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Keeping Our Balance in Our Own Context: Keeping the Cross in Cross-cultural and Taking the Con Out of Contextualization

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Abstract: The dialectic between theology and culture and its subtopic “contextualization” provide a case study that shows how Lutheran theology properly holds theses in a “both/and” tension, as well as identifies antitheses that need to be called out as aberrant theology and practice.

Orthodox theology is about making distinctions, and mission is about contextualization. As we turn the corner toward our next convention of the Synod, the need for clear distinctions and honest discussion about matters that both unite and divide us is urgent. Having recently participated in now the fifth Multiethnic Symposium at Concordia Seminary,¹ we have again engaged the important issues of theology and culture as they both complement one another—and stand in dialectic tension.

Lutheran theology can handle tension; it is one of our hallmarks. We also make distinctions. Both are needed on a daily basis and as we do our best—and sometimes our worst—to “walk together” through another convention season. The first part of this essay speaks to our own LCMS context into which our Lord’s confession and mission is contextualized and inculturated. Then we turn attention to some basic issues of contextualization as a critical issue in the mission of our Lord that moves us outside of our more parochial contexts.

As Confessional Lutherans, we understand both thesis and antithesis. Our Confessions are clear to point out not only what we believe, teach, and confess but also what we reject and condemn. But we have to be careful that this duality and polarity does not, in fact, further divide what we actually do believe, teach, and confess. On the other hand, what we claim to believe should not, in fact, be itself tainted or confused with what we should also reject.



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The “Both/And” of Lutheran Theology

There are many issues about which we must maintain an “either/or” between thesis and antithesis, where we are “for” this but “against” that. But there are also many issues about which the proper Lutheran distinction is not an “either/or” but a “both/and.” Inherent in our theology is the ability to distinguish and yet hold key motifs as necessary but complementary. The tension between doctrine and mission is an example: we are “for” both of these. These should present agreement among us all, and a list would touch on key *loci* within our Confessional agreement.

A basic list might include the following:

Law / Gospel

bread and wine / body and blood

why some? / why not others?

Jesus as true God / Jesus as true man

simul justus / simul peccator

Office of the Public Ministry / Priesthood of the Baptized

righteousness as vertical (*coram deo*) / righteousness as horizontal (*coram hominibus*)

already / not yet

formal principle / material principle

faith / reason

corporate / personal

“catholic” and ecumenical / confessional and doctrinal

What can happen is that our sense of thesis and antithesis that is appropriate for the “either/or” distinctions can carry over into our discussions over the “both/and.”

In fact, I would suggest that a lot of our internal tension and even disunity occurs because of a confusion of these two categories, often based on misunderstandings and characterizations, fostered by an inability or even unwillingness seriously to engage the “other side.” Let us try out a few more pairs, about which we would all agree, but about which we might sense some tendencies toward “leaning” toward one side and creating an imbalance:

doctrine / mission

clarity and purity of doctrine / ambiguity and messiness of mission contexts

theology (“from above”) / social sciences (“from below”)

attention to contextualization and culture / God’s Word as the only universal truth

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Here are areas where we might privilege one or the other, and thus where we need to work harder to keep our balance, engaging both sides of the proverbial aisle. But this can get tricky and easily out of balance, like the dryer spinning with a lumpy load. A system of checks and balances is a good thing.

In physics, for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction, but in the LCMS, for every action there is all too often an equal and *slightly greater* reaction, adding a “plus one” that creates an imbalance.² Thus, for example, some experimentation in worship styles causes a fearful reaction that we are losing our theology of grace-oriented, sacramental worship, grounded in God’s divine service *pro nobis*. And instead of discussing these tensions, we begin a process of overreactions on both sides that can lead to non-Lutheran worship styles on the one hand, and to a reduction and restriction to a tightly controlled and limited set of rigidly prescribed forms on the other.³ As another example, we sense a growing functionalist view of the Office of the Public Ministry, even a sense of “lay ministry” as “laity serving in the Pastoral Office” (not as the “ministry of the laity”), and we overreact into a loss of the Waltherian “both/and,” extolling the views of Loehe and even flirting with the views of Grabau.⁴

