
Currents in Theology and Mission: A History

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Currents in *Theology and Mission* was born out of the events that led to the formation of Christ Seminary-Seminex but has served a far broader constituency. We begin by explaining the name itself.

In 1930 the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod started a journal called *Concordia Theological Monthly* (CTM) and appointed the faculty of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis to edit it. By this action the Synod combined three previous journals: *Lehre und Wehre* (Doctrine and Defense), which had a seventy-five year history, *Theological Monthly*, and *Homiletisches Magazin* (aids for preachers). In the initial years of the new journal some of the articles were still written in German but that gradually changed. The last German article I found was in the 1942 volume. Even back then those German articles were not accessible to many pastors. As the name of that journal states, it was published every month. The last volume appeared in 1972, and in the course of those four decades the theology of the journal became more “progressive” and criticism of the CTM, as it was popularly known, was a contributing factor in the hostility toward the St. Louis seminary faculty that was exploited by Jacob Preus, the president of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, in his condemnation and vilification of the faculty.

By 1972 funds had run short—not to mention the challenge of editing a monthly journal—and CTM became the *name* of the journal and not its abbreviation. For the following years, beginning in 1973, CTM was to appear five times a year. The first issue contained an article by John Reumann of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia on the New Testament basis for the ordination of women, although with an unusual editorial note that stated that “the issue has already been exercised beyond its intrinsic merit.” The Lutheran Church in America (LCA) and the American Lutheran Church (ALC) had already approved the ordination of women. CTM was to have a short life since the St. Louis seminary was exiled in February 1974. That also wiped out CTM. The last issue contained an essay by John H. Tietjen, “Theological Education in Ecumenical Perspective,” his response to an honorary doctorate conferred by Eden Seminary (United Church of Christ). Another article by me was titled, “The Yahwist Looks at Abraham.” This clear denial of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch was anathema to the synodical hierarchy.

With the exile of the seminary, the faculty realized that it needed to maintain its communication with its supporters and with the wider church, and began a new publication called *Cur-*

rents in Theology and Mission (Currents). The name echoed the CTM abbreviation/title. The inclusion of the word *mission* was an attempt to emphasize the external purposes of a seminary and a denomination, in order to move behind the internal squabbles of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS). *Currents* was to appear six times a year, and for the alternate months the Seminex faculty launched *Preaching Helps* as an aid to pastors in their homiletical calling. We were back to being a monthly magazine. The editing of *Preaching Helps* was entrusted to other Seminex colleagues, first George Hoyer and later Robert Smith. Both of these dear colleagues have now died. Craig Satterlee became their successor until he became bishop of the North/West Lower Michigan Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). He was the last editor of *Preaching Helps* under my editorial service.

The editor of the first issue of *Currents* was Seminex Professor Herbert T. Mayer, a professor of New Testament and Church History, who had begun his editing duties with *Concordia Theological Monthly*. But Mayer was trying to develop a congregational renewal program he had devised called “Congregations Organized for Mission Endeavor” (COME) and asked to be relieved of his editorial responsibilities. Seminex Academic Dean John Damm invited me to become editor of *Currents* for a two-year term, which actually lasted thirty-five years!

I never called *Currents* “CTM” because I wanted to move beyond that nostalgic/backward-looking focus and present the journal for what it was: something new, something addressing the wider Lutheran and ecumenical audience. I also decided not to continue the battle against our critics in the Missouri Synod in the new journal, but to solicit articles that would try to help pastors and lay people engage with their theological and missional callings. So we sought articles on biblical studies, especially the three-year lectionary, worship renewal, social justice, pastoral care, the full inclusion of women in the leadership of the church, and the like. I spent a great deal of energy in writing the opening editorial, which summarized each issue and tried to show its importance for Christian life in the latter part of the second millennium. I also hoped the editorial would set a tone for the journal and its subscribers.

