

**Properly Dividing:  
Distinguishing the Variables of Culture  
from the Constants of Theology  
or  
It's Not How You Look,  
It's How You *Think* You Look**

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**Abstract:** This article is an anthropological investigation of cultural forces at play within our Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and their impact on our institution. It is an examination of the complex entanglement between a theological understanding and a cultural context. The article includes observations about our current demographic profile, our stated ideas about ourselves and what we'd like to be, and discussion of what needs to be done for us to become that which we say we'd like to be.

## **Introduction**

Thank you for the kind invitation to address a topic of critical importance for our church as we consider our future responses to changing national demographics and our proclamation and expression of the changeless Gospel of our Lord.

My vocation as an anthropologist is the investigation of cultural forces that circumscribe and permeate our human experience. These forces are usually invisible or hidden. They are hidden because they are assumed, unexamined, and therefore go unchallenged. Anthropology brings to awareness everyday practices and beliefs that may appear natural and neutral but, in effect, privilege some actions and assumptions

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while marginalizing and subordinating others. These usually invisible forces influence and shape even when they are unrecognized or denied. These very human forces are instrumental in the maintenance of culture and are at play in each aspect of a culture, including its religion. It is the consequences of these forces that I hope to expose today for your consideration as we seek ways to be more effective in our ministries.

I maintain that it is critical to understand the distinction between the Word of God and the culture-specific formulations of that Word. My remarks here are made to impress upon you just how difficult that is to do, and yet how critically important it is to do. I speak with no rancor. I, like you, am striving to fulfill my calling, my vocation in the service of our Lord. I also am trying to understand how best to communicate the truths of God that we have been entrusted with. It is my purpose, as it is yours, to communicate our Lord to others, as He is. I am one of you. But I might not speak like you do.

I see my primary goal here today as giving you additional ways to think about the relationship between culture and theology as you fulfill your calling of speaking the Word of God to ethnically diverse communities. I seek to provide you *additional* ways to think, not new, or different, as if there is something wrong with your way of thinking up till now. Rather, my goal is to provide additional cognitive tools in your repertoire that you will have available as you interact with diverse peoples.

I've entitled this address, *Properly Dividing: Distinguishing the Variables of Culture from the Constants of Theology, or, It's Not How You Look, it's How You Think You Look.*



This image is a photo of a picture that hangs in our bathroom. It was a gift from another family, the Sopers, to ours. Rod Soper is a colleague of mine at Concordia University, Irvine. He and his family, like me and mine, moved from Oklahoma to California to take positions at Concordia. Our families arrived within weeks of each other, and we all went through together the process of assimilating and acculturating into our new surroundings. The adjustment from the Midwest to the “Left Coast” was gradual. (Culture shock is not only an international phenomenon.) Our Sunday afternoons were often spent together at the beach where many of the pains of adjustment were mollified by the waves,

the breeze, and that abundant sunshine. While we sat on the shore, we were regularly astounded by the beach attire and the confidence, if not brazenness, of the adults of all shapes and sizes who squeezed themselves into the smallest of swimsuits, so that more than once I remarked wryly, “remember, it’s not *how* you look, it’s how you *think* you look.” Rod’s wife, Dessa Soper, immortalized that observation in this picture that hangs in our bathroom.

This morning I’d like to frame my address around that image as a metaphor. The important feature here is that what we *are* often contrasts to what we *think* we are. There is often a disconnect between how we view ourselves and how we actually are. And embedded in that dynamic is some notion of what we’d like to be. In our attempts to better understand how theology and culture interact, I would like to consider with you these four points: What we, as LCMS Christians, think we are; what we *also* are; what we’d like to be; and what might be necessary to get us to that ideal.

### **What We Think We Are**

When answering the question “Who Are We?,” whether it be at the “About us” link on the official Web site of the Synod, in a congregation’s new member packet, or in most of our personal endorsements of the church body, our usual characterizations of who we are as the LCMS are *doctrinal*. We define ourselves by our doctrine. We are quite deliberate about theology. We submit to the ultimate authority of the Word of God and insist that all our beliefs and practices conform to that Word. We are a gathering of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, committed to following faithfully. And I will not dispute such a characterization.

But what *else* are we? Even as we are believers gathering around the Word of God, we are not *only* simply and purely responding to and expressing that Word.

