**PURE DOCTRINE**

Martin Luther writes, “Above all things we should strive to preserve the true

doctrine of Scripture in purity and unanimity.”1 If anyone emphasized the importance of

pure doctrine, it was certainly Martin Luther. It was precisely because the doctrine was

not pure that the medieval church had instituted so many practices contrary to God’s

Word, practices that deprived the people of comfort as they directed them to various

human works for assurance of God’s favor. The practices of indulgences, prayers to the

saints, pilgrimages, relics and so on all proceeded from a false and impure understanding of the Scriptures. And of course the practices reflected the theology on which they were based.

The Reformation took place precisely because Luther rediscovered the pure

doctrine. The Gospel, with its magnificent comfort in Christ, came once again to shine

forth in its glory because the pure doctrine was taught to the people. Ever since Luther,

the Lutheran Church has treasured pure doctrine, has considered it necessary for the

health and salvation of the church and has strived for it. Our Lutheran Confessions

declare, “The true adornment of the churches is godly, useful and clear doctrine...”2

From time to time there are those within the Lutheran Church who lament her

insistence on the commitment to pure doctrine. Incessant doctrinal purification may

deprive the church of her energies and divert her from the task of evangelism. So the

reasoning may go. Never mind that the Old Testament frequently warns against false

prophets. Never mind that the Apostles in virtually all of the epistles have it as their

objective to teach the pure doctrine and to identify and reject the false teachings of their

day. Never mind that Jesus Himself is constantly setting forth the pure doctrine and

condemning the false teachings of the scribes and Pharisees. Never mind all this! The

complaint about attention to pure doctrine continues to be heard from those who have

pietistic or liberal leanings. So it will always be.

In our day the very concept of absolute truth or pure doctrine is denigrated. But

Luther says, “If purity of doctrine is to be maintained and the true religious worship is to

be commended publicly, it is certainly the duty of all pious teachers to expose again and

again the godless doctrine of the papacy and to denounce false forms of worship.”3

Luther promotes incessant doctrinal purification. C.F.W. Walther also promotes incessant doctrinal purification. In his essay, “Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Synod,” Walther states, “It is impossible for a sizable church body to remain in the true faith if there isn’t a **constant check** to see that everything still is as it was in the beginning.”4

For myself, I will be content to stand with Luther and Walther and also with the

authors of the Formula of Concord who, having taught the pure doctrine, and having

refuted the many errors that had arisen in the church since the death of Luther, confessed in these words:

From this our explanation, friends and enemies and therefore

everyone, may clearly infer that we have no intention of yielding aught of

the eternal, immutable truth of God for the sake of temporal peace,

tranquility, and unity (which moreover, is not in our power to do). Nor

would such peace and unity, since it is devised against the truth and for its

suppression, have any permanency. Still less are we inclined to adorn and

conceal a corruption of the pure doctrine and manifest condemned errors.

But we entertain heartfelt pleasure and love for, and on our part are

sincerely inclined and anxious to advance, that unity according to our

utmost power, by which His glory remains to God uninjured, nothing of

the divine truth of the holy Gospel is surrendered, no room is given to the

least error, poor sinners are brought to true, genuine repentance, raised up

by faith, confirmed in obedience, and thus justified and eternally saved

alone through the sole merit of Christ.5

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In my presentation to you today I would like to focus on four main aspects of this

subject of pure doctrine. First of all, I would like to spend time on the intimate connection

between doctrine and practice. Second I would like to talk about the connection between

Scripture’s clarity and pure doctrine. Third, I would like to discuss the concept of pure

doctrine as salvific or saving. Finally, I would like to point out the importance of

identifying error and condemning it as an essential counterpart to the proclamation of the

truth.

In his lectures on Galatians in 1535 Luther noted a distinction between doctrine

and life that is quite useful.

