

The Iowa Synod, the ALC, and Open Questions

By

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[NOTE: This was originally written as an answer to a challenge posted on The AALC's Discussion Board, which was eventually shut down because it served to stir up discord. The question had to do with what the founders of The AALC meant when they inserted a statement about open questions into the DECLARATION of FAITH and Policy and Position Statements of The American Association of Lutheran Churches, passed at the Constituting Convention. This Declaration of Faith was replaced and supplanted by the Constitution of The AALC, which itself contains no such statement. The statement in question reads as follows: "we acknowledge that there are 'open questions' in theology and church practice." The issue was one of a number of issues raised by 21 pastors who signed a letter of dissent. The questioner asked, as a means of settling the dispute, why we didn't simply ask the founders of The AALC what they meant by their statement on open questions.]

I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the issue of open questions. We could certainly ask the founders [of the AALC] what they meant by open questions, but I suspect we would get a variety of answers. Our founders were careful to be explicit where agreement had been established, but were vague on the subject of open questions. This suggests the possibility that our founders had different understandings on this subject. I'd suggest that rather than look to the founders, as useful as that might be, we ask what those pastors who raised the issue of open questions [in a letter to the Presiding Pastor] actually meant; that we look to the historical positions of Lutheran church bodies; and we examine the scriptures on the matter.

Earlier on this discussion board, when asked to define open questions, the following answer was given, quoting from the proceedings of the Iowa Synod of 1879:

"Our Synod was from its very beginning persuaded to make a distinction between such articles in the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as are necessary articles of faith and such other doctrines as are not doctrines necessary for salvation; and our Synod has considered it one of her duties very earnestly and emphatically as an important truth...that there are doctrines, even doctrines of the Bible, concerning which members of our Church may hold different views and convictions without thereby being compelled to refuse each other church fellowship.... In such matters unity should indeed be sought; but it is not absolutely required as in the doctrines of faith."

The proceedings of the Iowa Synod describe two specific issues. The first issue involves the separation of doctrine into fundamental and non-fundamental articles, or those articles which are essential for salvation and those which are not essential for salvation. The second issue is that of church fellowship. The Iowa synod here declares that only those doctrines necessary for salvation are essential, and therefore only those doctrines necessary for salvation may limit church fellowship. But this is a false, syncretic understanding, making the Gospel of no effect, and disparaging the very Word of God.

The apostle Paul is sometimes thought to have divided doctrine into essential and non-essential articles in I Cor 3:2, when Paul says "I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able." But that is not it at all. Paul continues his argument and states that the problem is not one of doctrine, but of sanctification. *"I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?"* (I Cor 3:2-3). The reason Paul couldn't teach them anything more was because their lives were fleshly rather than spiritual. The writer to the Hebrews confirms this understanding. In Hebrews 5:12-14, the writer laments that he would like to give them meat, but they still need milk, for they are unskilled in the word of righteousness. *"strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil"* (Heb. 5:14). The writer of Hebrews continues the argument in chapter 6. *"Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, Of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this will we do, if God permit"* (Heb 6:1-3). So the milk of the word is equated with repentance, faith, baptism, ordination, and last things. The meat is described as going on to perfection, by which is meant both maturity and sanctification. In this passage, the writer of Hebrews defines last things as foundational, while the Iowa Synod described it as non-essential.

In its synodical report of 1858 the Iowa Synod made this declaration: *"Accordingly we dare not deny that beside the teachings which are symbolically fixed there is found a sphere of theological knowledge containing open questions which have not as yet been answered by the Church and symbolically defined because the Church cannot symbolically fix anything unless it has passed through controversy and hence become a vital question for the Church"* (pp. 14,15). In 1866, the Iowa Synod requested a theological opinion from the German theologians in this manner: *"Since concerning these matters" (the questions pertaining to the ministerial office and the last things) "until now no universal agreement has come about in the Lutheran Church, we are of the opinion that these things, or at least those that are most controverted, had best be entirely eliminated from the public proclamation of the Church... Briefly stated, we consider the teachings mentioned as open questions."* (Quoted from Guericke's Journal in L. & W., Vol. XIII, 363.)

