

COMMUNICATING THE IMPORTANCE OF DOCTRINE IN A HETERODOX  
ECUMENICAL CONTEXT

BY

CHARLES CRASS

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PROF. SAMUEL DEGNER, ADVISOR

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## ABSTRACT

In a country with a growing population of heterodox ecumenical Christians, a confessional Lutheran might struggle to communicate the importance of doctrine with a person who sees little to no need for it. This thesis aims to better prepare Lutherans by giving them some insight into the spirit of the Ecumenical movement and providing some helpful tips for communicating with their ecumenical friends and family members.

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## INTRODUCTION

It feels like every confessional Lutheran has a Christian friend or family member who loves to talk about their unity of faith. Both parties believe in Jesus as their Savior. Both go to church, pray, and sing hymns. It is easy for a Christian to see a Christian of a different denomination and say, “you believe in Jesus as your Savior and I believe in Jesus as my Savior. We are both Christians.” But there is more to unity than just faith in Christ. The confessional Lutheran understands why doctrine is foundational to the message of Christ.

The main focus of this thesis is to help a confessional Lutheran answer the call to unity by heterodox ecumenical Christians. It aims to answer the questions: What is ecumenism? How does an ecumenical think? What should a Lutheran keep in mind when communicating the importance of doctrine? How can a Lutheran show a heart for the gospel while discussing a topic that is so contentious?

In no way does this thesis try to give a step-by-step formula for the Lutheran to use. It merely informs the reader of the ecumenical spirit and gives him some thoughts to keep in mind while engaged with an ecumenical. Ultimately, I propose that Lutherans can communicate the importance of doctrine with heterodox ecumenical Christians when they can put their finger on the pulse of ecumenism and be attentive to the context of their conversation.

## Literature Review

In order to share the importance of doctrine with an ecumenical Christian, one must understand what an ecumenical is and why they minimize the importance of doctrine. The resources that give a clear picture of ecumenism will be covered first.

The history of the ecumenical movement gives good insight as to where ecumenism came from and the historical events and movements that forwarded the mindset. *The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America*, by Donald Bitter, gives a thorough foundation of ecumenism's history and beliefs. Bitter also gives a timeline of the influences that set the stage for ecumenism, helping the reader understand that ecumenism did not appear out of thin air, but came about on the back of other philosophies. Andrew Pratt's paper, "*Out of One, Many - Within One, Many*": *Religious Pluralism and Christian Ecumenism in the United States*, explains the movement's influences, specifically in the United States. This will help put the focus on the American flavor of ecumenism. Pratt's opinion is that the political pluralism of the United States created the breeding grounds for the Ecumenical Movement.

Figuring out the prevalence of ecumenism in the United States is also of some importance for the conversation. This is a difficult task, because even though ecumenicals are willing to unite with other Christians, there are few official groups that try to count their membership. The Roman Catholic Church is one of the largest ecumenical groups, and the *Pew Forum* gives the number of Roman Catholics in the United States, along with some statistics indicating the beliefs of people inside different denominations which give evidence of ecumenism. One of the largest official ecumenical groups in the world, the World Council of Churches, gives some statistics about their size on their website, *oikoumene.org*.

Numbers might help to understand how widespread the ecumenical movement, but it does not answer the question of why these people are ecumenical. Jeffrey Stivason in his paper, *Benjamin B. Warfield and True Church Unity*, examines the views of one of the great voices of the Ecumenical Movement, Benjamin Warfield. Stivason pulls out a variety of pillars of ecumenism.

There is a reason that not all Christians share this ecumenical spirit though. Léna, in *Paths of Recognition*, helps explain what ecumenicals see as roadblocks to uniting with other Christians. Timothy Lim and Teck Ngern's *What if We could?* works to answer the same question. The reasons which drive these people to unite are various, and almost every writer in the papers and books used had different opinions on the benefits of ecumenism.

Once the ecumenical mindset is explained well enough, it will be useful for a Lutheran living in a country full of ecumenicals to understand how to talk to their ecumenical friend, relative, associate or neighbor about the importance of doctrine and how a difference in teaching will cause larger problems down the road.

The base, as will always be in religious discussion, is Scripture. Fellowship principles, while being one of the last topics covered in most Bible information classes, are useful for the Lutheran to study before entering the discussion with an ecumenical. Gawrisch, in his essay, *"Levels Of Fellowship"—Scriptural Principles Or Rules Of Men?*, and Lawrenz in *The Scriptural Principles Concerning Church Fellowship*, neatly organize these principles and present them in a way that is practical for the Lutheran to understand, apply to his own life and present it to the person with whom he is talking.

There are certainly roadblocks to communicating the importance of doctrine. Since not much work has been done from a Lutheran perspective, writings by those in the social sciences

are helpful in understanding the difficulties. In *Rhetorical Invention, Conflict Resolution, and Critical Awareness in Composition Instruction* by Erik Juergensmeyer, stubbornness is shown to be a leading roadblock in settling discussions.

Dorothy Sayers, author of *Letters to a Diminished Church*, is a Christian writer who takes the stance that doctrine is not what is making the church less popular, but rather the lack of doctrine is tearing the heart out of the Christian message. Sayers makes the case that the real difficulties are the lack of biblical knowledge among Christians, Christianity not lining up with the rationale of the world, and a trend by some Christian churches to focus on worship rather than the teachings of Scripture.

It's important for a Lutheran to understand his situation in the conversation and be aware of what is going on around him. Both the social science writers and the religious writers, like Sayers and Bitter, give some helpful advice in these types of conversations.

In the realm of communication studies, Carl Rogers' Client-Centered Therapy is a counseling tool used to establish the best possible setting for an open discussion. Juergensmeyer's paper as well as Byron Hawk's *Rogierian Rhetoric: Pedagogy and the Ethos of Seduction* show that the Rogerian Theory is all about the person knowing what's going on around both himself and the person with whom he is talking.

There is also a convincing argument for consensus in a conversation in *Defending the Enlightenment: Jürgen Habermas and the Theory of Communicative Reason*, by George Snedeker. Snedeker shows how important agreement on minor points is when trying to argue a main point. Juergensmeyer also writes on this point, speaking in terms of problem solving through "invention."



Finally, from a specifically Lutheran perspective, so much practical application is brought out by David Sellnow from J. P. Koehler's essay, *Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns*. Sellnow demonstrates some key insights of Koehler in his paper, *J.P. Koehler's Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns: What Can We Learn From It Today? What Problems Does It Present For Us?* Koehler's insistence on the teachings of the Bible is on full display, and evangelical applications are demonstrated from start to finish.

So much has been written about the spirit of ecumenism, but little has been written from a Lutheran perspective. Even less has been written to cover the topic of communicating the importance of doctrine to heterodox ecumenical Christians. By looking at ecumenical thought through a Lutheran lens and applying communication techniques to this conversation, the Lutheran should be better prepared to speak about the importance of doctrine.

## PART I: WHAT IS AN ECUMENICAL?

### Definitions

Before a Lutheran can begin to talk to his ecumenical friend about the importance of doctrine, he must understand what an ecumenical Christian is. Ecumenism is more of a spirit or mindset than a system of beliefs. Pastor Donald Bitter defines ecumenism from a Lutheran perspective:

Strictly speaking the term ecumenical means “universal,” including all Christendom. In that sense it has traditionally been used of the Ecumenical Councils in which all Christendom was represented, or of the Ecumenical Creeds which are accepted throughout Christendom. In recent years, however, the term has been used more and more in the sense of unity, so that when theologians speak of an ecumenical church they mean a united church, and when they speak of the ecumenical spirit they mean the spirit of unity. The ecumenist is the one who seeks to bring about union and the Ecumenical Movement is the move toward one united church.<sup>1</sup>

Michael Kinnamon, a supporter and defender of ecumenism, explains the heart of ecumenism when he writes,

At the heart of the ecumenical movement is the conviction that there is one church and that its members, however fragmented they may seem, are deeply related to one another thanks to what God has done in Jesus Christ. The ecumenical task, therefore, is not to create unity, but to address divisions of human origin in order that the unity God has given may be visible to the world.<sup>2</sup>

The final sentence of this definition makes clear what the main point of the Ecumenical Movement is: to unite the Holy Christian Church into a visible entity. This goal of ecumenism will show up in various parts of this paper.

The main goals of the Ecumenical movement are not consistent with all its proponents though. Andrew Pratt defines modern ecumenism as he writes, “contemporary use of the term

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1. Donald Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” <https://essays.wls.wels.net/handle/123456789/497>, 4.

2. Andrew Pratt, “‘Out of One, Many—Within One, Many’: Religious Pluralism and Christian Ecumenism in the United States,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 42.2 (2015), 152.

ecumenism refers to mutual efforts at understanding and cooperation, not only among Christians but among other faiths as well.”<sup>3</sup> The widest forms of ecumenism are openly pluralistic. For the sake of this paper, only that narrower ecumenism, trying to unite Christians, will be covered.

The pillars of ecumenical thought are crucial in defining ecumenism. First, they hold to the idea that outward union of the church is absolutely vital for the extension of Christ’s kingdom, for the defense of the Church, and that Jesus’ prayer of unity be answered. The second pillar states that union is possible with a minimum degree of unity in doctrine and practice. Then finally, it is the prime calling of the Church to improve social, economic, and political conditions in the world.<sup>4</sup>

### **History**

While the term “ecumenical” had been used since the early church to define the joining together on the grounds of doctrine, modern ecumenism really came about when in 1817 Frederick William III, king of Prussia, tried to force unity between the Lutherans and Reformed in his land. He feared the lack of unity among his people, and thought that if they would just unite, the country would be stronger. This decree created unity in name only, and did nothing to unite the two groups.<sup>5</sup>

At about the same time in the United States Lutheranism was giving way to ecumenism. In 1820 the Evangelical Synod of North America came about as a union between Calvinists and Lutherans, accepting their books of doctrine and ignoring their differences. Twenty-four years

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3. Pratt, “Out of One, Many,” 152.

4. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 7.

5. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 2.

later this Evangelical Synod of North America joined with the Reformed Church in the United States to form the Evangelical Reformed Church. In 1957 the Evangelical Reformed Church merged with the Reformed Church and the General Council of Congregational and Christian Churches to create the United Church of Christ. Bitter comments on this timeline, “this is the history of what once began as a Lutheran church body almost one hundred and fifty years ago. Today there is not the slightest trace of Lutheranism in this body.”<sup>6</sup> All these mergers serve to show that even a confessional Lutheran church can unite in the name of peace and end up losing the gospel message in its truth and purity.

There were plenty of singular events of ecumenical action by American church bodies throughout the 1900s. In 1930 the Ohio Synod settled for the Iowa Synod’s open questions, resulting in a statement that “it is neither necessary nor possible to agree on all non-fundamental doctrines.”<sup>7</sup> The National Council of Churches of Christ came about by twenty-nine churches across the spectrum of doctrinal beliefs to do church work. Now there are thirty-three denominations and forty million members which are part of this group.<sup>8</sup> In 1962 the Vatican declared an Ecumenical Council to rally Christians against the militant atheism threatening the church.<sup>9</sup> That same year, even some Lutherans were getting in on the merging, with the creation of the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America, a merger between the United Lutheran Church in America and the Augustana Synod. But the Lutherans were not just

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6. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 12.

7. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 17.

8. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 13.

9. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 1.

merging with each other. They were also in talks about unity with the Calvinists.<sup>10</sup> This had happened in 1820, and almost 150 years later the Lutherans were aiming to do it again.

Even in our own circles, unity became a focus. The synod Conference in 1872 joined the synods of Missouri, Ohio, Wisconsin, Minnesota and Norway based on doctrinal agreement.<sup>11</sup> Over the course of about 50 years, 60 Lutheran synods became just a few. This speaks to the effects of the Ecumenical Movement on Lutheranism from the 1910s through the 1960s.<sup>12</sup>

### **Influential Philosophies**

The modern Ecumenical Movement did not come out of nowhere. It came on the heels of the Pietism of the eighteenth century and liberalism of the nineteenth century. Bitter says that Pietism “emphasized the Christian life, but usually at the expense of Christian doctrine.”<sup>13</sup> Pietism was focused on what happened externally to a Christian, so it boiled Christianity down to “how can I serve Jesus to show I really trust him?” But what really set the stage for ecumenism in the age of Pietism was the discrediting of confessionalism and orthodoxy.<sup>14</sup>

The nineteenth century pulled Christians in a different direction. Liberal theologians had begun to question the authority and reliability of Scripture. The historical-critical method that had become popular in Europe in the latter half of the eighteenth century was now creeping into Christian theology stateside. Darwin published his theory of evolution, denying creationism and

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10. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 1.

11. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 12.

12. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 16.

13. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 2.

14. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 2.

intelligent design. Rationalism took center stage and, united with the liberalism that had pervaded much of society, made the Bible seem unreliable and truly unnecessary to find the truth.<sup>15</sup>

The large societal shifts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries laid the groundwork for unionism in the twentieth century. Unionism was in the air, even on the geopolitical scale. In 1920 many nations from around the world came together to unite, forming the League of Nations. Labor unions became a mainstay in the United States, recognizing the power in numbers.<sup>16</sup> While the liberalism of the nineteenth century had threatened the church, many denominations were now looking to make unions with those who taught the same thing about the Bible as they did. This changed in the twentieth century, as churches created unions based on things besides doctrinal agreement.<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to think that churches were joining together at first in opposition to liberal thought, and in the next century were uniting based on that same liberal thinking.

The pluralism that was so common in America from its conception, political pluralism, also played a role in the spread of ecumenism. Political pluralism is the concept that two or more parties share power and must compromise. With a two-party system in America, this pluralism is in theory supposed to create balance between conservative and progressive ideas.<sup>18</sup> The end

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15. Bitter, "The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America," 3.

16. Bitter, "The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America," 3.

17. Bitter, "The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America," 12.

18. Pratt, "Out of One, Many," 144.

result is, in theory, increased freedom. Many people understand that freedom allows people to do more of what they want, even if it means they will not agree with everything others do.<sup>19</sup>

Those who wanted to unite saw vast differences throughout the Christian Churches of the United States, and often spoke about the differences as merely different expressions of faith. They point to Pentecost and see the message of Christ being contextualized into different languages and cultures.<sup>20</sup> They see the contrast between different Christian groups as a difference in the context in which the gospel is shared. Differences not only in language but also in culture create a message that is appropriated into their own context. One point an ecumenical might make is that different cultures might affect the way Christianity might look. Andrew Pratt says that just as the Pentecostal Christians embraced diverse expression, ecumenicals will also embrace their diversity.<sup>21</sup>

Pluralism is often looked at as different outward manifestations of the same faith. Dianna Eck says,

Pluralism takes the reality of difference as its starting point. The challenge of pluralism is not to obliterate or erase difference, nor to smooth out differences under a universalizing canopy, but rather to discover ways of living, connecting, relating, arguing, and disagreeing in a society of differences. This is no small challenge, given the fact that some of the most contentious differences are within religious communities and even within particular sectarian or denominational movements.<sup>22</sup>

Robert Handy speaks specifically of “ecumenical pluralism,” saying, “‘Ecumenical pluralism’ may sound like a contradiction in terms, but it is an observable reality. It is really not a surprising one, for ecumenism in trying to find and advance our unity as Christians does reach out into the

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19. Pratt, “Out of One, Many,” 145.

20. Pratt, “Out of One, Many,” 144.

21. Pratt, “Out of One, Many,” 157.

22. Pratt, “Out of One, Many,” 145.

vast diversity of Christian life and cannot help but be internally affected by what it seeks to gather together.”<sup>23</sup> This concept of being different and united at the same time is also at times called “unified diversity,” or “within the one many.”<sup>24</sup>

The effects of pluralism in the U. S. on Christian groups are significant. In fact, there are some that see the diversity of Christian faiths as a benefit. Laurence Moore writes,

the American religious system may be said to be working only when it is creating cracks within denominations, when it is producing novelty, even when it is feeling antagonisms. These things are not things which, when properly understood, are going on at the edges or fringes of American life. They are what give energy to church life and substance to the claim that Americans are the most religious people on the face of the earth.<sup>25</sup>

It is clear that there are some in the ecumenical community who apply “variety is the spice of life” even to religious matters.

Bill Leonard gives an interesting opinion on the ecumenical pluralism in the United States, treating it like an umbrella that uses the denomination to protect the consciences of people who proclaim the gospel in a different manner.<sup>26</sup> Leonard certainly finds a link between American politics and American religion. Political freedom influences religious thought. Leonard shows that just as man was shaping the mighty American government, so was man also shaping their religion, influenced by the outside forces around them.<sup>27</sup> Not every ecumenical thinks the denominational structure of American Christianity is healthy for unity. Pratt takes the view that denominationalism has hindered ecumenism from going beyond denominations.<sup>28</sup>

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23. Pratt, “Out of One, Many,” 153.

24. Pratt, “Out of One, Many,” 154.

25. Pratt, “Out of One, Many,” 145.

26. Pratt, “Out of One, Many,” 150.

27. Pratt, “Out of One, Many,” 150.

28. Pratt, “Out of One, Many,” 154.



Ecumenical pluralism is alive and well today. Dianna Eck, an advocate for ecumenism between many various groups, gives a sort of “State of the Union” for ecumenism in America today. She says that there is more pluralism today than ever before, on account of immigrants coming from a greater variety of places.<sup>29</sup> Increased transportation has allowed people to come to the United States who could have never done it 150 years ago. Even non-Christians have changed the Christian landscape via syncretism.

Eck points out that Christianity is still the overwhelming majority when it comes to religions in America, though “no religious affiliation” is on the rise. Finally, she points out that ecumenism is on the rise. This is backed up by a study by Robert Wuthnow, who finds that 31% of American Christians considered themselves “spiritual shoppers.”<sup>30</sup> This shopper mentality has led to more denominations with more widespread identity and uniqueness, as they are forced to compete with one another.<sup>31</sup>

### **Biblical Evidence**

The basic principle of the Ecumenical Movement, uniting under Christ, is not unbiblical in and of itself. Ecumenicals will point to specific passages and sections of Scripture which speak about uniting as their reason for the cause. Pratt paints the early New Testament church as pluralistic.<sup>32</sup> In 1 Corinthians, Paul is attempting to eliminate the divisions in teaching in the church. Uniting

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29. Pratt, “Out of One, Many,” 146.

30. Pratt, “Out of One, Many,” 154.

31. Pratt, “Out of One, Many,” 154.

32. Pratt, ““Out of One, Many,” 155.

Christians around the truth of God’s Word is clearly a Biblical thought.<sup>33</sup> In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prays for his disciples that they might be one. Jesus does not just limit his prayer to his disciples though. He also prays that all believers may be one (John 17 NIV).

Ecumenicals will also point to any passage speaking about the “body of Christ” and interpret the different parts of the body as different denominations. They use passages like Ephesians 1:22–23, Galatians 3:28 and Ephesians 4:3–6 to support this interpretation. Some passages like Revelation 2:17 are also used, which only create uncertainty among Christians as to who really holds the truth. They read this passage and are humbled, though they do not understand the language of Revelation.

### **What Does an Ecumenical Look Like?**

Since ecumenism is a spirit and mindset, there is no “one size fits all” ecumenical. They come from a diverse range of denominations and locations all over the country. The Roman Catholic Church has shown itself to teach ecumenism and join in the Ecumenical Movement from the movement’s foundation. This will be shown later in the paper. The Roman Catholic Church made up 23.9% of the population of the United States in 2008.<sup>34</sup>

The World Council of Churches is one of the largest ecumenical groups in the world, containing 350 denominations and including over 500 million Christians.<sup>35</sup> Not all of these churches are in the United States, but this demonstrates how widespread ecumenism is among Christians.

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33. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 2.

34. “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Beliefs and Practices,” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project (9 October 2019): 110.

35. “World Council of Churches — World Council of Churches,” <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/>.

In a study done by the Pew Forum in 2008, when asked if there is more than one path to salvation, 79% of Roman Catholics, 83% of mainline Christians and 57% of evangelical Christians answered “yes.”<sup>36</sup> American Christians are noticeably pluralistic in the way they think about religion. The same study asked how strictly to interpret the faith, and 77% of RCC, 82% of mainline Christians, and 53% of evangelical Christians answered that there is “more than one way to interpret the teachings of my religion.”<sup>37</sup> Again, there is a lack of certainty among Christians as to their own teachings and the general belief that the reader inserts meaning into the text, regardless of the author’s original intent. Logically, if there are multiple right answers to the question of “what is truth,” whether to have fellowship or not becomes less focused on any differences.

### **What Ties Them Together?**

The answer to this question varies depending on an ecumenical’s own view of ecumenism. Some are very conservative about the groups they are willing to unite with, and others will unite with anyone who call themselves “Christian.” Generally, ecumenicals will tie themselves to other groups on account of commonalities. It is Bill Leonard’s encouragement that churches might find a common thread in which they can unite.<sup>38</sup> Regional identity might play a big factor in groups being different though united.<sup>39</sup> Many Churches regardless of denomination might look and function the same in a certain area. It would be Leonard’s suggestion for these churches to unite

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36. “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey,” 58.

37. “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey,” 59.

38. Pratt, “Out of One, Many,” 155.

39. Pratt, ““Out of One, Many,” 156.

in their “sameness.” Joseph Ratzinger goes in the other direction. He calls on Christians to find that common thread that unites them to other Christians and stop considering tradition as the center.<sup>40</sup> It is not about how the church looks and feels, but something different.

Almost every congregation in an area will look very different from most around them though. Different ethnic groups, customs, languages, and theologies make churches into one of a kind snowflakes. This is why some ecumenical leaders call on churches to unite on the basis of more commonalities than differences. The original thought of ecumenism was that compromise could be found on differences. This led to dishonesty.<sup>41</sup> The Roman Catholic Church in Medieval days through the Reformation received a bad reputation because they made theological compromises to bring reformers back into the fold, only to revert back to the old teaching when the reformer lost his social leverage.