…doctrine must be carefully distinguished from life. Doctrine is

heaven; life is earth. In life there is sin, error, uncleanness, and misery,

mixed, as the saying goes, “with vinegar.” Here love should condone,

tolerate, be deceived, trust, hope, and endure all things (1 Cor. 13:7); here

the forgiveness of sins should have complete sway, provided that sin and

error are not defended. But just as there is no error in doctrine, so there is

no need for any forgiveness of sins. Therefore there is no comparison at all

between doctrine and life. “One dot” of doctrine is worth more than

“heaven and earth” (Matt. 5:18); therefore we do not permit the slightest

offense against it. But we can be lenient toward errors of life. For we, too,

err daily in our life and conduct; so do all the saints, as they earnestly

confess in the Lord’s Prayer and the Creed. But by the grace of God our

doctrine is pure; we have all the articles of faith solidly established in

Sacred Scripture. The devil would dearly love to corrupt and overthrow

these; that is why he attacks us so cleverly with this specious argument

about not offending against love and the harmony among the churches.6

Earlier in this same commentary Luther remarks, “Therefore doctrine must be one

eternal and round golden circle, in which there is no crack; if even the tiniest crack

appears, the circle is no longer perfect.”7 Luther’s point is not difficult to follow.

Doctrine must be perfect. There must be no error in our teaching. When the teaching is

correct, he says, “we do not permit the slightest offense against it.” On the other hand,

when it comes to people’s lives, we are willing to forgive anything. Sin should not be

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defended but it should be forgiven. Doctrine comes from God and we do not have the

right to tamper with it, change it, eliminate it or deny it in any way. Therefore, when a

pastor preaches the teachings of Scripture, there will never be any need for him to ask for

forgiveness for the way he has preached. But life is what we do. It is filled with sin and

error. We should be understanding when it comes to the way people live and be prepared

to forgive.

This distinction between doctrine and life is a helpful one. It was made by Luther

to refute the charge that the Lutherans were not loving when they insisted so strenuously

that there must be agreement on doctrine. “We are very willing to be loving when it

comes to people’s lives,” Luther is saying. “But we have no right to be “loving” when it

comes to God’s Word. Here there can be no flexibility, no forgiveness, so to speak. The

Word must be taught and preached clearly. A very helpful distinction.

But there is another important distinction that needs to be made, namely the

distinction between life and practice. There are many who would like to place the

church’s practice in the same category as Christians’ lives. Here, too, it is held, we need

to be understanding and forgiving and not be critical if people within the same fellowship

have different church practices. As Lutherans, of course, we recognize the validity of our

church’s teaching on adiaphora. We recognize that certain practices in the church are

neither commanded nor forbidden by God’s Word. That is not the issue here. The

questions here are: Does our practice reflect our doctrine? Should our practice reflect our

doctrine? Does doctrine form practice? Does unscriptural practice compromise the clarity

of our doctrinal confession? The Christian’s life and the Church’s practice are not the

same thing. They need to be distinguished from each other.

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In 2002 Dr. David Scaer made a presentation to the Council of Presidents of the

Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. It was entitled, “Doctrine and Practice: Setting the

Boundaries: An Abstract Essay with Practical Implications.” His presentation took place

about five months after the participation of District President David Benke in an

interfaith prayer service at Yankee Stadium in New York. This was a very painful time in

the history of our church. Although Dr. Scaer’s paper does not address directly the

episode at Yankee Stadium, it is clearly an attempt to provide guidance to the Church

when difficult decisions are before her and to make it clear that doctrine and practice are

intimately connected. Toward the beginning of his presentation, he notes that a

distinction needs to be made between the church’s practice and Christian life. Christian

life is imperfect and is to be excluded from the concept of the church’s practice. Dr. Scaer

then goes on to explain the view of the Lutheran Confessions regarding the relationship

between doctrine and practice. He says,

The *Augsburg Confession* and the *Apology* discuss doctrine in the

first twenty-one articles and practice in the last seven. This division might

suggest that doctrine and practice are two different *things*, but as these

confessions show, they are really aspects of one *thing* with each reflecting

the other and both deriving their content and form from the same

underlying reality, God Himself. So we may begin with doctrine or

practice, two sides of one coin. Doctrine expresses itself in certain

practices and embedded in our practices is what we believe…8

The intimate connection between doctrine and practice ought to be obvious. If I

were to say that I accept the 6th Commandment as true and correct doctrine but am not so

much concerned about how the doctrine of that commandment is expressed in my

practice, how would you interpret that? You might conclude that I would not be critical

of adultery or fornication. You might conclude that, as a pastor, I would have no trouble

with two of my members living together outside of marriage. You might even conclude

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that I was a liar who didn’t accept the teaching of the 6th Commandment at all! What kind

of person accepts the doctrine but not the practice? Or if I were to say to you that I accept

the teaching of the 7th Commandment but am not so much concerned about how the

doctrine of **that** commandment is expressed in my practice, how would you interpret

**that**? You might want to keep a close eye on your wallet!

According to David Scaer,

Doctrine and practice draw from the same substance, they are

inseparably related: two sides of the same coin.

