

Evangelical Lutheranism and Lutheran Evangelicalism

David L. Adams

Introduction

A friend recently suggested to me that, considered as institutions, seminaries are a lot like military academies. His main point was that, like military academies, seminaries do not educate students to serve in some general marketplace, but rather they prepare students reserve in a very particular environment. So, West Point does not prepare students to be accountants or drama critics; it prepares them to be military officers. It does not even prepare just any military officers — it does not prepare sailors or airmen — but military officers who are *soldiers*, officers in the Army, and not just in any army, but the United States Army.

In the same way, this seminary does not prepare students to be accountants or drama critics; it prepares them to be church workers. It does not even prepare just *any* church workers — it does not prepare teachers or directors of Christian education — but workers who are pastors and deaconesses, and not pastors and deaconesses for just any church, but for The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod.

His analogy was a good one. And as I have reflected on this analogy between the seminary and military academies, it dawned on me that there were other ways in which the seminary is like a military academy as well. Both military academies and seminaries teach a mix of theory and practice. In the case of military academies the mix of theory and practice might take the form of the study of the theory of ballistics (the science of predicting how a projectile will travel through the air) and the practice might be the use of modern artillery in combat, or (more simply) how to fire a cannon. In the case of the seminary the mix of theory and practice might take the form of the study of the theory — we call it *theology* — of worship and the practice of how to lead a worship service.

Another way in which military academies and seminaries are alike is in the fact that the graduates of each are minimally trained generalists who need experience and further education to grow into what they should ultimately become. The army understands that a newly-minted lieutenant is not yet a seasoned general. He is a full officer, but not a fully-developed officer. He has to continue to grow, requiring both experience and additional learning before he will become master of his profession. In the same way, the church needs to understand that while newly-graduated and ordained pastors are full pastors, they are not yet fully-developed pastors. They have a lot of growing to do. They need both experience and additional learning before they can become masters of their profession.

This is a fact of the life of the church that some congregations who receive new pastors seem not to understand. Frankly, between you and me, some pastors seem not to understand it either. All of which suggests that this is something that, as a church body, we need to improve on. We do not do a very good job of continuing to help new pastors grow in the pastoral office. But that is a topic for a different speech, so I will not bore you with it further here.

Yet another way in which military' academies and seminaries are alike is in fact that much of what their graduates do in practice is lead people. For both army officers and pastors, and understanding of people, of what motivates them and how they react and respond in various situations, is an important part of what they do.

Well, there are a great many other ways in which military academies and seminaries are alike, but there is one aspect of this analogy that is especially important for us today: one of the greatest dangers facing both military academies and seminaries is the danger that they might be training students to fight the last war instead of the next war. It is a problem that arises naturally enough: professors (whether of theology or of the military arts) teach based on their knowledge and experience. And all of that knowledge and experience is knowledge and experience of die past.

In the military realm this tendency to prepare soldiers to fight the last war can be disastrous. In the years leading up to the First World War, none of the armies of Europe had anticipated what new weapons such as the machine gun, barbed wire, the airplane, or the submarine meant for combat. They marched into the war planning to fight the kind of wars they had fought in the 19th century, and the results were catastrophically deadly. In the years between the First World War and

the Second World War, the French army had learned the lessons of the First World War and built the Maginot Line. They were preparing to fight World War One over again. As a result they were completely unprepared for the fact that the German army had embraced even newer developments in military technology, and had prepared to fight a new kind of war: a *blitzkrieg*.

Seminaries and churches face the same problem as military academies and nations. I was a student at this seminary in the years following the Walk Out of 1974. In those years our faithful professors worked hard to prepare us to deal with the challenges to the authority of the Word of God inherent in Historical Criticism. And their faithful efforts carried us through those difficult years.

At the same time, they did not see, and did not prepare us to fight, a new conflict that was at that very moment beginning to develop in The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod. As we in the Missouri Synod struggled against those who would reject the authority of the Bible as the written Word of God, we quite naturally developed an affinity for others with whom we shared those concerns. We developed natural intellectual alliances with conservative Protestant evangelicals over issues such as the doctrines of inspiration and inerrancy, of the historicity of Biblical accounts of the flood, the conquest of Canaan, and of six-day creation. Over the last thirty years these natural intellectual and theological alliances have continued to be forged in the context of other conflicts in which we have been on the same side: the opposition to abortion, the upholding and defending of the family and its fundamental importance as the God-given foundation for society, and more recently the definition of marriage as the legal union of one man and one woman in the face of those who would promote same-sex marriage.

What we failed to appreciate is that as we worked together with Evangelical Protestantism on these issues — as we read their books, listened to their music, heard their speakers, and followed their leaders — we were being influenced by them in other areas besides those for which we had originally become engaged with them. This influence began subtly in the 1970s, but over the last three decades it has gradually eroded the understanding of what it means to be *Lutheran* for many of my generation of seminary graduates.