In Christian theology, a **formal principle** is the authority which forms or shapes the doctrinal system, or the basis for what is believed. The formal principle of Lutheran theology is *sola scriptura*, or scripture alone. By that we say that scripture alone is the source of our doctrinal understandings. The Iowa Synod places the confessions over and against the scriptures, making the church's confession the *judge* of scripture rather than a summary reflection of it. For if the church has not "answered" regarding an issue, the Iowa Synod indicates the matter cannot be "fixed" and must remain an open question. The confession of the church become the means by which the scriptures are fixed, by which doctrinal clarity and unity is achieved, and is therefore the judge of scripture.

But notice as well that doctrinal clarity and unity is *not* what is requested. The Iowa Synod specifically requested that these issues under dispute not be settled by the church, but remain

open questions. They claim that due to doctrinal disputes, the scriptures are unclear, and they request that the issue remain unclear and the issue open. In essence, they desire to substitute their authority for that of the church, and the authority of the church for that of the scriptures. For the Iowa Synod and its heirs, the formal principle of theology is no longer *sola scriptura*, but is personal revelation and the confessions of the church. Thus the Iowa Synod separates itself both from the reformation and the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, thereby truly becoming a schismatic church body. (As evidence of this last, note the “Four Principles” controversy begun by the Iowa Synod, a controversy that sundered the General Council.)

The scriptures speak differently of themselves than the understanding implied by the Iowa Synod. Scripture is a light, a lamp, the sure testimony of the Lord, making wise the simple (2 Pet 1:19; Ps. 119:105; 19:8). The word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart (Heb 4:12). The holy scriptures are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus (2 Tim 3:15). But the scriptures are efficacious for more than just our salvation, for all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works (2 Tim 3:16-17). In other words, all scripture is inspired, not just the so-called fundamental doctrines; and all scripture is profitable to bring the Christian along towards maturity, and towards their ultimate sanctification and the end of all things.

The scriptures themselves pronounce a curse upon those who would add or subtract anything from it (Deut 4:2). Jesus himself said not even a jot or a tittle (the smallest of punctuation points) would pass away until all is fulfilled (Matt 5:18).

The holy scriptures speak of the “one faith” (Eph 4:5). This “one faith” was not something that remained to be discovered by the church through struggle, and codified in its confessions, but is the one “faith which was once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3). The “one faith” spoken of by the apostle Paul was not the subjective apprehension of the merits of Christ (dogma), but is an objective faith in the Word of God, complete and entire. According to the apostle Paul, the Corinthian Church was already, before much of the New Testament has been written, enriched “in all utterance and in all knowledge,” so that the Corinthian Christians “did not come behind in any gift, waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 5,7). By contrast, it is the hypocrites who are described as “ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim 3:7). It is the hypocrites who see doctrine as something subjective, something to be discovered, and something that is proven true by the church through the crucible of dissension, and obtains the status of dogma through the confessions of the church.

The structure of Luther’s Small Catechism is especially relevant to this discussion. The first part is the Ten Commandments, which corresponds to the Law. The second part is the Creed, which corresponds to the Gospel. The third part is the Lord’s Prayer, which corresponds to the sanctified life of faith. In his Personal Prayer Book, Dr. Luther describes the content of the catechesis this way: *“Indeed, the total content of Scripture and preaching and everything a Christian needs to know is quite fully and adequately comprehended in these three items (Ten Commandments, Creed, Lord’s Prayer). They summarize everything with such brevity and clarity*

that no one can complain or make excuse that the things necessary for his salvation are too complicated or difficult for him to remember" (AE 43:13). These three parts represent the minimum of what Dr. Luther considered necessary for salvation, and include all the major articles of doctrine as found in scripture, (including some---like Last Things---the Iowa Synod in 1859 declared to be non-essential to salvation and thus to church fellowship.)

