
Theological Journals: Bridges over Troubled Waters

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Today multiple currents are swirling around all journals, not least those identified with theology. There are pressures on all print media. As a member of the Editorial Board of a local and Sunday Gannett newspaper, I see the continuing struggle to balance newsgathering and reporting with ever-increasing costs for every aspect of production and distribution. This is doubly true for specialist journals and magazines, never a significant source of revenue for their publishers. A huge number of printed media are going out of business, under the price pressure of mailing/distribution, postage, and salaries/honoraria. Some have moved partly or completely to online distribution, which has multiple problems unless the journal is offered free of charge. “Pay walls” are contentious for even the most desirable and timely of publications. Moreover, it is an uphill struggle to persuade people that online material deserves financial support.

This is complicated in the case of the Lutheran theological journals by a number of theological factors. The obvious decrease in “Lutheran identity” as evident in congregations and denominations has several sources. The move toward ecumenical relationships and formal agreements, or even interreligious dialogues, may be less relevant than the casual ecumenism in families, workplaces, and friendships. Both forms may undermine a general concern to maintain a Lutheran confessional stance, as if that would be impolite or irrelevant in the twenty-first century.

This is both a product and result of the obvious decrease in catechesis in congregations, with shorter periods of formal catechism and less support from parents for real study and learning. This is accompanied by the decline of Sunday school and other classes, even for learning the Bible, which is now rarely taught in public schools. A casualty and contributor to this decrease in catechesis is the decline and struggle of denominational printing houses that now must produce material that appeals to buyers across denominations, leading in turn to many congregations purchasing their materials from non-Lutheran publishing houses. Seminaries can attest to the significant number of seminarians needing remedial work, including for many their first encounter with the Catechism. Some Lutheran seminarians cannot recite the Nicene Creed when they begin classes.

This is mirrored by the general loss of interest in serious theology in our culture, or even of any extended argument in formal language in an age of sound bites. Television preachers spouting self-help and self-promoting religion, often proud of their lack of theological education (for example, Joel Osteen), are on every TV

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or device, conditioning many of our parishioners to simplistic and comfortable platitudes that inoculate people against real theology. Pastors may themselves be tempted to try to compete without the advantages of expensive television production. Reduced interest in drilling deeply into theology and the theological inheritance is exemplified at seminaries and graduate schools of religion by internal institutional competition for funds and faculty time, with some administrators seeing journals as merely public relations instruments, while editors and contributors see the academic focus as the core of the journal’s work. It is hardly necessary to add that the stunning decrease in denominational support for seminaries represents an institutional turn away from the historic commitment of prioritizing theological education maintained through nearly two centuries of wars and economic depressions.

A major issue for journals is the fracturing of the Lutheran center or consensus. Some Lutherans are derided as “confessionalist,” for holding to traditional understandings of Luther and the confessions; others are moving from “Luther, warts and all” to “Luther, all warts.” Multiple re-readings of Lutheran theology are partly a consequence of the academic trap that people do not get hired, tenured, promoted, or published for reiterating a traditional, and therefore familiar, perspective. This has been intensified by the fracturing of all the historic denominations, with a polarization over fault lines. Theological “parties” proliferate with the loss of a sense of “authoritative” voices in Lutheran theology. Neither elected officers, who may be elected for popularity rather than theological acumen (or even commitment), nor carefully designed grids for the selection of candidates for academic positions promise a way out of the rough waters.

History may sort out cause and effect in these societal and ecclesial challenges, but editors are struck by a strong cross-current

that has developed in recent years, which might be called a Luther Renaissance. Perhaps stimulated by the approaching 500th anniversary observances, this Renaissance is exemplified by an outpouring of new and renewed resources. The first may have been the 2000 edition of the *Book of Concord*, accompanied by the very useful *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord*. This was quickly followed by the 2001 *Luther's Works on CD-Rom* by Fortress Press, now available only from Logos in an electronic download. Even the most ardent Luther scholars, who owned the fifty-five volume American edition, rushed to buy the CD-Rom for the quantum leap forward in the search capacity of electronic documents. *The Lutheran Confessions: A Digital Anthology* offers a tool for teaching the Confessions in an interactive way that shows both development and the reasons for such movement. *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of The Book of Concord* from 2012 is a serious contribution to the essential interaction of theology with history as the Reformation took shape.