The result of these developments is that for the last thirty years conservatives in The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod have been preparing to fight a new war against the liberals of the 1960s and 70s.

Today we in the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod find ourselves in a conflict, but it is not the conflict that we prepared for.

The Three Missouri Synods

In some ways, the challenge before us today is like that of the 1960s and 70s. Our overall goal is the same: to defend conservative Lutheranism. In the 1960s and 70s the challenge facing us was the challenge of defending conservative Lutheranism against the threat that had arisen from the form of moderate modernism that had gradually crept into our churches in the previous twenty years. We were, in effect, defending conservative Lutheranism against a different vision of what Lutheranism would become: the vision of a liberal Lutheranism.

Today the challenge facing us is also the challenge of defending conservative Lutheranism. But today the challenge arises from a different quarter. Today we must defend conservative Lutheranism against the threat that has arisen from the Evangelical Protestantism that has gradually crept into our churches since the 1970s. Today we must, in effect, defend conservative Lutheranism against a different vision of what Lutheranism will become: the vision of a conservative Lutheranism that is essentially a form of conservative American Protestant Evangelicalism with a slight Lutheran veneer, a church that is conservative on the issues of Biblical authority, abortion, same-sex marriage and the like, but a church that is scarcely distinguishable from any other church on the broader landscape of American Evangelical Protestantism.

To understand the conflict within the Missouri Synod today, it is important to recognize that within this house that we call the LCMS there are three different Lutheran Churches — Missouri Synod.

Traditional Missouri

This group, which remains the largest portion of the Synod, continues to hold positions that re-affirm the Synod's connection to its past. It is commonly recognizable through the following emphases:

- It *prefers traditional worship with an emphasis on the Sacraments.*

Traditional Missouri believes that the worship of the church is best conducted using the traditional liturgy set in traditional musical forms.

It is suspicious of liturgical innovation and especially of alternate forms of worship that depart from both the liturgical tradition of the Synod and dispense with the use of a hymnal in worship.

- It is concerned about church and ministry *issues*.

Traditional Missouri is very concerned about maintaining the position on church and ministry defined by Walther in the theses, adopted by our Synod as an official doctrinal statement of the church, that make up the core of his book Church and Ministry. It is troubled by both an extreme clericalism that under-varies the role of the laity in the church and also by efforts to undermine the role of the rightly-called and ordained Office of the Public Ministry by allowing lay workers to conduct word and sacrament ministry.

- It *rejects 'church growth' methods*.

Traditional Missouri believes in evangelism and mission outreach, but it rejects the idea that the church should sacrifice its integrity on doctrinal issues in order to adopt a sociologically-based approach to outreach that employs certain marketing techniques simply because they 'work' to get more people in the doors of our churches. For this reason it is often accused of not caring about mission work.

- It *believes that church fellowship should be based on doctrine*.

Traditional Missouri believes that public fellowship among Christians should be based upon the public-stated and clearly articulated doctrinal positions of the churches to which the Christians belong. It distinguishes between public fellowship (joint participation in public worship services) and private acts of devotion between individual Christians. It also recognizes the distinction between joint public worship and Christians working together in what we sometimes call cooperation in *externals*, public and private efforts (such as disaster relief) that do not involve us in either joint public worship or the suggestion that agreement in doctrine exists between the parties when it does not.

- It *opposes women's ordination*.

Traditional Missouri believes that the Bible teaches clearly and unequivocally that women may not be ordained to the Office of the Public Ministry. It values the service of women in the congregation as teachers, deaconesses, and in all the offices of the congregation that

do not involve them in positions of authority over men or in the exercise of pastoral responsibility.

- It has a *high view of Scripture*.

Traditional Missouri believes in the doctrines of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture.

Evangelical Lutheranism and Lutheran Evangelicalism Page 5 of 16

- It practices close (d) communion.

Traditional Missouri recognizes the Eucharist has both a vertical element, in which we receive the body and blood of Christ, and a horizontal element, in which as often as we eat this bread and drink this cup we confess our common faith and proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. As a practical application of this teaching, the celebration of the Eucharist is an expression, at the congregational level, of the church's general theology of fellowship. Traditional Missouri believes that the proper practice of the church is that Christians should receive the Lord's Supper together only when they are prepared to receive the Lord's Supper through repentance of their sins, faith in Christ, proper catechetical instruction, and the public profession of faith in the teachings of Scripture as explained in the Lutheran Confessions, including the recognition that in, with, and under the bread and wine they do receive the true body and blood of Jesus Christ. In practice this means that the congregation should admit to the Eucharistic table only those who are members of LCMS congregations or other church groups with whom we have established ties of fellowship.

