

# Stewards of the Mysteries of God in Today's World

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Your district officers have asked me to address you in several sessions on the topic, *Stewards of the Mysteries of God in Today's World*. I cannot tell you how pleased I am to accept the assignment. The topic touches the heart of any ministry in the church whether it is in a classroom, a parish, or a staff ministry to the Synod. The health and vitality of any church is directly related to its stewardship of the mysteries of God. The special ministry to which I am called is to undergird the mission of the Synod by employing the total resources of the Wisconsin Synod constituency in support of its common ministry. The theme, therefore, has immediate and practical consequences for my own special ministry.

I propose to address you in two sessions. In the first session I will speak about the Gospel in today's world. In the second session I will share with you some of my thoughts on the administration of the stewardship of the Gospel as it has been practiced in the Wisconsin Synod.

## The Gospel in Today's World

"Stewards of the mysteries of God" is an expression used by St. Paul in I Corinthians 4:1—"Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God"—to describe the nature of his apostolic ministry. Paul did not intend it to be "just another" description of his ministry among many. He opposed this expression to the false conception of the ministry which prevailed among the Corinthians. The expression is the summary of all that Paul had said about his ministry in the first three chapters of the letter.

As nearly as we can judge from the polemics of the first three chapters, there were two matters disturbing the church. First, the Corinthians had turned the Gospel into an instrument of factionalism. They pitted the preaching of Paul against the preaching of Peter and the preaching of Apollos against both Peter and Paul. Paul, on the contrary, argues that there is only one message, whether it came from Peter, Paul, or Apollos: "Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (I Cor. 2:2). All three labored at Corinth, but none is to be preferred above the other, for "other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (I Cor. 3:11).

The other matter which appeared to disturb the Corinthians was "wisdom," *sofiã*. It appears that a primitive form of gnosticism had insinuated itself into the church. There was, according to this incipient gnosticism, a superior form of *sofiã* accessible only to the sophisticated and the initiated. This superior form of *sofiã* transcended the simple *sofiã* in Christ which Paul had brought to them first. I think this conclusion is inescapable, otherwise we have difficulty explaining why Paul used the word *sofiã* 14 times in the first three chapters, *sofiã* being a technical term defining the object of all Greek philosophy.

It could well be that Apollos unwittingly nourished this deviation. Apollos is described as a Jew "born at Alexandria, an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures" who was instructed by Aquila and Priscilla, two of Paul's early converts (Acts 18:24-26). The Egyptian city of Alexandria was an incubator for novel and exotic philosophies which culminated in the neoplatonism of Plotinus and his logos philosophy in the third century. There is nothing in the chapters to suggest that Apollos was a false teacher, but with his eloquence, the nuances of his preaching, and the perversity of people to hear what they want to hear, he may have unintentionally supported their notions.

Paul's answer was simple: Christ is *sofiã* and not many of the high and mighty can grasp that (I Cor. 1:24-28). The preaching of Christ does not depend upon "excellency of speech." "My speech and my preaching was not with enticing words" (2:1,4). The Gospel is not a complicated philosophical system, excluding the slaves and peasants from understanding it. It is not a "mystery" to be penetrated only by the wise of this world.

This brings us to Paul's characterization of himself as a "steward of the mysteries of God," and to the great weight which I have given it as a summary statement of Paul's ministry and of every Gospel ministry since Paul's time. We must look more closely, now, at the expression itself.

"Mystery" is not used by St. Paul in the same way we use the word today in English. The primary meanings of "mystery" in English are related to "anything that is kept secret or remains unexplained or unknown" (*Dictionary of the English Language*, Random House). If this difference in usage is not kept in mind, it can lead to nothing but confusion as we read the New Testament.

The word "mystery" occurs 27 times in the New Testament. Of the 27 times, 20 of the times occur in the Pauline corpus. The basic meaning is "the divine will to save fulfilled in the crucifixion of Christ and made known by the Holy Spirit in His revelation" (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, *sub voc.*) Typically, Paul connects "mystery" to the preaching of Christ: "We preach Christ crucified (1:23)...declaring unto you the mystery of God (2:1, reading *musthion* instead of *marturion*)...We speak the wisdom of God in a mystery" (2:7). There are several obvious exceptions to this connection, e. g., in II Thess. 2:7, where the anti-Christ is called the "mystery of iniquity."

There is nothing obscure about this mystery of the New Testament, nothing that remains unexplained and unknown. The mystery is the Good News revealed in God's time in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. Paul entreats the Ephesian church to pray "for me...that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the Gospel" (6:19). So it is entirely consistent with Paul's thought to consider "mystery" and "Gospel" precise synonyms, interchangeable without any diminution of meaning. What Paul is saying, therefore, is that he is to be regarded as a "steward of the Gospel."

Some, perhaps, would feel more comfortable with something like "steward of the Holy Scriptures." Without wanting to sound like a "Gospel reductionist," there is a priority of the Gospel which is thrust upon the preacher by the New Testament. Luther used to say that God's word of law was God's *opus alienum*, an alien work. In a similar manner the law is also the preacher's *opus alienum*, the Gospel his *opus proprium*, his proper work. I don't think we can remind ourselves too often of this.

"The Reformation," Peter Taylor Forsyth reminds us, "was not the rediscovery of the Bible chiefly, but the Gospel in the Bible." (*The Gospel and Authority*, p. 148). Reformation was in the air long before Luther arrived on the scene. There were powerful voices like Jean Gerson and Pierre d'Ailly (who pointed out that the Savior built his church upon the Bible, not upon the chair of St. Peter). Long before Luther, powerful voices, like John Wyclif and Jan Hus, cried, "Back to the Bible!" And the Roman church had to reckon with the reforming voice of Erasmus. But it was Luther who became the great reformer. History, of course, was his friend, but he broke through because, by grace, he found the keystone, the heart of the Gospel: justification by faith alone.