Or we rightly resist subsuming theology to sociology, properly prioritizing our biblical and doctrinal “text” to any cultural context, but then we resist and problematize *any ministerial use* of the social sciences.⁵ Or instead of engaging the complexities of culture and contextualization, we might oversimplify these realities and retreat into what might seem quite obviously to be “the one culture of God’s church” and forget that it, too, is inculturated and contextualized into forms that can divide as well as unite. While working to keep the “cross in cross-cultural,” we can easily fall prey to the “con” in contextualization, as though we need to be “against” any suggestion that the pure truth of God’s Word that transcends any and all culture can be—and will be—contextualized by human culture and history.

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Keeping the Proper Tensions

In fact, Lutheran theology is not simply bipolar. It is better characterized by balance between polar tensions, like the clothesline held taught. Release the tension, and the line goes limp. Overextend the tension, and the line breaks. Our theological

distinctions are not simply “thesis::antithesis,” but rather begin with those “both/and” tensions that are really “thesis::thesis.” But there are also antitheses, the “either/or” distinctions, and these exist on *both* sides. And it is usually in these extremes where the true mischief can be found. The better model is thus—*antithesis::thesis::thesis::antithesis*.

Might this form something of a grid or map for our church, including “Synod in convention”? If the “center aisle” divides the two sides of the house, we need to remember that there is a “thesis” position on each side that needs to be respected by the other. But there is also an “antithesis” position on each side. Far too often it is the issues on the margins that tend to define that which divides us—and frankly should divide us, as there are aberrant issues of substance and practice on both sides of the aisle that need to be identified and rejected. Better than offering fuel for those on the other side who would critique such extreme attitudes and actions, these “side aisles” are better policed from those on their own respective sides of the center aisle.

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Here are some more polarities, but with a bit of that “overreaction” and “plus one” problem that might benefit from some tempering:

We must retain our tradition and restore historic worship practices as the only way that Lutherans should worship. / We must be innovative in connecting to everyday people, even re-writing the Creeds so people can understand them better.

The pastor is a leader, motivator, using social and anthropological skills to lead (manipulate?) his congregation to agree to his pastoral “vision.” / The pastor must be as objective as possible, even downright boring, to assure that faith is worked solely by Holy Spirit and that God’s people do not engage in sociologically driven church growth.

The Word of God is transcultural and universal within the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church that transcends space and time; thus, issues of culture must be superseded by what we claim to be the pure “divine culture” of liturgy. / The Word of God is always “inculturated” and can make no claim to universal truth; culture will always cause theology to be adjusted and relativized.

We must be loving and tolerant, even if anything goes, and the Eighth Commandment can be trumped by concern for mission. / We must be

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suspicious and intolerant, and the Eighth Commandment can be trumped by concern for pure doctrine.

We will live and die by the need for the Means of Grace, even by laity in pastoral roles. / We will live and die by AC XIV because no Word and Sacrament ministry can happen unless one is *rite vocatus*.

We lie awake at night, concerned that people are going to hell. / We lie awake at night concerned that impurities in doctrine and practice will destroy faith and threaten salvation. (And for those of us who care deeply about both, well, we just don't get much sleep!)

We think the "other side" is too far to the edge and should not be tolerated in the church of God, or at least as "Confessional Lutherans." / We think the "other side" is too far to the edge and should not be tolerated in the church of God, or at least as "Confessional Lutherans."

While intentionally pushing toward hyperbole here, the point is that we can easily slip from the "both/and" of thesis::thesis, into the "either/or" of our antithetical boundaries. Lutheran theology is especially equipped to deal with such tensions. We need to be in honest dialog with one another as we address both long-standing and new tensions, lest they divide us. The problem with a "coalition of the willing" is that it often fails to hear (or even to listen to) those who may actually be raising legitimate concerns. Matters of the Word of God are not simply decided by a majority vote, but by consensus around the study of the Word itself, seeking unity in that text despite our differing contexts.

