

# **CHURCH HISTORY**

## **in the**

### **Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Curriculum**

*Armin J. Panning*

[World Mission Seminary Conference, Isla Verde, Puerto Rico, August 18 - 22, 1986]

Under the discipline of Historical Theology the opening paragraph of the catalog at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary states: "Courses in Church History are given during each quarter for the three years the student is at the Seminary. Entrance requirements at our Seminary include a thorough knowledge of world history. The students are then guided to note how our God and Savior has ruled in grace and judgment amidst all that has happened in world history since our Lord's Ascension to the present time. Stress is constantly laid on the point that our God has made everything serve His one great purpose of gathering His Church of believers through the Gospel from among all nations."

One short sentence in that description is particularly worthy of note and has extremely great importance on the Church History curriculum at Mequon. It is the terse observation, "Entrance requirements at our Seminary include a thorough knowledge of world history." It is good to remind ourselves from time to time of the wealth of historical knowledge that particularly Northwestern College graduates bring with them when they enter Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. They have much more than just a passing acquaintance with the Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, as well as the Greeks and Romans. A knowledge of those cultures can be taken for granted, and that knowledge constitutes invaluable background for the task which the Church History department assumes when it attempts to instill in every seminarian an appreciation for "how our God and Savior has ruled in grace and judgment amidst all that has happened in world history since our Lord's Ascension to the present time."

If the teaching in our classrooms is effective, then "the desired outcome will be," as the 1978 Seminary Self-Study states, "a proclaimer of the Gospel who will judge the contemporary scene, as well as the past, with that soberness that befits the Lord's spokesman.

"Major specific objectives the department seeks to achieve in the student are a readiness:

1. To recognize joyfully the spread of the Gospel over the globe and across the centuries as God's effort to save sinners;
2. To trace the role of the church and the churches in this endeavor;
3. To take the side of truth in the message of Law and Gospel in its relentless struggle with error;
4. To appreciate in their historical context the contribution made in that struggle between truth and error by Lutheran confessors and confessions;
5. To recognize the importance of certain key areas and eras in this historical panorama, specifically the Reformation and the American scene."

To accomplish those objectives the Seminary in all three years offers Church History courses that in chronological sequence present the unfolding of God's dealing in grace with a sinful world.

The junior course covers the period from Pentecost to 1500 A.D. Specifically, the material divides as follows: The early church until the time of Constantine is treated in the first quarter of the junior year. The second quarter addresses itself to the time of Constantine (324) to Charlemagne(800), with the third quarter covering the Middle Ages until about 1500, or the time just before Luther.

Professor Koehler's Kirchengeschichte forms the basis of the class notes. There is also an anthology of readings from original sources. Reports and book reviews acquaint the student with the current literature on the subject.

It should perhaps be noted that there has recently been some change here as to the amount of material covered in the junior year. The end point of the junior Church History course used to be 1268 A.D., and three hours per week, three quarters, were allowed to cover the material.

With the increase in material caused by asking the junior course instructor to cover also the Pre-Reformation, one hour of class time has been added to the third quarter, so that the time allotted now is three hours in the first and second quarters and four hours in the last quarter. Admittedly, it is a challenging task to cover the assigned material in the time allotted.

The rationale which moved the faculty in connection with its Self-Study to add material to the junior year was the hope of lightening the burden which middlers bore. For middlers the Church History assignment has been reduced to just two quarters, covering the Reformation in three hours during the first quarter and taking the Post-Reformation period up to 1648 in the second quarter.

An obvious emphasis in the Luther quarter will be the reading of a considerable amount of Luther's writings. The exact procedure for doing that has varied from time to time and from section to section, with daily Luther readings being expected in some situations, and with the reading and discussion of a major treatise on a weekly basis being attempted in others. It might also be noted that there is encouragement to students to read Luther in German, but honesty compels us to admit that that has met with only moderate success.

The title of the second quarter, "The Post-Reformation," is a bit of a misnomer. Actually, it deals with the spread of Lutheranism and the Reformation to areas outside of Germany, i.e., the Scandinavian countries, England, France, etc. Also treated is the Counter-Reformation and the tensions it caused, culminating in the Thirty Years War and its "settlement" in 1648.