It was the successful reformer Luther—and not one of the pre-reformers—who insisted: "The proper subject of theology is man guilty of sin and condemned, and God the Justifier and Savior of man the sinner. Whatever is asked or discussed in theology outside of this subject, is error and poison" (*American Edition of Luther's Work [AE]*, vol. 12, p. 311). Luther's reformation did not aim at the externals of the papacy, much of which he could have tolerated. He did not turn from the Roman church, a disillusioned son because of its corruption. The breach with Rome came when it condemned the doctrine of justification, when it could not endure the Gospel of Jesus Christ. With unwavering singleness of mind he fastened on the Gospel. "What then is the *Word of God*, and how shall it be used," Luther asked, "since there are so many *words of God*? I answer: The Apostle explains this in Romans 1. The *Word* is the Gospel of God concerning His Son, who was made flesh, suffered, rose from the dead, and was glorified through the Spirit who sanctifies" (*AE*, vol. 31, p. 346).

As faithful sons of the Scripture and of the Reformation, this Synod in all its works and all its ways will reflect this primacy of the Gospel. There is no life in that Synod which does not come from the Gospel. That Gospel alone is God's power to salvation. The good work we want to let shine before men is our Gospel preaching. If the world scorns us, let it be the Gospel which they are scorning, not our own rudeness and coarseness. Let the offense be the offense of the cross and not something less than that. If we suffer, let it be for the Gospel's sake.

The Gospel is our treasure because it is the “fragrance of life” (II Cor. 2:16, NIV), of our life and of anyone else that will live. It has two characteristics which I want to speak about. First, it is absolutely unconditioned, and, secondly, it is universal.

It is an unconditioned Gospel. By this is meant that nothing can be added to it this side of heaven. This is the great linchpin of the Gospel referred to by many as the doctrine of objective justification. Its clearest statement is found in II Corinthians 5:14-21. “One (Christ) died for all,” Paul writes, “and therefore all died.” That is the heart: when Christ died for the sins of the world, with him died all men. He took their sins, their death, their guilt, their shame to the grave and rose again. Paul’s ministry is a “ministry of reconciliation” with a message of a *completed* reconciliation: “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them” (II Cor. 5:19, NIV). That Easter morning the *status* of the whole world was changed from death to life. There God spoke His word of forgiveness over the world.

In commenting on this crucial passage, Professor John P. Meyer says that

the forgiveness of sins was not only *secured* and *provided* for the sinners, it was pronounced over them. Their sins were non-imputed to them; they were imputed to Christ. This applies to the whole world, to every individual sinner, whether he was living in the days of Christ, or had died centuries before His coming, or had not yet been born, perhaps has not been born to this day. It applies to the world as such, regardless of whether a particular sinner ever comes to faith or not. (*Ministers of Christ*, p. 109)

Here the Gospel shines forth in all its glory: never, by any act or deed of man, does salvation depend upon man. If it does, we are dead men. It is God all the way. We are beggars and God fills us. *Gratia non est gratia ullo modo*, says Augustine, *si non est gratia omni modo*.

There is a large body of theology which says otherwise. God’s justification of the ungodly is *conditioned* by faith. The decision of man for faith is a vital *link* in the justification of the sinner. “It was God’s sovereign choice to bring into existence a universe inhabited by free-willed creatures whose decisions would to some extent determine the total picture” (*Grace Unlimited*, Clark H. Pinnock, ed. , p. 64). God’s free Gospel of grace cannot tolerate “*to some extent*.” It can in no way be conditioned by man or it is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ as it was proclaimed by Paul.

It should not be thought strange that this same large body of theology rejects infant baptism as a means of grace, i.e., the way in which we receive the forgiveness of sins. If man must add something to the perfection of the Gospel by his faith, then above all infant baptism is an absurdity. Infant baptism is a kind of touchstone separating the synergists (“man to some extent determines the total picture”) from the grace which the New Testament knows. Infant baptism is the purest proclamation of God’s free and full act of grace—the purest proclamation of an unconditioned Gospel.

If the Gospel is unconditioned, then its second characteristic follows: universality. This is not an easy lesson to learn by any of God’s people. Israel could not get it through its head that Jehovah was not a tribal deity, meant for Israel alone. Peter had to learn, even with the record of the Old Testament prophets before him, that God was not a respecter of persons or nations (Cornelius, Acts 10).

Beginning with Abraham’s call, “in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 12:3), this universality runs through the Old Testament like a thread of gold, but never really assimilated in the heart of God’s chosen nation. “All the ends of the world shall remember and turn unto the Lord,” sings David in Psalm 22, “and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before thee. For the kingdom is the Lord: and he is the governor among the nations.”...“The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light,” is the Epiphany lection of Isaiah, “they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined” (9:2)...“Behold, thou shalt call a nation that thou knowest not,” prophecies Isaiah II, “and nations that knew not thee shall run unto thee (55:5)...“From the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same,” is the solemn cadence of the Old Testament’s last prophet, “my name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every

place incense shall be offered unto my name, and a pure offering: for my name shall be great among the heathen, saith the Lord of hosts” (Mal. 1:11).

For those who possess that Gospel under almost the same exclusive terms as Israel the message is clear: exclusivity is not the gracious good will of God, non-contamination is not the Gospel’s ultimate task, the Gospel will not create its own ghetto. If necessary God must permit a “great persecution” against the church which was at Jerusalem: in order that his Gospel may be “scattered abroad” (Acts 8:1). The epistle, appointed for Reformation Day, lays upon us the universality of the Gospel. “And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven,” it reads, “having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people, saying with aloud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come” (Rev. 14:6,7).

Of this unconditional, universal Gospel, Paul says “we are stewards.” Whether Paul is directly referring only to himself and Sosthenes, the brother who joined with him in writing the letter, or to all the pastoral leadership at Corinth (Peter and Apollos), is not really very important. He is asserting that there are men, called by God to discharge a public ministry of Word and Sacraments in the life of the church who in a special way are stewards of the Gospel.

There is nothing in the context to suggest that whatever these public stewards may preach, it is the responsibility of the flock to accept uncritically, that the foolishness of preaching may docilely become the preaching of foolishness. The context suggests, however, that certain standards do not apply. The test of the Gospel preacher is not applause from the grandstand and bleachers, as it appeared to be the case in Corinth. In such a case, “he that judgeth me is the Lord” (I Cor. 3:4). We are not to impugn motives where none can be impugned, for “God will make manifest the counsels of the heart” (3:5).