And so, in the Synod, we have election results by the slimmest of margins, with those elected by one side not very interested in serious engagement with the other and often publicly opposed by them. The two-party system is now firmly in place, and the ideological polarization mimics a similar gridlock on the national political scene.

Whoever is in power is in correction mode from the abuses or neglect of the previous decade or so, losing continuity as though nothing good happened in the recent past.⁶

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Moving specifically into the area of missions, the following pairs of assertions might be considered, all of which nearly quote or paraphrase various voices within the LCMS.

Mission is accomplished only by the Means of Grace. The role of the church is the administration of the Means of Grace. Like a light on a hill, we gather the people of God around the presence of God, in His holy and historic liturgy, universal in space and in time as God's inerrant "text." Let those who are seekers come in here.

Mission is accomplished only by the Means of Grace. The role of the church is the administration of the Means of Grace. As Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, so we must enter into the messiness of lives, identifying with people where they are in all their felt needs and in ways that will connect and communicate to their contextual expressions of faith.

Salvation is accomplished only by the Means of Grace. The role of the church is the administration of the Means of Grace. The church does mission. The first thing we need to do as a mission planting strategy is to establish proper Lutheran worship through the office of pastoral ministry among a community of Lutherans, gathered around Word and Sacrament. Visitors are welcome but must be instructed in our worship, familiar to us if not to them. They must be fully catechized in all points of doctrine to make a confession of faith in order to join our communion fellowship.

Salvation is accomplished only by the Means of Grace. The role of the church is the administration of the Means of Grace. But mission creates the church. So don't have your first worship service too soon or be dependent on a called and ordained pastor. Worship is for the insiders, and we need to reach out to outsiders. A small worshipping community will not attract outsiders. Develop a strategy to build community and relationships. Do not hold a worship service until 9–12 months after establishing a beachhead presence in the community.

Mission strategy must be driven by meeting people in their context, identifying their manifestations of spiritual need. We need to connect people to Jesus. So we must understand American culture. The missional impact of much of American Evangelicalism is that it identifies spiritual expressions from within the context of American culture. We need to learn something here. Worship must enter into American culture.

Mission strategy must be driven by a proper and pure understanding of the Triune God, whose salvation for all nations was accomplished in Jesus the Christ. Humanity must be drawn into the truth of God, expressed by the orthodox faith throughout history. So we need to subsume any contemporary context into the larger story of God's holy history, manifest in that "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church" and holy liturgy that transcends space and time. Worship must take us out of American culture.

So how do we restore and keep our balance, affirming that which should not divide us, even within the proper tensions of our "both/and" and, at the same time, dealing with what should properly distinguish us from aberrant theology and practice?⁷ I do not have a long list of answers, but some obvious practical solutions would start with respecting others and actually listening to their concerns, beyond what are often surface or "presenting" issues.⁸ A second is a greater intentionality for dealing with the problems on the margins *from those on the same side of the aisle*. Too often we are far more interested in dealing with the aberrant issues on the other side of the aisle and ignore the "beam" that is in our own margin. Our political process doesn't help, since such a critique and even correction may well need to be applied to those who are the basis of support for election and re-election. But until we can honestly address both the "pros" of the other side and the "cons" of our own side, we will continue to swing back and forth, with the direction of Synod set by ideological agendas. And so a third obvious way forward is the cross, and its drawing us into the humility before God and one another in our own "cross-cultural" ways of being Synod together. As much as we need to cross cultures outside our church, we also need to cross our own cultures within it. And always, in every way, the unity is found in keeping the cross central in our "cross-cultural" awareness!

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Mission and Contextualization: Keeping the Cross Central as the Mission Goes Out

Meanwhile, the mission of our Lord is exploding before us, with all the challenges and joy and messiness and reorientation that comes with engaging on the edges *outside* the church; and it offers extraordinary opportunities for cross-cultural, multicultural, and inter-cultural encounters, not just internationally but also in our own neighborhoods all over America, declared a mission field already in 1992. And

so we have renewed debate—and one might hope healthy dialog—regarding “contextualization.” This is a subset of a much greater mission conversation, engaging now an additional Lutheran journal.⁹ Many of the missionaries who have left the mission field in recent years have brought a wealth of experience from global contexts into our own North American contexts and thus into our domestic conversations as well. How will we address the current issues with dialog, not diatribe, and from both sides of the aisle, with their differing but valuable and helpful perspectives and with their own sets of “pros and cons” that need to be heard and understood?

