



Volume 66:2

April 2002

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Taking Missouri's Pulse: A Quarter Century of Symposia

Lawrence R. Rast Jr.

The Death of Missouri?

During the heady days of 1974, as the Synod's Saint Louis seminary first faltered and then, almost miraculously, survived through the generous efforts of the rest of the church, including its sister seminary in Springfield, the reality of a split within the Missouri Synod seemed inevitable.

Two competing understandings of what Lutheranism is squared off and joined the battle. Among the leaders of the more progressive party was John Tietjen, president of Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis. Among the leaders of the traditional Missourians were the Preus brothers, Jacob and Robert, president of Synod and Saint Louis seminary professor, respectively. As the issue moved toward a confrontation, Tietjen claimed that President Preus's vision was fundamentally flawed and that his Fact Finding Committee's report betrayed Lutheranism. He wrote: "A theology whose basic thrust is unLutheran underlies the Report of the president's Committee and served as the yardstick for measuring the confessional position of the faculty, resulting in a basic distortion and misrepresentation of faculty views."¹ At issue were two radically different understandings of what Lutheranism is and should be. One, the version of the Preuses, saw Lutheranism primarily as *freedom to confess*—a faithful "speaking together" with the church of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. It is a confession bound in the speaking together of the church catholic in its ecumenical creeds, which are normed, fundamentally, by the Scriptures themselves as the rule and norm of all theology and practice. The other, that of Tietjen, saw Lutheranism as *freedom for change*—a contextual confession that is bound always to historical circumstances and thus constantly shifts, develops, and accommodates

¹John H. Tietjen, *Fact Finding or Fault Finding?: an analysis of President J. A. O. Preus' investigation of Concordia Seminary* (no place: no publisher, 1972), 34.

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itself to the prevailing conditions as the “world sets the agenda for the church.”

After his removal, an embittered Tietjen unloaded himself of any ongoing relationship to The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and called for the creation of a new church that was radically progressive:

We are free to find new forms and methods to bring God’s Gospel to the world. God has set us free from the law, including any system of rules, no matter how serviceable it may have been, which seeks to muzzle the free proclamation of the grace of God. . .

Shall we stand in God’s way by trying to hold on to the past? Shall we interfere with God’s work by seeking to preserve the institutions and organizations he has already consigned to destruction? . . . The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is dead. Let the dead bury their own dead. The organization that has given us life and nurtured us is no more. Its structures are hopelessly corrupt. Its leadership is morally bankrupt. Let the dead bury their own dead.²

Shortly before Tietjen delivered his remarks, Robert David Preus was elected president of Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois. In little more than a year, the Synod in convention closed the Senior College and moved Concordia Theological Seminary from Springfield, Illinois to Fort Wayne, Indiana, its ancestral home. With that election and move, what was already a vibrant and dynamic enterprise took on an even more vital role in the life of the Synod. What one professor has called the “days of dead orthodoxy” were about to begin and the Missouri Synod, nor any of us here, would ever be the same. One of the key elements in those lively times was the development of the Annual Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions.

Tietjen looked at Missouri and saw a corpse. The Annual Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions, however, examined the body more carefully and found a pulse. It has been taking that pulse ever since.

²John H. Tietjen, “The Pangs of Death,” text of Sermon at ELIM Assembly Eucharist, August 26, 1974, O’Hare Inn, Des Plaines, Illinois, 6-7. In the archives of Concordia Theological Seminary.

Organizing the Symposium

The idea of a symposium was first considered in the 1976-1977 academic year, the first year that the seminary was on the old Senior College campus. On April 21-22, 1977, Dean of Chapel Daniel Reuning and Dr. David Scaer arranged the first liturgical symposium, titled "The ILCW as Factor in Lutheranism," which Dr. Scaer stated "was successful in that a lively discussion ensued." Further, he noted, "The symposium was intended to draw upon scholars throughout Lutheranism and would not be limited to Missouri Synod clergy and laity. The university concept meant the exchange of ideas and opinions." A second liturgical symposium was held the following year. However, when it was poorly attended, it was cancelled. Possible reasons for the failure? It was scheduled for the week just before Palm Sunday, and the appearance of a new event just two months before.³

That new event was, of course, the First Annual Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions. Scaer describes the development of the new symposium this way: "The impetus for the confessional symposium was the wide success that similar ventures had in other Lutheran churches. . . . Basic to the liturgical and confessional symposiums was and is the idea that pastors and laity are interested in confronting theological issues and they are willing to test them out with persons who may not necessarily agree with them."⁴

As the time for the first Confessions symposium approached, Dr. Preus took the lead in publicizing the upcoming event, both publicly and privately. In one letter he stressed the importance of the participation of the laity in the symposium, stating, "These symposiums will be targeted for the laity as we believe that the real future of the church rests with them."⁵ When the confessions congress had passed he described it as "The high point of our extra-curricular activities" of 1978. "Some of the finest and conservative confessional scholars of the world were with us. . . . A very spirited discussion followed the delivery of every paper, and it was decided to hold another larger Congress in the coming year and

³David P. Scaer, "The Annual Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions," unpublished report, CTS Archives, Symposium, 1978.

⁴Scaer, "Annual Symposium," 2.