Despite their supposed subscription to the confessions, the Iowa Synod declared the Smalcald Articles and the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope to be simply a "human application" of the teaching of scripture as concerns the identification of the Papacy with the Antichrist. The ALC compounded this error by stating that this was a "historical judgment", while looking forward to a more comprehensive fulfillment. This is a "historically conditioned" subscription, in that the confessions are accepted as true for their day and situation, but not reflective of the current situation and therefore the judgments of the confessions are not binding upon us today. This supposed subscription distorts the meaning of subscription, using linguistic trickery and facile arguments to create a falsehood behind which they hide their true doctrinal position. "We subscribe," they say, when by their own words they actually reject subscription.

The Iowa Synod has a peculiar understanding of Open Questions. In 1859 they declared these to be questions about which *"there may be a difference of opinion without disturbance of church fellowship and concerning which in the symbols of our Church no confessional decision has been laid down, for which reason both views may exist in the Church alongside each other"* (Pastoral Declaration, 1859). Please do not be fooled by this conjurers trick. This statement of the Iowa Synod is not actually a definition, in that it fails to properly define the nature of the word "open" as a restriction of the term "question". They fail to clearly delineate the content of these so-called open questions, and also to describe the grounds upon which any particular issue is declared to be non-fundamental and therefore open. Thus the Iowa Synod is not actually defining open questions, but is actually hiding behind that term to raise the issues of fundamental doctrines and the nature of church fellowship. This prestidigitation is what the Iowa Synod attempted to pass off as a definition, but it fails the most basic test of linguistics. And besides, it is theologically suspect, as we have already described.

A better definition (if only from a linguistic perspective) is found in *A Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod* (1932), which has been accepted as the doctrinal statement of a number of Lutheran bodies and churches. Regarding open questions, the Brief Statement defines those questions *"which Scripture answers either not at all or not clearly. Since neither an individual nor the Church as a whole is permitted to develop or augment the Christian doctrine, but are rather ordered and commanded by God to continue in the doctrine of the apostles, 2 Thess. 2:15; Acts 2:42, open questions must remain open questions"*.

Here we see the stark difference between the two positions. The position of the Iowa Synod and the old ALC is not actually about open questions at all, but was based upon a weak, historically conditioned subscription to the confessions. And since the confessions *"are the presentation and explanation of the pure doctrine of the Word of God and a summary of the faith of the evangelical Lutheran Church"* (TAALC Constitution, 03.08), then a weak subscription to the confessions is tantamount to a weak subscription to the scriptures themselves. The issue in the Iowa Synod is truly about their lack of respect for the authority of Holy Writ. If the content

of the Gospel is reduced to a bare minimum, if anyone can hold nearly any doctrine and still be in fellowship, then the scriptures are truly meaningless, our faith is in vain, and the church is become the synagogue of Satan.

In his Commentary on Galatians, Dr. Luther addresses this issue.

Here you see what St. Paul thinks of a little error in doctrine which apparently is insignificant, or even seems to represent the truth. He considers it so grave and dangerous that he is justified in denouncing its sponsors as false prophets, even though they appear to be eminent people. Therefore it is not right for us to consider the leaven of false teaching a little matter. Let it be as little as it pleases; if it is not watched, it will result in the collapse of truth and salvation and in the denial of God. For if the Word is adulterated and God denied and blasphemed (a result which will necessarily follow), all hope of salvation is gone. ...Hence we in this instance do not concern ourselves with Christian unity or love, but we straightway express our judgment, that is, we condemn and denounce all those who even in the smallest particle adulterate and change the majesty of the Word; for "a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump" (Comments on Gal. 5:12, VIII, 2669 f.)

At the colloquim of Regensburg in 1601, Aegidius Hunnius (1550-1603) stated that a person who, being uninstructed in the faith, believed a false doctrine, could nevertheless be saved. In such cases these false doctrines would be what the apostle calls the stubble that is burned in the fire of tribulation. Yet if such a person hears the true doctrine and rejects it, or refuses to hear the truth, the matter is far different.