So let us steer back to the actual goal: not just keeping our balance, but doing so for the sake of the mission of Christ. We began with a reference to the Multiethnic Symposium this past January. Its theme sought to address the related tension of unity and diversity, between the unity of faith and confession as one Body in Christ and the diversity that represents the gifts of God—given into the real lives of real people from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue. Drawing on the motifs of community and hope that have framed every previous Multiethnic Symposium, we listened to the various “communities of hope” that find unity in the “one community in Christ.” The plural “communities” is intentional and raises the question of how biblical and Confessional Lutheran theology is inculturated and expressed within different communities, each in—and from—its own cultural context.

In a church body that is 95 percent Anglo, the question of “contextualization” is easily complicated and even confused by the simple fact that the “context” of being Lutheran, more specifically an LCMS Lutheran, can become that of the dominant culture into which other cultures need to be contextualized.¹⁰ In fact, we, too, have our own context that must be recognized, lest the mission of our Lord across cultural boundaries be hindered by the assumption that contextualization is really an invitation for others to enter into our context. A key factor to “unity in diversity” is, in fact, a respect for appropriate diversity. This can too easily become a “con,” both in the sense of being fearful and thus “against” any understanding of contextualizing the Word of God into *other* contexts not our own, but also in the sense of deceiving ourselves that our own context is self-evidently normative.

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Of course, this cuts both ways. We are all both “cultural” and “cross-cultural” in virtually every dimension of socialization. Anglos are not the only ones who have to cross cultural boundaries; but, as the dominant culture of our church body, Anglos need to take extra effort and care that what we are communicating as the truth and

message of God's Word is, in fact, God's Word and not our own culturally appropriate way of articulating and confessing and practicing it. To be sure, we have come to know and articulate God's truth and to put it into practice in ways that are "contextualized" into our historical and cultural context. But that context is not the content, and Christ's mission to all nations assumes that the same Word of God can and will be contextualized in different ways in different cultural contexts. This is not to relativize the Word of God but actually to understand that it will be expressed in culturally appropriate ways, just as it is in our culture, however we might describe it (German, "western," American, English).

On the other hand, we need to work to insure that the culture does not alter the truth of God's Word. There are ways of receiving and expressing that truth differently, but it is the same truth. There is the danger of running headlong into the culture without maintaining our theological foundations, but there is also the danger of being so wary of losing our theological moorings that we never leave the safety of the harbor to engage the culture. We are in a very complex and changed social context, and those who head out into uncharted waters need a compass (or, in today's world, a GPS) that works very well indeed. But engage the culture we must, as the Word of the Lord goes forth from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

To be sure, the "direction of fit" must always be to receive God's Word and His ways as normative. The strong and self-serving sinful tendency in all of fallen creation and in every culture, particularly our self-indulgent American culture, is to try to fit God into my life and my worldview. Rather, the "text" of the Word of God must bring us into God's worldview.¹¹ Yet God has come to us and entered into our world, which is, in fact, His. He has "contextualized" Himself as the incarnate Word Made Flesh, a man within a Jewish family. This "scandal of particularity" by which God chose the Jewish culture of the first century is a case of cultural specificity. Yet His Galilean exhortation to make disciples of all nations implies that those of every nation, tribe, and culture are to be included. But they are not simply included or incorporated into this or that one culture but into the unity of the Body of Christ that includes many and various cultural contexts. Whatever we do, we need to keep the cross (and all that it conveys) in "cross-cultural mission!"

The Context of Contemporary Mission, without the "Con"

Frankly, I suspect that there would be general agreement with the caution that we can easily "mash up" or mix up our clear Gospel proclamation as we seek to communicate it across cultural boundaries. In their article, Woodford and Senkbeil are rightly concerned for a "unifying way forward that combines both biblically faithful foundations and culturally sensitive approaches," including what is called "common sense contextualization." Likewise, the call for "textualization" is important, if what is meant deals with that "direction of fit" of our lives (and cultures) into the life of God, and not the other way round, as most folks want and

are wont to do. Much religious activity is focused on finding ways for God to fit into my life than for my life to fit into God's life, given as gift and then lived under Him in His kingdom.