The recently announced *The Annotated Luther*, a six-volume new translation of seventy-five of Luther's key documents, with many supplements for teaching and learning, and a new *Dictionary of Luther and Lutheran Theology* (also still in process) offer rich reference resources. Taken together, these contemporary products, the results of intense research, offer more resources than could have been imagined a couple of decades ago, and more than most busy pastors and church leaders will be able to digest. They could, however, prompt renewed study throughout the English reading world. All of these are now available in electronic editions, some solely in that form. The huge advantage is that a smart phone or a small computer can hold them in portable and immediately accessible form. The frustration is that these electronic editions cost the same as hard copies, despite the almost negligible cost of production.

Theological journals must find their way, navigating within the strong cross currents of the decline of denominational identity and denominations themselves, producing theological polarizations within traditions, including North American Lutheranism, and taking their bearings from this renaissance of serious Luther scholarship, producing an abundance of new resources hard to track even for teaching theologians, let alone for pastors and church executives. Allowing these resources to serve as bridges between the latest scholarship and the broadest audience is the continuing challenge and opportunity of editors. Both longer articles and, perhaps even more, book reviews can inform in a preliminary way and invite readers to further study, which in turn can function as continuing education, required in many professions but not in the churches.

These journals can and must be the clear voice to articulate Lutheran theology in a practical way for pastors, church officers, and lay leaders, as well as possible congregational use. They can serve as an entry point for publishing younger scholars, pastors, and lay theologians who would like to reach an audience beyond the guild. The differing emphases of the various journals are their strength, with some having the explicit goal of reaching as many

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“practitioners” as possible. *Trinity Seminary Review*, for example, distributes more than 4000 copies per issue, but can do that only by providing gratis subscriptions, while Trinity Lutheran Seminary funds the costs of editing, printing, and distribution.

All publishing is facing the challenge of increased costs. Paid subscriptions provide funding but inherently limit the readership. The journals have different policies regarding advertising, which can offer some modest income. Institutions sponsoring journals do gain recognition and even a degree of status or academic “sheen,” but they all also face financial strain with some resistance to providing adequate funding. The future obviously belongs to electronic publishing, pushed by financial realities and pulled by the advantage of supreme portability and accessibility. A student said in one of my classes, “If it’s not on the web, it doesn’t exist.” Yet my own repeated requests for readers to agree that exclusively online publication would work for them has drawn scant support—a handful of positive responses out of more than 4000 readers. Moreover, it has not been only older readers (and libraries) that have said they wanted something to put on their coffee table or shelves to pick up at the reader’s leisure. Our solution, temporary at best, is to provide both print and online copies, the latter on the seminary’s website, which now holds all issues from 2004 onward. Placing a journal on EBSCO eJournals, a process that can take a year or more, allows scholars around the world to search in subject areas and discover articles from our journals. Some of my colleagues have been delighted to be quoted globally from articles published by our journal and included on EBSCO.

The problem of financing remains, as demonstrated by online editions of the largest and most popular newspapers and magazines, who wrestle with “pay walls.” The huge resistance to paying for online content certainly applies also to theological material. Paid subscriptions cannot long co-exist with free online content. It would seem that only strong institutional sponsorship can provide the secure future the journals need.

Online content has other advantages. Editors always wrestle with timeliness, especially in providing reviews of significant contemporary books. Readers often describe book reviews as the most valuable part of a journal. Yet getting a book for review from the publisher to the editor, next sending it to an appropriate reviewer and receiving the review back to the editor, and then finally sending it to the printer and getting it out to the reader takes a year at the

minimum. This could be accelerated by a continuous posting of reviews online as they are ready. Online publishing also provides the possibility for reader response and conversation as well as study guides for congregational use. To this should be added easy permission for reprints for study purposes.

The value of timeliness is well illustrated by the high level of participation on sites such as www.workingpreacher.org, “always open, always free.” The site is not, of course, free to operate, with significant information technology expense and with honoraria for writers, yet it seems to have no trouble raising money from readers. Rare is the Lutheran pastor who has not accessed the site. On the other end of the online spectrum may be “Thursday Theology” on the www.Crossings.org website, now in its seventeenth year and closing in on 900 postings of serious theology. At one time this site was accessed weekly by tens of thousands of readers around the world, making Ed Schroeder perhaps the most frequently read Lutheran theologian alive. The site is free, but is supported by the Crossings Community and accepts donations via PayPal. The life and work of pastors is very concrete and timely—Sunday comes

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every week—and journals dare not seem abstract and out-of-date.

For future planning, editors might consider coordinating book reviews among the journals, with rolling online postings, rather than each journal covering many of the same books and needing one to two years for reviews to reach the readers. The editors might also find ways to be in regular communication with each other through an email group, or some other medium, to energize and encourage each other in the often frustrating work added to their day jobs.