Moderate Missouri

Moderate Missouri is that portion of the Missouri Synod that has been significantly influenced by the theological perspective of those who walked out of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in 1974. It is commonly recognizable through the following emphases:

- It emphasizes *the 'Gospel'* to *the* near exclusion of *other* teachings.

Moderate Missouri emphasizes the traditional Lutheran understanding that the Gospel is the central teaching of the church to such an extent that adherence to the Gospel tends to become virtually the only teaching that matters at all for the church. Moreover, it understands

'Gospel' in a very narrow sense, as referring only to the atoning sacrifice of Christ, and not to other teachings that are intrinsically connected to it. In this it is unlike the reformers, who throughout the Lutheran confessions engage a wide variety of articles of faith and church practices that relate to the Gospel. It also departs from the explicit words of the Formula of Concord, which teaches that agreement between churches should depend upon mutual agreement in "doctrine and all its articles" and not just in the Gospel defined in the narrowest possible terms. For this reason Moderate Missouri is sometimes accused of Gospel Reductionism.

- It is more *open in its* communion practice than Traditional Missouri.

Moderate Missouri tends to reject the view that participation in the Lord's Supper should be reserved for those who are members of the LCMS. It tends to view the joint celebration of the Eucharist not merely as a sign of the unity of the church, but also as an *instrument* to help achieve that unity. As a result some among Moderate Missouri welcome to the Eucharist all who recognize the presence of Christ's true body and blood in the sacrament. Others are freer still, welcoming all who believe in Christ.

- It *has a* strong concern *for social welfare issues*.

Moderate Missouri has long been characterized by a concern for social welfare and human care. Its members have been very active in these areas and in this they have reminded other segments of the Synod not to neglect the care of the neighbor to which Christ has called us. Some within Moderate Missouri have been criticized for going so far in this direction that they have substituted a 'social gospel' for the proclamation of the atoning work of Christ on the cross as the central message of the Church, but such excesses have been the exception rather than the rule, even within Moderate Missouri.

- It embraces *theological diversity*.

For Moderate Missouri, the emphasis on the Gospel alone as the defining doctrine of the church means a willingness to embrace theological diversity in the church. Generally, they do not accept the view that agreement in doctrine is necessary for the unity of the church.

- It is *open to considering, or openly favors, women's* ordination.

Moderate Missouri almost universally rejects the claim that the Bible teaches an order of creation, and tends to understand the New Testament's restrictions on the service of women as either a misunderstanding by the church today, or a reflection of a cultural value not binding on the church in all generations. As a result, most within Moderate Missouri favor allowing women to serve as elders and in other positions which involve the exercise of the office of the public ministry or having authority over men in matters of faith. Some go farther still, and advocate the ordination of women.

- *It has an ambiguous position on the Scriptures.*

While most of those affiliated with Moderate Missouri generally do affirm the doctrines of inspiration and inerrancy, they tend to be less specific in the doctrinal claims that they make on the basis of these teachings than Traditional Missouri. Only a very few would go as far as liberals in other church bodies in disregarding Scripture altogether. However, some within Moderate Missouri are often rather ambiguous about the historicity of the creation account in the book of Genesis, the acceptability of the teaching of evolution, the authorship of the Pentateuch and some other Biblical books, and other teachings of the church. If they seldom today publicly embrace the methods of historical criticism, they do sometimes assert an understanding of the *function* of the Word of God that is closer to that of historical criticism than to that of the traditional Christian understanding of the Bible.

Formula of Concord, Epitome, Article X, Affirmative Theses, 5: "We believe, teach, and confess that no church should condemn another because it has fewer or more external ceremonies not commanded by God, as long as there is mutual agreement in doctrine and in all its articles as well as in the right use of the holy sacraments, according to the familiar axiom, "Disagreement in fasting does not destroy agreement in faith" (Tappert, 493). The same idea is repeated again in Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, at the end of Article X.

Neo-Evangelical Missouri

I call this third group 'Neo-Evangelical Missouri' because this group's understanding of evangelicalism is more shaped by the theological perspective of American Evangelicalism than it is shaped by the theological perspective of the evangelicalism of the Lutheran Reformation.

- It is *outreach-oriented*.

While both Traditional Missouri and Moderate Missouri care about evangelism and missions, Neo-Evangelical Missouri is most clearly characterized by its strong emphasis on outreach. The tendency is for Neo-Evangelical Missouri is to read the Great Commission in such a way as to emphasize the call to go and baptize, but to de-emphasize the call to teach the baptized to keep all that God has commanded. As a result, while many in Neo-Evangelical Missouri continue to hold to traditional positions on most theological issues, they tend not to emphasize doctrine or to highlight the Lutheran confessions in their congregations and ministries. They are also often highly critical of others in the Synod who do not share their emphasis.