So again, there is needed emphasis and legitimate concern on both sides of this issue as well. Some well-meaning mission endeavors in our church have, in fact, sometimes "mashed things up." On the other hand, those who are deeply engaged in contextualization are, in fact, very concerned about "textualizing" people into God's story, through Word and Sacrament and embodied in the Word Made Flesh: this is God's text indeed!

Perhaps all this is obvious, but issues are far more complicated, and we need to maintain the healthy both/and, while also be well aware of the aberrations on both extremes. How does "textualization" actually work within the various contexts into which it inevitably must be contextualized? Here is some fertile ground, not for "cons," but for further conversation, especially in a culture that is not only increasingly "unchurched" but also neo-pagan.¹² In calling for "open and fraternal discussion of the challenges before us,"¹³ the article closes with the exhortation that "rather than contextualizing the Gospel by reshaping it to make it more culturally acceptable, we're called to welcome exiles from our collapsing world and textualize them into God's transcendent kingdom that never fades."

Indeed. But how is that "transcendent kingdom" actualized and incarnated into a world of cultures? Into which culture will it be incarnated and contextualized? Is it represented by the culture of first century Palestine? by the kingdom of David and the temple of Solomon, with lyres and lutes and no hint of a cathedral pipe organ? by the Early Church gathering in homes and later catacombs, finding a new way to be Israel without temple or one specific land? Shall we privilege "the Western liturgical tradition filtered through the sieve of justification by faith alone and honor it as our heritage (AC XXIV)"¹⁴ or explore what a non-Western liturgical *ordo* might look and sound like?

How do we "be who we are" as a Lutheran church culture with our heritage and historical shaping and yet not let that become the norm and form by which others enter into the Body of Christ as confessed by those who hold to our biblical and confessional theology? Form and content go together and influence each other, as the wise dictum of *lex credendi lex orandi* states so well. But the "forms" of our theology are not the theology itself. How might our rich Lutheran theology find expression in other cultural contexts? How might our own inculturated forms and language be horribly misunderstood in other cultural contexts? And perhaps most importantly, how are we to be Lutherans who are strong in both confession and mission when the context of being church in a churched society has so radically changed?

One of the deceptive “cons” within a fear of contextualization is to assume that “our” culture is the same as God’s culture, and other cultures need to adapt to our ways of being church. Another lesson learned from our Multiethnic Symposium and now years of engaging inter-cultural work is that the dominant culture has to humble itself as a servant even to begin to enter into other cultural worldviews and practices so that communication of God’s “text” can be shared and understood. This may well lead to “culturally sensitive yet pointed catechesis,” in Woodford and Senkbeil’s words, but it will take some serious attention to the problems of translation.

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Dr. Jack Schultz of Concordia–Irvine, one of a few within our fellowship that is trained in cultural anthropology,¹⁵ notes the following, “Mission is essentially praxis, and that entails involvement and communication. Whatever the criteria for the essence of the message, the specific and the concrete foundations for mission emanate from cultural and historical specificity.”¹⁶ He continues, “At this point we are brought face to face with the presuppositions of Christian engagement. There are two basic ways to proceed. Lamin Sanneh usefully contrasts a diffusion approach to a translation approach to missions as follows:”

One way is to make the missionary culture the inseparable carrier of the message. This we might call mission by *diffusion*. By it religion expands from its initial cultural base and is implanted in other societies primarily as a matter of cultural identity. Islam, with which Christianity shares a strong missionary tradition, exemplifies this mode of mission. It carries with it certain inalienable cultural assumptions, such as the indispensability of its Arabic heritage in Scripture, law, and religion.