Paul’s standard of faithful stewardship is the Gospel. Whatever corrupts the Gospel is to be summarily and promptly rejected. “If any man preach any other Gospel,” he writes, “let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:9) . Peter was rebuked at Antioch by Paul because he “walked not uprightly according to the truth of the Gospel” (2:9) . It may not always be so neat and easy to apply this standard, but this standard serves to remind us that the basic lethal quality of error is that it perverts the Gospel by which alone we live or die. The error is not academic, violating something I learned in the seminary, but intensely personal because the Gospel determines *my* destiny and whoever tampers with the Gospel plays games with *my* destiny.

It is not going too far to say that in the Scriptures the basic meaning of stewardship is always related to “stewardship of the Gospel,” otherwise stewardship becomes a legalistic device for extracting obedience from reluctant stewards. The paradigm is found in Ephesians. God’s plan of salvation—His οἰκονομία—is entrusted to and carried out by Jesus Christ—the οἰκονομῶν. Jesus Christ is stewardship’s model. He is, par excellence, *THE STEWARD*.

The Gospel of John is especially emphatic about that. “I seek not mine own will,” Jesus says, “but the will of the Father which hath sent me.” He refers to the “works which the Father hath given me to finish” (John 5). “I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak” (John 12:49). “I must work the works of him that sent me” (John 9). The underlying concept of all these words is stewardship, of himself as steward, faithful to the will of His Father, faithful to the plan of salvation the execution of which was his task.

That stewardship, *mutatis mutandis*, is passed on to his disciples. Paul speaks of the dispensation (οἰκονομία) of the grace of God which “is given to me for you,” of which, of course, he is the steward (οἰκονομῶν). (Eph. 3:2). Through Paul it passes on down to us.

The more I study the New Testament the more I become aware that underlying the whole of it is this stewardship of the Gospel—more implicitly than explicitly. The people of God are described in the Bible in many ways: salt, light, sheep, priests, kings, witnesses, wheat, fish, trees, doves, eagles, strangers, pilgrims, babes, branches, etc. But each one of these figures—some more evident than others—involves the stewardship of the Gospel.

Stewards of the Gospel, that's what we are. That's what we want to be. And we want to be that *in today's world*. And with that, you will note, I shift from the New Testament witness of the Gospel to the mind set, the tone, the forces at work in today's society and among its people.

In this century much—too much—has been made of the society and culture in which the church finds itself. (Of this, I do not accuse my Synod.) The process has been precisely parallel to the aggrandizement of sociology in the social studies field. Now I understand that we cannot cast the Word of God like a stone into the world. I firmly believe with Karl Barth that a pastor ought to read the Bible with the Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other. But having said all that, I still contend that, while the state of society and culture and politics is not irrelevant to the church, their impact on the mission of the church has been overstated by a country mile.

I suppose I agree with Alexander Maclaren, who one time told his beloved Manchester congregation: “When so many brethren are preaching to the times, it may be allowed one poor brother to preach for eternity” (*Expositions of the Holy Scripture*, Vol. XIV, p. 322). And I guess that if I had only one thing to say to the Wisconsin Synod today it would be: When so many denominations are preaching to the times, it may be allowed one poor synod to preach for eternity!

A factory owner was showing Baron von Huegel a factory which he was proud he had “christianized.” He showed the baron the ventilating system, educational and welfare services, the clinics, the canteens, swimming pool and playing grounds. All the time the baron became more and more impatient. Finally he turned and said to the owner: “You haven't begun to understand what Christianity is: Christianity is not refreshment bars and swimming pools—it is a soul in the presence of God” (*The Christian in Politics*, Walter James, p. 131).

Is it not of decisive significance that it is difficult, if not impossible, to reconstruct the political, cultural, and social milieu of Paul's time by a careful analysis of his letters? We just aren't able to determine whether Platonism or Stoicism was the prevailing philosophy. Only incidentally do we hear of an emperor. We are at a loss to reconstruct the empire's political and social structures. Obviously, Paul was knowledgeable in these matters. He knew, for example, precisely what his Roman citizenship entailed (Acts 16:37). But his consistent concern—almost to the exclusion of all others—was a *soul in the presence of God*. The permanent contemporaneity of the Scriptures is based on this one immutable fact: society is only the backdrop before which man, the sinner, enacts his life—it is not *that life itself*. As we read Scripture, we discover that man is not even particularly original in the ways he sins, whether it is a beautiful garden millenia ago, or the shores of Galilee 2,000 years back, or 1976 in suburbia.

What is going on in Christendom that we must be aware of as stewards of the mysteries of God? Not much! Not very much! We have lived through a generation of fadism. And there's more to come. So Bishop Robinson mass-produced Bultmann's demythologizing technique. He's had it. Where is the death of God theology? Don't bother to answer because Altizer and Van Buren have moved on to other things. The media burned the movement out. Today it is Moltmann's theology of hope and the theology of liberation of Gutierrez. Of tomorrow's theology we know only one thing: *it will not be St. Paul's*.

Among the unsophisticated, it is Sun Myung Moon's Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity. You don't like him? Then try Hare Krishna, or the Children of God, or Brother Julius, or Love Israel. And if you don't like any of those, try the Divine Light Mission. If all else fails, try TA or, if you're really into it, TM. If you're from the eastcoast—try EST.

But, suddenly, a breath of fresh air: but that too is only a fad. Someone comes along and asks the question, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (Karl Menninger, Hawthorn, 1973). “The very word ‘sin,’ which seems to have disappeared,” he writes, “was a proud word. It was once a strong word, an ominous and serious word. It described a central point in every civilized human being's life plan and life style. But the word went away. It has almost disappeared—the word along with the notion. Why? Doesn't anyone sin anymore? Doesn't anyone believe in sin?” (p. 14).