Doctrinal formulations arose not only as a response to

misformulations, as with Arius, (for example, the Nicene Creed), but also

because certain practices like indulgences were judged to contradict the

foundation of faith, which then may not have been fully formulated. This

controversy (practice) allowed both parties to articulate their positions on

justification (doctrine).9

There is an old song that goes, “Love and marriage, love and marriage go together

like a horse and carriage.” The same is true of doctrine and practice. They go together.

Our doctrine is reflected in our practice. Our practice demonstrates what our doctrine is.

If our practice is sloppy or unscriptural, it says something about our doctrine. I quote

David Scaer again. “Since both doctrine and practice derive their content and form from

the same reality, which is the Trinitarian God in His saving acts, then the strictures

required for one are also required for the other.”10

Thus, when it comes to worship, for example, one cannot take the cavalier view

that one can do what one wishes. While it is true that specific forms in worship are not

mandated by Scripture, it is nevertheless necessary that the worship of the church reflect

its doctrine and that it do so adequately and correctly. We cannot take the time today to

address the importance of uniformity in our worship or the desirability of worship that is

truly ecumenical in the good sense. We don’t have time to discuss the whole matter of

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what it means to be a **synod** in regard to our worship. However, we do have the time to

say that if, in our worship services, we use hymns which contain Baptist theology or

prayers that promote Methodist doctrine, there will be a disconnect between our doctrine

and our practice. Our practice will be denying our doctrine. And here I think I need to say

also that it is not only what the service **does** contain but also what it does **not** contain that

makes a statement about our doctrine. In other words, it is possible that a given service

would contain no false teaching whatever, but would also contain very little doctrine at

all. If, in the use of whatever liturgy you are using, the proclamation of the Gospel is not

clear, for example, if there is little or no reference to the forgiveness of sins or to the

atonement, there is still a disconnect between doctrine and practice. In other words, when

it comes to the connection between doctrine and practice, there are sins of commission

and sins of omission.

To cite Scaer again, “…doctrine and practice do not exist in autonomous spheres.

Abraham’s sacrificing Isaac (practice) was the evidence or extension of what he believed

about God (…doctrine) (James 2:21-25)… We know ourselves and others know us not

only by what we say (doctrine), but by what we do (practice).”11

I’d like to provide two more quotations from this excellent article by David Scaer

and then illustrate a disconnect between doctrine and practice that I find particularly

troubling, namely the practice of open communion. First the words of Scaer. “Practices

contradicting doctrine are unacceptable. Since both doctrine and practice flow from the

same fundamental reality, we can no more be lenient with one than with the other. We

cannot allow ourselves a freedom in practice that we would never allow for ourselves in

doctrine.”12

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At the very end of his article Scaer concludes, “What Jesus was, *filius dei… homo*

*factus est* (doctrine) is seen in what He did, *crucifixus* (practice). He did this *pro nobis*

(doctrine). So also what we believe (doctrine) must be seen in what we do (practice). We

can hardly require anything less of ourselves, lest what we do contradict what we

believe.”13

There are some churches, calling themselves Lutheran, that admit to their altars

all who have been baptized and who believe that Jesus is their Savior. The claim will

undoubtedly be made that they profess the Lutheran doctrine. Unfortunately, their

practice belies that claim. In fact, their practice denies their doctrine. What happens when

you admit to the same altar those who believe that the bread is Jesus’ true body and the

wine His true blood and that they therefore receive Jesus’ body and blood with their

mouths for the forgiveness of sins **and** those who believe that they receive mere bread

and wine? Here we deal not just with a minor difference of opinion.