The other way is to make the recipient culture the true and final locus of the proclamation, so that the religion arrives without the presumption of cultural rejection. This we might call mission by *translation*. It carries with it a deep theological vocation, which arises as an inevitable stage in the process of reception and adaptation. Conversion that takes place in mission as diffusion is not primarily a theological inquiry. It is, rather, assimilation into a predetermined positivist environment. On the other hand, conversion that takes place in mission as translation rests on the conviction that might be produced in people after conscious critical reflection. What is distinctive about this critical reflection is that it assumes, either implicitly or explicitly, a relativized status for the culture of the message-bearer. Christian

missionaries, from Peter and Paul down to our own day, have spent a good deal of their time denouncing false conversions, and urging believers to adopt a code of critical self-examination lest they presume too much on the worth of any person, whether as transmitter or as recipient.¹⁷

Translation is serious business, but we should know something about this enterprise. We see ourselves as the recipient culture of the biblical text, but in our mission we become the source and need to attend to the “locus” of the recipient, even as God took on the form of a servant, becoming like us. Perhaps the basic communication triad is helpful also in this context, noting the relationship of *signifiers* (signs, words, marks on a page, actions, forms) and the concepts that are so signified (*conceptual signifieds*), applied to a *referent*.¹⁸ Whether words or signs or offices and functions, signifiers evoke “meaning” as conceptual signifieds, which have referents in time and space. Finding common signifiers, not to mention clarity in what they actually signify, is very tricky across cultural boundaries, as anyone who has tried to function in a second language quickly realizes.

Even more difficult are abstract theological terms, such as justification and sanctification. Further, what are the signifieds for actions, rituals, and musical forms? We dare not abandon what is theologically correct doctrine and practice, but how do we translate the meaning of actions, rituals, and even worship forms, a problem most of us know even from the shift from German to English. At the time, that was of serious concern; yet today we seem to function fairly well in English. Of course, common signifiers can be clarified through conversation and even teaching (catechesis), but too easily even these practices assume the need for a “target culture” to learn vocabulary and forms from the “source culture” rather than seeking to engage the conceptual signifieds expressed through other culture-specific signs.¹⁹

The Symposium had as its underlying narrative the question of how a denomination can move from “doing ethnic ministry,” which implies a source and a target receptor, to what might be a truly “multi-ethnic church,” in a foretaste of the glorious vision of Rev. 7:9. Very few of us are trained in cultural anthropology; yet we actually do have such resources within our Confessional Lutheran fellowship. After many years, we are finally arriving at places where honest and open conversation can happen, respecting and celebrating both the diversities amongst us as well as our common life together as “one community in Christ.”²⁰

Moving forward with Courageous Confessionalism, with the Cross and without the Con

This essay does not pretend to have profound answers. I am neither a missiologist nor a social scientist. Nor am I a practicing pastoral theologian or directly engaged in inter-cultural mission. But I have learned how much I need to listen, maybe even going into “anthropology mode,” and to engage those who have helpful insights from all sides of an issue. But I approached this task simply as a

member of a church body that seems increasingly divided and virtually divorced from, and increasingly disinterested in, those on the “other side of the aisle” with whom we share fellowship within and around the Body of Christ, where lives of repentance humbly receive our Lord’s forgiveness given and shed for us. We are all under the cross.

In the end, the fact is that here on earth there is no one “God-culture,” other than our common creatureliness within a fallen creation still under God’s care. God’s “text” comes to us in ancient languages and contexts into which we need to be contextualized in order even to begin to be “textualized.” And then into what cultural “set of signs” shall that text be translated? What is the language, culture, and *context* of “the church” from which such translation must occur? What are the “heart languages” and cultures into which such translation must occur? What are the social, economic, political, historical, and even congregational contexts²¹ in which the text of God’s Word is contextualized? Ancient? Modern? Post-modern? First century? Sixteenth century? Nineteenth century? (Thank God for historians who understand historical *context*!) Hebrew? Greek? Latin? German? Spanish? Swahili? Korean? Chinese? Hmong? How do we move from simple translation to appropriation of the common conceptual signifieds and referents that allow us to confess the Creeds with the same understanding?