Benjamin B. Warfield saw that the early New Testament church was united in some ways, but also varied. He gives a list of what things did not constitute unity: Church unity was not organic. He supports this by saying that the apostolic churches were not disorganized, but were under some type of organized church governance. The main point he is trying to make here is that the church may have been organized, but all the churches were not united by an overall governing authority. Church unity was also not grounded in uniformity of worship. Warfield shows that there was some uniformity among these churches, but it did not stretch over all things like worship styles and individual church governance. The origin of the churches is not what united them. Warfield supports this by writing, “nobody cared whence a church drew its origin,

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40. Timothy Lim and Teck Ngern, “‘What If We Could?’: An Essay on Productive Ecumenism,” *Ecclesiology* 11.1 (2015): 72.

41. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 10.

so only it existed.” He says the apostolic unity was based upon “the only thing they had in common—their common Christianity.”<sup>42</sup>

Warfield’s support of union based on similarities is not just an opinion held by different individuals. Some church bodies have put it into practice. In *Lutherans and Catholics Chart Path to Unity* in the *National Catholic Reporter*, Thomas Ryan takes a look at the five hundredth anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation to see what a blessing it has been for the Roman Catholic Church. Throughout the paper he shows the historical events that led to talk of unity between some Lutherans and the Catholic Church.<sup>43</sup>

In 1972 a Catholic document, the Malta Report, said that Roman Catholic leaders would sit down with some Lutheran leaders and dig through the doctrines that divided them. They did not downplay doctrine on the surface, but discussed it. Six years into these discussions a document was written up regarding the Lord’s Supper. It focused less on what Scripture said, outside of communion in both kinds, and focused more on appeasement in exchange for unity with the Lutherans.<sup>44</sup> In 1985 the Roman Catholic Church publicly accepted the Augsburg Confession as a “legitimate profession of faith.” Cardinal Johannes Willebrands even noted that Vatican II accepted many of Luther’s critiques of the church’s corruption, but ignored any of Luther’s complaints about the office of the papacy.<sup>45</sup> Dominican Fr. Hervé Legrand comes to the conclusion that Catholics and Lutherans must put the past in the past and work together in

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42. Jeffrey A. Stivason, “Benjamin B. Warfield and True Church Unity,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 79.2 (2017): 334.

43. Thomas Ryan, “Lutherans and Catholics Chart Path to Unity,” *National Catholic Reporter* (21 October 2016).

44. Ryan, “Lutherans and Catholics Chart Path to Unity,” 1.

45. Ryan, “Lutherans and Catholics Chart Path to Unity,” 2.

ministry and come to the same Roman Catholic Church understanding of “episcopacy, the college of bishops, apostolic succession, and the office of Peter.”<sup>46</sup>

The danger of this type of unity is that the differences are simply ignored in favor of the similarities. Bitter says: “The distinctive feature of modern union movements is that they no longer pretend to have arrived at unity, but instead glory in their diversity.”<sup>47</sup> William Adams Brown, an ecumenical himself, would agree with Bitter’s insight, but sees it as a positive opposed to a negative. He says, “Unity of doctrine, they say, is not only unattainable, but undesirable. Those who have united in the Movement have recognized that when finite and imperfect men are dealing with matters as high and deep as those which concern the Christian faith, one cannot expect complete agreement as to their meaning and implications.”<sup>48</sup> This is the biggest difference between the old and new ecumenical thought. Older ecumenicals expected much more unity in teaching and practice than modern ecumenicals.

Some ecumenicals have a more specific point that ties them together. That specific point is Christ. For some, what unites them to all other Christians is belief in the Trinity.<sup>49</sup> Warfield sees this as the commonality that unites Christians. He says that the unity of the church is not based on the dispensing of the Word even accompanied by the Holy Spirit, but the source, Christ. In fact, Warfield says, “the sole principle of the Church’s unity is, therefore, the common union of its members with the heavenly head.”<sup>50</sup> Newbigin would agree, coming to the

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46. Ryan, “Lutherans and Catholics Chart Path to Unity,” 2.

47. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 10.

48. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 10.

49. Lim and Ngern, “What If We Could?” 71.

50. Stivason, “Benjamin B. Warfield and True Church Unity,” 335.

conclusion that if Jesus is the one name that brings together all believers into a family, and you do not unite with those around you, you do not really trust the name of Jesus above all.<sup>51</sup>

### **Roadblocks to Ecumenism**

It is true that Paul speaks of the body of Christ as one that is united. Jesus calls on all believers to be united. So why are all Christians not united? Again, ecumenicals have countless opinions as to why Christians have a hard time uniting. One roadblock is the pain of the past. Some ecumenicals will say this is the biggest roadblock that hinders the spread of ecumenism. The fact that churches blame each other for problems throughout history creates walls that are difficult to break down.<sup>52</sup> Marguerite Léna says, “The successive wounds of history and cultural distance have marred the initial manifestation of a church undivided.” Her view is that the church was once united. It is the history of the church and cultural distance that changed it. Léna’s solution is simple in theory. Christians can overcome the pain of the past when they look back at their shared history. She adds, “When we gather to pray or to worship, to serve those who are most vulnerable, to stand up for creation or peace between nations, we are not doing this as strangers.” She leans on the common past to heal the wounds of the present.<sup>53</sup> These wounds are often caused by Christians harming other Christians emotionally, physically, or spiritually. Léna says that this pain which a church body causes a different church body can be overcome by taking responsibility for actions.<sup>54</sup>

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51. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 7.

52. Marguerite Léna, “Paths of Recognition,” *The Ecumenical Review* 69.1 (2017): 20.

53. Léna, “Paths of Recognition,” 16.

54. Léna, “Paths of Recognition,” 16.

Cardinal Mercier, archbishop of Malines at the beginning of the 20th century, sees the problem not in the harm done to other Christian groups, but in the ignorance of those Christian groups. He says that if Christians really love their neighbor, they will reach out to them and not wall themselves off. Christians must recognize the groups outside their own and go out to meet them.<sup>55</sup> The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification from 1999 between the Lutherans and Roman Catholics fostered a situation where these two groups put their differences aside and allowed common obedience to God's Word.<sup>56</sup> This would be an instance that ecumenicals would point to, where two groups separated for a lengthy period of time left their contentious past behind to begin working together. Léna would go so far as to say that once the past is put in the rear-view mirror, the Lutheran and Catholic groups could now share in prayers to the saints, since they are one.

A second roadblock that is put forward is confessionalism. To some like Timothy Lim and Teck Ngern, holding to a specific theology excludes some and hinders the ability to unite in Christ. Confessional groups can also be viewed as arrogant, since they claim that they have the right answer to the question, "What does the Bible mean?" Lim and Ngern suggest that churches could and should unite, recognizing and sharing differences in order to move the conversation forward. This approach involves uniting then working through the discrepancies in teaching and practice.

### **Benefits of Ecumenism**

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55. Léna, "Paths of Recognition," 17.

56. Léna, "Paths of Recognition," 18.



There is something about the human spirit that desires unity with others. People want more friends. People care about being part of a group. Ecumenism acts on that desire. There are very practical benefits of ecumenism. By uniting, church bodies can consolidate ministry resources. By saving wasted money and manpower, Christians could do more work in their community and the world around them. This naturally carries the assumption that ministry is ministry, and though there are a variety of practices among Christian groups, they are all basically the same, since they are based in Christ. Pratt says that union is a great blessing, because when Christian groups join together, they have a louder voice to speak out against violence, hate and prejudice.<sup>57</sup>

That same line of thinking transitions easily into the realm of outreach. When united, churches can present a united message, making it more attractive to those outside the Kingdom of God. Ecumenicals believe that the world can only be conquered for Christ if Christians just all get together.<sup>58</sup> This plays on that desire for people to be part of something bigger. This thought streams from the fact that the majority opinion is usually the one that holds traction. If all these Christians gather together as one voice, others might want to be a part of this large voice. Ecumenicals will state that a unified front is more powerful in conversion. This would carry more weight and pressure, but this pressure will be peer pressure conversion opposed to gospel conversion.<sup>59</sup>

Defense is also seen by some as a benefit of ecumenism. Some taglines that have been used to describe this benefit are, “in union there is strength,” and, “merge or be submerged.” In order to stem the tide of religious persecution, some ecumenicals might lobby for groups to

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57. Pratt, ““Out of One, Many,” 153.

58. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 7.

59. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 7.

gather together, since this is the best way for Christianity to stand against the Foe trying to destroy it. This argument ignores the fact that the Church does not need a man-made defense. That will not stop the foe. It needs Jesus to defend it, and that's exactly what he does.<sup>60</sup>

One of the largest benefits from an ecumenical perspective is that union allows people to work together to find the truth. An ecumenical who has more pluralistic leanings might call this the "best truth." One point ecumenicals will make on the basis of postmodern thought is that a church body can never say for certain that they have the right interpretation and expression; therefore they should humble themselves and recognize that truth might be relative to culture.<sup>61</sup> Some, like Dr. Ralph H. Long, would argue that in working from the inside of a union, they might be able to correct and balance false teaching. He says of the World Council of Churches, an ecumenical group, "We believe that the World Council will be a better balanced organization, if it has strong confessional groups within its ranks, than if it is made up of those who have little regard for confessional standards."<sup>62</sup>

Warfield also sees the value in doctrine and growing in the knowledge of God's Word, but also recognized that people could be united in their search for the truth.<sup>63</sup> Warfield was not like others, looking for the minimum ground on which all Christians could stand. He was looking at what did bind them together, Christ, and emphasized the importance of truth off that. His focus on our bond as part of the invisible church is important, as we would agree that we are one

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60. Bitter, "The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America," 8.

61. Lim and Ngern, "What If We Could?" 74.

62. Bitter, "The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America," 17.

63. Stivason, "Benjamin B. Warfield and True Church Unity," 342.

in salvation through Christ.<sup>64</sup> He uses the early church as an example of this, writing, “if invisible unity is grounded in the truth, which is God, then the visible unity of the post-apostolic church must also be grounded in the truth.”<sup>65</sup> His point here is that truth is important, but the truth is Christ. Warfield views the study of systematic theology as something that has value for the church. He says, “it is ours to advance steadily towards this ideal, as it is God’s delight to be ‘daily smoothing the wrinkles and wiping the spots of his church away.’” His view is that over time the group of ecumenicals evolves toward the correct view. Stivason makes Warfield’s position even clearer: “It is our task to advance steadily in the expression of theological knowledge that ever seeks to attain precision and perfection for it is God who works in us to bring his bride to the day of glory. Thus, it is the church’s expression of truth systematically that bridges the gap between the church’s existence in the present and her perfection in glory.” They are working their way toward understanding what Scripture teaches.<sup>66</sup>

John R. Mott agrees with this doctrinal evolution. He writes,

Christian truth, he said, is like a diamond with many facets. One church sees one facet of that truth; another church sees another facet of it; a third church still another facet, and so on. In order to get the whole truth, the whole diamond, we must combine all the churches with all their distinctive teachings into one comprehensive body. Then the ‘rent and sundered body of Christ’, as they call all visible Christendom, will be made whole again. As there are said to be 168 facets in a diamond, this makes room for practically all the major sects in the church today, so that everyone should be satisfied!<sup>67</sup>

*A Formula of Agreement*, a document produced between some Lutherans and Reformed churches in 1997, is a practical example of this attitude. It said that their unity would allow for

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64. Stivason, “Benjamin B. Warfield and True Church Unity,” 343.

