its power and life from the living faith of the preacher; for the Lord says distinctly: ‘The words that I speak, they are spirit, and they are life.’ John 6, 63.”

So that tension remains.

That tension has manifested itself repeatedly in the life of the LCMS and its mission both nationally and internationally. Sundberg’s critique that to “get Lutherans to preach conversion is a tall order” likely stems from this tension, at least in part. When Walter A. Maier started preaching on the Lutheran (Half) Hour, some of his ministerial colleagues in the LCMS expressed concern over what they believed was the conditional language he used in regard to forgiveness and of his emphasis on the need for hearers to “accept” Christ.⁷ Later David Luecke’s *Evangelical Style and Lutheran Substance: Facing America’s Mission Challenge* argued for Lutheranism to embrace its Pietist heritage uncritically as a way of interfacing with American Evangelicalism and to at least use a “confrontationist oriented approach” to moving people toward conversion.⁸ Two overly brief examples, but you get the point.

Finally, there is the question of accommodation. Here again, Sundberg’s careful distinction between Muhlenberg’s and Schmucker’s versions of Pietism is of note. Where Muhlenberg sought to continue Spener’s confessionalism, Schmucker argued for an accommodation, a fundamental readjustment, of the Lutheran confession to American sensibilities. Elsewhere I have argued that a form of this debate manifested itself in the LCMS controversies of the 60s and 70s.⁹ I cited John Tietjen above. That little quote appeared in the following context.

Because the Lutheran Symbols call justification by grace the chief article of Christian doctrine,

God is not time-bound as we are. All things are immediately present to Him. Our past, present and future is bound up in Him and His unchanging Word to us.

and because *many* Lutherans have come to label it “the article by which the church stands or falls,” *some* people have assumed that for Lutherans justification must be the organizing principle of theology — the hub from which all specific teachings radiate. Such theology was indeed valid at the time of the Reformation. But does it provide the most effective and relevant means for proclaiming the gospel today?

Certainly we cannot simply transfer Reformation theology from the 16th to the 20th century without accommodating it or applying it to 20th-century conditions. But must we begin with justification at all? In fact, do we begin the theological task with some basic thematic expression of the gospel?

No! Not if we want to assure a relevant proclamation of the gospel! For theology to be relevant, the theological task has to begin not with the gospel but with the situation to which it is to be addressed. The first step in theo-

logical formulation is to analyze the conditions of the world for whose sake the gospel is to be proclaimed. “The world writes the agenda,” we are being told these days. True as that may be in other areas, it is true also for theology. The situation in our world should help shape our theology.

Why? Because there is no “gospel in a vacuum.” The gospel cannot be dealt with by itself apart from the situation to which it is addressed. It is ever so much more than a set of religious propositions, spiritual truths, or divine principles. If it were only that, it could be passed on unchanged from generation to generation. The gospel must always be addressed to particular conditions and circumstances. Therefore, it cannot be formulated in terms enduringly valid for every age and condition.¹⁰

⁷ See Richard Shuta. “Walter A. Maier as Evangelical Preacher,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 74 (January-April 2010).

⁸ D. G. Hart. *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 158-161.

⁹ Lawrence R. Rast, Jr. “Challenges to Inerrancy Today” in *Divine Multi-Media: The Manifold Means of Grace in the Life of the Church*, Luther Academy Lecture Series no. 11, John Maxfield, ed. (Saint Louis: The Luther Academy, 2005), 17-35.

¹⁰ John H. Tietjen. “The Gospel and the Theological Task,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 40 (June-July-August 1969): 438-39.

I disagree. The Gospel can be formulated in terms enduringly valid for every age and condition. And it has been. To adopt Tietjen's approach leads to a vacuous, ever-changing theology, much like that described by Sundberg in respect to the current ELCA.

In the light of this history, what is our situation today? I can only speak for the ELCA. The ELCA is a mainline Protestant denomination whose leadership is dominated by an unrelenting progressive cadre that cares neither for Lutheran orthodoxy nor Lutheran Pietism, but is dedicated to one article of faith above all others even though it is bringing the church to its knees and threatening the very viability of its national office, its 65 synods, and its eight seminaries, let alone scores of congregations declining and splitting. Since 1988, the ELCA has lost 20% of its membership, 15% of which has been lost between 2009 and 2012, that is since the ELCA Churchwide Assembly approved the ordination of practicing homosexuals. All of this is in fact a bizarre form of martyrdom for a belief; they know what is happening to the denomination as a whole and they keep right on doing it. What is this article of faith: *that the Bible and the Confessions must accommodate to the cultural imperatives of today's society*, which imperatives are determined by a segment of the population; and a minority segment at that: secularized, educated, middle-class white people, vast numbers of which have drifted away from or take no interest in the church. This is their mission; their form of evangelism is political activism.

To be fair, such accommodation has also manifested itself in the LCMS in the adoption of radical forms of Evangelicalism. The result has been a loss of the richness of the biblical witness and consistent practice of the Church.

At the same time, Sundberg's claim that Evangelicalism "is the natural form of Protestantism in the American context" demands further nuancing. That it became the

dominant form of Protestantism in America was not "natural" in the sense that it was a given and, in fact, may be due more to historical and social realities than theological ones. Further, while he rightly notes that Lutheranism is in decline, so is Evangelicalism. Indeed, some presently are predicting "the coming evangelical collapse."¹¹ The jury remains out on these matters.¹²

So where do we go? In conclusion, to return to our earlier theme, for the sake of our future mission, we must recall that God is not time-bound as we are. All things are immediately present to Him. Our past, present and future is bound up in Him and His unchanging Word to us. For, in the Second Person of the Trinity, the eternal God became incarnate and bound Himself to our time and our experience. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." (Heb. 4:15)

This is the Christological center of the Lutheran confession, and it must be maintained. The challenges we face today are real; no one here is questioning that. However, the promises of God in Christ are greater than the challenges of this world.

The Rev. Dr. Lawrence R. Rast, Jr. is president of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind.

¹¹ Michael Spencer. "The Coming Evangelical Collapse," *Christian Science Monitor* online, March 10, 2009, <http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2009/0310/p09s01-coop.html> (accessed November 20, 2013).

¹² See also Lawrence R. Rast, Jr. "What is the Future of Evangelicalism? Adrift in a Sea of Individual Faiths—American Evangelicalism in the Early Twenty-first Century," *Modern Reformation* 17 (Nov.-Dec. 2008): 31-32.