He is a heretic who denies an article of faith. ...It is something different if somebody should say contemptuously: 'for me the foundation of salvation is sufficient, and I am satisfied if I fully accept this article,' and if such a person should refuse to receive fuller instruction in the remaining doctrines. It is true that such a person would err with regard to minor articles; however, his error would not be insignificant but be connected with contempt of the divine Word. (Colloq. Ratisbonae, hab. Lauingae, p. 351 sqq.)

Johann Franz Buddeus (1667 - 1729) adds the following to our discussion.

It will be observed that we do not speak of that which must be believed because it has been revealed by God but of that which a person must believe in order to be saved; for in Holy Scripture many things are contained which we must in true faith accept since they have been revealed to us by God...which, however, are not necessarily required for obtaining salvation. Besides, many things are required and therefore necessary if a person is to be a member of a particular Church, and still more, if one is to be a pastor in that Church, even though such matters are not at once required for salvation; and hence we do not speak of them here. (Institut. th. Dogm. Lips., 1724, p. 41.) Thus according to Buddeus, the entirety of scripture is important.

Likewise the Confessions are important because they are based upon and derived from the scriptures. As the summary of the doctrine of Holy Writ, the confessions are binding upon every Christian. According to the fathers,

Our intention was only to have a single, universally accepted certain, and common form of doctrine which all our Evangelical churches subscribe [bekennen; agnoscant et amplectantur] and from which and according to which, because it is drawn from the Word of God, all other writings are to be approved and accepted, judged and regulated.” (FC SD Introduction 5) Of the confessions, the fathers made the following pledge: “We also have determined not to depart even a finger’s breadth either from the subjects themselves nor from the phrases which are found in them, but, the Spirit of God aiding us, to persevere constantly, with the greatest harmony, in this godly agreement, and we intend to examine all controversies according to this true norm and declaration of pure doctrine. (Trig. p. 23)

Finally, even broaching the subject of open questions would seem to indicate that some questions are closed, that all striving in these matters is for naught, that the answers have already been provided. We Lutherans would say that yes, some questions are closed, those being any questions addressed in the Scriptures. And since the Confessions are the summary of the doctrine of the scriptures, we would also say that where the church has spoken in its confessions, the question is closed. We would further state that where the scriptures have not spoken clearly, such questions must remain open. The approach of the Iowa Synod seeks to reopen questions that have been settled by the scriptures, to open the scriptures up to the private interpretation of every man (2 Pet 1:20). The Iowa Synod and its intellectual heirs would have us destroy the unity of the church through the admixture of error, through the leavening of the one loaf (1 Cor 5:6-8; Gal 5:1-9; 1 Cor 10:17). My brethren, should we rather not tremble at his Word (Isa 66:2), desiring with Christ that not one jot and tittle pass from the law, till all be fulfilled? (Matt 5:18). Why do we provoke the wrath of God through our refusal to accept his Word?

We shall let Luther have the final word in this matter.

Augustine says with respect to himself: Errare potero, haireticus non ero; that is, I can err, but I do not want to become a heretic. The reason is this: Heretics not only err, but they refuse to be instructed; they defend their error as right and contend against the truth which they have come to know and against their own conscience. Of such people Paul says, Titus 3:10, 11: ‘A man that is an heretic, after the first and second admonition reject, knowing that he that is such is subverted and sinneth,’ being autocatacritos, that is, he deliberately and finally chooses to remain in the condemnation resulting from his error. But St. Augustine will gladly confess his error and accept instruction. Hence he cannot become a heretic even if he should err. All other saints take the same course and willingly throw their hay, stubble, and wood into the fire in order that they may remain on the saving foundation. This very thing we also have done and are still doing. (Concerning Councils and Churches, A. D. 1539, XVI, 2663 f.)

Appendix: Discussion of Specific Doctrines Thought to be Open Questions

1. The Papacy

The Iowa Synod in a 1904 document continued its teaching that it is a "human application" of the teaching of Scripture to declare the Papacy to be the Antichrist. The Iowa Synod became part of the American Lutheran Church, and its teaching on the Antichrist persisted in the new union. Since 1930 the ALC taught that it is only a "historical judgment" that the Papacy is the Antichrist. In 1938 this view was officially sanctioned in the ALC "Sandusky Declaration." It stated:

"We accept the historical judgment of Luther in the Smalcald Articles ... that the Pope is the Antichrist ... because among all the antichristian manifestations in the history of the world and the Church that lie behind us in the past there is none that fits the description given in 2 Thess. 2 better than the Papacy..."