### **What We Are**

What else are we? Drawing from a variety of social scientific and historical sources, here’s “how we look to those sitting on the beach”: We are one of more than 250 autonomous Lutheran church bodies, 21 of which are found in North America.<sup>1</sup> We are “the eighth largest Protestant denomination in the United States”<sup>2</sup>; “A branch of conservative evangelicalism or fundamentalism”<sup>3</sup>; “biblically literalist,”<sup>4</sup>; “moderate, formalistic...not given to religious innovation or demonstrativeness... [We tend] to produce sober, serious, industrious people, relatively tolerant but supportive of the political status quo.”<sup>5</sup> We are “a Christianity...of assorted rightist tendencies.”<sup>6</sup> We are “overwhelmingly Republican.”<sup>7</sup> More broadly as Lutherans,<sup>8</sup> we are “remarkably unremarkable” and “pretty ordinary,” “unobtrusive, inconspicuous.”<sup>9</sup> We are “quite ordinarily American.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, in virtually every demographic variable Lutherans are right in the middle, average: our income<sup>11</sup>

and education levels,<sup>12</sup> our marriage and divorce rates,<sup>13</sup> and our levels of home ownership. We are an “ethnic church,” made up primarily of descendants of German and Scandinavian immigrants.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, “it is difficult to separate what is Lutheran from what is northern European ethnic.”<sup>15</sup> We “remain a predominately [sic] white denomination; less than 2 percent of Lutherans in America are other than European descent”<sup>16</sup>; and even with our efforts in this direction, Lutherans are identified<sup>17</sup> as having the greatest proportion of white members (95%) and as the least racially diverse mainline Christian denomination in the U.S.<sup>18</sup>

In consideration of these descriptions, it is clear that we are not “*just* a collection of believers gathered around the Word.” We are a *kind* of people. The LCMS is doing things that attract some *kinds* of people while repelling other *kinds* of people. As I observed previously,

We...have characteristic ways to think and speak. We have a *common* sense. We privilege the head over the heart. We have our values (especially regarding work, education, and home ownership). We have our mores, and foodways (with regional iterations to be sure), and dress (I am told by non-Lutherans that we have a look; and once an airport shuttle driver picked me out of a crowd of 30 as the Lutheran). We have our traditional songs (some of which are only a decade old), and indispensable vocabularies. We have our recognized authorities. We know our heroes and our villains. We are prone to a slightly self-congratulatory ethos at our Reformation Festivals. We are mindful that the “mispronunciations” of Sy’nod and Con’cordia often mark those who were raised outside our church. We have a set of shared and unexamined institutionally supported assumptions. We have our gate-keepers and our institutions of enculturation and sanction (whether they be our seminaries, our Sunday schools, or doctrinal review). We have an underlying, organizing framework whose potency lay in its concealed ubiquity and assumed structures. And these traits we can explain *theologically*—but that does not preclude their being a contextual (cultural) expression that may not be the only acceptable theological manifestation of the theological truth. Even if denied or spiritualized, we still have an identity. This identity structures our social relations, provides social cohesion, perpetuates our systems, organizes our ways of acting and interacting, and distinguishes *us* from *them*. It is an identity that functions, in effect, as ethnicity.<sup>19</sup>

There are social forces at play in our denomination. It is not, as many of us understand, that we are “just regular” and the “others” are the ones with those accretions of culture that need to be left at the narthex door. We are heavily influenced by our ethnic history, our American experience, and our ongoing reinforcement of our ways of thinking, acting, and believing. We are so enmeshed in our way that it is sometimes difficult for us to distinguish our unique traditions from

our Lord's universal directives. Our use of pipe organs, the call process, and Overtures and Resolutions in National Convention are not "simply what the Bible says." We should not require others to accommodate us in these things.

### **What We'd Like to Be**

What we'd like to be is aptly defined by the announcements for this conference: "multi-ethnic" and acknowledging "diverse cultural expressions." The one demographic variable that we are not "average American" is our racial and ethnic makeup. While approximately 70% of Americans are white, 95% of Lutherans are. What are we doing that attracts some *kinds* of people, while repelling other kinds? How does our LCMS "culture," that is, those hidden human forces, perpetuate an institution that produces, attracts, and reproduces a *kind* of people? Certainly, we see ourselves as part of the Church universal. Shouldn't we expect our congregations to reflect or exemplify that universality? Shouldn't we expect to have racial, ethnic, linguistic, economic, and political diversity within our congregations? Perhaps we have, like most Americans, too closely identified a Christian expression with a social and political agenda.