In offering to the sinner the body and blood of Christ, the sacrament acts as

absolution. We know and believe this. It declares that the body and blood of the Savior

offered for the sins of the world, are received by the mouth of the sinner together with that

forgiveness which Christ purchased by His death. The Sacrament of the Altar, therefore, is

not merely a divine mandate given by Jesus as a memorial, nor is it simply a token of His

love. It is the Gospel itself for it offers and bestows precisely that which the Gospel gives,

namely the forgiveness of sins. And where there is forgiveness of sins there is also life and

salvation.

Consider, on the other hand, the Reformed view of the Lord's Supper. The

Reformed deny the Real Presence. They deny also that the Sacrament bestows the

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forgiveness of sins. Why do they attend the Lord's Supper? Simply because the Lord has

said, "This do in remembrance of me." They come in obedience to His command. They

view the Lord's Supper simply as "a memorial meal in commemoration of the death of

Christ." In other words, they view the sacrament as Law rather than Gospel. Regardless of

the piety with which their "memorial meal" is celebrated, it remains true that if one regards

the Sacrament primarily as something pious Christians do in obedience to Jesus, one sees

the sacrament as Law. In their teaching on the Lord's Supper, the Reformed have deprived

the Church of everything which our Lord Jesus placed into His precious Testament – grace,

absolution, forgiveness, life and salvation. They have bequeathed to the Church instead the

hollow shell of pious human obedience – this because they see the Sacrament as law, not as

Gospel.

What tremendous confusion then results when such people commune together at

the same altar! Amos says, “Can two walk together if they are not agreed?” (Amos 3:3)

How then can Lutherans and the Reformed or Lutherans and Roman Catholics come

together at the same altar? When this happens, those communing together are not even in

agreement as to what they are doing in the Lord’s Supper – practice! Do you know why?

Because they are not in agreement as to what the Lord’s Supper **is** – doctrine! There

could hardly be a greater disconnect between the doctrine and the practice than when

those who disagree on both the doctrine and the practice come together in the same

practice. This practice is all the more egregious because the parties cannot even agree

whether the Lord’s Supper is Law or Gospel. Does this Sacrament have to do with our

obedience or with our salvation? No wonder Luther exclaimed:

In summary, it is frightening for me to hear that in the churches of

one party, or at the altar of one party, both parties are taking and receiving

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the Sacrament of that one party, and that one group should believe that it is

receiving mere bread and wine while the other group believes that it is

receiving the true Body and Blood of Christ. And I often wonder if it is

believable that a preacher or Seelsorger could be so callous and evil as to

maintain silence on this issue and to permit both groups to come, each with

its own fancy that it can receive its own kind of Sacrament according to its

own belief. Therefore, whoever has such preachers or could expect such

from them, let him be warned about them as about the incarnate devil

himself!14

It is in participation in the Lord’s Supper that the contradiction between doctrine

and practice can be most evident when so-called Lutheran congregations admit those of

other Christian church bodies to the altar regardless of a lack of agreement on the Lord’s

Supper.

But isn’t it simply a matter of interpretation anyway? With this question we

address the second aspect of our presentation today, namely the perspicuity or clarity of

Scripture. It is precisely in regard to our understanding of the Lord’s Supper that we

frequently hear that our differences are simply a matter of interpretation. Well, in the first

place, that’s not true. It is not a matter of interpretation. Everybody knows what the

words say – this is my body – and everybody knows what the words mean. It is not a

question of interpretation; it is a question of whether or not you believe the words of

Jesus who is God and who, therefore, cannot lie and will not deceive.

But secondly, the suggestion that our understanding of the Lord’s Supper is a

matter of interpretation raises the insidious implication that Scripture is not clear. After

all, if the record of Jesus’ institution of the Lord’s Supper can be included four times in

the New Testament and be related more often than practically any other events in the

New Testament other than Jesus’ death and resurrection and we **still** cannot know for

sure what it means, then perhaps many other teachings of the Bible are also up for grabs.

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Perhaps the Scriptures are frequently unclear and we may have differing interpretations

of Baptism, conversion, election, and so on.