"The answer to the question whether in the future that is still before us, prior to the return of Christ, a special unfolding and a personal concentration of the antichristian power already present now, and thus a still more comprehensive fulfillment of 2 Thess. 2 may occur, we leave to the Lord and Ruler of Church and world history (VI, B, 1)."

However, the Lutheran Confessions state the matter differently. The Iowa Synod, and the old ALC, falsely claimed this doctrine to be an open question.

"This is a powerful demonstration that the pope is the real Antichrist who has raised himself over and set himself against Christ, for the pope will not permit Christians to be saved except by his own power, which amounts to nothing since it is neither established nor commanded by God. This is actually what St. Paul calls exalting oneself over and against God. Neither the Turks nor the Tartars, great as is their enmity against Christians, do this." (SA, II, IV, 10)

"Accordingly, just as we cannot adore the devil himself as our lord or God, so we cannot suffer his apostle, the pope or Antichrist, to govern us as our head or lord, for deception, murder, and the eternal destruction of body and soul are characteristic of his papal government." (SA, IV, 14)

"It is manifest that the Roman pontiffs and their adherents defend godless doctrines and godless forms of worship, and it is plain that the marks of the Antichrist coincide with those of the pope's kingdom and his followers. For in describing the Antichrist in his letter to the Thessalonians Paul calls him "an adversary of Christ who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God: (II Thess. 2:3, 4)." (Tractacus, 39)

The teaching that the Papacy is the Antichrist is not a fundamental article of faith, one upon which saving faith rests, and by which Christianity stands or falls. Yet the teaching that the Papacy is the Antichrist is not an open question, for it is clearly stated in the Confessions and evidenced by the Scriptures themselves. Therefore whoever denies the Papacy is the Antichrist does not stand in the one true faith with his fathers, and is not a confessing Lutheran. A Lutheran pastor who proclaims this question to be open should be open and honest enough to

confess that he no longer subscribes to the Confessions of the Lutheran Church, for whoever denies the least article of doctrine weakens the whole.

2. Last Things

In 1859, the pastors of the Iowa Synod published the following "Declaration" in their synodical organ: *"We treat the teaching pertaining to the 'last things' as an open question, that is, as a question in which there may be a difference of opinion without disturbance of church fellowship and concerning which in the symbols of our Church no confessional decision has been laid down, for which reason both views may exist in the Church alongside each other."* This does not contain a definition of the term "open questions". In fact, neither word is defined in any sense. Instead they use the term "open questions" to describe their position that only fundamental doctrines---those that are essential to salvation---are important. They then use that statement to define their view on what is essential for church fellowship. But they never actually define open questions: they never say what makes a question open, and they never state whether the concept of closed and open questions are even important. This is nothing more than theological sleight-of-hand.

The issue of Last Things is not, in fact, an open question, but is exceptionally well-defined in scripture. (See Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Matthew chapters 24-25, and the book of the Revelation; besides which many of the Psalms and numerous other Old and New Testament passages treat of the same issue.) The creeds of the Christian church treat this issue, as do the Lutheran Confessions. The article of doctrine concerning last things cannot honestly be thought of as an open question, as the church has spoken. And besides, the scriptures declare the article of doctrine concerning Last Things to be foundational, to be part of the milk of the word, to be part of the basics of Christianity (Heb 6:1-3; cf 1 Cor 15: 12-29).