### **What Will It Take?**

I have been attempting to demonstrate that our church body is heavily influenced by human, or cultural forces. These forces shape us, though they are usually unrecognized. These forces are, to a large degree, controllable, when they are recognized. But these human forces are difficult to discern and, at times, to distinguish from a theological position. "Properly dividing" the Word of God from a culture-specific understanding of that Word may be easily granted heuristically, but determining specific locations is difficult as it may be contended that there is no "cultureless" accounting or understanding of anything. However, we must attempt it and continuously critique the creeping effect of contemporary culture into our proclamation and response to the Living Word. For whose Church is it? It is our Lord's, not ours, no matter how comfortable we are with our way of "doing church." The LCMS is a group of like-minded people with a particular way of "doing church." We are not unique in this. All denominations are "cultured." They are each local and contextual iterations of the Christian faith. Our doctrinal formulations are not from nowhere, nor everywhere, but from somewhere. All understandings are situated. Our understanding of and responses to the Gospel are related to time and place; they are contextually manifested. If we hope to become multi-ethnic, we must acknowledge this reality and seek to mitigate the dominating human forces influencing our church body and make social changes that will make us more inviting and less repelling, and that will remove obstacles that prevent others from "walking with us."

Historically, people coming to the Christian faith have brought with them aspects of pre-Christian culture. Many non-essential cultured features accompany conversion. Many non-biblical elements have become “Christian,” and some biblical elements have been abandoned. Christians have redeemed Christmas trees, mistletoe, Easter eggs, and even the name Easter. Voting has replaced the casting of lots for the selection of church leaders. We have replaced sackcloth and ashes with black garments for mourning. Fasting has become an optional and marginalized Christian practice. We have concluded that the admonishments for women’s hats and the holy kiss are cultural and we have dispensed with them. We have embraced chivalry, democracy rather than monarchy, institutional hierarchies, flowcharts, and marketing. With great reluctance, we have acknowledged that English can be as faithful as German for doctrinal discourse. Albs, cinctures, clerical collars, pews, pipe organs, and handbells have been sanctified. Drums and guitars are still being negotiated. (That was supposed to be funny). Need we consider woman suffrage in congregational voters’ meetings, or the appropriateness of life insurance?

When we bring others into our fold, we expect them to make the adjustments and accommodate us. Many of those expectations for accommodations are “ethnic,” or “cultural.” *We* have made use of non-biblical elements. Might not practices of, or symbols in, other ethnic communities likewise be converted for Christian use? Might not, for example, eagle feathers or sacred tobacco in a like manner undergo a conversion? Could these non-Christian symbols be reinterpreted by a faithful community to be given a place within an authentic Christian response to the Word of God?

And who gets to decide? Who gets to decide which of the practices get in and which need to stay on the other side of the sanctuary doors? I must go back to the social sciences to remind us that in any institution there is differential access to power. Status quo has its own inertia and trajectory. We who are in the LCMS institution have chosen to be there. We have self-selected for our participation. Those who have self-selected to remain in this institution have, consciously or not, conformed their behavior to belong. We have chosen to “walk together.” We are like-minded people. That is one of the functions of religion, any religion. And while I am quite sure our Lord walks together with us, I am equally certain that we are not the only ones He is walking with. I don’t believe He has a preference for which language we speak as we walk together, and I’m quite sure He does care about the *kinds* of people who walk with us.

Can we speak the Word, trust the Spirit to work, and recognize that there will be a variety of authentic responses? Can we discuss and disagree (although I would prefer the term “negotiate”) even while we *walk together*? Can we live within the tension created by taking both our theology and culture seriously? How much discomfort might we be willing to endure to become that which we would like to be, indeed, know that we *should* be?

Some years ago, I served at the Lutheran mission on the Navajo reservation near Window Rock, Arizona. There the Navajo Lutheran converts worshiped using the old red hymnal with its archaic formal English (particularly difficult for English-as-a-second-language speakers), they gathered after services for potlucks which included casseroles and Jello salads, and they had frequent ice cream socials even while most of them were lactose intolerant. I had to ask myself, what were we converting them to?