And of course this is precisely the view of many who take the position that in

regard to all of the above teachings you can have your interpretation and I can have mine.

And since this is so, as long as we all believe in Jesus, we should be able to have

fellowship with each other. Apart from our fundamental understanding of the Gospel

itself, everything else is subject to one’s own interpretation. Such a view, of course, if

followed to its logical conclusion will lead to such a speculative view of Scripture that in

the end the Gospel itself will be lost. But Jesus says, “If you continue in my word, you

are my disciples indeed and you will know the truth.” (John 8:31-32)

One of the major controversies of the Reformation revolved around the biblical

doctrine of the human will. Is the human will free or is it bound when it comes to

spiritual matters? Luther took the position that it is bound. Erasmus took the position that

it is free to choose the spiritual good. In the context of this disagreement, when Luther

cited Scriptural evidence clearly supporting his view of the bondage of the will in

spiritual matters, Erasmus criticized Luther for his over-bold assertions. He wanted a

more irenic approach, a less dogmatic approach, an approach which consulted reason and

urged people not to let doctrinal difference get in the way of peace. Luther responded

forcefully to Erasmus’ aversion to assertions. He wrote,

Away now with Sceptics and Academics from the company of us

Christians; let us have men who will assert, men twice as inflexible as

very Stoics! Take the Apostle Paul—how often does he call for that ‘full

assurance’ which is simply an assertion of conscience, of the highest

degree of certainty and conviction. In Rom. 10 he calls it ‘confession’—

‘with the mouth confession is made unto salvation’ (v. 10). Christ says,

‘Whosoever confesseth me before men, him will I confess before my

Father’ (Matt.10.32). Peter commands us to give a reason for the hope that

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is in us (1 Pet. 3:15). And what need is there of a multitude of proofs?

Nothing is more familiar or characteristic among Christians than assertion.

Take away assertions, and you take away Christianity. Why, the Holy

Spirit is given to Christians from heaven in order that He may glorify

Christ and in them confess Him even unto death—and is this not assertion,

to die for what you confess and assert? Again, the Spirit asserts to such

purpose that He breaks in upon the whole world and convinces it of sin

(cf. John 16.8), as if challenging it to battle. Paul tells Timothy to reprove,

and to be instant out of season (2 Tim. 4.2); and what a clown I should

think a man to be who did not really believe, nor unwaveringly assert,

those things concerning which he reproved others! I think I should send

him to Anticyra! (Footnote indicates Anticyra was a health resort on the

Aegean coast, famous for hellebore, which was a plant used to treat mental

illness.)

But I am the biggest fool of all for wasting time and words on

something that is clearer to see than the sun. What Christian can endure

the idea that we should deprecate assertions? That would be denying all

religion and piety in one breath—asserting that religion and piety and all

dogmas are just nothing at all. Why then do you—you!—*assert* that you

*find no satisfaction in assertions* and that you *prefer an undogmatic*

*temper to any other*?15

Luther lectures Erasmus quite extensively on this matter of assertions and

concludes his remarks on this topic with the words, “The Holy Spirit is no Sceptic, and

the things He has written in our hearts are not doubts or opinions, but assertions—surer

and more certain than sense and life itself.”16 Luther then goes on to demonstrate that

Erasmus’ dislike for assertions was due to his view that Scripture is not clear. The dislike

today that people have for those who assert their religious convictions with certainty

demonstrates an affinity with Erasmus and exhibits a lack of confidence in the clarity of

Scripture and a spirit of skepticism.

Is God’s word clear? Nobody argues with the fact that here and there there are a

few difficult passages. But is the Bible, in all its fundamental teachings, clear? If we

answer “No,” we must conclude that it is nonsensical to talk of pure doctrine. After all, if

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we cannot know what the text means, how can we know whether or not what we are

teaching is pure or impure?

In his book, *The Inspiration of Scripture*, Robert Preus demonstrates that the

Lutheran theologians of the 17th Century followed Luther in their insistence on

Scripture’s clarity.