65. Stivason, “Benjamin B. Warfield and True Church Unity,” 338.

66. Stivason, “Benjamin B. Warfield and True Church Unity,” 340.

67. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 10.

“mutual affirmation and admonition.” This recognized differences in doctrine, forms of worship, devotional practices, ethos, and church order, and saw the only way of discussing to be uniting.<sup>68</sup>

### **What Do Ecumenicals Do Together?**

Ecumenicals create grounds for uniting based on a variety of reasons, but most ecumenical leaders will agree on a few activities that Christians will do together once united. Robert Handy outlines four types of ecumenical activity. The first is dialogue and mutual edification.<sup>69</sup> This plays on the natural human desire to be part of a larger group.

The second reason is working together on common tasks for human rights and liberation. Sadly, society so often looks at churches as institutions whose primary task is to better the physical lives of those they serve. A key of ecumenism is putting social, economical, and political conditions on the front burner.<sup>70</sup> Lesslie Newbigin says that,

The Church’s mission to all the nations—that phrase, of course, means more than what we call foreign missions. It means the total corporate witness of the churches and of all who profess and call themselves Christians to the sovereign love of God in Jesus. I think that means, among other things, that we must make a much bigger effort than we have done, to bring the great issues of international politics, of economic policy, of commercial development, within the range of our thinking about the mission of the Church.<sup>71</sup>

Newbigin sees the Church’s mission as a witness to Christ, not just sharing the good news of Christ, but doing powerful things for society in Christ’s name. Part of making the world a better place would be to create better conditions for the sharing of the gospel. This is why ecumenicals

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68. Lim and Ngern, “What If We Could?” 70.

69. Pratt, ““Out of One, Many,”” 153.

70. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 11.

71. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 11.

will be more vocal on social issues. When speaking on political issues, ecumenicals might take the approach that if they can control the political sphere, they can further Christ's message in society.

The third activity of ecumenism is gathering churches for councils.<sup>72</sup> If a group is going to recognize its oneness, work to better its community and attempt to find truth in Scripture, there is need to physically join together in a location. In a similar way, WELS pastors meet to discuss how best to walk together.

Handy says the final activity that that ecumenical churches engage in is organic church union. What Handy means is that church union is not just a multitude of groups who share a set of ecumenical ideals, but a group actually united in practice.<sup>73</sup> One of the biggest ways ecumenicals show this organic unity is in Lord's Supper Fellowship.

Many ecumenical leaders will recognize a multitude of differences of belief regarding the Lord's Supper and its relationship to Jesus' body and blood. Lim and Ngern say that the difference in understanding really undercuts the unity of the various Christian groups.<sup>74</sup> Their main point about the Lord's Supper is that since Jesus commands it, any interference in practice or argumentation about communion or its components just gets in the way of what God wants.<sup>75</sup>

This does not mean there are no serious discussions to be had about fellowship during the Lord's Supper among ecumenicals. Many faiths that are ecumenical in nature view the Lord's

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72. Pratt, "Out of One, Many," 153.

73. Pratt, "Out of One, Many," 153.

74. Lim and Ngern, "What If We Could?" 77.

75. Lim and Ngern, "What If We Could?" 77.

Supper is an outward sign, or “seal and means of unity” of faith and therefore unity.<sup>76</sup> This is true of Evangelicals, but Roman Catholics believe that the Lord’s Supper is Christ’s corporal body and blood, and that its blessings involve the conference of grace. Recognizing that there are a variety of understandings about the Lord’s Supper, Lim and Ngern desire to reformulate the Eucharist. This would help people to understand that these separate meanings are just other expressions. Their thought is that the rest of the body would be benefited to see that the Holy Spirit works in different ways.<sup>77</sup> Once again, pluralism shows itself in the solution to any roadblocks that find themselves in the way of the Ecumenical Movement.

The belief also exists that communion together is a means of reconciliation with one another.<sup>78</sup> For some ecumenicals the Lord’s Supper might be useful in working through a contentious past. Since many view the Lord’s Supper as a sign of unity, it could be compared to having someone over for dinner as a grand gesture, showing that these two groups are now right with each other. The Malta report took on this attitude. It stated that, since Roman Catholics and Lutherans occasionally agreed, they could occasionally share the Lord’s Supper. This was really a public show of goodwill, because they wanted to continue to have talks.<sup>79</sup>

### **Inconsistencies**

The biggest inconsistency of the Ecumenical Movement is their misunderstanding of the visible and invisible church. Bitter says, “the Ecumenical Movement considers the outward unity of

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76. Lim and Ngern, “What If We Could?” 77.

77. Lim and Ngern, “What If We Could?” 79.

78. Lim and Ngern, “What If We Could?” 78.

79. Ryan, “Lutherans and Catholics Chart Path to Unity,” 1.

Christendom essential that the prayer which Jesus spoke on the night of His betrayal might finally be answered.” In essence, this is the main goal of ecumenism: making the invisible church visible.<sup>80</sup> Ecumenicals like Lesslie Newbigin take Jesus’ promise of unity to the invisible church and apply it to the visible church.<sup>81</sup> When one understands Jesus’s promise in this way, he looks for the manifestations of the united Church that Jesus calls for, and when none is found, seek to make Jesus’ promise into a command. They begin to create unions themselves in order to keep Jesus from being a liar.

*Dialogue*, an ecumenical Lutheran journal, falls into the same trap of looking for what is invisible among what is visible. It says, “we do not know how or when the Lord will act to integrate the members of his body into a unified expression of their faith and action, but the experience of the church indicates that reunion is realized through reconciliation, and reconciliation happens through the medium of discussion wherein we discover one another as already brothers in the faith.”<sup>82</sup> In a way *Dialogue* is saying that in uniting, people are making Christ’s plan come true. This is not just an action that Christ miraculously does, but it is a process he is working in his church, and his people honor this process when they take the first steps to reconcile by seeing that they are truly brothers and sisters in faith.

Some churches like the Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox even identify their visible churches as the manifestation of the Christian Church.<sup>83</sup> This temptation to make the invisible visible was already in the works long before the ecumenical movement came about.

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80. Ray F Kibler III, “Reflections on The Church: Towards a Common Vision,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 50.2 (2015): 302.

81. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 4.

82. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 10.

83. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 5.

The problem with this thinking which merges the visible and invisible churches is that God makes it incredibly clear in his Word that there are hypocrites in any church body and true believers that don't belong to any congregation. Bitter says, "we are persuaded that the Scriptures present the Church of Christ as truly united, as already ecumenical, as one body of believers; not held together by any external organizational ties, but inseparably joined by the bond of a common faith in Jesus."<sup>84</sup>

Jesus makes it abundantly clear that there is one Church. When he speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd, he tells both his disciples and the Pharisees that there is only one flock, one family of believers (John 10:16). When Paul writes his inspired letter to the Ephesians, he assures the believers that they are part of something bigger than their congregation. He shows them that they are one, not in their church membership, but in Christ (Eph 4:3–6). Not everyone in a congregation that teaches God's Word is necessarily a believer.

From a bird's eye view, it is incredibly evident that there are those who go to a church every week and believe what the church teaches, yet are not part of the Kingdom of God. Jesus speaks against the Pharisees, the devout religious men of the time, and calls them unbelievers (Matt 12:34; 23:33). Paul warns of those Judaizers, who probably thought they were teaching law and gospel according to God's Word, yet ended up staunchly leading the people down the road to hell (Gal 5). Paul never calls them "brothers." He never calls their interpretation "a truth."

It is important for a Lutheran to remember that the issues that divide Christian churches are not just cultural expressions, but serious divisions because of sin. It is Satan at work

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84. Bitter, "The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America," 4.



confusing and dividing the church.<sup>85</sup> These divisions come from different churches teaching different things. This will be covered at the beginning of Part II.

Christ does call for unity though, and this unity is of an inward nature. Being united inwardly will show itself in some way outwardly.<sup>86</sup> F. W. Koehler explains true ecumenism in the invisible church in *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, saying, “while all believers are most intimately joined by faith to Christ, their Savior, they are for this very reason also most intimately joined to one another by the bond of a common faith, a common hope, and a mutual love, and thus they constitute, no matter how far apart locally they may be from each other, a single body, a great communion, which we call the Church.”<sup>87</sup> Bitter echoes Koehler’s sentiments on the united invisible church. He says, “For the true believers are one, wonderfully and gloriously united, as we have already seen, in the Holy Christian Church. The apostles, the disciples, the martyrs who died in faith, and the believers today, they are all one in a blessed spiritual unity even as Jesus and the Father are one.”<sup>88</sup>

Luther explains the difference between the visible and invisible church: “This community or assembly consists of all who live in true faith, hope, and love, so that the essence, life, and nature of the Church is not a bodily, but a spiritual assembly of hearts in one faith.”<sup>89</sup> In 1 Corinthians it is brought to the attention of the believers that they are God’s temple (1 Cor 3:16–17). It is not the physical place where the true Church is. Christians will not see this invisible

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85. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 6.

86. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 9.

87. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 4.

88. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 9.

89. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 5.

church until heaven. There the perfection of the Church will be fully realized and Jesus' teachings will be made clear to all.<sup>90</sup> There is comfort in knowing that a physical group of people gathered together is not the Christian Church. It is good news that the visible church is not the Church, because if the visible church was the invisible Church, the Devil would have a foothold in the group Jesus tells us are safe.<sup>91</sup>

It is also comforting for the Christian to know that they do not have to play God and judge who is in the One True Church. The prayer Jesus prays for the unity of his Church was not for all people, but for those who would be believers. He knows who is a part of his invisible church.<sup>92</sup> And the fact that his church is not a visible church gives the Christian comfort, that just because a church or even church body be destroyed by the Enemy, the Church stands forever.<sup>93</sup>

Because of all of this, a Lutheran ought to have a firm understanding as to what the visible church is and does and what the invisible church is and does. Ecumenism blends the two together, and because of this, creates a multitude of problems. There are people in many congregations who are part of the Holy Christian Church, but not all are. By linking someone's faith to his church membership, one does not do justice to what Scripture tells us faith is and ignores the fact that there hypocrites lurk even in the most orthodox of churches. An outward profession of faith does not guarantee that the faith inside matches it.<sup>94</sup>

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90. Bitter, "The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America," 6.

91. Bitter, "The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America," 6.

92. Bitter, "The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America," 9.

93. Bitter, "The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America," 8.

94. Bitter, "The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America," 5.

## PART II: A LUTHERAN RESPONSE TO ECUMENISM

### **The Bible Illustrates the Importance of Doctrine**

Before a Lutheran can share the importance of doctrine with his heterodox ecumenical friend, he himself must understand why doctrine is important. This argument is based in large part on fellowship principles. Unity is something that God calls his people to have with one another. In Galatians 3:26–28 Paul explains the basis for fellowship among Christians. They were to come together based on a common faith and baptism. And these Christians who are united are not joined in one place or time. Many members of the invisible church are now in heaven.<sup>95</sup> There are many members of this body with whom the Lutheran is a contemporary on this earth and will never meet. Yet God says they are united.