A creed is a statement of faith; in fact, the word creed means "I believe". Creeds are used to teach catechumens and to delimit the boundary between the church and false teachings. In this sense the creeds define the content of acceptable doctrine in the Christian church. And so we see in the Apostle's Creed the following statement: *"I believe in...the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting."* And in the Nicene Creed: *"I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come."* And finally in the Athanasian Creed: *"God and man are one Christ, who suffered for our salvation, descended into hell, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, is seated on the right hand of the Father, whence he shall come to judge the living and the dead. At his coming all men shall rise with their bodies and give an account of their own deeds. Those who have done good will enter eternal life, and those who have done evil will go into everlasting fire. This is the true Christian faith. Unless a man believe this firmly and faithfully, he cannot be saved."* Thus the three ecumenical creeds are united in making the doctrine of last things a foundational article of faith, and also stating that unless a man believe what the creeds declare, he cannot be saved. The Athanasian Creed in particular forbids one to be a millennialist, or to believe in any sort of secret rapture, and declares persons who believe such things to be unsaved.

It must be said that Last Things is the historic term used to discuss the end times. This term has a two-fold application: the end times for the world, and the end times for me. The two modern terms are (respectively) macrocosmic eschatology, and microcosmic eschatology. Within the

microcosm, the last things for me, are a host of meaningful issues. Pastorally, the end times for me has been the most important part of eschatology, for death comes to us all. At the point of departure the reality of the afterlife and one's mode of existence in the afterlife becomes paramount--both for the individual, and for those left behind. However, in 1 Corinthians 15 the end of me and the end of the world are linked together in the same narrative, such that they become part of the same discussion. The scriptures unify the issue; we later theologians, arrogantly sure that we know more than the Spirit of our Lord, divide asunder that which God has joined together, and thus create an opening for the devil to destroy faith.

An example of this is the Norwegian theologian Ole Kristian Hallesby (1879–1961), professor of systematic theology at the Free Faculty of Theology, Oslo, 1909–51. Hallesby argues for a millennial theology using a convoluted hermeneutic in which synonyms, circumlocutions, and figures of speech are not taken in their usual sense, but rather each term is perversely taken to mean something entirely different. According to Hallesby, in the story of Lazarus the rich man died and opened his eyes in the realm of death, which is not the same as hell. *“The realm of death is designated by the Greek translation of the Hebrew word sheol which in the Old Testament is used to designate the place after death both for the pious and for the ungodly, Genesis 42:38; Numbers 16:30; Psalm 9:17.”*¹ For Hallesby, the realm of death is the equivalent of the Hebrew word “sheol” and the Greek word “hades”, all of which reference the intermediate state. In contrast, “Greed word gehenna is made out of the Hebrew word gehinnom”, which Hallesby says refers to hell. In this manner, using a faulty exegesis and a defective hermeneutic, Dr. Hallesby destroys the certitude of the scriptural declaration, “Absent from the body...present with the Lord” (2 Cor 5:8). Hallesby continues in like fashion to distort the scriptures, to abrogate Augustana XVII through a historically conditioned subscription, and thus to divide the body of Christ in what the scriptures themselves declare to be a foundational doctrine.

3. Holy Ministry

“The situation on the New World was substantially different than that in Europe. In Europe the organized church was supported by the state. When the immigrants moved to the new world, they left the old state churches and their pastors behind. In the New World the state was constrained not to support any particular religion. Great religious freedom was afforded the settlers, but with freedom came the necessity to find pastors and build churches and church bodies from scratch. This did not come easily, and occasioned serious doctrinal concerns. According to Maria Erling, “The need for ministers...became so great that congregations, or more properly groups of German settlers, realized that they couldn't wait for a pastor to perhaps arrive from one of the universities in Germany. Given the great distances and the scattered nature of settlement in America, it was difficult to recruit able candidates even where there was some interest in Germany. It was eventually necessary to generate suitable candidates for ministry from among the settlers themselves. The first ordination of a Lutheran pastor in America took place on 25 November 1703, and it was conducted by three priests from the Swedish Delaware settlement who together ordained a German, Justus Falckner, so that he could provide ministry to German settlers in Pennsylvania.

¹ Hallesby, O. *The Last Things*. p. 3. Dreyer, E. P. (tr.) Fogelquist, A H. Jr. (ed.) 1928. (Publication status unknown.)