⁵Robert D. Preus to Charels DeVries, September 27, 1977, in CTS archives, Symposium, 1978 file.

begin a permanent Center for Confessional Studies here at our seminary."⁶

The first symposium featured a wide range of speakers, many of whom were notable scholars in their field. Whatever the attendance may have been, the lineup of presenters ensured that this would be an historic occasion: Robert Preus addressed "The Need for Confessional Reapplication in the Contemporary Church"; George Fry surveyed "Protestant and Catholic Confessional Statements in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century"; Kurt Marquart, somewhat recently arrived from Australia, spoke on "The Two Kingdoms Today"; Eugene Klug addressed the "Confessional Emphasis on Law and Gospel for Our Day"; Jobst Schöne's topic was "Confessional Lutheranism: Churchly or Sectarian Movement?"; Tom Hardt of Sweden discussed "Contemporary Denials of the Lord's Supper"; Henry Hamann addressed "The Lutheran Confessions as a Distinctive Contribution to World Christianity"; Apologist John Warwick Montgomery presented "Confessions and Apologetics as the Church's Mission"; at the banquet Samuel Nafzger considered the "Future of Confessional Lutheranism in the World"; Norman Nagel addressed "Lutheran Ecumenical Practices"; and Lewis Spitz spoke on the topic "Discord, Dialogue and Concord – The Lutheran Reformation's Formula of Concord." All in all, it was an impressive lineup featuring international speakers.

In his summation of the first symposium, President Preus addressed the issue of whether there was the possibility of the production of new confessions of faith and whether confessional Lutherans should work to make this a reality. Preus maintained that there was a great need for a new confession touching such upon several contemporary theological issues, such as the relationship between the church and the world, and apologetics. He was pessimistic, however, whether statements on these subjects could be constructed today which would gain wide Lutheran approval throughout the world.⁷

⁶Robert D. Preus, "The President's Message: 'The State of the Seminary,'" *Newsletter: Concordia Theological Seminary* (Winter 1978): 1. Preus concludes the article (7): Yes, it has been a busy year thus far and we do not anticipate any letup. But it is the finest year I have ever spent at a seminary. Faculty and student spirits are the highest ever. God has blessed us with a large excellent student body. For all of this we are indeed grateful."

⁷From an untitled and unsigned summary of the Robert D. Preus's concluding

Dr. Preus's summation led at least one participant to correspond that he "was really thrilled over your speech at the end stating the time had come for a new confession."⁸ Preus responded: "I got the impression at our Convocation however, that many of the people were interested and even somewhat optimistic about the possibility of writing a confession for world Lutheranism." However, he noted, "this, of course, would have to be confined to those who really believe the present confessions we have, and that would be a mere fraction of the Lutherans all over the world. But it would certainly tend to unite those who still want to be faithful."⁹

Symposium participants were given the opportunity to assess the event at the close. They were queried on the theme, number of presentations, and timing of the symposium. Overall, the respondents were very pleased with the event, both in terms of the agenda and the accommodations available.¹⁰ Additionally, many offered suggestions on future topics and strategies for the symposium. A selection from the list is striking in its contemporary application: 1) inerrancy, authority, unionism, close communion; 2) conversations with representatives of other confessional traditions (Westminster Presbyterians, for example), and even "offering two sides on an issue"; 3) the Lutheran Confessions and the church, altar and pulpit fellowship, unionism, ecumenism, Lutheran missiology; and 4) discipline for clergy.

For the Second Annual Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions in 1979 essayists received assignments relating to Luther's Catechisms, spanning their relationships to the early church and their pastoral character. A news release described the event this way:

The primary objective was to draw attention to, reexamine, and pay tribute to the documents that have served us so well over the centuries. Only the Scripture has had more significance for teaching and maintaining the heritage of the Lutheran Church. . . . The final

remarks at the 1978 Symposium. It may be found in the seminary archives in the symposium section.

⁸The Rev. Richard Bolling to Robert D. Preus, January 9, 1978, in CTS archives, Symposium, 1978 file.

⁹Robert D. Preus to Richard Bolling, January 25, 1978, in CTS archives, Symposium, 1978 file.

¹⁰At that time, four or five dormitories were available for symposium attendees, though some stayed in hotels.

conclusion of the Congress was that not only are the Catechisms still relevant for today, but that no other comparable exposition of Christian doctrine is available for the layman, making their use a necessity. They have been an incalculable benefit to the stability and unity within the church.¹¹

In a significant move, the essays were collected and published as a stand alone volume.¹²

But how would things continue and who would be responsible for overseeing the symposium? Dr. Preus helped organize The International Center of Lutheran Confessional Studies, whose purpose was to conduct "seminars, convocations, and forums for Confessional studies within the Lutheran Church." It sought: 1) To provide evangelical direction for Lutheran pastors and laypeople; 2) To demonstrate the validity and relevance of Scriptural and Confessional truths for the modern age; 3) To encourage a strong Confessional stance on the part of all Lutherans; 4) To maintain a true and firm Biblical and Confessional base for the Gospel ministry within the Lutheran churches; 5) To develop a united front for all Lutherans to be guided honestly by Confessional theology; 6) To provide guidance for resolving critical problems of theology and missions; and 7) To involve Lutherans in effective and constructive decision-making processes."¹³

Event or Institution?

In the early days there was hope that the symposium would be an ongoing seminary program, but its future was uncertain. One way to ensure the future was to attract the best possible speakers. Robert Preus's remarks in 1978 certainly show this concern. In 1979, David Scaer wrote to President J. A. O. Preus of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod inviting him to speak at the banquet on the theme of "Chemnitz and the Book of Concord."¹⁴ On receiving Dr. Preus' positive response, Dr. Scaer

¹¹News Release, CTS, January 16, 1979, in CTS archives, Symposium, 1979 file.

¹²David P. Scaer and Robert D. Preus, editors, *Luther's Catechisms – 450 Years: Essays Commemorating the Small and Large Catechisms of Dr. Martin Luther* (Fort Wayne, Indiana: Concordia Theological Seminary, 1979).

¹³Stated on the inside cover of the brochure for the Third Annual Congress on the Lutheran Confessions, CTS Archives, Symposia, 1980.