This unity is a blessing, not according to the ecumenical standards of outreach, mutual defense and growth in biblical truth. Lawrenz explains this blessing when he writes, “yet from the very moment that we sinners were received into this blessed fellowship with our God through faith in Christ our Savior, we also entered upon another fellowship that should likewise thrill our hearts. We were intimately united with one another, with every other believer in Christ.”<sup>96</sup> A Christian can give thanks that he is part of a group that cannot and will not turn them away. He is not able to see this group, but is constantly reminded that he walks among God’s people and has protection from the only one who can truly pluck him from the devil’s hands.

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95. Wilbert Gawrisch, “‘Levels of Fellowship’—Scriptural Principles Or Rules Of Men?,” <https://essays.wls.wels.net/handle/123456789/1712>, 2.

96. Carl Lawrenz, “The Scriptural Principles Concerning Church Fellowship,” (June 1994), <https://essays.wls.wels.net/handle/123456789/2952>, 2.

There is error in the church though. How prevalent and whether it is corporate error in the church or errorists inside the church will depend on the congregation or church body. Error never brings benefits. Jesus tells his disciples just what false doctrine can do to the believer in Matthew 16:11–12. Like yeast, the smallest amount of false doctrine can work its way into the believer and pull them astray. It only brings problems. The biggest danger of error is that it can change or even nullify the gospel.<sup>97</sup> The heterodox ecumenical must understand this truth before a conversation about the importance of doctrine can begin.

A Christian can recognize the danger of error and try to resist it by studying Scripture and growing in the Word, but how is he supposed to know if others err from what the Bible teaches? Since faith is not a tangible part of humans, it will always be impossible to see the invisible fellowship of believers among the visible organization.<sup>98</sup> All believers are part of Christ's family, regardless of any inward or outward differences. There are no outward customs or actions that can prove without the shadow of a doubt that a particular person is a believer.<sup>99</sup>

The only way a Christian can know what a person believes is by his confession. Romans 10:10 makes it clear that a Christian lets his faith shine through his confession. A person's beliefs can be found out by asking them or simply hearing them speak for a time.

Lawrenz illustrates this point by looking at the human life. A person cannot see human life, because is intangible. Yet it is very evident that the person has life, based on his breathing, his pulse, and the fact that he is walking and talking. Likewise, though faith cannot be seen,

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97. Gawrisch, "Levels of Fellowship," 3.

98. Gawrisch, "Levels of Fellowship," 3.

99. Lawrenz, "The Scriptural Principles Concerning Church Fellowship," 2.

people know faith exists based on the manifestations of faith, like confession and works inspired by faith.<sup>100</sup>

When people confess something that is contrary to God's Word, God commands his people to separate from them. Jesus makes the command to teach and observe everything he commands, so holding people to the standard of true doctrine is not unloving, but exactly what he commands (John 8:31). Unity is a noble goal. Lutherans should always remember that. But it is not more noble than holding to Scripture. Holding to Scripture is not just a person waving a Bible around while they speak or quoting passages out of context. It is reading, learning and taking to heart the entirety of God's Word.<sup>101</sup>

Jesus tells his disciples, "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves" (Matt 7:15). Wilbert Gawrisch says, "'watch out for,' 'keep away from' and 'do not welcome' are clear, unqualified imperatives. These are the Lord's directives flowing from his loving concern for the spiritual safety and welfare of his people."<sup>102</sup> There will be those who try to twist God's Word, acting and speaking like a messenger of God, yet force-feeding poison down the throats of the sheep. A Christian cannot be ignorant that these types of people exist in the world. The only way a Christian can go about making sure the one who is preaching God's Word to them is teaching them what is true is to open up the Bible and study the Scriptures.

If a Christian encounters a false teacher, Paul makes it abundantly clear that he should attempt to correct the teaching. If this is not successful, he should mark the person as a false

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100. Lawrenz, "The Scriptural Principles Concerning Church Fellowship," 4.

101. Bitter, "The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America," 22.

102. Gawrisch, "Levels of Fellowship," 1.

teacher and separate from him (Rom 16:17, Titus 3:10). There is no *caveat* for a Christian to join with a false teacher in fellowship in order to show them their error. Not only is sharing the means of grace an expression of fellowship, but so is any form of showing people you are one. A Christian cannot soften his separation to further the gospel. Instead, he should trust God to open those doors of sharing the truth of his Word with others.<sup>103</sup> The only true unity a Christian can have that will last is unity based on the unchangeable Word of God.<sup>104</sup> Lawrenz gives the Lutheran a practical question he should ask when considering fellowship: “who are those with whom God would have us jointly express our faith?”<sup>105</sup>

The claim that the early Christian Church had a variety of acceptable practices and interpretations of Scripture is inherently false. When there were problems in Galatia with Christians holding onto Christ in one hand and Old Testament practices in the other, Paul did not write it off as a minor difference. He stepped in and spoke against it. Paul recognized that anything that gets in the way of the truth Christ taught could be a stumbling block.<sup>106</sup> False teaching was alive and well even in the century after Jesus’ resurrection. Never was this false teaching tolerated on the grounds of union, because the Apostles understood Scripture. Bitter warns of the slippery slope of ecumenism: “and well might those involved bear in mind the inevitable path of unionism: first toleration of error, then granting error equal right with truth,

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103. Gawrisch, “Levels of Fellowship,” 7.

104. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 22.

105. Lawrenz, “The Scriptural Principles Concerning Church Fellowship,” 8.

106. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 11.

and finally error gaining supremacy.” This is essentially what is happening in ecumenical bodies. Truth and lies coexist.<sup>107</sup>

The fact that there is one truth is challenged by the post-modern society of the 21st century, though any non-colorblind third grader could unflinchingly declare that grass is green and the sky is blue. Two truths cannot both be true. Either Jesus’ body and blood are present in the Lord’s Supper, or they are not. Either Baptism is a sacrifice to God, or a sacrament from God. Either man is justified by faith alone, or he is justified by some balance of faith and works.<sup>108</sup> There is only one truth, and anyone who teaches what is contrary to that truth is to be deemed a false teacher.

### **The Difficulties of Communicating the Importance of Doctrine**

Just as there are difficulties that ecumenicals perceive for the spread of ecumenism, the Lutheran must overcome or at least understand the roadblocks he faces when engaging an ecumenical in conversation about the importance of doctrine. The chief of these obstructions might be stubbornness.

So often when a person finds himself in a contentious situation, he might be blinded to the opportunities of reaching resolution. Instead, he chooses to focus on his goals and his perspective, holding to the opinion that his point of view is the correct one. This is not to say he is off-base with his doctrine, but that he holds to the specific points of argument that have already been proven ineffective. Juergensmeyer, a scholar in the social sciences, explains, “the

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107. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 17.

108. Bitter, “The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America,” 11.

major barrier to mutual interpersonal communication is our very natural tendency to judge, to evaluate, to approve or disapprove, the statement of the other person."<sup>109</sup>

Some critical theorists of communication believe that society ought to be arranged in order to invite critique of rational ideas and bring out the contradictions in society.<sup>110</sup> They find that a healthy back-and-forth can increase the productivity of a conversation. The Lutheran must take this with a grain of salt though. Conversation centering on God's Word is not always going to be completely rational. What is rational is the process of taking God's Word and applying it to life. In order to accomplish this, the Lutheran must not stubbornly hold to his pet argument.

It is also difficult when the ecumenical the Lutheran is dealing with is stubbornly holding their position and argument. German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, believes that there are ideals that are cemented into society and are not allowed to be challenged. The result is that problems go unsolved, because they are never able to be recognized.<sup>111</sup> This can be the situation when two people who are firm in their beliefs come together to debate them. Both hold to what they know, and their problem goes unsolved. This can be a roadblock for the Lutheran, because ecumenism has been accepted in some bodies as just the staunch reality, along with the theology that supports it. A door needs to be opened in order to challenge it.

A second roadblock to communicating the importance of doctrine is the fact that society mostly finds doctrine boring. People's hectic lives and the ability to "just ask Google" have conditioned them to look for the quick big picture answer, which bodes poorly for systematic

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109. Erik Juergensmeyer, "Rhetorical Invention, Conflict Resolution, and Critical Awareness in Composition Instruction," *Rocky Mountain Review* 65.1 (2011):, 88.

110. Eric Gilder, "Towards a Critical Paradigm for Change: Habermas' 'Ideal Speech Situation' as a Meta-Model of Development Communication," (Boston, MA: November 5-8 1987), 8.

111. Gilder, "Towards a Critical Paradigm for Change," 8.



theology. People often care more for the practical benefits of their religion than the specific details.

Christian author, Dorothy Sayers, finds the opposite to be true about doctrine. She finds that when Christian doctrine is applied to secular stories, they are viewed as interesting. But when these same doctrines are connected to Christianity, they are viewed as boring.<sup>112</sup> She says, “it is the dogma that is the drama—not beautiful phrases, not comforting sentiments, nor vague aspirations to loving-kindness and uplift, nor the promise of something nice after death—but the terrifying assertion that the same God who made the world, lived in the world and passed through the grave and gate of death.”<sup>113</sup>

The word “dogma” is an ugly word by today’s standards. According to Newbigin, it “stands in our language precisely for all that is ignorant and arrogant.” Sayers agrees with the word “dogma” being too hot of a word for society. She says, “Only what can stand up under the critical examination of the modern scientific method can be taught as public truth: the rest is dogma.”<sup>114</sup>

While “dogma” might carry a negative connotation in society, Sayers believes that churches are becoming less popular not because of dogmatism, but because they have fled from theology.<sup>115</sup> Even those people who stand against doctrinal hum-drum and support Christian values must admit that those values are based on teachings, or doctrine.<sup>116</sup>

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112. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church: Passionate Arguments for the Relevance of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville, TN: W Pub. Group, 2004), 16.

113. Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church*, 21.

114. Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church*, 5.

115. Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church*, 51.

116. Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church*, 53.

Sayers shows what Christianity is like without doctrine: “It is a lie to say that dogma does not matter; it matters enormously. It is fatal to let people suppose that Christianity is only a mode of feeling; it is vitally necessary to insist that it is first and foremost a rational explanation of the universe.” The problem with the churches is not too much of doctrine, because doctrine is at the heart of the Church. The church does everything and sees everything through the scope of doctrine.

The problem Sayers does see with dogma is that at times the church uses haughty terms to express the teachings of Scripture, terms that are not understood by the more biblically illiterate hearer or reader.<sup>117</sup> If the one teaching the importance of doctrine to his friend uses highly ecclesiastical terms, he will find himself in a situation where it might be just as effective for him to be speaking in tongues. The Lutheran should wrestle with doctrine in order to explain it on the level of the person with whom he is speaking.