The dogmaticians teach that the divine origin, the sufficiency and

the clarity of Scripture are articles of that which ought to be accepted with

faith because they are revealed in Scripture. Scripture is clear and

sufficient because it is God’s Word to men. Unless Scripture is clear, it

cannot be said to be sufficient. How can we be saved through faith in the

message of Scripture if that message is not clear? Rome taught that the

witness of the Church was needed to make Scripture clear. This was also

the persuasion of the Lutheran syncretists. The orthodox teachers hold that

the Church is the interpreter of Scripture, but in such a way that each

Christian searches and interprets Scripture himself. The Bible does not

require the interpretation of others. It is not clear merely implicitly: it

clearly sets forth all we need to know to be saved. The perspicuity of

Scripture consists not merely in the fact that it enlightens the person who

already understands its literal meaning; Scripture is itself a light, it is

inherently, clear, making wise the simple, namely, those who allow

themselves to be persuaded.17

The clarity of Scripture is not required simply for Scripture’s sake, but for the

sake of the Gospel. If Scripture is not clear, who can know how to be saved? If Scripture

is not clear, there is no comfort for the distressed sinner. According to Walther, pure

doctrine, “…alone is the medicine that gives life to us human beings who are sick, yes

dead in sins.”18 Again Walther says, “We regard the pure Word of God as more precious

than heaven and earth and therefore would rather lose everyone’s friendship than lose

this. By this course of action we preserve the dear, precious, saving Gospel, and that not

only for ourselves—oh, no; but also for the sake of other souls…”19

Only pure doctrine saves. The historic Lutheran commitment to pure doctrine is

motivated by a desire to be faithful to God’s teaching. But it also flows from the

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understanding that only that which is pure can actually benefit us. It is only the pure

doctrine that saves sinners. It is only the pure doctrine that effects all spiritual benefits in

the Church. Insistence upon pure doctrine is, therefore, indispensable to the life and

survival of the church and is especially essential in an age which disparages the very idea

of absolute truth. In the end, if we cannot insist that we possess pure doctrine, we can

have no certainty; we can have no true hope.

Does this mean that in those churches that teach error nobody can be saved? Of

course not. Many will come to a knowledge of Christ also in these churches but it will not

have been the errors of these churches that brought them to Christ. Rather, it will have

been the truth that shines forth even in the midst of error that brought them into Christ’s

fold. Again, only pure doctrine saves. If one comes to the saving faith through the

proclamation of a message which is not entirely pure, it is not that error is responsible for

good, but that the truth, insofar as it has been expressed, has the power to create faith and

save. In other words, one is saved in spite of the error.

Thus, far from being loveless in our insistence on the proclamation of only pure

doctrine, faithful Lutherans are exhibiting precisely the very love which their opponents

insist they so firmly desire. For apart from this insistence on the teaching of pure

doctrine, the Gospel dissolves and gives place to pious speculations that will always point

sinners to their own works rather than to the grace of God for salvation.

It is actually love that leads the Church to insist upon the identification of error.

And so we have arrived at the last point I wish to emphasize in my presentation today.

The proclamation of the truth requires the faithful shepherd to identify error for the sake

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of the flock. This is a loving thing that he does. In an excellent chapter contained in *The*

*Abiding Word*, Walter Baepler declares,

Whoever teaches the true doctrine, but does not warn against false

doctrine and against wolves in sheep’s clothing (Matt. 7:15), is not a

faithful steward of the mysteries of God, not a faithful shepherd of the

sheep entrusted to his care, not a trusty watchman on the walls of Zion, but

as the Word of God says, a wicked servant, a dumb dog, a traitor. It is

evident that many souls are lost because they are not warned against false

doctrine, which is poison to the soul.20

Martin Luther insists upon the pastor’s duty to protect the sheep from false

teaching. In the exercise of his ministry, Luther says, the pastor is committed to battle on

behalf of Christ's church.

