

The FIRE



and the STAFF

LUTHERAN THEOLOGY IN PRACTICE

KLEMET I. PREUS

THE  
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## INTRODUCTION

I had an argument with my editor about this book. I wanted to title it *A Lutheran Understanding of the Relationship between Doctrine and Practice in Light of the Influence of American Evangelicalism*. The Rev. Fred Baue, my original editor at Concordia Publishing House, said that the title was too long and unimaginative. He suggested *The Fire and the Staff*.

“But, Fritz,” I countered, “how will people know that this book is about the Lutheran understanding of the relationship between doctrine and practice if they cannot read it in the title?”

Fritz reminded me that the Holy Bible did not, in its title, proclaim the theme of the saving work of Jesus. In addition, without actually reading it, one might think that the Book of Concord is a manual for transatlantic, high-speed airplane travel. People value these books, he maintained, even though they actually have to read them to know what they are about.

I was unconvinced. “What about C. F. W. Walther’s *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*? That title tells you what the book is about. Or think of that great book by Theodore Schmauk, *The Confessional Principle and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church: As Embodying the Evangelical Confession of the Christian Church*. We need a title like that. Those books were written when churches were churches, preachers were preachers, and books were books.”

Fritz, ever patient, reminded me that these were books written by stodgy, old, German Lutheran theologians of the nineteenth century. Did I want people to think I was a stodgy, old, German Lutheran theologian from the nineteenth century?

I have to confess I agonized about that for some time. The fact is that most people who know me consider me a middle-aged, twenty-first-century, lightweight, American “wanna be” theologian. The

nineteenth-century image had its attraction, but I thought the description “stodgy” might be a bit harsh.

Regardless of the title, I want people to read this book because I believe it says something important—even urgent—to the church. The relationship between church doctrine and church practice is often neither valued nor understood. Some accept the church’s historic doctrine but adamantly demand the right to implement novel or different practices than Lutherans have often employed. Some correctly claim that our common doctrine unites us as a church but also claim that, in matters of practice, uniformity is neither desirable nor even possible. Others insist that the church be united in both doctrine and practice. Consequently, the church is not only confused by an overabundance of church practice options, but we cannot even agree on the function of church practice. How much should the Lutheran church strive for uniformity of practice? How crucial is unity of practice for our walk together as a church? What is the Lutheran understanding of the relationship between doctrine and practice?

We settled on the title *The Fire and the Staff* for three reasons. First, it was the editor’s idea, and I have learned not to argue too much with the editor. Second, the last thing I want to be is stodgy. Third, and most important, *The Fire and the Staff* captures the relationship between doctrine and practice. Doctrine is like a fire. It lights our way and warms us. The evangelical Lutheran doctrine gives us our identity and attracts others to the Lutheran church. Practice, by which I mean the regularly accepted actions of a church body, a congregation, or an individual, is a staff that points to our doctrine and reinforces it.

Doctrine and practice are more closely related, even interdependent, than is often realized. Doctrine affects practice and practice affects doctrine. The two are so intimately woven together that when you change one, you will inevitably change the other, sometimes without realizing what has happened. The analogy of a shepherd is apt. A shepherd warms himself and his flock by the fire. With his staff he gently nudges the sheep toward the source of warmth. So God gives us doctrine, and through churchly practices He nudges us toward the biblical doctrine of Christ. What shepherd builds a fire that offers warmth and light then uses his staff to drive the sheep away from the fire? Wouldn’t that be like a pastor who

teaches the true doctrine but through faulty practice actually undermines his own teaching? Or think about a foolish shepherd who might gently guide his sheep with a good staff only to find that the fire is out. That would be akin to establishing good practices within the church but teaching faulty doctrine.

The first chapter, “Light the Fire,” shows the importance of pure doctrine. Biblical doctrine points to Jesus Christ and saves sinners through faith in Him. Pure doctrine unifies Christians. The benchmark we measure the work of the church against is neither our own charm nor the perceptions of numerical effectiveness. Rather, we measure our church and our work as pastors and people against the pure doctrine of the cross that God has given us. Chapter 1 establishes the importance of doctrinal fire.

The second chapter proclaims the central article of Christian doctrine. It shows from the Holy Scriptures that “justification by grace through faith” is the article of doctrine upon which the church stands or falls. Salvation by grace is the central and most important teaching of the Bible. We are saved without the works of the Law and are purely passive in our salvation. Justification is often questioned today, especially by those who think that we are saved by Jesus in our heart rather than on the cross. We need an objective Savior and an objective doctrine of justification. Chapter 2, “The Heat of the Fire,” shows the importance of the doctrine of the cross.

Chapter 3 deals with the Gospel of Christ and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. These are the instruments Christ uses to “bespeak us righteous” and to apply to us the treasures of His cross. The Holy Spirit has committed Himself to these means of grace and to no others. The Word and Sacraments alone are the power of God unto salvation. Further, they are always powerful. You neither need to search for the Holy Spirit elsewhere nor wonder whether you have Christ’s Spirit wholly so long as you have Christ’s promises in Word and Sacrament. God gives us neither a wordless Spirit nor a Spiritless Word. As in chapter 2, we are passive in our reception of God’s grace through these means. As God extends His kingdom through the Gospel, this chapter is entitled “The Fire Spreads.”