But the undereducated in biblical matters must be trained. False doctrine rarely stems from too much understanding of Scripture. It often comes from too little. Sayers says that, “heresy is largely the expression of opinion of the untutored average man, trying to grapple with the problems of the universe at the point where they begin to interfere with daily life and thought.”<sup>118</sup> If a man tries to wrestle with the big questions of the world, but does not understand the Word as a whole, this will affect how he lives his life and views the world.

Tied in with this is the third roadblock of ecumenism: the lack of biblical knowledge. According to Sayers, an overwhelming majority of Americans do not know what the church

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117. Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church*, 54.

118. Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church*, 57.

teaches about God, man, society or Christ.<sup>119</sup> This includes those who claim to follow Christ, but have little idea who he is. Sayers divides people into four categories. There are those who understand what God teaches, those who are open unbelievers and see the Bible as a book of stories, those who make Jesus out to be mild and gentle and focus on his humanistic ethics and those who know many canned answers to a hot-topic religious argument, but are unable to find where this truth comes from.<sup>120</sup> Since many Christians of this century have less Bible knowledge than those in the previous centuries, it will be harder to argue based on the depths of God's Word. It might be the Lutheran's only option to explain some of the basics of Scripture before delving into the depths that really divide many denominations.

Sayers spends some time refuting those who read the Bible with a Christology of Jesus the moral example. She says, "first I believe it to be a grave mistake to present Christianity as something charming and popular with no offense in it. Seeing that Christ went about the world giving the most violent offense to all kinds of people, it would seem absurd to expect that the doctrine of his person can be so presented as to offend nobody."<sup>121</sup> This will be important for the Lutheran to remember, if the heterodox ecumenical he is speaking with is under the impression that Jesus only came into the world to show people how to have peace. Jesus was so inflammatory, he was thrown out of church, hunted from place to place, labeled as a public agitator, set up, and put to death.<sup>122</sup> It must be understood inside of the conversation that Jesus' ministry involved preaching the law and ultimately giving himself to fulfill that law.

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119. Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church*, 49.

120. Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church*, 50.

121. Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church*, 58.

122. Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church*, 58.

The fourth difficulty for the Lutheran in a conversation such as this is the fact that Christianity is not rational to the world. Cultural norms in recent society have trained Christians to keep religious thought out of their mouths in public, and in some way, this might affect how they see the world. They begin to see their lives as a dichotomy between their secular selves and their spiritual selves. The secular self tends to analyze the world through rationalism, while the religious self ends up being kept in the closet until a use is found for it in the realm of religion. Because of this shift in thinking, it might become a temptation for Christians to think through religious matters with their human reason.

Human wisdom is never king over faith. God's Word does not line up with the rationalism of the world, and because of this, Christians trust it not by reason, but by faith. While Christianity is viewed by many Christians as reasonable, taking this assumption into conversations and trying to argue for the faith based on humanist assumptions is dangerous.<sup>123</sup>

But this does not mean human reason is without worth. There are those who have heard the drum banged against human wisdom in Christian circles and come to the conclusion that human wisdom cannot serve faith, so the importance of religion is simply a gospel of love.<sup>124</sup> This is not true. Reason serves faith.

A correct understanding of Baptism is exemplified by reason's role in understanding Scripture. Never in the Scripture are Christians directly instructed to baptize infants. But though Jesus nor the Apostles ever command on it explicitly, it is alluded to implicitly. Jesus makes the command to baptize "all nations" (Matt 28:19). He says that children are part of his kingdom (Matt 19:14). David points out that children, even unborn, are sinners (Ps 51:5). Paul and Silas

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123. Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church*, 3.

124. Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church*, 58.

baptize the jailer and his whole “household” (Acts 16:25–40). Though the Bible never directly commands the baptism of children, letting human reason serve what the Bible teaches is useful in understanding God’s Word.

Christianity may not be rational to the world, and that may not fit with people’s rationalism. At the same time, the Lutheran will by no means vilify the gift of human reason that God gives him in service of the Word and faith. The Lutheran should walk the middle road, understanding that human wisdom is beneficial, but not king over faith.

Ecumenical worship is also a roadblock to speaking about doctrine. Sayers points out that the spirit of modern Christianity is focused on worship ahead of all else. She goes so far as to say that this worship has no focus, since dogma has been so degraded. She notes that this empty form of worship only goes so far, saying, “the only drawback to this demand for a generalized and undirected worship is the practical difficulty of arousing any sort of enthusiasm for the worship of nothing in particular.”<sup>125</sup> If Christians are used to worship centered on emotional experience and of little to no doctrinal content, they might marry faith with feelings. The Lutheran can end up talking past the heterodox ecumenical, because one sees religion as fact and the other sees it as emotion.

A Lutheran can recognize that temptation to abandon doctrine for, as Sayers calls it, “some nice religion.”<sup>126</sup> Sayers does not see this as a continuing trend though. She believes there are signs that the younger generations are seeking out the deeper truth, because they want a creed they can hold to wholeheartedly.<sup>127</sup> Eventually the emotionalistic theology of worship that is

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125. Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church*, 15.

126. Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church*, 51.

127. Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church*, 50.

found all over heterodox Christianity will leave people wanting something more, and Sayers says orthodox churches should be ready to talk about it:

This is the Church's opportunity, if she chooses to take it. So far as people's readiness to listen goes, she has not been in so strong a position for at least two centuries. The rival philosophies of humanism, enlightened self-interest, and mechanical progress have broken down badly; the antagonism of science has proved to be far more apparent than real; and the happy-go-lucky doctrine of laissez-faire is completely discredited.

The Lutheran should be ready to discuss the depth of theology that the Bible teaches. God does not only desire to be publicly worshiped. He wants to be known. He wants the truth of his one and only Son's sacrifice and resurrection to be understood and taken to heart. What the Lutheran has to offer is much deeper than the third use of the law disconnected from the gospel. It is life beyond this life.

### **The Role of Relationships in Communicating Biblical Doctrine**

As with any other aspect of life, relationships are important. People are more apt to take their friend's suggestion on what restaurant they should go to than they are to listen to the Yelp reviewer. People trust the neighbor they have known for years to watch their kids over the teenager they found on Facebook Marketplace. Relationships and trust must be built. When having this conversation about doctrine, the Lutheran ought to always consider his relationship with his friend.

Common ground is always a great place to start. Since for the sake of this paper we assume the person who is talking with the Lutheran is a heterodox ecumenical Christian, the foundation of the conversation will be the common foundation of Jesus as the truth. Some other baselines might be the Bible as the inspired Word of God, who God is, and how people get to heaven.

There is certainly value when talking one-on-one with an individual, to recognize unity up to a point, but this is where the conversation is going to open up about differences. By recognizing another's faith, it might open a pathway to an honest and open conversation and make specific beliefs a positive opposed to a negative.<sup>128</sup> When there is common ground, it is wise to point it out. It shows love to be willing to say, "I'm in total agreement with you. That's exactly what God's Word says." This will prepare people for the times where there is no agreement and difference needs to be pointed out.<sup>129</sup>

Denominational background will also play into the conversation. Some people view denominational membership as an identity marker. It is common for people to ask, "What do Lutherans teach? What do Catholics teach? How do Baptists interpret that passage?" This can get in the way of an organic conversation about doctrine, free from tying any doctrine to a specific church body. A possibility in sharing with others is that the Lutheran does not define himself according to his church's confession, but according to his own confession of what Scripture says.<sup>130</sup> The Lutheran is not speaking for his church body, but for himself.

Relationships can be harmed on account of these sometimes contentious conversations, and the Lutheran must be prepared for this. Sharing the importance of doctrine might earn him an earful from his ecumenical friend.<sup>131</sup> It can also hurt someone emotionally for the Lutheran to explain that they cannot be publicly united in fellowship. The ecumenical might think his

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128. Lim and Ngern, "What If We Could?" 75.

129. Byron Hawk, "Rogerian Rhetoric: Pedagogy and the Ethos of Seduction" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference of College Composition and Communication, 1 April 1998), 2.

130. Kibler, "Reflections on The Church," 301.

131. Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church*, 59.

Lutheran friend is belittling or even denying his faith. Bitter gives some tips to show a lack of unity without judgment of another's faith:

And so when we follow these directions of the Lord and avoid persistently erring church bodies we are not thereby denying the Christianity of anyone. That is the Lord's business. We are simply following the Lord's bidding and testifying in love to our neighbor, 'You have departed from God's Word. And since talking has not won you to the truth, God has told us to bring this to your attention in the most earnest way possible, by refraining from fellowship with you.' Such action hurts, but it is done in love and obedience.

Conflict is a likelihood when discussing volatile topics such as doctrine. Richard Lloyd-Jones defines conflict as "diversity of point of view and desires."<sup>132</sup> Conflict stems from a different point of view.

### **Setting the Stage**

#### **Know the Other Person**

In almost every situation a Lutheran will not have time to prepare for a discussion with his ecumenical friend. These types of conversation often come out of nowhere. In order to prepare for the possibility of a future conversation, a Lutheran will want to think through his approach. The first step is for the Lutheran to know with whom they are talking.

This must never be forgotten: in every denomination where the gospel is preached, even when false doctrine is also preached, there will be true Christians.<sup>133</sup> It is wise to keep from caricaturing the viewpoints of others, since this will open up an easier path to the truth.<sup>134</sup> The biggest danger of caricaturing others' views is that often one's understanding of someone else's

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132. Juergensmeyer, "Rhetorical Invention," 79.

133. Bitter, "The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America," 5.

134. Juergensmeyer, "Rhetorical Invention," 90.



view is inaccurate. The Lutheran's job is not to guess what his friend believes based on his perceptions, but to find out what that friend believes.

Scholars like Kenneth Bruffee argue that learning occurs in conversation with communities different from ours in regard to rules, assumptions, goals, and values.<sup>135</sup> It is important for the Lutheran not just to understand the argument his friend is making, but also know the background from which this argument came.<sup>136</sup> Only once the Lutheran understands the background behind his friend's argument will he be able to address it sufficiently.<sup>137</sup> Consider why this person is ecumenical. Is it love and respect? In showing his friend the importance of doctrine, the Lutheran is showing his friend a great amount of love and respect. Is it a strong desire for unity? In showing a friend where his doctrine is not in line with the Bible, the Lutheran is fostering true unity. This is where the conversation starts, so the Lutheran can be sure he is not misrepresenting his friend.

How does the Lutheran get to know what his friend believes? It might seem like an easy answer, but so often people assume instead of investigating. The best way a person can know what someone else thinks and believes is to ask them. The Lutheran will want to get to the heart of his friend's theology to know how to help him, just as a doctor must get to the heart of his patient's medical issue to know how to treat him. Some scholars like Juergensmeyer suggest a line of questions that moves down a path toward the truth. He suggests heuristics. "Detailed by Aristotle, heuristics, derived from the Greek verb *heurisko*, or 'I find,' are lines of questioning

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135. Juergensmeyer, "Rhetorical Invention," 80.

136. Denise A. Kensit, "Rogerian Theory: A Critique of the Effectiveness of Pure Client-Centred Therapy," *Counselling Psychology Quarterly* 13.4 (2000): 347.