- *It favors or practices a more open communion.*

Like Moderate Missouri, Neo-Evangelical Missouri tends to reject the view that agreement in doctrine must be a precursor to reception of the Eucharist in our churches.

- *It is strongly independent.*

Another characteristic of Neo-Evangelical Missouri is that it emphasizes the traditional Synodical affirmation of the congregation as the church-in-that-place to such an extreme that some seem not to care at all what the rest of the Synod thinks or believes. This reduces the Synod from being a covenant of love that places a genuine (if self-imposed) obligation upon those who pledge themselves to it to being a mere external association of loosely affiliated independent entities with no obligation to one another.

- *It has a high view of Scripture.*

Like Traditional Missouri, Neo-Evangelical Missouri has a high view of Scripture. It unreservedly regards the Scripture as the inspired and inerrant Word of God. However, its practical use of Scripture is sometimes different from the approach taken by Traditional Missouri, emphasizing the Word as source of knowledge about self rather than as a means of grace, as we shall examine further later in this presentation. This difference in approach often leads to different emphases and conclusions about what the Scripture says, and most especially about the way that the Scripture is used in the life of the Church.

- *It favors 'church growth' methods.*

Given its strong emphasis on mission and its highly independent attitude, it is not surprising that Neo-Evangelical Missouri should embrace the emphases and methods of the church-growth movement. This shapes both its theology and especially its practice of worship, generally in the direction of a 'tent meeting' theology to worship, as we shall consider further in the next portion of this paper.

- *It has a pragmatic approach to ministry.*

For Neo-Evangelical Missouri, ministry decisions are often based on 'what works'. More significantly, 'what works' is generally defined in terms of what gets people in the door and makes them feel good about their membership in the congregation. This leads in turn to an emphasis on pastoral ministry as *leadership* that reflects a theology of the pastoral office that differs from that of Traditional Missouri. Neo-Evangelical Missouri tends to view the pastor more as a manager, trainer, marketing director, and executive officer and less as a spiritual care-giver and shepherd of God's flock, who cares for the souls of the people of God entrusted to him by Christ his over-shepherd through the ministry of Word and sacrament.

- *It embraces contemporary worship;*

another of the most characteristic aspects of Neo-Evangelical Missouri is its embrace of contemporary music in worship and a corresponding de-emphasis of both liturgy and traditional hymnody.

- *It is tolerant of the charismatic movement.*

While most of Neo-Evangelical Missouri is not charismatic, it (together with Moderate Missouri) has exhibited a tolerance for charismatics in the Synod. Needless to say, virtually all charismatics in the Synod belong to the Neo-Evangelical segment of the Synod- Its "live-and-let-live" attitude reflects both its de-emphasis on doctrine and its highly independent orientation.

- *It tends toward open fellowship with other Christians.*

Finally, Neo-Evangelicals within the LCMS generally reject the traditional Missourian position that church fellowship should be based on agreement in doctrine. Neo-Evangelical Missouri generally emphasizes the unity of all Christians in Christ as the basis of fellowship, and sometimes expresses a greater affinity with the broader world of American Protestantism than with other more

traditional Lutherans.

What Does This Mean?

In presenting this summary, my sole purpose is to suggest that there are *three* theologically distinct groups struggling for control of the Synod today. I am not attempting to document in an exhaustive way *all* the positions of the various groups, but rather merely to summarize the main characteristics of each in order to support my main point about the nature of the struggle within the Synod today. You understand, I hope, that there are a great many people in the LCMS who do not fall cleanly into one of these three groups, but eclectically embrace elements from two or even all three of them. There is also a spectrum of beliefs and attitudes within each of these three broad groupings.

My main point is this: recognizing that there are within this house three distinct Lutheran Churches — Missouri Synod is important if we are going to understand the dynamic of conflict within the Synod today. Sometimes in our desire to make things simple to understand, we speak as though the struggle in the Synod today is a two-sided struggle between conservatives and liberals, The conflict within the Missouri Synod today is not a two-sided struggle between conservatives and liberals. Rather it is a three-sided struggle in which there is often ambiguity caused by the blending and interplay of three major perspectives. This interplay is complicated by the fact that the alignments and alliances among these adherents to these three groups often shift according to the issues. For example, Neo-Evangelical Missouri and Traditional Missouri would be allied against any assertion of a low view of Scripture by Moderate Missouri, but Neo-Evangelical Missouri and Moderate Missouri stand together against Traditional Missouri's strong position on closed communion. Moreover, many in Moderate Missouri share with Traditional Missouri a preference for traditional liturgical worship while others within Moderate Missouri align with Neo-Evangelical Missouri's promotion of contemporary worship.