Again, there is no such thing as a culturally neutral church or a culturally neutral theology. We can embrace what we are even as we seek the input of other Christians, recognizing that we are all limited, as well as allowed, by our cultured understandings. We can approach our conversations to “properly divide” confidently, yet humbly. And those are conversations we must have if we are to be the church catholic and not only an ethnic enclave. The dialogue regarding the interaction of theology and culture requires protracted conversation. These others among us are equally created, loved, and sought by our Lord. He knows their names; He hears their songs. And we mustn’t fault them for not being us.

## How to Do It

It is naïve to assume that religious conversion involves only the exchange of one theology (or liturgy or system of morals) for some other. It is reductionist to see religion only, or primarily, as doctrine. For Christians particularly, we understand that the life of faith is not simply a way of thinking or believing, but it is a *life* of faith. Life involves eating and drinking, wearing and doing, earning and building. And each of these components is cultural. Conversion requires a supporting socio-cultural milieu if it is to be sustained.

I will propose two directives that can guide our “becoming that which we’d like to be.” The first is that we embrace the tensions and contradictions between our theology and our cultures. We must take these both seriously. If we take *only* our theology seriously, we have the tendency to retreat into enclaves, to barricade ourselves behind bunkers (or fortresses, if you prefer), and become, in effect, an ethnic group of like-minded and behaved people and mistake that like-mindedness for faithfulness. If we take *only* culture seriously, we will so relativize and water down the Word of God that our proclamation will be little more than empty assurances that “God loves you” and admonitions to “be good to one another.” But by taking both seriously we, in ongoing dialectic with our other-cultured brothers and sisters, press our theological understandings to ascertain how these eternal truths are contextually relevant and negotiate (read, e.g., “worship wars) authentic Christian responses to the Living Word of God.

Converts express and live a faith in an actual life, speak a specific language in a given location, and do particular things. A theology detached from these activities is

abstract and irrelevant. How can we as ministers of the Gospel and shepherds of God's people acknowledge or provide culturally appropriate avenues for the tasks of a living faith? The answers must be found in the tension between theology and the local culture. They require the missionary/pastor to "properly divide" and allow local culture to be expressed while preserving theological integrity.

One should expect tension between the local congregation and the institutional requirements of the Synod. The local pastor/missionary must be an advocate for the people in his congregation and their specific needs. He must engage in the tension between the local and the national.

We must also properly divide the needs of Gospel communication from the needs of the human institution (or, in our theological categories, the right- from the left-hand kingdoms). Our institution supports Gospel, it is not the Gospel. Our institution is not what needs to be preserved and shared. The institution, while necessary and indispensable, is but the vehicle for the communication of the Word of God. The Word of God is not a theological system, a liturgical foundation, or a cultural tradition. The Word of God is the person Jesus Christ—living and active among his people.

As communities change around our established, urban and suburban churches we must decide either to do as we have always done, entrench ourselves and invite others to join us if they'd like, or we must be willing to consider adapting our practices, ethos, to be more accessible to the new neighbors. Whose church is it?

How much diversity can we tolerate? Can we properly divide ethnic diversity (with its concomitant language and practice differences) from theological diversity? Can we accept the one without compromising on the other? The answers will come as a result of the ongoing dialogue between the local expressions and the national institution and the responsible negotiations in which each will allow and each will insist. These adjustments must go both ways, each responding to the admonitions and warnings of the other. It is here that we will prove the "proper division" between the constants of theology and the variables of culture.

The second directive is to speak the Word of God to individual persons, not cultures. God created individuals; He seeks individuals, not culture groups. Culture is just a context that the individual inhabits. As theologian George MacDonald elegantly observed, "by his creation, then, each man is isolated with God; each, in respect of his peculiar making, can say, 'my God;' each can come to him alone, and speak with him face to face, as a man speaketh with his friend. There is no massing of men with God."<sup>20</sup> "There is no saving in the lump. If a thousand be converted at once, it is every single lonely man that is converted."<sup>21</sup> We must move away from a mindset of ministering to "Hispanics" or to "Native Americans" and toward an orientation to the individual, who is, of course, a bearer of a culture. But look at the person first and primarily as a person, not as a representative of some ethnic or social



group. We must engage with individuals, not types. And as we get to know these individuals with their diverse backgrounds and proclaim the Word clearly to them, we'll begin getting what we need for the "proper division."