I appointed an editorial board consisting of a few professors, a few parish pastors, and a couple lay people. We rejected about a third of the submitted manuscripts. I found writing letters to the authors whose essays had been declined one of the most difficult assignments, especially if I knew or was even a friend of the author. One of my most embarrassing mistakes involved one of

my esteemed professors at Harvard, Krister Stendahl. Stendahl, like a number of other professors, came to lecture at Seminex, and I asked him if I could record his lecture and publish it. Always gracious, Krister said yes and someone painstakingly transcribed the tape recording. Stendahl was by that time Dean of Harvard Divinity School and because of the pressure of time usually lectured from a few note cards. When I began to edit the manuscript, it was clear that Stendahl's first language was Swedish, and the typed version left a great deal to be desired stylistically. So I edited it substantially, even thinking I had improved it. At the last moment I remembered that I had not checked these changes with Krister and sent the manuscript off as quickly as possible to Cambridge. A few days later I got a telephone call from Krister at midnight—1 a.m. in Cambridge. After cordial greetings he commented: "This manuscript is not right in a number of places." There was a long silence on my end of the line, and Krister finally said, "It's in the press, isn't it?" I conceded that it was, and Krister said, "Go ahead and publish it." When you make a mistake, Luther said, sin boldly.

In the first few years we had almost 4000 subscribers, from the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC), from progressive pastors remaining in the LCMS, and from pastors in the ALC and LCA. Many libraries subscribed right from the start and we provided complimentary subscriptions to Lutheran and ecumenical leaders around the world. A number of the lay supporters of Seminex also subscribed at first, but that number soon dwindled. We were, sad to say, not writing in a style that appealed to many lay people.

I had several goals for the editing process in addition to the usual ones about punctuation and justification for the writer's arguments. I tried to edit for readability—avoiding technical terms or explaining them, and avoiding foreign language quotations from German, Hebrew, or Greek, except where they were absolutely necessary. When they appeared, they were always followed by a translation. I also asked writers whether all their footnotes were necessary and whether they at times reduced the accessibility of the essay. One of my pet gripes these days is about publishers of books who replace footnotes with endnotes. Unless the reader of a book with endnotes has extraordinary patience or energy, he or she probably skips most of the endnotes. Sometimes the reader misses good stuff tucked away there, but sometimes it makes the reader ask herself: "Why am I paying for sixty pages of endnotes in a 300-page book?" *Currents* is a professional journal, not a technical journal. I think that means going light on the footnotes.

Editing and publishing a journal in the first few years did not have the advantages of personal computers and the technological revolution. Manuscripts were submitted in typed fashion, and because most of them needed significant editing, a secretary had to retype them, so that they could be used by a professional typesetter. The typesetter in turn produced galley sheets, which had to be checked for accuracy and then used to paste up a mock issue. Fortunately, I had a part-time secretary and wonderful student assistants, such as Patrick Keifert, now a professor at Luther Seminary, and Ronald Roschke, now assistant to the bishop in the

Rocky Mountain Synod of the ELCA. To mail the two journals we used IBM punch cards, which again required outlandish expenditures of time to keep them current, as well as two different mailing lists, one for *Currents* and one for *Preaching Helps*. Once personal computers became popular, authors submitted their manuscripts electronically and editorial changes were made on the Word file, eliminating the need for double retyping. Only in a very few cases when major editing was required did I have the manuscripts retyped. The printing companies also did not retype and mock ups were done electronically. Let me take time to recognize the computer skills of Peggy Blomenberg and the late Ann Rezny, my long-time assistants, who supplemented my editing and were masters of layout. These changes also reduced the number of spelling errors thanks to "spell check."

I was persuaded from the start to include essays on a variety of topics in every issue, reasoning that issues centering on one topic might turn subscribers off, if they were not interested in that one theme. If an issue discussed only rural ministry or urban ministry, for example, many readers would find little to benefit them. There were exceptions to this policy, the principal one being that the December issue featured articles on the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke scheduled for the following lectionary year, with faculty members from many ELCA seminaries generously contributing articles. We never paid honoraria to our authors. The other exceptions were for *Festschriften* (celebratory writings) published to honor retiring colleagues. But these issues also usually addressed a variety of topics, so that readers could always find something that fit their interests. Occasionally so many colleagues wrote articles to honor the retiree that the *Festschrift* filled two issues.