Each of these three groups sees the other two as lacking some vital element. From the perspective of Traditional Missouri, both Moderate Missouri and Neo-Evangelical Missouri appear to be willing to compromise fundamental teachings that define Lutheranism for the sake of conforming to the ambient American Protestant culture. In the case of the Moderate Missouri it is assimilation to the liberal American

Protestantism of the old mainline denominations. In the case of Neo-Evangelical Missouri it is assimilation to conservative American Evangelical Protestantism. The impulse for each is the same; it simply leads them in different directions. So from the perspective of Traditional Missouri, neither Moderate Missouri nor Neo-Evangelical Missouri is willing to hold onto the distinctives necessary to maintain the traditional Evangelical Lutheranism of the Lutheran confessions.

From the perspective of Moderate Missouri, both Traditional Missouri and Neo-Evangelical Missouri have succumbed to the American fundamentalist impulse. They are bound by an over-simplistic view of the Bible that they see as neither required by nor particularly helpful to a Lutheranism that emphasizes the Gospel alone (narrowly defined) as the chief article of the Church. Moderate Missouri also regards the both of the other segments of the church as deficient in their care for people, as reflected in their lack of concern for social justice and human care issues.

From the perspective of Neo-Evangelical Missouri, both Traditional Missouri and Moderate Missouri lack an adequate passion for evangelism and outreach. As a result they have failed to embrace those methods that are most efficient in carrying out the central work of the Church: the saving of souls. Their churches, Neo-Evangelical Missouri insists, are stagnant because they have failed to embrace the cultural context of our generation, which we must do if we are to reach the lost.

Having said all of this, we must further recognize that an adequate description of the state of the Synod today requires more than an awareness of these three groups. There are those within each of these three main segments of the Synod who are strongly committed to the principles of the group to which they belong, and are willing to fight for them. There are others who have been influenced in a certain direction, but are not strongly committed to it. They generally agree with the group, but their convictions are not so strong that they are prepared to fight for their position.

In addition, there are many others in the Synod who simply do not know what they think. They hear the competing claims, but generally do not understand what all the fuss is about. They wish that we could all just get along, and they are willing to accept most any of the positions of any of the groups if it will buy peace in the Synod.

Finally, we should note that these three groups are not equal in size.

Traditional Missouri is the largest group within the Synod today. Neo-Evangelical Missouri is the fastest-growing group. Moderate Missouri is on the wane, both in terms of numbers and in terms of influence. It still exists, and Traditional Missouri is right to be concerned about its teachings. What power Moderate Missouri has within the Synod, however, is largely dependent upon its alliance with Neo-Evangelical Missouri.

Because of these trends the major conflict — the next *war*, if you will — is between Traditional Missouri and Neo-Evangelical Missouri. Or, to put it another way, it is between those who wish to uphold a Reformation understanding of Evangelical Lutheranism and those who would promote a form of American Evangelicalism with a Lutheran veneer.

Evangelical Lutheranism and Lutheran Evangelicalism

In the time remaining I would like to illustrate more fully the differences between *Evangelical Lutheranism*, the traditional position of the Synod, and *Lutheran Evangelicalism*, the growing form of faith within the Synod that is simply a kind of general American Evangelicalism with a slight Lutheran veneer.

Perhaps one way to get at this distinction would be to ask, "What is the difference between a Lutheran and a Southern Baptist who just happens to think that it is OK to use wine in the Lord's Supper and is willing to baptize infants?" I have asked this question quite often in recent years as I have traveled around the Synod, and I have come to the conclusion that there are a great many lay members of our church, and far too many pastors, who cannot explain what the difference is between being a Lutheran and being a Southern Baptist who just happens to baptize infants and use wine in the Lord's Supper. As I will suggest, Lutheran Evangelicalism is more or less the position of someone who is a Southern Baptist who just happens to use wine in the Lord's Supper and baptizes babies. There is more to *Evangelical Lutheranism* than this. While a complete answer to this question is beyond the scope of this paper, for the sake of brevity in the time remaining I would like to highlight three key areas in which these segments of the Synod differ.

Understanding the Word of God

We have already said that both Traditional Missouri, representing Evangelical Lutheranism, and Neo-Evangelical Missouri, representing

Lutheran Evangelicalism, have a high view of Scripture. Both affirm that the Holy Scripture *is* the Word of God. Both affirm the doctrines of inspiration and inerrancy. But that does not mean that they approach the Scripture the same way, or get the same thing out of it when they read the Scripture.

To understand what is happening with the use of the Bible in Lutheran Evangelicalism, we need to begin with the difference between the use of the Bible among conservative Lutherans and conservative Protestants. For Evangelical Lutheranism the primary function of the Word of God is as a means of grace. God has joined His Word to the water of baptism, to the bread and wine of the Eucharist, and to the words of Scripture in order to reveal Christ, to work repentance in sinners, to extend His grace to the penitent, to create and sustain faith, and to teach His ways. We encounter this Word of God through the Scriptures and in the sacraments. Thus, for us, the Word of God is primarily a means of grace, and secondarily the normative authority for teaching in the Church, a source of propositional truth about God and His ways.