It appears to me that the devils of today's world are the devils that have always been with us only thinly disguised. We turn to the Word and find it as relevant as the day it was composed. “Put to death,” St. Paul

warns, “whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, evil desires, and greed, which is idolatry” (Col. 3:5) . Those are the enduring facts of the sinner’s life and no thin veil will mask them. If the preacher seeks contemporaneity in the fads of society, he will always be behind the times. By the time he reviles them before his congregation, they will have passed his people by.

If the preacher faithfully seeks the deeper and deeper meanings of the Scriptures, he will always be right on target. The Scriptures may not be a textbook in psychology. But it is a Book that reaches right down to the center of the sinner’s being and life. It reaches for his basic need. It is the one and only textbook for a *soul in the presence of God*.

In the Wisconsin Synod we have not strayed far from that conviction. Nothing we have seen, or heard, or read leads us to conclude that we must change the central thesis of St. Paul’s Romans: “I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation” (1:16) . With every confidence in that Gospel he went through the Mediterranean world turning men and women to Christ. With every confidence in the Gospel we can carry it to our world.

Are we naive? Is that a simplistic, unsophisticated view of the mission of the church? Are we the troglodytes of Christendom? Are we being unfaithful and indifferent to the basic needs of the people of our plan? Let us not, for one moment, ever think so! Dean M. Kelley in a recent book tries to explain the remarkable growth of “conservative churches.” It is a scathing rebuke of the social activism of the mainline denominations. Churches, he writes, “sometimes seem a little impatient and embarrassed to be standing around with nothing to offer but words when everyone else is busy dispensing layettes, birth-control pills, and surplus foodstuffs. “Churches, he warns, “should not abdicate their unique and essential contribution to healing the world’s wounds: *meaning*...They have a contribution to make to the human predicament that is different from the technological interventions of secular groups” (*Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, pp. 134,135). And let us all say, Amen!

Sometime ago a sociologist conducted a survey of Lutheran attitudes in Detroit. “The Wisconsin Synod,” he writes, “reveals three distinct features when compared to the other branches of Lutheranism...Third, the attitudes, values, and role expectations of the Wisconsin Synod clergy *correspond closely with those of their laymen*.” In fact, he writes, “most Lutheran laymen would be best served by Wisconsin Synod clergymen” (*The Lutheran Ethic*, Lawrence K. Kersten, pp. 211,214).

*Meaning*—that’s where it’s at. And *meaning* enfolded in the Gospel—that’s what the Bible is all about. The main character in a recent novel is disenchanted with the church. “In general,” he reflects in his diary, “the churches bore for me the same relation to God that billboards do to Coca-Cola: they promote thirst without quenching it.” And the words of Jesus at that well in Samaria reverberate through the centuries: “Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give to him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life” (John 4:14).

Promote thirst without quenching it—is that our stewardship of the Gospel? I trust not. But I must also confess that there are times when that trust wavers. I have bad days when I am puzzled not so much by the Gospel we preach, but by the perverse way the Gospel manifests itself in our words and deeds. There are unhappy days when I ponder these melancholy words:

You are spiritual mechanics, agents of prefabricated and assembly-line products. All that remains of your sermons is a rehashing of the same old stuff. You add nothing new to what you once learned, the same treadworn speeches and phrases Sunday after Sunday, year in and year out...You have already begun to make of your whole Christianity and Christian life a matter of form, inherited with no effort from the fathers...You preach the pure Word, you do not shy away from reproofing sin, and preach an unconditioned Gospel. You uphold discipline and order in the parish. You hold pure against the lodge. You insist on confessional announcements and the parish school. You visit the sick, are punctual and conscientious in the exercise of your calling...Now you need only add “All these things have I kept from my youth. What lack I yet,” and you have the rich young ruler before you in life size...At conferences and Synod meetings

you only rehash the dogmatical capital brought along from school...and in the pulpit ride the same empty phraseology, exhaust your reserves, and get fed up on your own stale thoughts, and bore your audiences, no less.

No, those words were not spoken by some unkind critic from the outside. They were spoken by Professor August Pieper to the 1919 convention. (Cited in Koehler, xviii, I amended “we” and “our” to “you” and “yours”). I must admit that the words still trouble me. I search my own heart. I look around to see how it goes with my Synod. Has the process, which Pieper saw beginning, been completed in our generation unawares to us? O Lord, is it more true today? It would be a tragedy if we who hold, under God, the pure Gospel should lose both it and heaven by eighteen inches: the precise distance between our head and heart; if we should lose eternity, because we are the reincarnation of the rich young ruler. In our stewardship of the Gospel, my dear brothers in Christ, that is still worthy of our great concern, our ruthlessly honest introspection and reflection, and our fervent prayers!

### **Administration of the Stewardship of the Gospel in the Wisconsin Synod**

In this second part of my essay I will analyze on a rather arbitrary selective basis the administration of the stewardship of the Gospel by the Wisconsin Synod. As I said yesterday, the content of the Gospel is unchangeable. An excellent understanding of the Gospel has been with us from our beginnings. I have read a number of Muehlhaeuser’s sermons. With just a touch here or there, they could be preached to one of our congregations today and no one would know the difference. But the *administration* of that stewardship of the Gospel is another matter. At that point we are influenced decisively by history. Without exception, all of us are captives of our history, of the particular circumstances in which we are cast. It is one of the rules of the game: we cannot lift ourselves out of our *sitz im leben*.

If a church is going to reach out with the Gospel—assuming it is faithfully held—there are, according to the rules of the game, a number of elements which must be present. First, that church must have a strong sense of *identity*. Secondly, that church must have the *manpower* to carry out its mission. Thirdly, that church must have the *resources* available to fund that mission. Fourthly, that church must have the *opportunity*. In each of these vital areas the infant Wisconsin Synod was notably weak. I will now review that history not because it is just “interesting” or as a mere academic exercise but because it will give us, I hope, a clearer vision of where we are today.