For a pastor must not only lead to pasture by teaching the sheep

how to be true Christians: but, in addition to this, he must also repel the

wolves, lest they attack the sheep and lead them astray with false

doctrine and error. For the devil does not rest. Now today one finds

many people who can let the Gospel be preached, provided that one

does not cry out against the wolves from coming and leading the sheep

astray. For what is built if I lay stones and watch someone else knock

them down? The wolf can surely let the sheep have good pasturage. The

fatter they are, the more he likes them. But he cannot bear the hostile

barking of the dogs. Therefore to him who takes this to heart it is

important to tend the sheep in the right way, as God has commanded.21

In the face of danger, then, the faithful preacher will not flee. He will stay to

protect souls, lest they perish.22 Nor can the faithful pastor pick his battles. Whenever the

flock is in danger, he must be ready to stand in its defense. This duty to defend the flock

is the most compelling reason for the identification and refutation of false doctrine. There

are certainly other reasons to identify false doctrine and to avoid it. As Baepler points

out,

Every errorist transgresses the Second Commandment, for he lies

and deceives by God’s name, which as our Catechism informs us, is done

by teaching false doctrine and saying that it is God’s Word or revelation.

The errorist sins against the First Commandment, for either he is trusting

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his own reason in matters of religion or he is following someone who is

erring and whom he is holding in greater esteem than God. In either case

he is committing idolatry… False doctrine is a sin against the Third

Commandment, which demands that we hold the Word of God sacred, in

other words, that we tremble at God’s Word in holy awe. Changing this

Word either by adding thereto or by taking away therefrom is despising

the holy Word of God.23

Surely these are sufficient reasons for pastors to point out error to their members

to keep them from grave sin. The teaching of false doctrine violates the entire first table

of the Law. But then Baepler goes on to point to the same duty of the pastor that Luther

identifies – the duty to identify false doctrine for the sake of souls. This care of souls is of

utmost importance. “To commit murder is generally considered a heinous crime,”

Baepler says. “But worse than destroying the body is the destroying of a soul. But just

that is done when the pure Word of God, which is able to save souls (James 1:21), is

taken from someone and he through error is led on the path that leads to destruction.”24

No wonder Walther commended the early Saxons because, “There a pastor was

bound by oath that as soon as he became aware that a fellow pastor had apostatized and

was attempting to mislead his congregation he would report this to the superintendent.”25

The identification of error serves another salutary purpose. When error is

identified, the truth is better understood. When I was a young pastor in my first

congregation, I was teaching a youth Bible Class on comparative religions. One of the

girls in the class got very upset because there was so much focus on falsehood and error.

She actually quit coming to the class as a result. She thought it was too negative. All the

other young people loved it. They recognized that when error was exposed and contrasted

to the truth, they understood much better the value of the truth. They understood why

they believed what they did. This growth in appreciation of the truth after having studied

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error is something I have seen repeatedly throughout my ministry. So it is no surprise to

read in our own Confessions, “Every simple Christian can perceive what is right or

wrong, when not only the pure doctrine has been stated, but also the erroneous, contrary

doctrine has been repudiated and rejected.”26

St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:6, “[Love]… does not rejoice in iniquity, but

rejoices in the truth.” The Lutheran pastor and layperson both need to understand that it is

not negative, it is positive; it is not unloving, but loving, to identify and reject that which

is false. To neglect this essential aspect of the office of the pastor especially, is

inexcusable. Imagine the following conversation: You go into a restaurant. The waiter

arrives and asks if you would like a menu. You say, “No, thank you.” “So you already

know what you would like,” the waiter says. “No,” you say. The waiter is puzzled,

hesitates and finally asks, “So – what would you like?” You say, “I don’t care. Just bring

me anything. It doesn’t matter.” Nobody would go into a restaurant with that attitude.

How much less ought you to go into a church with that attitude! How grateful you should

be if you have a pastor who feeds you with pure doctrine and does everything he can to

warn you about that doctrine that could harm you!

The *Formula of Concord* employs a very effective way of teaching. It identifies

controversies, describes the biblical doctrine and then identifies false doctrine. It does this

in its first 11 articles. But the 12th article is dedicated only to the identification and

rejection of heresies and false doctrine. It provides a whole list of false teachings to be

rejected, false teachings about Baptism the Lord’s Supper, the office of the ministry, the

person of Christ, the Trinity and so on. It then says,

These and like articles, one and all, with what pertains to them and

follows from them, we reject and condemn as wrong, false, heretical, and

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contrary to the Word of God, the three Creeds, the Augsburg Confession

and Apology, the Smalcald Articles and Luther’s Catechisms. Of these

articles all godly Christians should and ought to beware, as much as the

welfare and salvation of their souls is dear to them.27

In conclusion, pure doctrine is a treasure. We should dedicate our lives to the use

of this treasure. Thus, Paul urges Timothy, “Continue in the things you have learned.” (2