For most of Protestantism, the Word of God has a rather different function. While acknowledging the Bible as the Word of God, the primary function of the Word is not as a means of grace. In its rejection of the Word in the sacraments, Protestantism is left only with the Word as a source of knowledge. For classical Protestantism this certainly included knowledge of God and the truths of His way. However, Americans of the late 20th and early 21st centuries are children of the Romantic Movement, and to understand how American Evangelicals read the Bible today one must understand the impact of the Romantic Movement.

The Romantic Movement in literature and the arts left its mark on religion in Western Europe and America by transforming religion's focus from objective knowledge about God and the world to the individual's subjective knowledge of himself (or herself). Satan used the Romantic Movement to reduce our understanding of religion to a focus on the religion of the heart. The religion of the heart seeks authentic experience as the validation of religious truth. It is not interested in abstract, objective, external ideas and concepts for their own sake. Truth, the children of the Romantic Movement believe, is a matter of the heart, not words on a page in a book.

This demonic ruse does not necessarily take us away from the Bible so much as it changes what we seek when we read the Bible. It changes

the questions that we ask of the text, and consequently the answers that we find there. When the children of the Romantic Movement read the Bible, they are trying to discover something meaningful for themselves, something applicable to their individual life-situation and experience. They are not seeking objective information about the shape of the cosmos or an account of how God has acted in ages past to accomplish the redemption of all mankind. As such, the way that contemporary American Protestantism reads the Bible is primarily as a source of self-understanding and personal enlightenment. It is Bible-reading as spiritual therapy.

This *Bible-reading'tis-therapy* is foreign to both Evangelical Lutheranism and the classical Protestantism of the Reformation-era, but modern American Evangelicalism is steeped in it. This is not to say that modern American Evangelicals would deny that the Bible has something to say about God and the world. They would certainly say no such thing. Indeed, their rigorous defense of such teachings as six-day creation underscore their commitment to what the Bible says. However, their common *use* of the Scripture is as a kind of emotional and spiritual balm: it makes them feel good about themselves and their relationship with God.

The net result of this is a Christianity that acknowledges the Bible as the Word of God in *theory*, a Christianity that reads the Bible to reinforce its own emotional engagement with God, but a Christianity that has little interest in, or use for, what the Bible actually says, and a Christianity that no longer connects what the Bible says with what the church, or the believer, does. This emphasis on individual, subjective, and devotional reading of the text rather than upon a public, objective reading of the text is die primary way in which popular American Evangelicalism reads and uses the Scripture.

Lutheran Evangelicalism's reading of the Bible is predominantly shaped by this same influence of the Romantic Movement. As a result, Lutheran Evangelicalism tends to see Traditional Missouri's claims about what the text means and its significance for ecclesiastical practice as just a matter of individual opinion, and hardly relevant for the real life of the Church.

The disconnection of the faith from what the Bible actually says manifests itself first, and most obviously, in the gap between what we confess that the Bible teaches and what we actually *do* in our ecclesiastical practice. Another way of saying this same thing is to suggest that the main focus of the Battle for the Bible today, and one

of the chief sources of conflict among us, is not over the *nature* of the Bible, but over the use of the Bible.

This shift in the debate was brought home to me quite emphatically a couple of years ago when I spoke before a hearing of a dispute resolution panel that was deliberating over what was then a contentious matter in the Synod. I had been asked to make a presentation to the panel on the Biblical teaching on the issues before the panel. After my presentation there was a break in the schedule of the hearings. During that break, one of the three members of the panel, one of the three 'judges' who would decide the case, approached me in the hallway, thanked me for my presentation, and then made the following statement: "I know that what you said about what the Bible says is true, but we have to do what is best for the Synod." I was tempted to respond with what seemed to me to be the obvious thing here: doing what the Bible says is what is best for the Synod. The striking thing about this interchange, however, is that to my interlocutor, and to an increasingly significant portion of the Synod, that very point — that doing what the Bible says is what is best for the Synod — does not seem obvious.

Worship

A second area in which there is a growing divide between Evangelical Lutheranism and Lutheran Evangelicalism in the Missouri Synod is in the area of worship. I am not here to re-hash arguments about contemporary music, the employment of liturgy, or the use of a hymnal, as important as those topics are. Rather, I suggest that the most important distinction between Evangelical Lutheranism and Lutheran Evangelicalism in the area of worship is the difference over the fundamental theological understanding of what worship is.

For Evangelical Lutheranism worship is a divine dialogue in which God speaks to us and gives his gifts through the Word and the sacraments. We, the people of God, gather in His presence at his beckoning to receive those gifts in faith and respond in praise and thanksgiving. However — and this is of fundamental importance — Evangelical Lutheranism understands that the response of the people of God in worship is to be normed by God through the gifts of God.