137. Juergensmeyer, "Rhetorical Invention," 87.

that abet the discovery of information relevant to a given topic.”<sup>138</sup> The rigid system of heuristics is not very applicable to the Lutheran in this situation, but the spirit is. If one thinks through their argument ahead of time using heuristics, asking, “if they ask or say this, how will I respond?” he will not only prepare for that discussion, but have the opportunity to really analyze his faith. A benefit of walking through these questions is not necessarily knowing the answers, but rather what questions to ask.<sup>139</sup>

Rebecca Stephens works in the field of communication and gives a list of questions to her readers that the Lutheran can also apply to his own situation to better understand the argument of the ecumenical and the discussion at large:

- What is the nature of the issue, in general terms?
- Whose lives are affected by the issue?
- What beliefs and values motivate each of the interested groups?
- What other things influence those beliefs? For example, are there economic, social, political, legal, or religious reasons which contribute to their perspectives?
- Name and describe the reason for these influences.
- What kind of publicity do the various perspectives receive?
- Are the media biased or unbiased in presenting these views?<sup>140</sup>

Admittedly, some of these may not feel very applicable or helpful to the Lutheran, but understanding even the non-religious biases that person carries helps understand the heart of their argument.

Carl Rogers, creator of Rogers Client-Centered Therapy (RCCT), worked in the field of psychology and came to the conclusion that the only way to understand the argument as a whole was to be able to explain the position of the other person in the conversation.<sup>141</sup> Judith Todd and

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138. Juergensmeyer, “Rhetorical Invention,” 83.

139. Juergensmeyer, “Rhetorical Invention,” 90.

140. Juergensmeyer, “Rhetorical Invention,” 89.

141. Hawk, “Rogerian Rhetoric,” 2.

Arthur Bohart say, “Generally, RCCT has had an enormous impact on modern counselling practices and humanistic psychology.”<sup>142</sup> When preparing to have a conversation with a person and understand their side, it might be useful for the Lutheran, if possible, to assume the opposing side.<sup>143</sup> The more he can put himself in the shoes of an ecumenical, the better.

### Know yourself

One of the biggest disruptors in any discussion where two sides have opposite opinions is a lack of self awareness.<sup>144</sup> The Lutheran, without any knowledge of it, can and will bring predetermined beliefs into the conversation. He must not shut down when the ecumenical makes a point. In fact, he must be able to analyze the point to see if it matches with Scripture. Rogers gives three thoughts to communication in psychology that could just as easily be applied to the current conversation.

First, he says that the psychologist must be able to be real with his client. People recognize when the person they are speaking with is genuinely listening and genuinely cares.<sup>145</sup> When speaking to a friend, relative, associate or neighbor, it should not be much of a struggle for the Lutheran to show he is genuine. Whether it is perceived or not could go a long way in having an open conversation.

The second suggestion is the psychologist must accept the person and their opinions unconditionally.<sup>146</sup> This does not mean the Lutheran must agree with the opinions of his

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142. Kensit, “Rogerian Theory,” 348.

143. Hawk, “Rogerian Rhetoric,” 4.

144. Paul Komesaroff and Isan Kerridge, “It Is Time to Move Beyond a Culture of Unexamined Assumptions, Recrimination, and Blame to One of Systematic Analysis and Ethical Dialogue,” *American Journal of Bioethics* 11.1 (2011): 32.

145. Hawk, “Rogerian Rhetoric,” 3.

146. Hawk, “Rogerian Rhetoric,” 3.

ecumenical friend or support their misunderstandings regarding what the Bible teaches. It simply means he understands that these are the actual thoughts and feelings with which the ecumenical is working.

The third and final suggestion is that the psychologist have an empathetic understanding of where the client is coming from.<sup>147</sup> The Lutheran may struggle with this one the most. It is not easy to feel sorry for someone who rejects truth and chooses lies. Yet would he want people to feel bad for him and voice concern if he were walking down the wrong path? The Lutheran must remember that he is bringing to light what has been in the dark for the ecumenical.

The three Rogerian thoughts here really focus on one thing: ethos.<sup>148</sup> In so many conversations the way a person is perceived can make all the difference on if his argument is heard or not. He should make every effort he can to make himself approachable and the type of person with which others want to have deep discussions.

#### Remember That Both Arguments Come from Different Backgrounds

This concept was covered from the perspective of the ecumenical and the Lutheran separately, but there is value in bringing them together. Lutheran and ecumenicals think very differently. They come from churches which use different hermeneutics when interpreting the Bible. When they go to church, the same Christ might be spoken of, but his person and purpose might sound different.

Kenneth Burke gives this quote showing that one can only truly communicate when he can put his thoughts into another's conditions: "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with

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147. Hawk, "Rogerian Rhetoric," 3.

148. Hawk, "Rogerian Rhetoric," 7.

his.”<sup>149</sup> Listen to their opinion first without an evaluative tone. Just listen. This will help the Lutheran fit himself into the ecumenical’s shoes and give him a better picture of where his friend is coming from.<sup>150</sup> A key is to find out what boxes they check about ecumenicals from part 1. This is going to give the Lutheran a better understanding of why the ecumenical feels they are the same.

### Know the Setting

According to Carl Rogers, the climate of the conversation is just as important as the ethos a person carries into it.<sup>151</sup> Rogers found that people would be more open and respectful when in a safe and respectful environment.<sup>152</sup> Byron Hawk summarizes the Rogerian Theory: “we are more likely to establish real communication with people, especially on sensitive or controversial issues, if we give up traditional, legalistic kinds of arguments and use a non-threatening approach based on shared concerns and common goals.” Hawk’s advice to avoid this traditional way of argument involves the person restraining from stating their position up front.<sup>153</sup>

The Royal Australasian College of Physicians has developed some guidelines to help resolve conflict. This process is adapted from Kant’s methods and state that every person takes on more than one role in life. People have coworkers, families, and those they participate with in other activities. They wear a variety of hats in life, and none of these hats is more important than the others. Komesaroff and Kerridge use the term “community” for this group of people who

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149. Juergensmeyer, “Rhetorical Invention,” 80.

150. Juergensmeyer, “Rhetorical Invention,” 88.

151. Juergensmeyer, “Rhetorical Invention,” 87.

152. Kensit, “Rogerian Theory,” 347.

153. Hawk, “Rogerian Rhetoric,” 2.

play a role in an individual's life. This process is supposed to help one person solve an internal problem, where two of their roles are pulling them in opposite directions. For purposes of this paper, we can look at the two interests as the two parties, and the community as the result of mutual agreement.<sup>154</sup>

The first step of this process is to identify the interests of each role.<sup>155</sup> Each person wants to come to a conclusion, but those conclusions might be different. The ecumenical is probably seeking unity with the Lutheran, hoping he will understand that it is God pleasing for faith to recognize faith and join with it. On the other hand, the Lutheran seeks to convince the ecumenical that they will not and cannot have God pleasing unity until they are in doctrinal agreement. While Hawk suggests tabling the conclusion each side wishes to come to, there might be times when it is valuable to be forthright and verbal about the aims of the conversation.

The second step involves declaring these interests to the other party.<sup>156</sup> It is important not only to verbalize one's own interests in the conversation, but once the Lutheran understands his ecumenical friend's interests, he should verify that his understanding is correct.

The final step is less of an action and more of a spirit. The arena in which this conversation takes place ought to be an open test ground where ideas can be tested free of judgement.<sup>157</sup> This certainly will not be easy, as an ecumenical might say plenty of things about which the Lutheran must bite his tongue. The goal of this step is to work out a solution together

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154. Komesaroff and Kerridge, "It Is Time to Move Beyond a Culture of Unexamined Assumptions," 32.

155. Komesaroff and Kerridge, "It Is Time to Move Beyond a Culture of Unexamined Assumptions," 32.

156. Komesaroff and Kerridge, "It Is Time to Move Beyond a Culture of Unexamined Assumptions," 32.

157. Komesaroff and Kerridge, "It Is Time to Move Beyond a Culture of Unexamined Assumptions," 32.

as if the whole process is taking place in the mind, free from anyone else's judgements and snide comments.

Scholars like Kenneth Bruffee argue that learning occurs in conversation with communities that are foreign to a person in regard to rules, assumptions, goals, and values.<sup>158</sup> Again, the focus here is on the setting above the process. If the setting feels organic and open, the process will be organic and open. Jürgen Habermas agrees, saying that it is not the process of communication as much as it is about the conditions that the communication could function under.<sup>159</sup> The Lutheran should make every effort to create a setting where conversation is not stifled by arrogance and intrusion.

### Know the Endgame

Just like writing a thesis paper, it is important to know where the conversation should be going. The Lutheran must assume that the ecumenical has the desire to leave the conversation with the truth, regardless of whose argument was correct.<sup>160</sup> Remember that this conversation is not one centered around winning the argument, but winning the person. Respect will be of the utmost importance.<sup>161</sup> One way to show respect is to talk through both opinions, discussing the logical implications that that idea will bring about. In this way, it gives both arguments equal treatment, and shows the ecumenical that doctrinal differences are not just words in a book, but a completely different understanding of how the world works. This is why the Lutheran has to

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158. Juergensmeyer, "Rhetorical Invention," 81.

159. George Snedeker, "Defending the Enlightenment: Jürgen Habermas and the Theory of Communicative Reason," *Dialectical Anthropology* 25.3/4 (2000): 247.

160. Kensit, "Rogerian Theory," 347.

161. Juergensmeyer, "Rhetorical Invention," 87.

assume the conversation is working toward truth. And he must know the logical steps to get to that truth.

### Know How to Start

The first step is always the hardest. It takes a carefully thought out approach to begin the walk down the path that is this conversation. How does the Lutheran begin the conversation with so many moving parts and different understandings regarding a variety of biblical teachings? It might be best to establish Scripture as the basis of all truth. If the ecumenical cannot come to agreement that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, the conversation will crash before it gets off the ground. The Lutheran recognizes that all truth comes from the pages of Scripture and that the Word surpasses all human understanding. If the ecumenical is on board with the perfect inspiration of Scripture, the conversation can always go back to God's Word and what it says.

### Know the Argument

Few things are more painful than watching a person flounder in a discussion he is ill prepared for. In the same way, if a Lutheran begins a conversation with his ecumenical friends without even thinking about why doctrine is important prior to that conversation, he should not expect to be too successful in convincing his friend to his side. He has to know what his argument is. Rogers says a person ought to know where he is coming from in order to explain his opinion well.<sup>162</sup> Just as he thinks through the possible arguments of the ecumenical, the Lutheran should think through his own argument. Does it line up with what God says in his Word? Does it make sense?

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162. Hawk, "Rogerian Rhetoric," 2.



## **Communicating Techniques and Theories that Set the Right Mindset**

### Storytelling

One of the time-tested ways of communicating truth to others is through story telling. People like a good story. It captivates them by taking them elsewhere and putting them at the edge of their seats in anticipation. Dorothy Sayers suggests the use of storytelling in showing the relevance of the teachings of God's Word. Certainly she would admit this idea is not original to her. In fact, it is the tool that the greatest teacher of all time used, as Jesus spent much of his preaching in parables. Sayers says that since many teachings in the Bible are not directly relatable to human brains, there are times when the use of analogical language is not only acceptable, but effective.<sup>163</sup> When illustrations present themselves, the Lutheran would be wise to use them. A simple example would be the grandmother who begins baking a cake, but she substitutes baking soda for baking powder, and her cake is ruined. When understanding the directions is not important, the whole entity can be worthless.