¹⁴David P. Scaer to J. A. O. Preus, April 17, 1979. Preus responded positively on April 23, 1979. CTS Archives, Symposia, 1980.

wrote about how pleased he was that the President would attend and speak and noted, "we have been hoping to establish a tradition here at the seminary with these annual symposiums. Your participation will help us in reaching this goal."¹⁵

The strategy seems to have worked. By 1981 David Scaer claimed that the symposium has become part of the seminary tradition. . . . The faculty itself provides a ready source of participating lecturers. Seminary students have an opportunity to see their instructors openly discussing their ideas with others outside the seminary community. Pastors, especially alumni, appreciate refreshing their theological skills Lay persons, especially benefactors of the seminary, have a first hand experience in hearing seminary professors present their views.¹⁶

By 1989 Scaer believed the importance of the symposium had extended well beyond the geographical boundaries of Fort Wayne and now was entitled to be called an institution of the Missouri Synod.

With traditions come expectations, and with expectations come rules. The question of who was actually responsible for the organization of the symposium emerged. Yet even with the center in place, local arrangements had to be made, and the relationship of the faculty to the event had to be defined. Almost by default, much of the responsibility fell to the Department of Systematic Theology. In its department meeting of January 15, 1979 the department announced that it "expresses its willingness to sponsor the confessional conference next January and it invites the historical department to share in sponsoring it."¹⁷ At further meetings during the year it acted to "request the faculty to appoint the department members to serve as the continuation committee for the Symposium in the Lutheran Confessions"¹⁸ and suggested that "the president, chairman, secretary and a member of the Historical

¹⁵David P. Scaer to J. A. O. Preus, May 2, 1979. CTS Archives, Symposium, 1980.

¹⁶Suggestions for the Conference on the Lutheran Confessions, CTS Archives, Symposium, 1981.

¹⁷Faculty Journal, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, 1978-79, 80.

¹⁸Department of Systematic Theology, February 26, 1979, Faculty Journal, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, 1978-79, 119.

Theological Department serve as the committee of implementation for the January 1980 confessional symposium."¹⁹

Minutes of the Faculty Study Meeting of March 26, 1979 state that "a resolution was introduced which essentially asked the Faculty to designate the Systematics Department as the Standing Committee for the Annual Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions. Action on this was postponed until the next business meeting."²⁰ But, as sometimes happens, the faculty did not take it up at its next meeting. Finally, around 1981, a document appears to have gained general assent. The initial version of the piece simply stated, "The Symposium is sponsored by the Systematic Theology Dept." A later addition to the document refined the process: "The Symposium is sponsored by the faculty and delegated to the Systematic Theology Dept. for planning."²¹ It appears that arrangement has remained in place ever since.

Imitation is the Sincerest Form of Flattery

The Annual Symposium on Exegetical Theology

As the Annual Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions grew, the question of the role of other departments began to emerge. Was this a Systematics event alone, or should the other departments have a say in how things operate? One of the brilliant points of the Confessions symposium in its early form was how it served to integrate the discreet departments. In his book *Theologia*, Edward Farley has shown how the division of theology into four distinct departments stemmed largely from the influence of the Enlightenment. Theological education became a matter of first learning theory (Dogma, Exegesis, History) and then applying it (Practical) — a concept foreign to the Lutheran Confessors. For confessional Lutherans, theology is holistic — a *habitus*, as Dr. Preus noted so well — in which doctrine and practice are intimately related.²² The early symposia picked up this point, and addressed a spectrum of topics. Hence, in 1982, the theme was hermeneutics, and featured Erling Teigen

¹⁹Department of Systematic Theology, March 19, 1979, Faculty Journal, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, 1978-79, 132.

²⁰Faculty Journal, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, 1978-1979, 136.

²¹Faculty Journal, Fort Wayne, 1978-1979, 136.

²²Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, Volume 1, *A Study of Theological Prolegomena* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970-1972).

on "The Clarity of Scripture and Hermeneutical Principles in the Lutheran Confessions," Seth Erlandsson on "Faith in the Old and New Testaments: Harmony or Disagreement," Douglas Judisch on "The View of Prophecy and Fulfillment in the Lutheran Confessions," Carl Braaten on "Confessional Lutheran Hermeneutics vs. Contemporary Hermeneutics," Horace Hummel on "Are Law and Gospel a Valid Hermeneutical Principle?" and Walter Kaiser on "Evangelical Hermeneutics: Restatement, Advance, or Retreat from the Reformation?" Here was a varied and engaging lineup of speakers whose specialties cut across disciplinary lines.

To get to the point another way, the Department of Historical Theology is often asked, "Why don't you have a symposium?" The answer is simple. In, with, and under the Confessions there is room for distinctive emphases in exegetical, historical, pastoral, and systematic theology, just as the confessional documents themselves have. Hence, there is no need for an independent historical symposium.

The exegetes and, more recently, the pastoral theologians have thought otherwise and the result has been a fragmentation of the Symposia. How did this come about? One writer has noted "The Symposium on Exegetical Theology began rather spontaneously in January of 1985 as an appendix . . . to the well-established Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions. . . . Dr. James Voelz . . . and Dr. David Scaer . . . are to be remembered as especially vocal in urging the sponsorship of this symposium upon the department of exegetical theology."²³ The new event began to take shape, as exegetical department chairman Dr. Waldemar Degner described, "The first overture toward an annual symposium in biblical studies is within reach. A day will be added to the annual Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions in order to present a group of essays on related exegetical topics. This extension to accommodate exegetical papers will begin in January '86, D.v."²⁴

The Symposium on Exegetical Theology quickly became an event in its own right. As the previous writer continued, "Interest in the conference

²³Douglas McC. L. Judisch, "The Symposium on Exegetical Theology," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 55 (January 1991): 48-49.