“Significantly, the argument [the connection between the ministry of the gift of the word with creation] does not align the ministry with the apostolic witness alone, or derive its authority and sanction from its succession from the original disciples. Instead it is the divine office of preaching the word, an office shared with the patriarchs and prophets that is now bequeathed via the actions of the Swedish priests, to one, a German, Justus Falckner.

“The process of decision-making [relating to ordination and leadership], even at that time, involved significant adjustments to their inherited Lutheran tradition. America had no Lutheran theological faculties at universities that could weigh in on the important theological developments that occurred within the young churches. Pietism, a movement focusing on individual reformation and spiritual renewal particularly among the laity, was the form of Lutheran practice that made the largest impact on the developing American church. It was an activist movement, and it was portable. The concept of the ‘priesthood of all believers’ gained a renewed emphasis through the writings of Pietist authors such as Philip Jakob Spener, and the voluntary nature of American church life allowed for the active participation of lay Christians, who provided financial support and local leadership in the work of building up the church. The development of democratic forms of church life characterized the experience of every new group of American Lutherans as they arrived, built congregations, trained and ordained their leaders, established seminaries and colleges, and determined the shape and focus of their collective work.

“In developing their own understanding of ministry, immigrant church bodies in America assumed that leadership would center on ordained pastors, but established structures in which laypeople would have significant input. At early meetings of ministers and at the conference gatherings of congregations, considerable time was spent debating the propriety of lay preaching, and discussing the relative authority of congregations and synods in the calling of pastors.

“These debates about the relationship of congregation and pastor echoed similar university-centered debates over ministry in Germany and Scandinavia. Did pastors derive their authority via transfer from the congregation, was the ministry just a set-apart dimension of the priesthood of all believers, or was the ministry divinely instituted and the minister a representative of Christ? These arguments between function and character and the diverse positions all appeared in the structures created by immigrant churches in America.

“Lutherans have traditionally trusted to the functions of preaching the word and providing for the means of grace, the sacraments, to build and preserve the church. When we examine the way in which this process works, we see that the ordained cannot bring this to pass without the participation of the congregation. Congregations, by themselves, cannot be the whole church. The building of the church as a wider fellowship – as synod, diocese or conference, or more widely as a denomination or communion – also depends on these functions of word speaking and administering the sacraments. The church is built as the koinonia of the congregations develops. The structure that American Lutherans borrowed and adapted for this developing koinonia, this developing fellowship, was the synodical meeting. In these gatherings, the local translations, or adaptations in preaching and teaching the Gospel made in congregations, were tested by the wisdom of the gathered pastors and lay leaders. The kind of translation or mission work done at the synod and conference meetings related directly to the work of the ordained ministers – those responsible for the local mission, the local translation, of the Gospel. These individuals, sometimes accompanied by lay leaders, who had dual identities as

pastors/local preachers and leaders and as ministerial colleagues, fashioned the developing communion among the congregations.

*“At these synod or district meetings, pastors examined candidates for ministry and approved them for ordination. This process has since been organized on a national level, but retains a strong synodical component, in that candidacy committees on the synod level examine and approve candidates for ordination. Throughout American Lutheran history, a candidate for ordination could never be approved on the word of only one pastor, nor could a candidate be ordained without the concurrence of other Lutheran ministers. The collegial nature of the ministry was further fostered at the annual gatherings where the ordained provided public leadership in the common deliberations of the church. They discerned together how money should be spent, who should be admitted to fellowship, how discipline should be administered, where new congregations might be started, and responded to social need with support for hospitals, orphanages, schools and programs for young people. Worship at these gatherings reminded the participants that they were a gathered church, but the very processes of speaking the word to each other, and together asking new questions of the Gospel, questions emerging from their local attempts to apply a heritage to a new situation, shows us how deeply they were involved in the self-critical work of testing their own faithfulness. This is one way to define apostolicity.” (Erling, M. *The Coming of Lutheran Ministries to America*. 2004. The Continuum Publishing Group).*

This brief history hints at the doctrinal difficulties encountered by Lutheran immigrants to this largely non-Lutheran land. They had left their church bodies behind. They had no ministers. How then were their children to be baptized? How were they to be catechized? How were they to be married? Who would preach the Word? Who would administer the sacraments? Todd Peperkorn distills the questions “down to the two [central] questions that were asked at the time were: 1) What is the church? and 2) Who has the original and immediate ground of all spiritual gifts and rights from Christ?” The process of finding answers to these questions was long and difficult, and is not yet over.