How can we realize and recognize that neither side of the aisle has the whole, pure understanding of doctrine and mission and that our “pros and cons” all need to be heard across the aisle? How can we avoid allowing unnecessary polarization into simplified “either/or” positions, rather than find and maintain the proper tension of a Lutheran “both/and”? Can we find a way to live together within a proper tension of actually having disagreements? How can we deal with aberrations and extremes within our church body that go beyond the tensions and are actually antithetical to what we believe, teach, and confess and how we live together, humbly kneeling at the Lord’s table as one body in Christ?

Our Lutheran theology gives us the tools and categories to address the changing cultural landscape, itself a new context into which the church needs to be incarnate and thus be “contextualized,” like it or not. But we need not lose our bearings, either. There is more that unites us than divides us. Indeed, energized by the power of the Holy Spirit through the evangelical Gospel, Lutheran theology has been extremely creative and generative in a proper sense, applying unchanging truths to the changing

In the end, the fact is that here on earth there is no one “God-culture,” other than our common creatureliness within a fallen creation still under God’s care. God’s “text” comes to us in ancient languages and contexts into which we need to be contextualized in order even to begin to be “textualized.”

needs of Christ's mission. We are not about simple repristination of another time and place and context. We do want our grandfather's church to be also our grandchildren's church. Sadly, the latter are increasingly absent, living in a cultural context different from that in which we learned to be part of God's church and mission.²² And unlike all those theological systems that have to resolve every tension, and in so doing fall into errors on one side or the other, we know how to manage polarities and deal with diversity. If anyone can do this, we can.

This, I would say again, is "courageous confessionalism": so clear and confident in what we believe, teach, and confess, so anchored in our biblical and confessional commitment, so humble in our confession of our own sinfulness, so dependent on the grace and mercy of God in Christ our Savior, so interdependent on one another as the Body of Christ, confessing His Name to one another and all the world, that we can move forward, together, rejoicing in our unity of faith and of purpose to face the challenges and opportunities of Christ's mission, strengthening the found to be the people of God, and actively seeking the lost, of every nation and tribe and people and tongue, and yes of every cultural context, that all nations might be saved, come to the knowledge of the truth, and be disciples of Jesus, who lives and reigns to all eternity.

There is more that unites us than divides us. Indeed, energized by the power of the Holy Spirit through the evangelical Gospel, Lutheran theology has been extremely creative and generative in a proper sense, applying unchanging truths to the changing needs of Christ's mission.

Endnotes

¹ The fifth biannual Multiethnic Symposium at Concordia Seminary, Jan 26–27, 2016, under the theme, "Communities of Hope: One Community in Christ."

² The fourteenth annual Theological Symposium at Concordia Seminary, September, 2003, addressed this issue under its overall theme, "Identifying Authorities: The Limits of Theological Diversity and Confessional Unity." See also Andrew H. Bartelt, "Keeping Our Balance: Maintaining Unity in a World (and Church!) of Diversity," *Concordia Journal* 30:3 (July 2004).

³ Actually, *LSB* offers a wider variety of forms than any previous hymnal in my memory, but even at that, it is not to be so restricted as to disallow any deviations or augmentation properly reviewed under the "doctrinal supervision" of the *pastor loci*.

⁴ I learned well from William Schmelder that there is a reason for the order of Walther's treatise as *Kirche und Amt*, another "both/and" tension. It is a gross oversimplification, to be sure, but one could generalize Loehe's view as "*Amt und Kirche*" and Grabau's almost Romanizing position as simply "*Amt*."

⁵ The broadsides against “church growth” are a good example. We cannot and will not “build the church” by sociological means and methods (and many church planting methods show that it can be done, without attending to much theology!). But why would we not engage sociological insights in a ministerial (not “magisterial”) way as a “first article gift” of our Creator that may assist our understanding of the human and social world into which our Creator came as Redeemer to form the Body of Christ among us?

⁶ The almost wholesale replacement of our international mission personnel since 2010 is one painful example. Domestically, we now have the “first” national missionaries sent out under the “Mission Field USA” emphasis, perhaps reconnecting with the declaration in 1992 of “North America as a mission field,” which then included the sending of numerous national missionaries in the decade from 2000–2010. The current emphasis is on church planting and revitalization, two of the three “Ablaze! goals,” but without any connection to the previous collaborative work and study.