²⁴Waldemar Degner, "Report of the Exegetical Theology Department, 1984-85 Academic Year," in Fall Faculty Forum Book (Concordia Theological Seminary, 1985), 24.

both inside and, more importantly, outside the seminary quickly became apparent. As the attendance increased, so did the number of offerings, including papers by scholars of note from other institutions (whether orthodox or heterodox by Lutheran standards).²⁵ Dr. Degner was not at all ashamed to speak of the roots of the Exegetical effort. "Riding on the reputation of the Systematic Department sponsored symposium, the Exegetical Department put on a one-day program with four lectures, three by our faculty. With success smiling on them the department plans another lively agenda for January 20 and 21, 1987. The theme of the convivium will be: Prophecy and Fulfillment."²⁶

The theme of prophecy and fulfillment—a seemingly perennial one at Fort Wayne—proved to be a dicey one.²⁷ As Dr. Degner himself noted, "Among the challenges that face the department faculty is the primary task of converting conflict into creative tension. Yes, we have some differences of opinion regarding hermeneutical principles, interpretation of prophecy, and certain exegetical methodologies. By open and free discussion, however, the variety of viewpoints is an opportunity for each faculty member to grow in his understanding and tolerance."²⁸

As time moved on, however, the Exegetical symposium became more and more independent of the Confessions symposium. In 1990, Dr. Judisch noted that "Last year (1990) the symposium had attained

²⁵Judisch, "The Symposium on Exegetical Theology," 48-49.

²⁶Waldemar Degner, "Report of the Exegetical Theology Department, Academic Year 1985-86," in Fall Faculty Forum Book (Concordia Theological Seminary, 1986), 20.

²⁷Dr. Scaer suggested a protocol for gaining departmental approval and Dr. Preus expanded on it: "I believe that, as in the case of the Symposium on the Confessions, the easiest way to finalize these things would be for Drs. Scaer, Degner and myself to come up with a very concrete proposal in line with the memo and have it accepted by the Exegetical Department. I think this would be perhaps better than to have the Exegetical Department as such do the planning. I do believe, however, that the Exegetical Department should have the right to make strong suggestions pro or con to anything that we bring in." Robert D. Preus to David P. Scaer, Waldemar Degner, Ronald Nelson, and Douglas Christian, February 18, 1986, CTS Archives, Symposium, 1987. The memo that Preus refers to is from David Scaer to Degner, Preus, Christian, and Nelson, February 12, 1978, CTS Archives, Symposium, 1987.

²⁸Waldemar Degner, "Report of the Exegetical Theology Department, Academic Year 1986-87," in Fall Faculty Forum Book (Concordia Theological Seminary, 1987), 24.

sufficient maturity to cut its maternal apron strings."²⁹ Indeed it had, and it continues to do so till the present. The 2002 Symposium is another landmark, for it marked the first time the iconography on the front of the symposia program reflected the Exegetical Department's theme and not the Confessional symposium theme.

Similarly, the offerings of the Exegetical symposium have been steadily expanding. From four papers in 1986, the 2002 Exegetical Symposium boasted seven papers, along with a number of shorter exegetical seminar papers. The length of the symposium has extended significantly. The 1986 Symposium began at 2:00 p.m. on Tuesday afternoon and ran through 11:20 the next morning. The 2002 Symposium opened at 9:00 a.m. on Tuesday morning and ran through 11:50 a.m. Wednesday. The Exegetical symposium has indeed gained its independence.

Liturgical Theology and The Good Shepherd Institute

The annual Good Shepherd Institute of Pastoral Theology and Sacred Music for the Church was inaugurated November 5-7, 2000, with the theme of "Christ's Gifts for Healing the Soul: Toward a Lutheran Identity in the New Millennium." In addition to twelve distinguished presenters, both local and visiting, the first Institute offered an all Bach organ recital and a banquet, "with lute music as Luther would have played it."³⁰

The 215 attendees of the first Institute must have been impressed with the rich worship opportunities and presentations, because they came back for the 2001 event, "The Theology and Music of the Divine Service," with a few friends—the attendance increased to 240. The 2002 Institute is themed "Psalms in the Life of the Church."

Dr. Arthur Just and Rev. Richard Resch, co-directors of the Institute, have many other plans for the Good Shepherd Institute, besides hosting an annual "symposium." In time, they hope that the Institute will serve the church by providing various kinds of assistance, including, in part, educational materials, kantor training, and guidance with acoustical and architectural decisions. The Institute will "encompass the whole realm of how Lutheran theology lives and breathes in a faithful practice."³¹

²⁹Judisch, "The Symposium on Exegetical Theology," 48-49.

³⁰Taken from the Good Shepherd Institute 2000 brochure.

³¹Richard C. Resch, "The Gift of the Church's Song: Sacred Music as Healing and Comfort" in *Christ's Gifts for Healing the Soul: Toward a Lutheran Identity in the New*

The Saint Louis Symposium

The advent of a similarly organized symposium at the Saint Louis seminary illustrates that Tietjen was also wrong about the viability of that institution. While of a very different character from the Fort Wayne Symposia, Saint Louis's symposium now is into its second decade and shows signs of having become an institution unto itself. For that we commend our colleagues and wish their endeavors well. Their symposium shows that the pulse of Missouri can be taken at more than one point in the body.

Challenges*Choosing the Theme*

The symposium has been a living and breathing reality that has developed over time, but with changes come challenges. The Symposia have not been immune.

One challenge is the choice of themes—who chooses the theme for discussion? A note in David Scaer's handwriting seems to provide the beginnings of an outline for the years 1988 to 1990. He simply writes: "Inter Lutheran Confessions; Confessions as Guide to Pastoral Ministry; Church." The themes as developed actually were: "The Tension Between Philippism and Lutheranism: A Problem of the Contemporary Scene"; "The Church Communicating Its Confession"; and "Missouri and the Separated Brethren."