Chapter 4 analyzes the close and varied relationship between doctrine and practice. Sometimes doctrine and practice are so intimately related that they cannot be separated. Other times the two

are related because of close associations during conflicts in the church, both past and present. When certain practices are forced upon the church, they should often be resisted. Frequently, the catholic nature of the church demands our acceptance of historic practices. A certain practice may teach the church so wonderfully that it must be retained for its didactic value. Chapter 4, “The Fire and the Staff,” is built upon the first three chapters and lays the foundation for the rest of the book.

Chapters 5 and 6 discuss worship and good works, respectively. Chapter 5 shows that our understanding of grace alone shapes the way we hear and receive the Gospel. As we are passive in receiving salvation, so we are primarily passive in worship. And as we are one in Christ in our salvation, so we are as uniform as possible in the Divine Service. On the other hand, we are very different in the ways we serve our neighbor. We have all been given different skills and stations in life. Chapter 6 is a discussion of the uniqueness of every Christian in the various vocations God has placed upon us. It also shows the importance of the Christian confession of the faith—the greatest good work. These chapters deal more directly with the practice of the Lutheran church. Because chapter 5 addresses the church assembled, it is called “The Church’s Staff.” As the shepherd guides to the warmth of the fire through the staff, so the church guides to the warmth of the Gospel through the Divine Service. Chapter 6, “The Christian’s Staff,” moves our focus from corporate and uniform worship to individual acts of love for our neighbor. Through our vocation, works, and confession, we serve Christ and guide others to Him.

Chapter 7 changes the mood a bit. It is a presentation of the theology of American Evangelicalism, which consistently and disastrously separates the Holy Spirit from the Gospel. One result of the separation is an insatiable and unrequited quest for the assurance of salvation through exciting manifestations. A second result is a pursuit of the Holy Spirit’s power in places where God has not led us. A third result is decision theology, which denies the precious Gospel of grace alone. I fear that we, living amid American Evangelicalism and its tendency to rip the Spirit from the Word, are forced to worry that “The Fire Is Doused.”

The false doctrine of the Evangelical community affects its practices. When the Spirit is separated from the Gospel, then people no



longer look to the Word and Sacraments of Christ for the assurance of their salvation. Doctrine is disparaged and theology is downplayed. The church no longer stresses the predictable power of the evangelical doctrine and the Sacraments. Instead, she craves excitement as the guarantee of salvation. Her style reflects this craving. Denominational distinctions are blurred as doctrine recedes and is replaced with excitement. Historic Christian practices such as sacramental examination and closed Communion are discarded while new practices are introduced. Chapter 8 shows how Lutherans who accept the practices of American Evangelicalism are in danger of accepting its doctrine as well. Church practice starts to point away from the Gospel. Hence the title, “The Staff Is Bent.”

In chapter 9 we examine the second aberration of the American Evangelical separation of the Spirit from God’s means of salvation: the pursuit of the Spirit’s power through dynamic preachers or congregations rather than in the Gospel. Consequences in practice are obvious. Pastors are valued for their dynamism rather than their faithfulness to true doctrine. Those not perceived to be effective are often not respected. Women, provided they are demonstrably vibrant, are acceptable as pastors despite scriptural admonitions to the contrary. These practices reinforce the bad doctrine of Evangelicalism. The staff has led to a cold and artificial fire—“The Staff Is Broken.”

Chapter 10 comes back to worship. This time we explore the source of worship innovations that even Lutherans have encountered and embraced recently. Most find their roots, predictably, in American Evangelicalism, especially the revivalist preachers, such as Dwight Moody. From marketing the church to altar calls, from preaching to felt needs to church hopping, the style of worship that has changed Lutheran churches with staggering speed in the last two decades is critiqued in this chapter. The Gospel of forgiveness in Christ does not often dominate. Worship no longer teaches Jesus Christ and His cross. It no longer leads to the warmth of the Gospel doctrine and “The Staff Is Lost.”

Chapters 11 and 12 cast a more positive light on the future of the church. Chapter 11 presents the manner in which Christians confess the Gospel of Christ. Our talk of Christ is not merely witnessing to what God has done in our lives. Rather, we confess the saving Gospel of our Lord. This requires learning the doctrine of

the faith, adorning it with a gentle Christian disposition, speaking it in various contexts, and perhaps risking the loss of face or reputation in our ambiguous age. When Christians offer the good confession of the faith, we see “The Fire Is Kindled.”

Chapter 12 answers the question of how the church changes. God forbid that we would ever change the saving doctrine of Christ. That would kill the church. Sometimes a change in practice is called for. Martin Luther initiated great change in the church. In a series of sermons preached in 1522, the “Eight Wittenberg Sermons,” Luther outlines for us the principles Lutherans need to follow when they contemplate a change of church practice. Luther, a truly strong yet patient leader, gives us words and examples that should be heeded by pastors and churches today. All change, even all salutary practice in the church, must serve the Gospel. Luther shows us “The Fire Stoked.”