Book reviews have always been a major part of *Currents*. It is a simple way to keep up with what is going on in the ecclesiastical and theological world. At the end of a busy day, one may not have the energy to read a lengthy article but half a dozen book reviews is quite another matter. Biblical studies has been my passion, but I always enjoy reading reviews of other kinds of theology or discussions of ministerial practice. The best reviews, of course, are the ones that state clearly the thesis of the book and its justification. For many reasons we published three kinds of reviews. The regular review was 300-400 words; "Briefly noted" book reviews were half that length. We also had a third kind of review: "A book worth discussing." Here the reviewer was given eight to ten typewritten pages to engage a book he or she thought was meaty enough to deserve that kind of treatment.

By 1983 the movement toward what would become the ELCA was underway, and it was clear that the new church body did not need a ninth seminary. Through a long process, Seminex closed up shop in St. Louis and was deployed: ten professors to Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC), four to Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary (PLTS) in Berkeley, and two to Wartburg Theological Seminary's house of studies in Austin, Texas. The other twenty-nine members of the original Seminex faculty had died, retired, or had taken up different positions in the church (Seminex Professor Wi Jo Kang, for example, joined

the Wartburg faculty in 1980). This deployment led to a number of changes. The LSTC faculty grew from seventeen to twenty-seven, clearly more than was needed in the classroom. Instead of a course load of six courses in the quarter system, the equivalent of one course was to be spent in continuing education for pastors and lay people, without the usual honoraria. That program lasted for several years until LSTC had right-sized itself. My equivalent course was defined as my work as editor of *Currents*.

A second more important change was the inclusion of LSTC, Wartburg, and PLTS with Seminex in the publishing of *Currents*. LSTC made the most significant financial contribution, but Wartburg was not far behind. Because of its own financial challenges, PLTS was not able to contribute much financially. But the faculties of the three new partner seminaries regularly contributed articles, and both Wartburg and PLTS occasionally wrote all the articles for an entire issue. I also invited the presidents of these three seminaries, as well as John Tietjen, to write back-page editorials that dealt with the challenges of theological education, as well as their perspectives on the mission of the whole church and the changes that were necessary to be effective in the world today. That lasted for about five years.

The third change was to combine *Currents* and *Preaching Helps* into one eighty-page issue instead of the sixty-four and sixteen page issues of the separate two journals heretofore. The monthly schedule was not only exhausting but the mailing lists were about 90 percent the same and postage rates were already on a rapid rise. There were minor criticisms from a few subscribers who wanted one journal and not the other, but most recognized the necessity and the wisdom of the decision.

In 1988 I became Dean at LSTC with all the work and tensions that office involves. Somehow I found time to teach three courses a year and continue to edit *Currents*. During those eleven years, President Leshner agreed that I could spend Tuesdays at home, trying to maintain a scholarly life. The faculty and students cooperated with this unusual schedule, but I showed up very early and often stayed quite late on the other four days of the week. One or two of those precious Tuesdays was devoted to editing *Currents* in every two-month period.

Over the years it was a challenge to maintain an adequate subscriber list. The three participating seminaries urged their alumni and supporters in a variety of ways to subscribe to *Currents*. We used the mailing lists of the ELCA and the LCMS for direct appeals, usually offering a bargain price for multi-year subscriptions. But the costs of such direct mailings eventually made them impractical and for the last years they have been discontinued. Publication costs have escalated over the history of *Currents* as has the cost if a subscription. Some of the widespread enthusiasm for Seminex and our publications in its early years disappeared as the Seminex faculty members became part of other institutions. In general, many professional magazines have faced similar challenges as people do not subscribe to as many journals as they did before. Some of this reduction is because of finances, but with so much material available online—and free—and with all of our

Gutenberg [printed] the Bible in moveable type from 1455.

Without that technological innovation,
the Reformation as we know it would
have been far different.

lives being driven by the hectic pace of the twenty-first century, people ask why they should pay for publications that they have no time to read.

About a year ago the editors of *Currents* decided to discontinue the hard copy of the journal, since they were losing thousands of dollars with each issue. They were kind enough to check in with me because of my thirty-five year investment in *Currents*, but I understood and supported the decision and look forward to the future of *Currents* as an open access, electronic only journal.