The manner in which a theme is chosen is somewhat mysterious, something like trying to explain the Trinity. At times Dr. Scaer has been brutally honest about the nature of choosing the theme. For example, in 1989 he stated "for several years the word 'communication' has been in the air and thus we hit upon the theme 'The Church Communicating Its Confession.' I think we did this more out [of] desperation than for any specific reason."³²

The themes of the Symposia over the years, however, reveal the rich and varied interests of pastors and laity in the Missouri Synod. They

Millennium (Fort Wayne, Indiana: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 2001), 87.

³²David P. Scaer, untitled remarks for the introduction of the 1989 Symposium, CTS Archives, Symposium, 1989.

show an interest in the lively discussion of theology that was so well captured by Robert Preus: "I love to talk about God." But what also emerges in this picture is something of a trend over time. Simply put, the tendency of the early symposia was to celebrate an anniversary of an historical document. From the Augsburg Confession to the Wittenberg Concord—or more recently the 1500th Anniversary of the Council of Chalcedon—rarely were opportunities missed to recognize significant anniversaries in the life of the church. Indeed, where these significant events have been ignored in the rest of the Lutheran world as dead and unimportant history, the Annual Symposia have taken the pulse of historic Lutheranism and kept these events alive.

More recently, however, the themes have moved away from observance of anniversaries (though some still do that) to being more topical in nature. Whatever the case may be, the Symposia have continued to fulfill the vision of their founders. It recalls to mind one of David Scaer's statements from the symposium banquet of 1990: "The winter symposium of Concordia Theological Seminary is a barter house for the exchange of philosophical and theological views. Here are the porches of the Jerusalem temple where political careers have been bought and sold. Self-appointed reformers have entered these sacred precincts to over turn [*sic*] the tables where the changers of theological views have sat selling their wares and the pigeons have been sent fluttering."³³

Choosing the Best Speakers

One of the keys to the success of the symposia, and an enormous challenge as well, is related to the speakers themselves. Put simply: how does one keep the scholarly level high, while making the ideas and vocabulary accessible to everyone? As one laymen put it, "In my estimation, and in the estimation of others with whom I discussed the matter, there were two areas in the essays, in which the laymen, and even some of the Pastors present, were not considered, as follows: 1) the learned Doctors who read their essays used words peculiar to theology, to which the layman would not, in the normal course of his education be exposed. In other words, the learned Doctors of theology on the rostrum addressed themselves to the learned Doctors of theology in the audience. 2) The essay as read contained many phrases in Latin and German which,

³³David P. Scaer, "Banquet Address: Thirteenth Annual Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions," January 24, 1990, CTS Archives, Symposium, 1990, 4.

with few exceptions, were not translated into English following such use."³⁴

Participants have also suggested that actual sections of the Confessions be studied ("open our books!") and for microphones to be set up for auditors to ask questions. Finally, one critic suggested that organizers "not look for the 'Big names' only – there are several knowledgeable men and also somewhat better speakers than several we had – 3 of the papers were [delivered] in so boring a manner it was difficult to listen."³⁵ Other participants responded personally to Dr. Preus. One layman in particular suggested "no foreign speakers."³⁶

Other speakers have been drawn to the campus for the most unusual of reasons. For example, Dr. Paul Maier of Kalamazoo, Michigan accepted the invitation to speak in 1980 only after learning that the Fort Wayne skyline had forever been changed by the construction of the Scaer mansion in Pine Valley. Maier responded to Scaer's invitation by saying: "You are *most* persuasive! My acceptance is prompted – not by any great presumptions regarding my expertise in the Reformation Era, but by my endless curiosity as to the sort of Tudor mansion you finally put up down there! How's that for scholarly motivation? Count me in!"³⁷

At other times, however, getting the speakers here has posed a problem. As the Exegetical symposium struggled to get off the ground, internal department tensions threatened to derail the entire enterprise. Prophecy and fulfillment – a perennial issue in exegesis – challenged the developing symposium. At one point Dr. Degner wrote "Horace Hummel [n.n.] called today. He begged off from giving a paper at our

³⁴S. F. Lange to David P. Scaer, February 14, 1980, CTS Archives, Symposium, 1980. Scaer responded on March 10, 1980, "Please be assured that your comments and suggestions concerning this matter will be taken under consideration."

³⁵Summary of responses in 1978 Symposium file in the CTS archives.

³⁶Fred Zehnder to Robert D. Preus, January 1978, in CTS archives, Symposium, 1978 file.

³⁷Paul Maier to David Scaer, no date, CTS Archives, Symposium, 1980. Later, in 1985, Dr. Maier was asked to speak at the banquet. He responded, somewhat incredulously, "Do you *really* want me back as banquet speaker for the Symposium? Well, if you can put up with the likes of me again, fine." (Paul Maier to Douglas Christian, October 21, 1985, CTS Archives, Symposium, 1986.) He came, and from all indications, gave a very fine speech at the banquet. Christian later thanked Dr. Maier for his "lively presentation at our banquet." Douglas M. Christian to Paul L. Maier, February 3, 1986, CTS Archives, Symposium, 1986.

January Exeg. Symposium. There's something deeper than any of us surmise, I fear."³⁸ At another point, the aged Walter Roehrs stated, "I am responding at once to allow time to select a substitute, for at my age (I shall turn 85 before this month is out) I consider it the better part of valor not to engage in the vigors of the kind of forum that you project."³⁹

Exceptions aside, one of the remarkable things about the Symposia has been their consistent ability to attract the highest level of speakers – not just to a confessional Lutheran seminary of modest size, but to Fort Wayne, Indiana in the midst of winter! Recalling the list of the lecturers from the first symposium, one is struck by the high quality of the speakers involved. How is it that the symposium has succeeded in this regard?