It has been pointed out often enough (and rightly so) that our founding fathers—Muehlhaeuser, Weinmann, and Wrede—were *Lutherans*, and even though they were educational products of the *union* mission houses of Barmen and Langenberg, they *consciously* wanted to be Lutherans. Their principle concern, however, was not *confessional*, i.e., a conscious conformity without reservation to the Lutheran symbols. When the Synod’s first constitution was drafted—apparently by Muehlhaeuser in the early months of 1850—it bore a subscription to the Scriptures, the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, and the other Lutheran confessional writings. On the original handwritten manuscript, however, the reference to the Lutheran confessions was crossed out and in its place was substituted a subscription to “*reines Bibelschrentum*” (pure, Bible-based Christianity) and “*reines Bibelwort*” (the pure word of the Bible). The revision was not thoughtlessly made.

But even here, the ambivalence of the founding fathers manifested itself (I want to be Lutheran, but let’s not get too fussy about it). In the questions put to the ordained, the confessional phraseology was *retained*. The ordinand pledged himself to the fundamental doctrines of the Holy Scriptures and to the Articles of Faith of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. The name “Lutheran” was not to be a fake.

That we are not misreading our founding fathers (their principle concern was not confessional) is clear from a contemporary newspaper account in the Boston *Puritan Recorder* of August 1, 1850. It was reported on that day that a Pastor Muehlhaeuser was in Boston to solicit funds to purchase the sanctuary of the First Congregational Church of Milwaukee. The paper encouraged support of Muehlhaeuser. “The formalists, or those who build the church of unconverted men, making baptism and the catechism the qualifications for the

communion of the church,” the report complained, “present one of the greatest obstacles to the spread of true and living Christianity.” The article went on to say that there are few of the recent German immigrants “who can sympathize in our views of religion, and cooperate with us in the spread of vital godliness among our own countrymen.”

The paper urged its readers to hearken to Muehlhaeuser’s appeal “with special favor...He has the fullest recommendations from personal friends of ours in that place (Milwaukee) whose word may be relied on.” Men like Muehlhaeuser, the paper pointed out, “are our only agents for assimilating to us and our religion millions, whose influence on the future aggregate of our national character is to be incalculable.” Who could have revealed so much, other than President Muehlhaeuser?

Our early years, I say, were bothered by just this *identity* problem. I do not wish to propose that a “confessionless” church cannot also be a missionary church--it indeed can be. Some of our most mission-minded churches have a “creedless” Christianity. The Southern Baptists and the Christian and Missionary Alliance come quickly to mind. Neither has any formal confession of faith. The problems arise, however, when a church wishes to have it *both ways*: to be confessional and non-confessional, both at the same time. The Lutheran joined, thinking that this church was *Lutheran*. The Reformed joined, thinking that his views of the Lord’s Supper and Baptism would be respected. And both were disappointed. The mother church of the Wisconsin Synod, Salem, was a victim of such an identity crisis. When the Reformed element collided with the congregation’s growing Lutheran consciousness, it departed and organized a church to its liking a quarter of a mile north of Salem where it is still located, a monument to our early vacillation. The split at Salem was not an exceptional case—and that’s a discouraging way to carry on mission work!

The second vital element in mission is *manpower*. From its organization the Wisconsin Synod was crippled by a lack of manpower. For almost 15 years the infant synod was at the mercy of German sources. Not until 1863 was a seminary established, and it took many years after that before a steady supply of pastoral candidates was assured. The crippling effect of the manpower shortage can be observed in the growth figures of the Synod from 1850 to 1860. At the organizing convention there were five pastors present serving 18 congregations and preaching stations. In 1858 there were 12 pastors serving 25 congregations, and by 1860 the number was only 20 pastors serving 48 congregations. And these were the years when German immigrants were flooding, inundating, Wisconsin.

An interesting office—not unique to the Wisconsin Synod—was the *Reiseprediger*, the circuit rider. Riding a circuit in the early years of the Synod, the *Reiseprediger* gathered Germans into congregations and preaching stations. In 1865 the office was discontinued, and for the next 15 years the “refrain rings out time and again in the *Proceedings* that we had no man we could spare from our already overworked pastorate” (Eric Hartzell, *Mission Zeal of the Infant Wisconsin Synod, 1850-1893*, p. 5). “There just were no men,” writes Hartzell. “It is understandable why the *Reiseprediger* had to wait. We were not able to supply pastors to churches we already had. However regrettable it may have been, it would have been folly to search out yet more pastorless groups of Christians.”

But the very attempt to remedy the manpower shortage contributed to the lack of *resources* for mission, the third vital element in mission. The establishment of its own pastor and teacher training schools became of primary importance as the Synod veered toward the right. To the early fathers like Koehler, Reim, and Hoenecke, there could be no confessional integrity as long as our pastors were picked up, willy-nilly, from the East or overseas mission houses. “Who can say,” asks Hartzell, “what kind of mission program would have been in existence if there had not been this terrible drain on the Synodical system” (p. 24).

The *Proceedings* of 1880 reported that “in outstanding debts and notes on our institutions we owe a total of \$18,825. In addition we borrowed \$873.91 from the mission treasury. The total debt is \$19,662.91.” Hartzell, engaging in some thoughtful extrapolations, estimates that in terms of today’s money the debt was about half a million dollars. But, he points out, for that to be a truly comparable figure the debt must be multiplied by the number of times larger the Synod is today than it was in 1880. “If these figures will be allowed to stand, then the Wisconsin Synod of 1880 was laboring under a (debt) load of millions of dollars in our money” (Hartzell, p. 25).

The class of people whom the Synod served also contributed to the resources shortfall. Koehler explains:

The first Germans faced hard work in establishing their homesteads and clearing them of encumbrances, physical and financial. Cash money was a rare article...During the whole time of the immigration tide from Germany, up to the 90s , the German farmers in America were mortgaged to the hilt during the arduous years of clearing their land, and after that they slaved again as long to clear the acquired property of the mortgage. (Koehler, p. 66)

The fourth element in mission is *opportunity*. There may be some question whether gathering Germans, baptized and confirmed in the Lutheran faith in the homeland, represented mission work. I will not add to the debate on that issue. But in terms of breaking out of a very constricted and well-defined geographical area, what did we expect? The mission work of the Wisconsin Synod in the first generation was basically carried out in Wisconsin. In adjoining areas thereafter—but feebly. There was no crying opportunity to break out.