What does this understanding of worship as divine dialogue mean in practical terms? First, it means that the worship 'event' of the Christian congregation is primarily for the congregation. That is to say, it is *the people of God* who gather together in worship. For this reason,

as you doubtless know, the early church restricted the participation in worship of non-Christians and (in some cases) catechumens. Second, the understanding that the response of the people of God in worship is normed by God through His gifts has important implications for the form that the Church's worship takes. In practical terms, this means that the words that the Church speaks in response to what God has done are primarily cast in the words of Scripture. We speak back to God what God has spoken to us. In this way worship is truly Christ-centered, for we hear Christ speaking to us, and we speak Christ's words in response. Thus worship is a divine dialogue in which Christ speaks to us and Christ speaks in us.

Lutheran Evangelicalism is tending toward a very different theology of worship. It has gradually adopted what we might call a *tent-meeting* theology of worship, a theology of worship that is rooted in the revivalist theology of Evangelicalism's Methodist roots. A tent-meeting theology of" worship elevates *outreach* to the level of a primary function of worship. Its constant subtext is the need to reach out to the unbeliever in our midst. It focuses on bringing people into the tent and making them comfortable so that they will be receptive to hearing the Gospel. And it looks for a response from the unbeliever and the renewed believer alike.

This theological perspective also has significant implications for what is done in practice. First, it means that the goal of reaching outsiders becomes significant in shaping the worship 'event' of the Christian congregation. While the people of God are present and involved, there is an intentional focus upon evangelizing any unbelievers who may be present. Second, the event is structured with a two-fold emphasis: First, there is an emphasis on keeping disinterested people engaged. This leads in the direction of worship-as-religious-entertainment. Second, there is an emphasis on eliciting a response from them. For the children of the Romantic Movement, a *valid* response must be a response from the heart. In practical terms, this means that the words that the assembly speaks in response to what God has done are not primarily cast in the words of Scripture, but are cast in terms of what is going on in the heart of the individual. Pastors who write their own liturgies often fall into this trap. Even so-called liturgical worship becomes person-centered rather than Christ-centered when we speak back to God what is on our minds rather than what God has spoken to us. It becomes worship normed by our needs and our response rather than by God's gifts and God's Word. This is the reason that even though many congregations shaped by Lutheran Evangelicalism have a veneer of liturgical worship, the kind of liturgy they employ strikes the

Evangelical Lutheran as deficient, for this kind of roll-your-own liturgy tends quickly to lose its Christ-centeredness.

The Nature of the Christian Life

The third major area of difference between Evangelical Lutheranism and Lutheran Evangelicalism that I would like to address here is their different understandings of the nature of the Christian life. To be sure, both sides understand that Christ calls his people to a life of service and mission, a life in which by the grace of God we grow into the image of Christ. There is, however, a clear difference between the Evangelical Lutheran understanding of the nature of the Christian life and that of Reformed and Evangelical theology.

For Evangelical Lutheranism, not only is salvation a gift of the grace of God, but so also is the Christian life. The Christian life, as Evangelical Lutheranism understands it, is a life of vocation, in which we live out our faith in the place in life that God has given us. In this vocation we also live out Christ's care for our neighbor. The recognition that the Christian life is a gift of God's grace means that Evangelical Lutheranism understands that the Christian life is a life of rest in the grace of God. It is not a life lived under compulsion to prove one's self worthy of God's favor, but a life of peace in Christ as God works through Word and Sacrament to shape the image of Christ in us and to accomplish His will in the world through us. It is an understanding of the Christian life shaped by St. Paul's words to the Galatians (2.20): "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

By contrast, Reformed theology and Evangelical theology conceive of the Christian life as something that I do for God rather than as something that *God does in me*. In their theology it is up to me to prove to myself and to the world, and most of all to God, that I really do believe, and to prove it by doing what God wants me to do.

The contrast between the Lutheran and Evangelical understandings of the Christian life, then, is the contrast between a life driven by purpose (as someone has recently said it), and a life lived at rest in the grace of God. Or, to put it another way, it is a contrast between Reformed doing and Lutheran being.

However you choose to put it, Lutheran Evangelicalism has begun to adopt this American Evangelical view of the Christian life. We regularly

listen to their speakers and read their books as they tell us what it means to be a Christian, that is to say, what you are supposed to do if you want to be a Christian. One sign of this adoption is the large number of LCMS churches that have promoted a purpose-driven model of the Christian life. To be sure, these churches have tried to avoid the worst excesses of Reformed Evangelicalism by producing handouts that point out chief problems to avoid. But when the fundamental concept of the Christian life being promoted undermines the view that the Christian life is a gift of God's grace, it does not do much good to plug a few little holes and claim that we are doing something genuinely Lutheran. This is merely a classic example of putting a Lutheran veneer on a Neo-Evangelical theology.