One element is the tenacious character of the people doing the inviting. Within the files of the Department of Systematic Theology are innumerable queries and responses seeking the finest confessional scholars in the world, as well as a variety of experts in their fields. What the files show is how much work goes into the task of organizing a symposium. Favorable responses often have a "Yes!" hand-written on them. The responses do offer a window into the minds of those asked to present. For example, note how very much the following captures the personality of Norman Nagel. "How very generous of you to invite me, and I shall be happy to have a go."⁴⁰ The same holds true for the late Henry Hamann.

I can accept your invitation for the Symposium in January. The topic you have asked me to write on is the one very congenial to me, as I think you know. The only thing I shall have to be on guard against is plagiarism from myself. If I merely copied what I have already written and gave the result a different title I would not be earning my honorarium. But I can't change the basic position. However, I shall make the supporting material and examples completely contemporary.⁴¹

³⁸G. Waldemar Degner to Dean Wenthe and Doug Christian, October 8, 1986, CTS Archives, Symposium, 1987.

³⁹Walter R. Roehrs to David P. Scaer, August 12, 1986, CTS Archives, Symposium, 1987.

⁴⁰Norman Nagel to David P. Scaer, April 2, 1987, CTS Archives, Symposium, 1988.

⁴¹Henry Hamann to David P. Scaer, June 23, 1988, CTS Archives, Symposium, 1989.

A sad note attaches to this little memo, however. Dr. Hamann, though successful in writing the paper, was not able to deliver it. He was taken ill in the Autumn of 1989 and passed away shortly before the symposium. Yet, noted Dr. Scaer, "I have an idea that when we hear Dr. Hamann's paper read, we will be listening to the last will and testament of [a] man to his church, a man who knew that his days on earth were numbered. . . . In a sense he will be communicating to us a message from the altar of the Lamb of God in heaven where the souls of the faithful departed are safely preserved waiting [*sic*] to receive their final reward on the day of judgment."⁴²

What was true of Dr. Hamann was also true of the President who did so much to organize the symposium in the first place, Dr. Robert Preus. The Rev. Klemet Preus spoke on the Preus legacy in Missouri at the 2002 Symposium, but briefly at this point, two fairly recent events should be noted. The first was in 1993 when, after being introduced, Dr. Preus received welcome and thanks from the attendees of the symposium that went on for an extended period of time. The second was in 1996, when Daniel and Rolf Preus read their father's last paper on justification and Rome. Even as he spoke his last words to us through his sons, he revisited a theme so many of us were blessed to have learned so clearly from him: "The article of justification serves not only to assess doctrine and practice in the church. It is the focal point and backbone, as it were, of the entire corpus doctrinae. And it is the basis of the Christian religion and life, for it is the very essence of the Gospel itself."⁴³

On the Field of Controversy

An intention of the symposium from early on was to arrange for presentations by speakers from outside the Missouri Synod and even the Lutheran tradition. This has, at times, caused consternation, while at others the symposium has been criticized for being "monolithic" in the view that it presents.

When the agenda for 1984's Symposium, with Father Richard John Neuhaus's name there appearing (his topic was "The Place of the Pope in Modern Protestant and Roman Catholic Ecclesiology"), was published,

⁴²David P. Scaer, remarks at introduction of the Symposium for 1989, CTS Archives, Symposium, 1989.

⁴³Robert Preus, *Justification and Rome*, edited by Daniel and Rolf Preus (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1996), 16.

a letter critical of his inclusion arrived at the seminary. It read, in part: "... I am quite puzzled. . . . even disturbed. . . . by the presence of Richard Neuhaus on the program and agenda. Is this the same Richard Neuhaus who has held less than a conservative stance in the past several years? Is this the same Neuhaus who has publically [*sic*] been less than supportive of our Synodical posture?"⁴⁴ In answering the query, David Scaer articulated clearly the intent of the Symposia.

The general purpose of the symposiums is to understand the Lutheran Confessions both in their historical setting and in the contemporary situation. Thus the first day is an attempt to see certain issues from the perspectives of the early church and the Church of Rome; the second day concentrates on our own in house issues, e.g., a LCMS vice-president, a WELS professor, and expert on LCMS church history are on the program; the third day looks at the formation of the "New Lutheran Church."

The symposiums serve as a reinforcement of our confessional position by studying the documents themselves and seeing them in their contemporary situation. In the past this has been done by those who are not only not members of the LCMS, but who have offered critique. Our confessions came into existence by listening to and answering our critics. Some times they might have a valid word to offer. Some times they do not. The symposium offers and opportunity to hear them on their own terms and for us to respond.⁴⁵

Others have been extremely critical of the "one-sidedness" of the event. One critic's remarks remain posted on a website almost a year after they were made. He states:

On the other hand, the Symposia would better serve the church if it were more even-handed, choosing speakers with alternate points of view, rather than those who would offer presentations in order to promote the party line. . . . The opportunity to respond would have been right and appropriate. It's what happens, however, when left unchecked by the church, an event like this is interested only in

⁴⁴R. R. Krueger to The Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions, November 28, 1984, CTS Archives, Symposium, 1984.

⁴⁵David P. Scaer to R. R. Krueger, December 7, 1984, CTS Archives, Symposium, 1984.

presenting a monolithic point of view. It feeds upon itself and appeals to an almost cult-like following who are known adoringly to subscribe to that monolithic point of view (grown now to over 650 in attendance).

The way to remedy the narrowness of this event, would be for more evangelically minded folks to attend future Symposia in Ft. Wayne. I trust it remains an event for the whole church. Let the church in its many shapes, colors and sizes show up next year, prepared to challenge, push, prod and engage next year's Symposia.⁴⁶

Still others have taken the opportunity to offer thanks and critique. In 1988, after offering "congratulations on another excellent Confessions Congress," and commenting on the "timeliness of the topics" (church growth and spiritual gifts), one pastor noted:

Imagine a congress wherein Dr. Nafzger, a Wisconsin Synod theologian, and an E.L.C.A. theologian all presented papers on the question of fellowship and the confessions. One might even throw in a presentation by Kurt Marquart just to keep things lively. At any rate, I believe the emphasis given to levels of fellowship demands a forum of thought accessible to the average pastor—and the Confessions Congress seems to fit the bill.⁴⁷

It certainly has fulfilled that purpose.