### Working Together

As was mentioned before, the Lutheran does not win the argument when he stomps down all the ecumenical's arguments. The ecumenical will just go home feeling attacked. It is hard to believe someone is bringing the truth when they verbally dominate their friend. Habermas says, "ultimately, there is only one criterion by which beliefs can be judged valid, and that is that they are based on agreement reached by argumentation." Though argumentation historically has been viewed as a form of bringing people to one's side by means of coercion and manipulation,

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<sup>163</sup> Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church*, 29.

Habermas' "ideal speech situation" looks to find conclusion through the accomplishment of consensus.<sup>164</sup>

Consensus is large scale agreement built on small-scale points.<sup>165</sup> The Lutheran cannot argue as to why they are not able to take the Lord's Supper with the ecumenical until they both understand what the Lord's Supper means to each party, and how their understandings differ. Hawk gives a powerful quote which sums up the point the Rogerian argument is trying to make: "There is no MY argument. It becomes OUR argument for common ground."<sup>166</sup>

A term that is used by many scholars of conflict resolution is "inventing." Invention here is not referring to the process of bringing something into existence that had never before existed. Here it means that the group is coming together to create a solution that is agreeable. Juergensmeyer describes invention as something that is "inevitably social."<sup>167</sup> He says that "a social view of invention helps people understand that solving problems requires patience and participation."<sup>168</sup>

### **The Heart behind the Communication of Doctrine**

It is important to remember that the doctrines of the church in almost every case were not laid out without reason. This does not mean the concept of the Trinity is rational or that the real presence in the Lord's Supper makes any sense. In almost every case, clear doctrinal points were

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164. Snedeker, "Defending the Enlightenment," 246.

165. Snedeker, "Defending the Enlightenment," 247.

166. Hawk, "Rogerian Rhetoric," 6.

167. Juergensmeyer, "Rhetorical Invention," 85.

168. Juergensmeyer, "Rhetorical Invention," 87.

laid out with much wrestling and to figure out what was truth and what was heresy.<sup>169</sup> The Lutheran will be quick to note this at some point in his conversation. When systematic doctrine was brought about by Lutheran theologians, time after time they want back to make sure what they believed fit with Scripture. Sayers sees doctrine as a whole for what it is. She says, “Christian doctrine is not a set of rules, but one interlocking system.”<sup>170</sup>

The heart behind communicating doctrine is one that is humble but confident. These teachings are not man’s teachings, but God’s. The Lutheran can be certain in his doctrine because he has pored over the pages of the Bible. He can be humble because this doctrine is not his to take and adapt. Just as the math student cannot make  $1+1=4$  to fit his purpose of getting an “A,” so the Lutheran cannot change the truths of Scripture to fit his purpose of making God’s truth easier to swallow.

### **What Can Be Learned from Koehler**

J. P. Koehler’s *Wauwatosa Theology* came from his disdain for the dogmatics of his day, where the methodology of the time was going through the Bible to find proof passages to already determined doctrine points.<sup>171</sup> Modern ecumenicals would probably agree with Koehler’s point, but on different grounds. Both would say the normal practice of studying dogmatics involved coming at Scripture from the outside and cherry-picking individual passages without any regard for context. Koehler felt that this did not do justice to Scripture as a whole, while ecumenicals might complain that it only allows one interpretation in places where many could be found.

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169. Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church*, 57.

170. Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church*, 60.

171. David Sellnow, “J.P. Koehler’s Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns: What Can We Learn From It Today?” (presented to the South Central District Pastoral Study Conference, Flower Mound, TX, April 25, 1995), 2.

In his paper, *Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns*, Koehler wanted to look at the teachings of the Bible in their historical setting, tying dogmatics less to individual passages that could be taken out of context, and tying doctrine more to the Bible as a whole. What he really wanted was a marriage between exegesis and dogmatics. For centuries people knew what their church taught, but often they did not know what the Bible says in context.<sup>172</sup> Some taught this way because they came to the belief that the truth of Scripture was not necessarily Scripture itself, but the teachings of the church that could point to individual passages to back them up.

Koehler called for even his own thoughts to be held up to the light of Scripture. He was not encouraging people to challenge the church, but that every generation reclaim the teachings of the church fathers, but not by blindly following the fathers.<sup>173</sup> So he went about putting this into practice. E. C. Fredrich wrote that during the church and ministry debate of the 1900s Koehler, Pieper and Schaller “looked beyond the current viewpoint and the ready dogmatical explanation and the deposit of an ecclesiastical situation of the past.”<sup>174</sup> When any Christian is walking down the path of finding the correct understanding of doctrine with others, he will want to take this same attitude. Do not lean on the dogmaticians of the day, but seek out the truth by digging into Scripture.

There is a temptation for Lutherans to go about sharing the truth of God’s Word for the wrong reasons. Koehler lays out the situation among Lutherans: Lutherans can find themselves falling into the ditch that finding and helping others find pure doctrine is important because it

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172. Sellnow, “J.P. Koehler’s *Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns*,” 2.

173. Sellnow, “J.P. Koehler’s *Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns*,” 2.

174. Sellnow, “J.P. Koehler’s *Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns*,” 3.

makes a “right faith.”<sup>175</sup> A question Lutherans ought to be asking themselves is, why am I trying to share this truth with them? Is it simply so they know the true piece of information, or will it spiritually edify them in some way?

According to Koehler, intellectualism and the lack of an ecumenical spirit are the reasons for overemphasizing orthodoxy. By intellectualism, he means that the demand for intellectual assent gets in the way of belief in the good news. By an ecumenical spirit, Koehler means having a heart for those who are part of the family of believers, though they are not in our immediate fellowship.<sup>176</sup> Instead of falling into these traps, the Lutheran will instead focus on the heart and recognize that these are real people whom God wants to come to the knowledge of the truth.

Koehler notes that the Lutheran cannot be ecumenical in the sense that he overlooks the differences, but he can and should still appreciate the invisible church. Koehler says that when he meets someone outside of his fellowship but with faith, he emphasizes the similarities, and does not attack their off-base doctrinal stances.<sup>177</sup> This is just showing love to someone. It is doing the opposite of what WELS is repeatedly accused of: thinking they will be the only ones in heaven. Give thanks for those people who know their Savior, and let them know this.

Koehler gives a practical example of this. He tells a story about how he met a Calvinist woman on a train who believed the same as him when it came to election. This surprised him, since the Calvinist view of election was so different from the Lutheran view. So he told her that her doctrine was not in line with what her church taught, which caused her to grab onto the false

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175. Sellnow, “J.P. Koehler’s Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns,” 8.

176. Sellnow, “J.P. Koehler’s Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns,” 8.

177. Sellnow, “J.P. Koehler’s Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns,” 9.

doctrine that her church taught, but she was not professing.<sup>178</sup> The Lutheran will be certain not to systematize someone's faith with their church body, and even more than that correct someone when they are confessing true doctrine. Instead of correcting, Koehler encourages others to appreciate people's faith in Christ, and to encourage them to grow in faith and understanding of the Bible. Koehler calls on the Lutheran to encourage the heterodox Christian without automatically turning on the icy water of our criticism.<sup>179</sup>

Koehler also hands out some great principles when it comes to fellowship and speaking about it. When discussing fellowship with the ecumenical, the Lutheran will focus less on the fact that it keeps the heterodox out, and more on the fact that it allows believers to rejoice in the complete unity Christ tells them to have with others who teach his teachings correctly. These conversations might be difficult to have. The Lutheran might be tempted to avoid them at all costs. But God has called him to spread his truth. The Lutheran should not be afraid to talk about the Bible with his friends that are not WELS. Though the term "ecumenical" has been muddied, the Lutheran will want to have a spirit that does not make him look standoffish. Instead, he wants a spirit that is open to talking about the Word with anyone and everyone.<sup>180</sup>

David Sellnow uses a story of an elderly Baptist couple who came to his church for a Bible class, because they were interested in learning what Lutheranism teaches. Though they never joined his church, Sellnow was glad that he was able to share the gospel with them and show them that Lutherans are not enemies of the gospel.<sup>181</sup>

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178. Sellnow, "J.P. Koehler's Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns," 10.

179. Sellnow, "J.P. Koehler's Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns," 13.

180. Sellnow, "J.P. Koehler's Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns," 21.

181. Sellnow, "J.P. Koehler's Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns," 22.

The person the Lutheran is talking with may never come to the same conclusion as the Lutheran wishes he would, but the doctrines that are shown them might have a lasting effect on how they view the specific Lutheran, Lutheranism in general or even the Lutheran message.

### **Conclusion**

There is no “one size fits all” process that a Lutheran can use to communicate the importance of doctrine with his ecumenical friend. It is a complicated situation and there are many moving parts. Each person has different thoughts, different ideals and different motivations. The Lutheran must understand the ecumenical, unwrapping his various beliefs and the events that have made him who he is. This is done by little more than asking questions. Some general beliefs and traits of ecumenicals are offered up by this paper, but assuming that a specific ecumenical checks all of these boxes would be irresponsible. An ecumenical could have all of these qualities or none of them at all.

Asking the right questions is never easy. Some questions may overstep the ecumenical’s comfort to share. Some questions might be interpreted as attacks or prying. But when the Lutheran asks, not to build a case against the ecumenical but to better understand him, he will often find a person who wants to talk about the things in life that are so great they go beyond our human understanding.

When the Lutheran understands his ecumenical friend’s worldview and finds that he thinks doctrine is of little importance, he will want to enter into a conversation to discuss this matter. Patience is key here. Many factors have led the ecumenical to conclude that doctrine is not practical in his life. The Lutheran will be willing to concede that there have been times

throughout history when doctrinal disagreement has been handled shamefully, but this does not make doctrine unimportant.

The only way a Lutheran will be able to communicate the importance of doctrine is if he recognizes its importance in his own life. It is not boring, but beautiful. It is not based on the changing emotions of sinful people, but on the unchanging truths which God divinely inspired men to write.

There are a variety of theories that are formulated to help problem solving and communication. These can certainly be helpful for the Lutheran, and a few have been given here, but there is so much more in the realm of communication. While the Lutheran should always let Scripture speak for itself, he can put the social sciences to use in order to keep himself from becoming a stumbling block while sharing what God's Word has to say.

Finally, the Lutheran can learn from the experiences of others. Examples of success and failure help to better train the Lutheran. J. P. Koehler offers practical advice in *Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns*, combating the legalism of the Lutheran church and encouraging the correction of false doctrine for the sake of spiritual edification.

The Lutheran might feel like the uphill battle of sharing the importance of pure teaching of God's Word can be a waste of time. He might be tempted to begin to take on the same attitude of the ecumenical. But once he understands the fundamental errors of ecumenism and the spirit of ecumenism, he is more prepared to explore potential strategies and tips for pointing ecumenicals back to Scripture in order to show them that a diminished value on specific teachings leads to more issues among believers, and ultimately a serious threat to faith in the long run.





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