How does one move from one medium to another?

The invitation to write this essay included an invitation to share my “wonderful imagination about the future.” I take that invitation seriously, especially since I will not have to do any of the work. Indeed the world will no longer remember what I say here. Some of my ideas are half-baked, impractical, and easily replaceable. By writing about them down, however, I hope to stimulate better ideas among the current editors.

I have had the opportunity to study Gutenberg’s printing of the Bible in moveable type from 1455. Without that technological innovation, the Reformation as we know it would have been far different. Sixteenth century printers were eager to get their hands on new and exciting material. Gutenberg himself printed everything in black and white. Individual artists were then hired to insert chapter numbers and to indicate with a red slash where new verses started. Verse numbers first appeared in English Bibles in the Geneva Bible of 1560. Some artists working on the Gutenberg Bible added elaborate drawings to the first page of a book, like Job, almost as if they were still producing a hand-written manuscript.

The publishers of the Koberger German Bible in 1483 included 109 woodcuts in their translation, and some copies of this Bible were hand colored. Luther’s complete Bible of 1534 included a magnificent woodcut of Jacob wrestling with an angel that had been colorized by an artist (see next page).

As we move from hard copy to electronic copy what are the opportunities? First, it will be possible to include many pictures in living color. The only pictures we ever published in the old days were black and white, usually of the retiree who was being honored in the *Festschrift* issue. For many years line drawings were included in the upper margin of the page to provide some beauty and to break up the boredom of line after line of type. Pictures, charts, and tables will now be a snap. Some magazines to which I sub-



Woodcut of Jacob wrestling with an angel, as found in Luther's complete Bible of 1534. Image from the LSTC Rare Book Collection. Used by permission.

scribe include a picture of every author. That helps the authors come alive, at least for me.

Discussion of articles can now take place in a lively and caring fashion. I used to invite letters to the editor, but actually received only a few. Someone's reaction to an article in the February issue, for example, would reach Chicago by the time the April issue had already been sent to print, and the letter could appear first in the June issue, too late for any significant interaction. In addition to online chat, I suspect that many readers will want to communicate directly with the authors, and authors can participate in the online chats, recognizing the legitimacy of the reader's remarks or correcting any misreading.

I hope to see articles of usual length, ten to twenty type-written pages, but I also hope to see shorter items, the length of a newspaper column. I regularly read the *New York Times* columns of David Brooks, Gail Collins, Paul Krugman, and Thomas Friedman. I would estimate that these columns are never longer than two or three type-written pages. In the *Times* the editors invite hundreds of marginal comments of approbation or disagreement, often of a hilarious nature. For more than thirty years the first

thing I read in the *Christian Century* was the back page "Memo" column by Martin E. Marty. There were rare occasions when that was the only thing I read.

The online *Currents* is scheduled to appear four times a year. Articles will also need to be edited, sometimes shortened, and be presented in a pleasing layout. My question is whether readers of the new *Currents* will be patient to wait three months for the next issue. That seems to me to be sticking with the old paradigm and with outdated technology. I hope the online discussion of articles will fill some of the gap but I wonder whether there will need to be a weekly or biweekly posting that will maintain interest in *Currents* and keep abreast of current events.

In the original *Currents* it was impossible to comment on breaking news, because by the time the comment would appear, the news would be "broken." What are the implications for Christians of events like Ferguson, Missouri; the killing of nine African Americans in a church in South Carolina; the collapse of the Greek economy; the decline of interest in the church by millennials; the struggle for individual congregations to survive; the sudden death of a prominent church or political leader; signs of hope as noted by readers; and the like? I realize that theological commentary on such breaking news could be very helpful, but it could also get out of hand. Ground rules would have to be set—like using "I statements" and agreeing not to impugn the motives of others.

Editors would have to retain the option of pulling comments when someone egregiously violates the guidelines.