⁴⁶Steven Krueger, "Fort Wayne's 2001 Symposia: A DayStar's Assessment," January 26, 2001, cited from http://www.day-star.net/ezone/symposia_01-01-26.htm. Visited on 1/21/2002.

⁴⁷Timothy D. Knapp to David P. Scaer, January 26, 1988, CTS Archives, Symposium, 1988. He continues: "Acknowledging the charge that advocates of church growth espouse an approach of bringing about the Kingdom of God through the use of secular means, could not that charge also be levied against those who use the secular means of political organizations and voting blocks to turn Synod around in the 70's? The temptation is always great to use *whatever* means are available to win a desperate fight. I fear there are those in Synod who place greater faith in political machinations than in the Lord of the church. I too often am one of them." Other pastors also appreciated the Symposium's timely topics, noting "I thought this year's symposium was the best ever. The topics and speakers were well chosen, I thought. I'm especially encouraged to hear some good confessional responses to the abysmal methods and practices of Church Growth..." Burnell F. Eckardt, Jr. to David P. Scaer, February 3, 1988, CTS Archives, Symposium, 1988.

Whether or not You Like the Weather

Not the least of these challenges – though apparently not in 2002 – is the weather. Simply put, the timing of the event is dicey to say the least – Fort Wayne in January. Picking up on this, Dr. Wilbert Rosin wrote in 1982 that “The continued high level of attendance and participation through the years even in the very worst of weather provides proof positive of the vitality and intensity of Lutherans’ interest in their confessions and Lutheran convictions that their confessions are important for the total church, and also for the unchurched.”⁴⁸

Other challenges included how best to publicize the event and who would ultimately be in charge of the works. Suffice it to say that the conversation continues!

Growing Numbers

Dr. Scaer has said on any number of occasions something to the effect that for the first symposium they went out to the seminary entrance and flagged down cars to come in so there would not be so many empty seats.⁴⁹ In fact, he has been known to claim that at the 1978 Symposium “the empty seats outnumbered the full ones by about 10 to one.”⁵⁰ While attendance was initially light, the symposium has been a growing event over the last twenty-five years.

By 1985 total registrations numbered 242 with 269 at the banquet. Strangely, however, daily attendance at the sessions was estimated at 450 on Wednesday, 350 on Thursday, and 450 again on Friday. Perhaps those are somewhat inflated figures – doing attendance Church Growth style – but still they show a discrepancy between those who actually registered and those who simply came along for the ride. A memo from 1989 reported: “Sorry to see that we lost money this year. Lower registration was the main factor (281 vs 319), but our expenses were also

⁴⁸Wilbert Rosin, “The Fifth Symposium on the Confessions: Its Thrust and Significance,” unpublished paper, CTS Archives, Symposium, 1981.

⁴⁹David P. Scaer, “Banquet Address: Thirteenth Annual Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions,” January 24, 1990, CTS Archives, Symposium, 1990, 4.

⁵⁰David P. Scaer, untitle remarks for the introduction of the 1989 Symposium, CTS Archives, Symposium, 1989.

much higher with the result that we spent [*sic*] more money for fewer people which is not a prescription for net profit."⁵¹

Plans for the 1986 Symposium added a new twist. As we have already seen, a distinct exegetical symposium was added to the program that year. In its first year it had thirty-one registrants. The Confessions symposium had 253, with 265 at the banquet.

By 1987 registrations for the Exegetical symposium had climbed to eighty-seven, though of these only twelve were specifically for that particular symposium. Of the 160 total registrations, seventy-five were for both events, and eighty-five were for the Confessions symposium only. So, by 1987, almost half of the participants were experimenting with exegesis, but staying for the Confessions. All of that being said, that is not a bad number for the second year of the event.

The next year there were only ten registrations for the Exegetical symposium only, and in 1989 there were only eleven. However, a trend emerged in regard to the Confessions symposium as well. In 1988 there were ninety-five registrations for the Confessions Congress alone, while in 1989, there were only sixty-one. However, overall attendance was growing.

Numbers, as we know, do not prove anything of themselves. "We're not in the counting business" is a recently heard statement. However, what the attendance at the symposium does show is a dedicated group of laity and pastors who love the Lutheran Confessions and the Lutheran Church. That the number of this group has consistently increased over the last several years, during the presidency of Dr. Dean O. Wenthe, is cause for thanks.

Speaking of Dr. Wenthe, one wonders whether the Symposia provided a platform for his rise to fame. In 1988, then Prof. Dean O. Wenthe received an invitation to address the topic of "The Universal Priesthood of All Believers." Wenthe responded to David Scaer as follows: "Dave, I'll be happy to give the Benedictine position on the above! Blessings!"⁵²

⁵¹R. R. Roberts to David P. Scaer, February 24, 1989, CTS Archives, Symposium, 1989.

⁵²Hand-written response of Dean O. Wenthe to David P. Scaer on a letter of March 25, 1987, CTS Archives, Symposium, 1988.