⁷ If I may insert a “political” observation, it is interesting to note that former President Kieschnick highlighted the *unity of our synod* in holding to the proper tensions within Lutheran theology in such matters as the divinity of Christ, or a high view of Scripture, or solid “grace alone” and sacramental theology, focusing on the vast midsection of the entire Synod and in contrast to those *outside* our Synod. Current President Harrison ran on a platform that highlighted the *disunity of our synod* in tolerating aberrant practices, focusing on specific areas in the margins of our church, in contrast to others *inside* our synod.

⁸ President Kieschnick’s Theological Convocations and now President Harrison’s *koinonia* project are attempts in this direction.

⁹ *Journal of Lutheran Mission*, 1:1 (March 2014).

¹⁰ Rev. Tom Park of Bethlehem Lutheran Church in St. Paul, MN, offered a sectional presentation entitled, “Kim Chi, Sauerkraut, Lutefisk, and Papaya Salad: Quintessential Ingredients for Multi-Ethnic Ministry,” noting (1) that even these fairly obvious diverse foods begin to demonstrate issues that can divide us (especially in the control of the parish kitchen!) and (2) that respect for this diversity can bring everyone together “to taste and see that the Lord is good.”

¹¹ This tension between contextualization and “textualization,” has been raised in a recent *LW* article, Lucas Woodford and Harold Senkbeil, “Mission and Ministry Mash Up” in *Lutheran Witness*, May 2015.

¹² The *LW* article was intended as a point of entry into a larger conversation and a larger project addressing also the underlying issues of our increasingly “sub-human” Western culture, engaging fundamental issues of theology and anthropology (Harold Senkbeil, personal communication).

¹³ In fact, this project began as an attempt to listen to issues that have been raised as a result of the *Lutheran Witness* article from both sides, noting both the common themes and agreement (the both/and) as well as those points where each side might refine the either/or. My goal was to engage the authors of that article in some follow-up conversation and clarification and even to mediate and moderate a dialog between these pastoral theologians, on the one hand, and someone engaged in the social sciences from a cultural anthropological perspective, on the other. For the latter role, I turned to Dr. Jack Schultz of our Concordia University–Irvine, who has served as a presenter and dialog partner on issues of theology and culture at several of the Multiethnic Symposia at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

As it has turned out, various factors, primarily those of overcrowded schedules and commitments, have so far prevented that interaction; but the principle of actually dialoging about a critical topic such as contextualization in the mission of our Lord is something to which all involved in this project remain committed.

¹⁴ Matthew Harrison, “A Theological Statement for Mission in the 21st Century,” *Journal of Lutheran Mission* 1:1 (March 2014), <http://blogs.lcms.org/2014/mission-in-the-21st-century>, §18.

¹⁵ Many who receive sound orientation to the mission field will have had at least some “basic training” in cultural anthropology, as will those engaged in Bible translation. I have learned only a small insight into what might be called “anthropology mode” as observation of a different cultural community’s activities, communication, language, relationships, rituals as a place to begin to understand connections between signifiers and conceptual signifieds.

¹⁶ Jack Schultz, personal communication.

¹⁷ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 29.

¹⁸ See James W. Voelz, *What Does This Mean: Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World* (St. Louis: CPH, 2013), 89–99, particularly the graphics on 95–96.

¹⁹ One of the presentations at the aforementioned Multiethnic Symposium featured a “case study” in cultural readings of texts, led by Dr. James Voelz and engaging readings of Mark 9:14–29 (the demoniac son) from a Native American, Hmong, and West African cultural context to show what different “meaning producing factors” are in play from different cultural contexts.

²⁰ This was thematic at the recent Multiethnic Symposium already mentioned.

²¹ It is interesting to observe that a related debate among us concerns the “contexts” of pastoral formation and education, including the strengths and weaknesses of contextualized education. In fact, all education is contextualized. The issue is defining and determining the most appropriate contexts.

²² See, as one example among many, David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011).