Timothy 3:14) He urges the Thessalonians, “Brothers, stand fast and hold the traditions

which you were taught.” ( 2 Thessalonians 2:15) Let us all heed Paul’s advice, continuing

in what we have been taught and learned, knowing that God will generously bless our

study of and our commitment to His pure doctrine. Let us be faithful to the Scriptures and

to the Lutheran Confessions. Then perhaps one day they will say of us what Dr. Richard

Lenski of the Ohio Synod wrote about the Missouri Synod in 1922.

If there ever was a strictly conservative body, it surely is the

Missouri Synod. Nevertheless, this growth! Here is a historical fact that

refutes all talk trying to persuade us that we must be liberal, accommodate

ourselves to the spirit of the time, etc., in order to win men and grow

externally. The very opposite is seen in the Missouri Synod. Missouri has

at all times been unyielding; it is so still. In this body the Scriptures and

the Confessions have been, and still are, valued to their full import. There

was no disposition to surrender any part of them. With this asset Missouri

has been working in free America, abounding in sects and religious

confusion, and now exhibits its enormous achievements. What so many

regard as Missouri’s weakness has in reality been her strength. This fact

we might write down for our own remembrance. It is a mark of the pastors

and leaders of the Missouri Synod that they never, aye, never, tire of

discussing doctrine on the basis of Scripture and the Confessions. That is

one trait that may be called the spirit of Missouri. People who thus cling to

doctrine and contend for its purity are of an entirely different nature from

the superficial unionists who in the critical moment will declare five to be

an even number. God will bless all who value His Word so highly.

Gratitude towards God, who has granted this division of American

Lutheranism so much glorious blessing, and through Missouri has

communicated this blessing also to other parts of the Lutheran Church,

will be the basic note of this festival celebration. May God keep Missouri

and us and all Lutheran Christians faithful in the doctrine and confession

of His Word and grant us His blessing for our external growth and

prosperity.28

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That was our past. By God’s grace may it be our future.

By Rev. Daniel Preus, March 2, 2011 – *Soli Deo Gloria*

1 Ewald Plass, *What Luther Says*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 411.

2 *Concordia Triglotta*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 401.

3 Plass, 415. Emphasis added.

4 Matthew Harrison, ed., *At Home in the House of My Fathers*, (Lutheran Legacy, 2009), 249. Emphasis

added.

5 *Triglotta*, 1095.

6 Luther, Martin: Pelikan, Jaroslav Jan; Oswald, Hilton C.; Lehmann, Helmut T., eds. *Luther's Works,*

(Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), Vol. 27, 41. (Subsequent references to this edition of

Luther’s Works will be abbreviated LW.

7 Ibid, 38.

8 David Scaer. “Doctrine and Practice: Setting the Boundaries: An Abstract Essay with Practical

Implications.” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol. 66, 4 (October 2002), 308. Italics in the original.

9 Ibid, 309-310.

10 Ibid, 310.

11 Ibid, 311-312.

12 Ibid, 312.

13 Ibid, 314.

14 Martin Wittenberg, "Church Fellowship and Altar Fellowship in the Light of Church History", Logia: A

Journal of Lutheran Theology, (Fort Wayne, Indiana: Luther Academy, 1992), Volume I, Number 1, 2.

15 J. I. Packer & O.I. Johnston, eds. *Martin Luther on the Bondage of the Will*, (Westwood, N. J.: Revell,

1957), 67.

16 Ibid, 70.

17 Robert Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), 156.

18 Harrison, 239.

19 Ibid, 254.

20 Theodore Laetsch, ed., *The Abiding Word*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1947), vol. 2, 508.

21 LW, vol. 30, 135.

22 Ibid, 277.

23 Laetsch, 502.

24 Ibid.

25 Harrison, 243.

26 Triglotta, 837

27 Ibid, 1103.

28 Laetsch, 515-516.