In the struggle to find answers to the primary questions (what is the church, and who has the original and immediate ground of all spiritual gifts and rights from Christ?), different positions were established. The first position was that of the Norwegian Free Lutherans, who taught that the congregation, by virtue of the priesthood of all believers, formed the church, and was the origin and immediate ground of all spiritual gifts and rights from Christ. Grabau and the Buffalo Synod taught that the

In the 19th century, a dispute had arisen regarding the nature of the ministerial office. On the one side were those who felt the scriptures and the confessions

In 1866, the Iowa Synod requested a theological opinion from the German theologians in this manner: *“Since concerning these matters” (the questions pertaining to the ministerial office and the last things) “until now no universal agreement has come about in the Lutheran Church, we are of the opinion that these things, or at least those that are most controverted, had best be entirely eliminated from the public proclamation of the Church. . . . Briefly stated, we consider the teachings mentioned as open questions.”* (Quoted from Guericke's Journal in L. & W., Vol. XIII, 363.) [emphasis added]

This passage does not state what the position of the Iowa Synod regarding the ministerial office was, and why they considered the teachings regarding the ministerial office to be an open question.

Maria Erling writes the following concerning the nature of the ministerial office: *“The office of ministry is centered on the functions of preaching, teaching and administering the sacraments. These functions themselves, Lutherans have argued, are the actions by which the church is built, since the word and sacraments provide the medium through which the Holy Spirit can create faith. ... Lutheran understandings of the office of ministry assume that the work of ministry is divinely instituted, and do not speculate or advance any new proposals about the inner character of the person of the minister nor demand any particular rituals beyond the recognized need for a public or proper accountability. The functions of preaching and sacramental ministry that are delegated to this office define the role of the minister. He or she is to preach the word that, through the Holy Spirit, brings faith, creates, and recreates the church.”* (Erling, M. *The Coming of Lutheran Ministries to America*. 2004. The Continuum Publishing Group.)

4. Sunday

From the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) we find a generous explanation of the controversy over Sunday:

“Besides coming in contact with various Reformed sects, which, to say the least, have a very vague conception of the third Commandment, our people were in many places also influenced by missionaries sent out by the Adventists. These missionaries found very fertile soil for their propaganda among the Norwegian immigrants, whose conception of the Sabbath was quite confused because of conditions prevailing in the state church from which they came. When our pastors began to instruct their members as to what the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions teach concerning the Sunday question, they were vigorously assailed, not only by the Adventists, but also by Eielsen's adherents and the Augustana Synod. This controversy was later taken up by the Norwegian-Danish Conference, and was continued until the eighties.

“During this whole controversy the fathers of the Norwegian Synod stressed the doctrine of the Scriptures and the Confessions in opposition to the traditions which in course of time had commonly been accepted even in parts of the Lutheran Church. They maintained that the third Commandment does not require of us the observance of any certain day as was the case in the Old Covenant. To the Christian every day throughout his life is a sabbath unto the Lord. To keep the Sabbath holy, one must use the word of God rightly and diligently. The word of God nowhere stipulates that Sunday is to take the place of the seventh day, which was the sabbath fixed by law in the Old Covenant. Exercising its Christian liberty, the church of the new Covenant, for the sake of order and for other practical reasons, chose Sunday as the day on which to gather for public worship and for special use of the word of God, and not because of any direct command of God.

“This controversy brought home to our people a very valuable lesson, inasmuch as the authority of Scripture and the Confessions was strongly stressed in opposition to all sorts of traditions and products of human reasoning.” (The Doctrinal Position of the Norwegian Synod: A Brief History of the Position in Doctrine and Practice Held by the Old Norwegian Synod Prior to the Merger of 1917. Rev. Chr. Anderson, extracted from an address to the synodical conference.)