Will people read full-length articles online? Some observers of websites say that readers will usually not go beyond one screen full. If you would look at the books in my personal library, you would see that they are riddled with underlining, question marks, exclamation points, and occasionally marginal comments. I think that I will want to print out a few articles from the new *Currents* that I consider really good contributions and fill them with underlining, question marks, exclamation points, and marginal comments. I will do that within reason and with environmental sensitivity. As I grow older my memory is not as good as it once was. Can I retain the weightiness of a scholarly essay by just reading it on the screen? I suspect there is much to be learned about the effectiveness of electronic journals. Back issues will have to be archived for online retrieval.

Book reviews will also be an important part of the new *Currents*. I hope that publishers continue to supply books *gratis* to reviewers. If a reviewer covers a 600-page book in less than two pages, readers may want to ask the reviewer, "Can you give me a little more about the argument of this book?" Or: "I have read the book and I think you missed an important point." Even the author of the book herself might want to join in the conversation. Readers of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, which has a subscription list of several hundred thousand, often react with praise or criticism to the last issue's articles, and I especially enjoy it when authors concede the point of the criticism or stick by their convictions.

What are the implications for *Preaching Helps*? Readers might take off from the published exegetical findings or homiletical suggestions and say, "Here is how I translated your suggestion to meet the needs of my parish." Or readers might say, "Your suggestions did not meet my needs, but here is what I found by studying the text myself." Many pastors participate in weekly pericope study groups. Could they be encouraged to share the best insights from those collegial discussions online? An editor might need to select the two or three best suggestions from the dozens that come in.

I edited *Currents* for thirty-five years and have now read it for an additional six years. So I am pretty much to the end of my innovative ideas. I want to encourage the editors of the new *Currents* to make it a dialogue, but not necessarily a *dialog*. But that also would be alright. How the editors might foster such an interactive journal remains to be seen.

When I began work on *Currents*, in a previous millennium to be sure, I tried to raise up biblical studies, ecumenism, worship, pastoral care, the role of women, ideas about evangelism, and gathering the faithful. No more boatloads of Lutherans are coming ashore these days. The editors of the new *Currents* will have their own agenda for what they are trying to accomplish. If the

ELCA has had one dominating theme, it has been the urgency of becoming a more inclusive church. That theme has indeed been very prominent but its success in making congregations more diverse much less so. Will it be easier to make *Currents* itself more inclusive with a wider range of voices? Will it be possible for the new *Currents* to attract readers and writers from the laity?

Higher education is debating the value of on-campus versus online education. The cost of residential education drives this debate as does the inability of some people to leave their homes and go to a residential college or seminary. I still prefer regular classes to online classes, but I have taught both and I think I have taught both successfully. In any case, the online discussions have often been better than those in the classroom, because everyone has to participate and they have a chance to reflect before they speak or write. The success of the new *Currents* will depend on how well we all adjust to the new medium. As Marshall McLuhan reminded us, "the medium is the message." So what is the message of this new medium? What is the message of the electronic medium?

How will the new *Currents* complement its Lutheran competitors? In many ways *Currents* and *Word & World* have had similar goals, although *Word & World* has tended to publish issues devoted to one theme. *Dialog* has been a scholarly dialogue among Lutherans, often Lutheran professors. *Lutheran Forum* has been a semi-popular journal for all Lutherans in the United States with a somewhat conservative stance. *Lutheran Quarterly* records the history and theological struggles of world Lutheranism. How many of these will survive in print editions? Might some of them merge with *Currents*?

How will the new *Currents* look after the next forty-one years? Surely none of us knows. I have speculated about some possibilities and hope for better ideas from the editors and from the readers of this article. The old joke about the person who represents himself in a court case having a fool for a client has some relevance for *Currents*. The younger generation is less paper-bound than is my generation, and my proposals may only represent ideas from a previous millennium. Good writing and good editing are still absolutely essential.

I graduated from the seminary in 1962 at a time when the church was in a post-war boom. Somehow that boom disappeared, and none of us imagined the issues and innovations that are debated among us today. In another forty-one years the ELCA will be a "senior citizen," probably with diminished numbers and increased challenges. I will not be around to experience that but I hope *Currents* will be. Its editors in 2056 are probably in graduate school now. Our Internet technology will seem to them as antiquated as an eight-track tape does to us.

Ad multos annos! Success to *Currents* for many years!