On a larger scale the Southern Baptists faced a similar problem. Prior to World War II, there was hardly a Southern Baptist mission north of the Mason/Dixon line. Their strength was in the South. Today they are in a vigorous expansion program in the North. Why the change? *Opportunity!*

Following World War II there was an enormous migration of Southern Baptists to the North in search of better jobs and the good life. For Southern Baptists the migration was opportunity. They followed their people North. With their manpower and resources they were able to gather nuclei of migrated Baptists and start their missions. But the nucleus was a prime requisite. One of their mission developers told me of standing at the checkout counters of a supermarket in Chicago and spotting those who bought grits. Through the local supermarket, he carried on a vigorous evangelism program!

How vital all these elements are becomes clearer if we look at the early beginnings of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Except for a brief moment in the “Bishop” Stephan crisis, these Saxon men knew exactly who they were. There was no identity crisis. Before ever they sailed from Europe, they subscribed to the following: “All the undersigned acknowledge with sincerity of heart the pure Lutheran faith as contained in the Word of God, the Old and New Testaments, and set forth and confessed in the Symbolical Books of the Lutheran Church.” The periodical, the *Lutheraner*, established in 1844, issued a ringing call for all true Lutherans to unite. The *Lutheraner*’s tone was aggressive, its style polemical, and its theology soundly Lutheran. And its high tide of theological imperialism had not yet been reached.

When the Missouri Synod was organized in Chicago in 1847, the list of pastors was rather long and distinguished—many of them university trained theologians. Four pastors and congregations came from Indiana. Two came from Illinois. There were two from Ohio. An influential pastor and congregation from Michigan. One came from New York and two from Missouri. When the Synod met the next year, its number of pastors and congregations had doubled to twenty-five, now reaching out into Maryland (Baltimore—Wyneken). Another twenty-five pastors were listed as advisory delegates and were soon to join.

Contrast this with Wisconsin’s beginning: five pastors all coming from within a 50 mile radius, and one of them shortly to leave because of his Reformed leanings . Beyond all doubting, because Missouri went national immediately it was presented with mission opportunities that our Wisconsin Synod fathers did not even dream of. Are our fathers to be chided?

The organization of the Synodical Conference federation in 1872 further shut off opportunity for the Wisconsin Synod. Missouri was all over the country—“firstest with the mostest.” There was no question—it was carrying the orthodox standard and it was planting it far and wide. The abortive attempt to form state synods, fostered in the early days of the Synodical Conference, also led to sizeable gains for Missouri as it engulfed smaller groups in its districts, already organized along state lines. While there were occasional quarrels about erecting “competing altars” between Missouri and Wisconsin, for the most part Missouri was left alone to establish congregations among the large German immigrant population of Illinois, Michigan, Iowa, Nebraska, Minnesota, and North and South Dakota. Its two seminaries, operative since Missouri’s organization, poured

out the manpower. Its resources were adequate to place their pastors strategically where they labored sacrificially.

And now I would like to pass from 1893 to 1933 which is a kind of watershed year. The intervening years witnessed Wisconsin's federation with the Michigan and Minnesota Synods in 1893 and their merger in 1917. According to my best calculations, the federation of 1893 added approximately one-third to the membership strength of the general Synod, as it was called then. These years also saw the beginning of our mission work among the Apache Indians of Arizona. That mission was to be our only non-white mission solely in our judicatory for the next 60 years.

With the 1917 merger, the president of the Wisconsin Synod, Pastor G.E. Bergemann of Fond du Lac, became the president of the merged synods. He was to remain president until 1933. The administration of Bergemann is given little space in Koehler's history of the Wisconsin Synod. Koehler had no taste for Bergemann's style, considering him officious and unduly concerned with the prestige of his president's office. It was during Bergemann's presidency that a full time president was first considered, the idea being quite congenial to President Bergemann who felt that the burden of a large congregation combined with the presidency was an impossible job. He may have been right.

President Bergemann was an expansionist, a mission man. The same theme runs through all of his reports to the Synod from 1919 to 1933: the task of the Synod is to spread the Word. The accent is unmistakable. But the dark clouds of the great depression were settling in upon the Synod. Through the 20s the seminary re-location project depleted the resources of the Synod, and exhausted its energy—in spite of Bergemann's ringing words. By the time 1933 came along, the Synod was in a desperate financial position.

The 1933 convention essay reflected the gloom which had descended upon the Synod. Professor August Zich of the seminary delivered the essay with the appropriate title: *Defeatism*. According to the secretary's minutes, Professor Zich spoke of its appearance and spread, its symptoms and cause, the damage it does to the work of the church, and its cure. It was intended to be a frontal assault on the pervasive gloom. The debt of the Synod was \$752,649.69. The Board of Trustees reported to the 1933 convention that during the past biennium "reckless plunging had to be stopped and extraordinary measures had to be resorted to to get back to earth and solid ground...It was a matter of live or die for the Synod." The trustees also reported that the "Church Extension Fund has been a source of untold grief and worry to the Board...The fund seems to be hopelessly frozen at least temporarily" (*Proceedings*, pp. 23,24,25).

Apparently there were some grave doubts about the competency of the administration in office to lead the Synod back from the verge of bankruptcy. Delegates defeated Bergemann's bid for re-election and instead elected John Brenner, pastor of St. John's of Milwaukee. President Brenner had headed the very successful offering for the seminary relocation project during the 20s. His keen and incisive mind, coupled with a facility in English, had early set him apart as a leader in the Synod. His trenchant wit and biting sarcasm are well-remembered to this day.

Pastor Brenner did not bring to the presidency the passion for mission work of the previous administration. He was oriented toward our worker-training institutions, serving on the board both of Northwestern College and of the Seminary. It is not surprising that there was a noticeable change in the *tone* of the president's reports to the Synod.