A Fort Wayne Homecoming

Few graduates of the institution will forget the first time they returned to the campus and were greeted by Dean Daniel Reuning with a hearty "Welcome home!" An emerging purpose of the Symposia over the years was its restorative character. A bond of collegiality drew graduates home to their seminary, and offered the opportunity for new friendships to be formed. One pastor captured the sense of it beautifully:

I wanted to express my deepest appreciation for your work on the Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions which I attended for the first time last week. It was a much needed inspiration and time of renewal for a young but pre-maturely tired young pastor in the trenches of parish ministry. It sent me the message that there is a small but very dedicated group of fellow confessional pastors, professors and laymen and women who are committed to defending the Lutheran Confessional heritage against all the forces of Satan that are trying to discredit them. Even I was surprised that deeply theological discussions such as these would have such a profound effect upon me. They renewed my love for the ministry, the love of the Scriptures and enlivened me for my work of bringing Christ's love to my fellow men and women. I believe this event was even more effective in this for me than would be the Great Commission Convocation with its "church growth guilt trips."⁵³

Over the years there have been different extra-curricular events that have, more or less, spontaneously generated themselves. From the early "Smokeouts" at Robert Schaibley's home (when the garage door opened, smoke literally poured out), to dinners at Mad Anthony's, to lunches, to gatherings at local hotels, eateries, and faculty homes. For years and years the gigantic, chaotic, and utterly delightful party at the Scaer's following the Thursday night banquet provided an intimate(!) setting for the brethren to encourage one another and cement bonds that held the colloquium tightly over the ensuing year. Taken as a whole, these events underscore the nature of the community that is Concordia Theological Seminary, while both solidifying the bonds of the already existing community and simultaneously extending its boundaries.

⁵³Robert L. Eggers, Jr. to David P. Scaer, January 23, 1989, CTS Archives, Symposium, 1989.

Resuscitating Missouri

“Let the dead bury their own dead,” stated Tietjen. He misdiagnosed the case of the Missouri Synod. While it suffered a dramatic schism in the controversy over the Scriptures and the investigation of Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, the body he pronounced lifeless has continued to live and breath and have its being in Christ—albeit not without significant challenges.

Why the continued life and why the continued challenges? In part, the life stems from an ongoing confessional revival that may, in future years if God is merciful, come to rival that of the mid-nineteenth century confessionalists like Charles Porterfield Krauth and the General Council. The confessional revival of the present has arisen from an engaged and critical posture to the books that form and shape the life of Lutheranism.

Writing in 1982, Dr. Wilbert Rosin captured this sense very well. He stated the following in his introduction to the symposium that year.

The question for the present day is to what extent the Lutheran Confessions are an adequate statement in terms of completeness and to what extent they are adequate in terms of expression of essential truths, given the changes in theological discourse and philosophical language. That is where this week's convocation comes to the heart of the matter, insofar as a British author (Davies) has said that the problem of authority is the Achilles heel of Protestantism, and insofar as their hermeneutical problem or interpretation of Christian truth is a central problem, perhaps the central problem, in contemporary theological discourse. That means that this fifth convocation which is addressing such questions as prophecy, fulfillment, and interpretation of prophecy, and understanding of the fulfillment, questions of hermeneutics with respect to particular passages, or the relation of portions of Scripture to confessional statements, or confessional statements to the total message of Scripture—that is why this convocation is one of particular significance.⁵⁴

The Missouri Synod of 2002 is both similar and different to the Synod of 1978. Similar in that the official doctrinal position of the church has not

⁵⁴Wilbert Rosin, “The Fifth Annual Symposium on the Confessions: Its Thrust and Significance,” unpublished paper, CTS Archives, Symposium, 1982, 4.

changed substantially from that of twenty-five years ago. Different, however, in terms of an ongoing disjuncture between doctrine and practice and an increasing radicalism at the local congregational level that has resulted in an "everyone does what is right in his own eyes" experience. How healthy is the doctrinal heart that gives Missouri life? On paper, it remains very strong; but without exercise, or with faulty exercises, the heart grows weak and is damaged. The practical compromises of our doctrinal position—indiscriminate communion practices, unionistic and syncretistic activities, and others—are like eating lard. The veins eventually clog and the heart will stop. The Annual Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions has offered a high fiber, low cholesterol diet and a program of vigorous exercise for Missouri's theological heart, and has helped that heart remain strong. Further, like a caring physician, it has taken the pulse of Missouri and made a prognosis—at times positive and at other times negative. That is exactly what a physician should do: tell the ill patient the source of his ailment, and affirm the healthy patient. The argument is often which comes first, the chicken or the egg, doctrine or practice. The simple fact is, without a strong doctrinal heart, there will be no practice to speak of. At the same time, without faithful practice, one's doctrinal heart becomes weak. The two must hang together, or they will hang separately.

For many years the symposium has tried to keep this balance in place. To a great extent I believe it has succeeded. Let us hope that twenty-five years from now we will be able to reflect on the ongoing, vibrant, pulsating life of confessional Lutheranism in the United States. If these Symposia will be a part of that ongoing life, that would be delightful, too—we might even see the days of dead orthodoxy again. As David Scaer has put it:

The confessional symposium has become for me one of the proofs for the existence of God. Like the four seasons and the rising and the setting of the sun, the symposium just happens to take place and no one knows exactly that [*sic*] it happens. It just happens. Even if we don't know how a symposium like this happens, we know why it happens. It happens because people want to do something irrelevant like talk theology. The hearers at this symposium are not so much interested in how something is being done, but rather in what is being done. This symposium has been dedicated not to how the church proclaims her message (this is not a communications convocation), but rather this symposium is dedicated to what the

message of the church's proclamation should be. It's a matter of substance over method. The medium, no matter how glitzy, is not the message. . . . This symposium demonstrates that there is nothing more relevant than such irrelevancy of theology. . . . So we have come here not to show how relevant we can be and discuss pop theology, but to turn back the clocks and submit ourselves to the judgments of the past and to submit pasts to the judgments of the present. If nothing can be more irrelevant than a person trying to be relevant, then we have proven that nothing succeeds like irrelevancy and whoever wants to be practical had better first be theological. . . . For the church the message must be forward into the past.⁵⁵

May this "irrelevancy" continue for many years to come!

⁵⁵David P. Scaer, "Banquet Address: Thirteenth Annual Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions," January 24, 1990, CTS Archives, Symposium, 1990, 1,3,18.