## **Conclusion**

Please do not take my appeals here to be some sort of criticism of our theology, or some backhanded urge to change or broaden it. Rather, I have attempted to demonstrate that even our understanding of unchanging theological truths is situated. We must view from somewhere, and culture provides a framework for viewing. Culture is a context; there is no contextual-less situation or person. The context, a culture, must not be feared or denied. It is but a situation in which individuals live and work, and where the Spirit of God brings life and works faith. Suggesting that one cultural context can better embody the Gospel is much the same as suggesting that one language better speaks the Gospel. Might not any language be used to speak the pure Gospel, and might not any language be used to speak an authentic response to that Word of God? And might not non-biblical, but not anti-biblical, practices be converted for Christian expression?

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Back to my framing analogy: We may, after having taken a thorough look at ourselves, decide that we are just fine in our favorite beach attire. This is who we are, why fight it? We like who we are, we're comfortable with who we are, and we could do worse. This is tempting and has been the more common response. The habitual is easier. And if this is the course we choose, we will remain an ethnic enclave while we slowly realize the consequences.

It has been my goal this morning to provide you with some additional ways of thinking about who we are and who we'd like to be; about the complex entanglement between a theological understanding and a cultural context; about how our Gospel expressions and communications are seldom a simple rehearsing of biblical truths. But of course, I speak as an anthropologist—looking at the knowable human forces, those empirical dimensions. And I readily acknowledge that the Spirit will move as and where He will, even to the confounding of the social scientists.

You all, each, will be deciding what to do with these concepts. You all, each, must discern the differences between our Lord's Gospel and our contextual understanding of it. And by properly dividing, we will have a more realistic view of ourselves and a recognition of what changes could be made. May God grant us the resolution to do the necessary tasks to become that which we acknowledge that we could be, indeed, should be.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Samuel Nafzger, “An Introduction to The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod,” 1994, Messiah Lutheran Church, posted June 18, 2011, accessed June 10, 2014, <http://www.messiahlutherangermantown.org/messiah-resources/lutherans/nafzger/>.
- <sup>2</sup> Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks 2010), 182.
- <sup>3</sup> Mark A. Noll, “The Lutheran Difference,” *First Thing*, February 1992, accessed January 17, 2014, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2008/01/004-the-lutheran-difference-25>, 8.
- <sup>4</sup> Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 182.
- <sup>5</sup> Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, *Religion in a Free Market* (Ithaca, NY: Paramount Market Publishing, Inc., 2006), 130.
- <sup>6</sup> Noll, “The Lutheran Difference,” 15.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.
- <sup>8</sup> Most of the researchers investigating Christian denominations do not distinguish the different Lutheran church bodies but rather treat “Lutheran” as a single entity.
- <sup>9</sup> Noll, “The Lutheran Difference,” 2, 6.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.
- <sup>12</sup> Kosmin and Keysar, *Religion in a Free Market*, 192.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.
- <sup>14</sup> Noll, “The Lutheran Difference,” 4.
- <sup>15</sup> Kosmin and Keysar, *Religion in a Free Market*, 130.
- <sup>16</sup> Kathryn Galchutt, *The Career of Andrew Schulze, 1924–1968: Lutherans and Race in the Civil Rights Era* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2005), 7.
- <sup>17</sup> Kosmin and Keysar, *Religion in a Free Market*, 236.
- <sup>18</sup> One report distinguishes the ELCA from LCMS (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life/U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Race by Protestant Denomination, June 2008, accessed February 26, 2014, <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/table-ethnicity-by-denomination.pdf>). In this report, the ELCA is identified as being 97% White, and the LCMS as 95% White. Kristen Koenig and Rick Marrs are acknowledged for locating this data.
- <sup>19</sup> Jack M. Schultz, “Dealing with Theology Culturally,” *Missio Apostolica* 20, no. 2 (November 2012): 161–62.
- <sup>20</sup> George MacDonald, *The Complete Works of George MacDonald* (O’Connor Books, 2010), Kindle edition.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*