Any report will do, but typical of his concerns is his report to the 1939 convention. "There is a quiet spiritual work," he told the delegates, "to which our Lord has called us, the work He has promised to crown with His blessings." That quiet spiritual work is to:

preach Scriptural sermons that lead the hearer into the Scriptures, and follow up the work when pastoral calls are made; to instruct confirmation classes carefully; not to confirm adults after six or seven lessons; conduct Bible classes for the old and the young; place one or more of our church papers into every home, and recommend helpful books to our people; and, *above all*, make *every possible effort* to found a Christian day school in our parishes. Try to induce

members to send their sons and daughters to our own higher educational institutions.  
(*Proceedings*, pp. 10-11)

I do President Brenner no injustice if I say that he would subscribe without reservation to the judgment of Koehler on the place of the Wisconsin Synod in the church world. “Not all groups or organizations,” observes Koehler, “have the same tasks. There are organizations like peoples, that remain small in number and in that have a token of their mission to do *intensive* rather than *extensive* work, by which the world even may profit” (Koehler, p. 196).

In the late 40s and early 50s when there was agitation for entering a foreign field, President Brenner stood aloof from the effort. Some might even have said he was hostile to it. His reports to the conventions of 1947 (where the search for a foreign field was authorized), of 1949, and of 1951 (at which the Japan and African fields were approved) cannot otherwise be interpreted. Judging from these three reports, which contained not one word or syllable of approval or encouragement for the effort, it is safe to say that he leaned toward Koehler’s view which Koehler expressed about an earlier attempt to involve the Synod in foreign missions. Koehler wrote about that attempt:

There was something not entirely sound about the Synod’s heathen mission endeavor, the idea that a church is not living up to its mission unless it engages in heathen mission work, according to the Lord’s great commission: “Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature.” That idea is dogmatism, with a streak of pietism. (Koehler, p. 198)

For Koehler those were strong words.

I have gone to some length in this matter because during this period—1939 to 1953 when President Brenner declined to stand for election—an enormous amount of energy and time at conventions was devoted to our growing estrangement from the Missouri Synod. Part of the lack of “mission zeal” at the time can be attributed to our occupation with the defense of the Gospel. It is equally true, however, that the presidency was occupied by one who was not militantly concerned about foreign missions.

Let me add, parenthetically, that the last sentence is not intended to reproach the presidency of Brenner. His first years in office were devoted to extricating the Synod from its fiscally irresponsible ways. Why urge missions when bankruptcy is dead ahead? That crisis had just passed when the disturbance in the Synodical Conference commenced. It was chiefly Brenner—although there were others—who saw the potentially destructive character of the ALC/LCMS negotiations. He correctly saw it as the tip of the iceberg. His firm and unyielding judgment set the Synod on the right course and ultimately shaped the unity of the spirit without which no mission thrust is possible. If the judgment of 1939 (see below) had been delayed, there would not humanly speaking have been a 1961. Brenner saw that clearly when others, many others, did not.

The years between 1939 and 1961 were critical ones for the Wisconsin Synod. In 1939 the Synod had responded to the efforts of the Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church to establish fellowship by stating bluntly that such efforts “involve a denial of the truth and cause confusion and disturbance in the church and ought therefore to be suspended for the time being” (*Proceedings*, p. 61). As the years went by, the area of disagreement between Missouri and Wisconsin widened by involving such diverse matters as the Boy Scouts, the military chaplaincy, cooperation in externals, and prayer fellowship. Finally after 22 years of exhausting and at times acrimonious debate, the Synod suspended fellowship with the Missouri Synod in 1961.

The suspension terminated a fellowship in the Synodical Conference which had endured 89 years. The parting was sad. The disruption was tragic. For most of those years, the Synodical Conference had stood—unwaveringly, without apology, and sometimes unlovingly—for confessional Lutheranism unwatered by the waves of contemporary theology. In the religious world it was the Missouri Synod which suffered the ridicule and scorn for the confessional position of the Synodical Conference. The Wisconsin Synod was the barely discernible shadow of the Missouri Synod, not really worthy of reproach.

But there is at least one thing to be said for the long controversy: we lost the fellowship of the Missouri Synod, but we gained an *identity*. No longer could we lean, carefree and comfortable, on Missouri's strength. Not for long could this obstreperous Wisconsin Synod escape notice. It was henceforth to perpetuate all the conceit, pride, and theological imperialism—as opponents saw it—of the old Synodical Conference. Now its mission was clear: it was the last Lutheran church body of any size—I do not wish to slight the Evangelical Lutheran Synod—to maintain a confessional Lutheran posture, unyielding in its subscription to the Lutheran Confessions and to the theology of classic Lutheranism. It had moved out of Missouri's shadow. And the next decade dramatically documented the move.

I have spoken of “identity.” Move over to manpower, During the 60s came the college boom and with it the great expansion on our campuses. With the dedication of Wittenberg Hall in 1975, the transformation of the Northwestern College campus in a twenty-year span was complete. Only one building from another generation is still standing. In the late 60s, the feat was duplicated at Dr. Martin Luther College. Manpower came pouring out the other end of our school system. Between 1962 and 1976, 51.6% of all our pastors who are active today were graduated. For the foreseeable future, pastors will be graduated at an average rate of 50 per year, each year adding approximately 5% to our roster of active pastors. A remarkable figure giving an average active pastorage ranging between 45 and 50 years!

Things were beginning to fall into place. Accompanying the growth in manpower was a notable growth in the Synod's available resources. In 1961 the average per communicant contribution for the Synodical operating budget was a paltry \$10.50 and 72¢ for special causes, and we were a conspicuous last in all Lutheran giving. In 1975 the offerings had climbed to \$29.91 for the operating budget and \$6.52 for special causes, and we were at the top of the Lutheran statistical heap. This growth in Synodical giving did not just happen because since 1961 we have preached a better Gospel message than our fumbling fathers. It was in response to the fourth element in a vigorous mission program: *opportunity*.

In the decades before the 50s, Wisconsin Synod families, moving from their midwestern “ghetto,” were routinely transferred to Missouri Synod congregations, commended, if reluctantly, to the spiritual care of a sister congregation. Having congregations in only 16 of the 48 states, and many of these in the rural areas, a pastor had little alternative. The urbanization of our country left the Wisconsin Synod behind since it was substantially represented in only one large metropolitan area—Milwaukee, where about 14% of its baptized membership lived (and still does). Our families, following a national trend, moved to other urban centers. How many families were “lost” to the Synod in that way is difficult to calculate.