Conclusion: What We Will Be?

I began this presentation with an analogy between the seminary and a military academy, and I suggested that the greatest danger for both is that they train students to fight the previous war rather than the next war. The truth is that my analogy was somewhat misleading. It should be clear that what we have been discussing here is not the next conflict within the LCMS, but the current one.

I have suggested that the current conflict within the Synod is a three-sided affair in which the primary threat to conservative Lutheranism is not the old-fashioned liberals of the 1960s and 70s but the Neo-Evangelical element that has grown up since the late 1970s and which is intent upon turning the LCMS from being a truly Evangelical Lutheran synod rooted in the theology of the Reformation to being just another American Evangelical group, albeit one with the Lutheran veneer of using wine in the Eucharist and baptizing infants. In the just-over 30 years between the walkout and Today, we have come halfway toward their goal. But the real question is not where we are today, but where we will be 30 years from today. Unless this church body changes its current direction, 30 years from today the LCMS will consist of Southern Baptists who just happen to use wine in communion and baptize infants.

We are engaged in a struggle for the soul of the LCMS. What disturbs me is that some of my friends, who are genuinely committed to the theology of the Lutheran confessions, seem to think that we should withdraw behind the Maginot Line of our confessional Lutheranism, hunker down in our bunker with our hymnal and Book of Concord, and just try to survive. But I do not think so. I believe that genuine Evangelical Lutheranism is worth fighting for. And I believe that the

confessing nature of our faith requires us to fight for it, regardless of the consequences to ourselves.

The struggle for the soul of the LCMS in which we are engaged requires four things of us: First, it requires faithfulness. Not faithfulness to an institution or to an organization, but faithfulness to the theology of the Word of God as articulated in the Lutheran Confessions. Human institutions, even human institutions such as ecclesiastical denominations and seminaries, come and go. The Word of God remains forever.

Second, it requires clarity of understanding. It is tempting to take refuge in the formulas of the past, simply to repeat what our forefathers have said before us, and believe that we have defended the faith. I treasure what our forefathers have said, and I look to them for guidance and understanding. I also recognize that the situation of the church today is different than it was in the past. To defend the faith today means that we must do more than simply repeat the formulas of the past, true though they may be. It means that we must clearly understand our own theology, and how to apply it to the situation of today.

We have a good model of this is the work of C.F.W. Walther. Walther was forced by the situation of his fledgling synod in America to draw not just upon the formulas of the past but to recast them in a new form to meet the challenges confronting the church in his generation. We must follow his example and do likewise. This requires real theological work, and not using mere slogans.

Third, the struggle for the soul of the LCMS requires bold and intelligent action. We must engage the conflict before us in a way that is effective. This means that we must *really* engage it. The temptation is for us to sit in comfortable enclaves such as this and vent our spleens and then go home feeling all righteous about how boldly we have stood up for the truth. There is nothing bold about my speaking here. I am preaching to the choir. I have not advanced the cause, I have merely talked about it. What is required of each of us is praying, teaching, preaching, speaking, and writing directed toward the goal of persuading those who are not here of the importance of preserving true Evangelical Lutheranism against the temptations of a merely Lutheran Evangelicalism, and to support others who are doing the same.

But our action must be intelligent as well as bold. Sometimes we are

tempted to follow the old syllogism:

Major Premise: *We must do something.*

Minor Premise: *This is something.*

Conclusion: *Let's do this.*

That can't be our way. We must not act simply for the sake of acting. Rather we must act in a way that is both faithful to our theology and that is likely to be effective in bringing about the goals that we seek to attain.

Fourth, we must be prepared to endure. I know that some of you are already proven veterans in the service of Christ's Gospel. You I honor for your faithful endurance. And yet I call upon you again to show us the way, to counsel us with your wisdom, to inspire us, to encourage us, and to keep us true to our calling. Others of us are raw recruits, yet to be tested in the fight. To all I say that the struggle before us is not the struggle of a day, or a week, or a month, or a year. It is the struggle of a lifetime. It is the cross that Christ calls you to bear. Bear it faithfully. Bear it wisely. Bear it boldly. Bear it with grace and with humility before the proud and with compassion for the weak. Bear it with endurance despite the hardship and the suffering that it brings. Bear it in peace and bear it in joy. And let Christ be victorious.

1 Copyright David L Adams, 2005. All rights reserved. This document may be reproduced and distributed free of charge for all educational and/or religious non-commercial purposes provided that the **text** is not altered and provided that this copyright notice is included. Other permissions may be secured from the author by contacting him at Concordia Seminary, 801 Seminary Place, St. Louis, Mo. 63105.