The theme of this book is that doctrine and practice have a reciprocal relationship. If you change one, you will change the other. The chapters outlined above show that this is precisely what is happening with Lutherans in America who blithely copy the practices of the Evangelical community around us.

We need to understand the influence of novel, uncritically accepted practices, subtle or not. They will gradually change our doctrine. And we should equally understand what happens when the historic practices of Lutheranism are discarded. Read on and you will, I pray, understand the relationship between doctrine and practice in the Lutheran church, especially in the face of American Evangelicalism.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. To what does the doctrine of the Bible point?
2. What is the central article of Christian doctrine?
3. What are the Holy Spirit’s means of grace?
4. What does the theme of the book hope to emphasize about doctrine and practice?

## THE CHURCH'S STAFF

### WORSHIP IN THE LUTHERAN CHURCH

In worship there are two questions that you need to have answered. First, who is doing the acting and the talking? Second, who is being acted upon and spoken to in the service?

#### LOOK WHO'S TALKING

When I was in catechism instruction, my pastor taught the whole class a little prayer we were to say when we first came into the church service. It went like this:

Lord Jesus, bless the pastor's word  
and bless my hearing too,  
That after all is said and heard,  
I may believe and do.

I have prayed that little prayer off and on for much of my life. It's a good prayer because it says what my job is, as a Christian, in the worship service. I am to hear. The prayer also says what my job is after the service. I am to believe and do. Paul echoes the same type of thinking when he says to the Christians in Colossae:

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the

grace of God in truth, just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit. (Colossians 1:3–7)

Notice what Paul says about these Christians. He knows their faith and love. Faith is the way we respond to God, and love is what we give to our neighbor. Where did the faith and love come from? They were brought about by the Gospel the Colossians heard and learned. And from whom did they hear and learn? From Epaphras, a minister and a preacher. I suppose those first-century Christians might have prayed, “Lord Jesus, bless Epaphras’s word and bless our hearing too, that after all is said and heard, we may believe and do.” The job of the minister is to teach and speak. The job of the people in the pew is to hear and learn. Paul says so.

I know that Christians are anxious to do good works. The next chapter is on Christian good works and how we love others. But for now, in the worship service, the primary job is to hear and learn, just as the Colossians did many years ago.

#### WORSHIP IS RECEIVING

Most people, when they think of the word *worship*, think of something that we do. By this way of thinking, we are active in giving God our honor and praise and God is passive in receiving our worship. Actually, the primary direction of the communication in worship is the other way. In true Christian worship we are passive and God is active. We are receiving and God is giving. We are learning and God is teaching. We are getting and God is giving. Roger Pitelko puts it this way:

The dictionary understanding makes worship our action or response. It turns worship into an anthropocentric [human-centered] activity that is measured and normed by what we do, by what we understand God to be. The evangelical Lutheran understanding of worship is just the opposite. It is from God to us. It begins with God. It has its foundation and source with God. It is theocentric [God centered] and more specifically it is Christocentric [Christ centered].<sup>1</sup>

The Lutheran Confessions agree:

Faith is that worship which receives the benefits that God offers.

. . . God wants to be honored by faith so that we receive from him those things that he promises and offers.<sup>2</sup>

The woman [who washed Jesus' feet] came with the conviction about Christ: that she should seek the forgiveness of sins from him. This is the highest way to worship Christ. Nothing greater could she ascribe to Christ. By seeking the forgiveness of sins from him, she truly acknowledged him as the Messiah. Now to think about Christ in this way, to worship and take hold of him in this way, is truly to believe.<sup>3</sup>

The service and worship of the Gospel is to receive good things from God. . . . The highest worship in the Gospel is the desire to receive the forgiveness of sins, grace, and righteousness.<sup>4</sup>

Why is this so important? It is important because we are saved by grace alone. And if we are saved by grace alone, then, when it comes to salvation, we are passive. The worship service is the place and the occasion in which God gives to us the forgiveness of sins that Jesus won for all people on the cross. It is precisely in the worship service that He “bespeaks us righteous” through His Word and Sacrament. Because we are passive when God saves us, we are also primarily passive in worship. Almost all of the discussion and controversy about worship practices and style could be easily settled if we would just keep in mind that the direction of communication in the service is from God to us.

## DIVINE SERVICE

The word *service* is also a bit unclear. When you attend the church service, are you serving God or is He serving you? Actually, there is some of both going on. But who is primarily doing the serving? God is. He is speaking to us and serving us His grace through the Word and Sacraments. Consequently, the worship service or the Sunday service are often called the Divine Service.

Here's a question: How much are we serving God in the Divine Service, and how much is He serving us?

The Divine Service is like a restaurant. My wife and I went to a fancy restaurant for our anniversary. What a place! This particular restaurant had won all sorts of awards for its menu, its service, and especially its food. Because of personal budget constraints, it is the type of place we go to infrequently.