The senior course concentrates on the last three hundred years of church history with a general survey being offered in the first quarter. It bears the title, "Modern Church History to the Present." The scope and sweep of that assignment becomes even more imposing as one realizes that the time in our curriculum allotted for that course has since the 1978 Self-Study been reduced to two hours per week. Unquestionably the "heart" of the senior Church History course is the second quarter offering, "Lutheranism in America." Graduates of that course, as many of you here are, will remember the assignment of a major research paper as the main assignment. Professor Fredrich continues to be remarkably successful in getting seniors into the library, including also the musty and dusty corners, in their search for the German and even Latin sources that are the grist of their research. In a surprising number of cases, what may have started out as a somewhat desultory and lackadaisical beginning ends up "hooking" the unwary seminarian on his topic and making an avid research student out of him. Sometimes it even makes a lifelong devotee of church history out of him. As will be evident, church history is not as innocent and harmless a discipline as sometimes supposed.

From the close, personal subject matter of searching our own specific roots, the third quarter course again returns to more general interests in the course, "American Christianity."

If you check the catalogs of other seminaries, you will find that generally Symbolics, or the Lutheran Confessions, are listed under the offerings of the Systematic Theology Department. That is certainly a very logical and understandable procedure.

I rather like, however, the pattern followed at WLS in grouping Symbolics with the Church History courses. It emphasizes the cardinal truth that to be properly understood, a confession must be read in the light of the background and setting that caused it to be written. While the "systematic" aspects are by no means overlooked at Mequon, the historical aspect receives its rightful emphasis, as is indicated also in the Catalog's description: "Courses in the Confessions of the Lutheran Church aim to give the student a thorough understanding of their doctrinal content and to help him recognize that they do indeed present the truths of Scripture. The courses emphasize the historical background that led to the drawing up of the several confessional writings. The importance and purpose of confessions in general are treated, as well as the meaning of confessional subscription."

We have spoken of the advantage we at WLS have in working with students who come in with thorough preparation. That advantage is much in evidence also here. The Ecumenical Creeds and Smalcald Articles have been studied by both Northwestern graduates and the Bethany men. Consequently these do not require course time in our curriculum.

The junior class assignment in Symbolics is a study of the Augsburg Confession and the Apology. One of the changes effected by the Self-Study is that of reducing the number of courses taught per quarter, but giving them more time in the quarter in which they are taught. That change will be evident in junior Symbolics. What many of you will remember as a two-hour course for all three quarters of the junior year has now become a one-quarter course meeting five times per week.

In keeping with the Catalog's description, the course on the Augsburg Confession spends considerable time on the circumstances which led up to the framing of that confession. For class presentation the subject matter is grouped somewhat topically. Class notes outline the main doctrinal points and provide the pertinent Scripture passages which support those points. Thus it becomes evident that the Augsburg Confession does indeed present the truths of Scripture, and hence requires a "quia" subscription on from all true Lutherans.

The writing of an assigned paper requires the student to work also with the Apology. In connection with each of the major doctrinal articles, there are also required readings and "enrichment" readings from the other Lutheran Confessions that deal with the same doctrinal point.

In his senior year the seminarian studies the Formula of Concord. That is a three-hour course, offered in one quarter—generally the first or second, depending on scheduling considerations. Here too there is a concerted effort to gain a full appreciation of this historic Lutheran confession by studying it in the light of the circumstances that produced it. Approximately one-third of the allotted time is devoted to history, with the other two-thirds spent on the content of the articles. Here the sequential pattern of the articles is followed, though there is also some topical grouping, for example, Articles 7, 8, and 11. Students' accounting for their work varies between testing and paper assignments.

The avid student of our WLS Catalog will no doubt have noticed that there is one C.H. course that I have not treated. It may, in fact, be a course of special interest to you because it is listed as "C.H. 278 Mission Perspectives (elective)." The course is the child of Professor Wendland. Upon inquiry he allowed that it is as much pastoral theology and systematic theology as church history.

As an elective offered to middlers it has been titled, "Life and Work on the Mission Field." It attempts to acquaint the student with the orientation and training necessary for a missionary and his family to adapt to the unique life of a world missionary. A second elective, "The Theology of Missions," examines our view of Scripture, of justification and the means of grace, and shows how that view gives our mission work a distinctive stamp and character.

There is, of course, also a great deal of church history taught in these two electives, particularly the history of missions. However, if a specific course on the history of missions is desired, the student currently stands the best chance of being able to take that in our Summer Quarter program. Twice there has been a course on "The Great Mission Century." Additionally, there has also been a course on "The History of the Christian Church in Central Africa" (1984) and "An Evaluation of WELS World Missions" (1986). It is certainly an area open for discussion as to whether perhaps more of that material should properly find its way into our regular Seminary curriculum.