But such transferring after 1961 was no longer possible. Pastors could no longer commend Missouri Synod congregations as “sister congregations.” Furthermore many of Missouri's pulpits were occupied by pastors who had received their seminary training under precisely those professors who were propelling Missouri into the ecumenical mainstream and experimenting with the historical-critical method. This type of pastor repelled a good many Wisconsin Synod families. Soon the appeals started to roll in: we're living 300/600/900 miles from the nearest Wisconsin Synod church, what shall we do?

The appeals could not be ignored without vitiating our testimony against error. Many of our mission starts in the 29 states we have entered since 1961 were started in this way. Mission congregations in the new areas—in another switch in strategy—were mainly started in metropolitan areas, few in any area smaller than the census bureau's standard metropolitan statistical area (SMSA).

The leap from congregations in 16 states in 1961 to congregations in 45 states in 1976 received impetus from another quarter. A great controversy over the understanding of the Bible broke out in the Missouri Synod. It is all quite familiar now. If our people (and the people in Missouri) had trouble understanding our position on fellowship, they had no trouble understanding the grave danger to their faith posed by theologians who said there were mistakes and myths in their Bible. Often these unhappy people had roots somewhere in the Wisconsin Synod. To no one's surprise they often shared their distress with that Synod.

Concomitantly in the Synod there was arising a new spirit, a new zeal, for sharing the Gospel. It seems to me there were two reasons for this new zeal. One was a change in perception of the destiny of the Wisconsin Synod—from what Koehler might call *intensive* work to *extensive* work. By that I do not mean to imply that

*intension* was to be neglected. Enough parish elementary schools and central Lutheran high schools have been opened in the last fifteen years to warm the hearts of even President Brenner and Professor Koehler. The change in perception, rather, has resulted in a more *balanced* program: it is possible to do both, and at the same time.

Secondly, there was a determination that our orthodoxy not become dead orthodoxy, devoid of life, of vitality, of concern for others. If we believe everything we say about our faith, our practice, our theology, if we believe everything we say about the destructive power of error, then our concern for sharing our faith must manifest itself. Or we must join in the singing of that famous old Welsh hymn: “We are the chosen few. / The rest of you are damned. / There may be room in hell for you, / We don’t want heaven crammed.”

What about the future of our administration of the stewardship of the Gospel? I have some concerns, and I will share several with you. First a story. A true story. A president of a conservative denomination (not Lutheran) was approached by one of his young preachers who expressed doubt about his faith. The fatherly president said to the young preacher, “Meaning no disrespect to your intellect, sir, you don’t have the brains to have doubts about your faith and neither do I. A few of the great heresiarchs had that intellectual capacity but not you and me. The trouble with you, sir, is that you’re just bored!”

That is what I most fear—boredom. Getting sick and tired of our bread and butter: educating pastors and teachers and sharing the Gospel with those who do not have it. It is a simple program, uncomplicated and—compared with many programs—unglamorous. It is, up to now, what we have done best. There are many other desirable things that we can do together as a gathering of Christians. As we become bored with bread and butter, we reach for other goodies. Before you know it, all our priorities are mixed up and nobody knows where we are going.

My other concern is that we maintain the funding for the essential mission. Most of the other Lutheran church bodies are in a funding crunch. Last year the Lutheran Church in America opened 32 missions. In the same period we opened 26. If the LCA had opened missions at the same proportionate rate, it would have opened 195 new missions! For most of ten years, the offerings in the Missouri Synod have been almost constant, inflation further eroding the plateau. This has led not only to a precipitous decline in central staffing—which few even in Missouri mourn—but the decline in the number of world missionaries, and there are few who will not mourn that.

God did not command us to go forth and raise money for the Synod. God told us to be faithful stewards of His mysteries, to share the Good News throughout the world. But to do that today requires a ministerial, ancillary function: the funding of the mission. The rate at which we can share the Good News with others is directly related to our ability to fund the operating budget. A little sum like \$17,000 does not seem big—shucks, half of our members have larger mortgages than that on their homes. But that is the approximate cost of a world missionary. And we won’t kid ourselves, will we? If the money is not available, the world missionary won’t be there either. As of this moment, we have the *identity*. We have the *manpower*. We have the opportunity, and how we have the *opportunity*! It is the question if *resources*.

Resources. That is the present—and perhaps unremitting—problem. Let me illustrate what is already happening. In 1970 the Synod’s share of its congregations’ all-purpose dollars was 18.4%...in 1971 it was 17.6%...in 1972 it was 17.7%...in 1973, 16.9%...in 1974, 16.1%...and in 1975 it had further declined to 15.5%. Through those years just cited there was a decline of 16% in the Synod’s share of its congregations’ all-purpose dollars. It is true that more dollars are being raised, but the Synod’s share of them is decreasing. If we had received the same proportionate share of the all-purpose dollars in 1975 as we received in 1970, we would have had an extra \$1.3 million. (All-purpose giving rose from \$29 million in 1970 to \$47 million in 1975). In next year’s congregational subscriptions we must have an average increase of 10%, for a total of \$750,000 in new money. That is the largest dollar increase we are anticipating in our budgeting since back in 1969 with the *Called To Serve* program. And even though to some it may appear that we are raising money just for the sake of raising money, and even though in the next months there will be a constant “harping” on the amount, and even though I may give the impression that I have dollar signs indelibly impressed upon my eyeballs, I would want the message to go out from you (at least) that this sum has more than a casual relationship to our stewardship of the mysteries of God, that it is more than a modest little effort to which one

*may or may not*—depending upon one's *feelings*—give serious attention. And I have rarely been more earnest in my life.

Stewards of the mysteries of God. As to our conservation of those mysteries, our record under God's grace has been remarkable—flying, in fact, in the face of history. As to our sharing of the mysteries of God, His *oikonomia*, His plan of salvation for the world through Jesus Christ, we have faltered at times. In more recent times history will record that we passed through an unparalleled period of expansion measured by any standard available to any historian. We do not know what the future holds. But we do know that God holds the future. For us that is *satis superque!*