

Twentieth-Century Lutheran Theologians

Edited by Mark C. Mattes



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Content

<i>Mark Mattes</i> Editor's Preface Twentieth-Century Lutheran Theologians	7
<i>David P. Scaer</i> Francis Pieper (1852 – 1931)	17
<i>Michael J. Albrecht</i> John Philipp Koehler (1859 – 1951)	37
<i>Gregory A. Walter</i> Karl Holl (1866 – 1926)	56
<i>Torleiv Austad</i> Ole Hallesby (1879 – 1961)	70
<i>Matthew Becker</i> Werner Elert (1885 – 1954)	93
<i>Hans Schwarz</i> Paul Althaus (1888 – 1966)	136
<i>John T. Pless</i> Hermann Sasse (1895 – 1976)	155
<i>Gregory A. Walter</i> Hans Joachim Iwand (1899 – 1960)	178
<i>Matthew Becker</i> Edmund Schlink (1903 – 1984)	195
<i>Richard H. Bliese</i> Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906 – 1945)	223

Roy A. Harrisville

Ernst Käsemann (1906–1998) 249

John T. Pless

Helmut Thielicke (1908–1986) 270

Mary Elizabeth Anderson

Gustaf Wingren (1910–2000) 291

Mark D. Menacher

Gerhard Ebeling (1912–2001) 307

Index of Names 335

List of Contributors 338

Mark Mattes

Editor's Preface

Twentieth-Century Lutheran Theologians

This book introduces readers to fourteen leading twentieth-century Lutheran theologians. Each essay covers the life, teachings, and continuing relevance of each thinker. The focus here is not on the later but rather the earlier twentieth-century figures, lest we forget the sources of contemporary theology. From each of these theologians we can learn how to assess truth from within the tradition and present it in our own context.

Composed over the last several years, these essays were initiated by the journal *Lutheran Quarterly* in order to determine how our recent past can help us shape our bearings in a new century. The goal of the authors has been to specify how each theologian's work continues to impact theology today. We best read our current theological milieu in light of how leading thinkers of the recent past have presented the faith as they have struggled with modern philosophical and scientific perspectives which challenge traditional assumptions.

Overview of the Project

The thinkers chosen are ones who are self-described "confessional" Lutherans and not merely culturally influenced by the Lutheran tradition. In its widest sense, to be confessional is to honor the Reformers' understanding that human justification before God is not to be had in any way through works, but solely by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ. It is to allow the documents in the Book of Concord to be one's compass in matters of faith and life, the lens through which scripture is interpreted. While not all Lutheran churches, such as the Scandinavian Folk Churches, are committed to the whole Book of Concord as a statement of their faith, most are committed to the Augsburg Confession (1530) and Luther's Small Catechism (1529). Nevertheless, we will see that there are remarkable differences among these theologians in how they assess the doctrinal truths found in the confessions and how they apply them to their intellectual landscape.

Ten of the theologians presented here are Germans, one is Norwegian, one is Swedish, and two are Americans. The fact that so many Germans are included should not be surprising given the ascendancy of German theology in the early to mid-twentieth century. No other single text in English provides an extensive

overview of all these key figures and the ramifications of their work for current theology, culture, and ecumenical overtures. These are theologians who deserve more careful attention than they have hitherto received within the English-speaking world. Several essays present the scholar in a significantly new light. All the essays evaluate how these thinkers shaped not only Lutheran theology but also the entire flow of twentieth-century Protestant theology.

The Intellectual Terrain

The majority of the scholars presented here dealt each in their own way with the philosophical and theological legacies bequeathed from giants such as Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), and Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), and it is worthwhile to alight briefly on each of these thinkers' perspectives.

Kant sought a critique of reason in order to determine reason's limits. He was convinced that reason is not able to know reality as such, the noumenal or "thing in itself" (*ding am sich*) as he put it, but only how it phenomenologically appears to us. In this schema, God is seen as a "regulative idea," a valuable concept for our confidence that all knowledge ultimately coheres. Kant's approach tends to dismiss the conviction that God is a reality as such who determines affairs independently of human conceptuality. Nevertheless, through ethical reasoning—employing the "categorical imperative" ("act on that maxim by which you can at the same time will to become a universal law"), Kant believes that we have access to God as legislator and judge. While genuine ethics exercises our autonomy, our freedom to formulate moral law rationally, the moral laws that we in fact formulate would be nothing other than what God himself would establish. For Kant, God then is an important postulate for practical reason. Unique among philosophers of the High Enlightenment, Kant acknowledges "radical evil" in human nature, that due to our self-centeredness we are prone not to follow the categorical imperative and that a moral conversion is often necessary to help people live a moral life. The beginning of the twentieth century would see an affirmation of the individual's autonomy and an anti-metaphysical stance due in large part to the appropriation of Kant.

While not as influential for our lineup of twentieth-century theologians, the philosophy of Hegel hovers in the background in nineteenth- and twentieth-century work, if for no other reason than that the renewal of Kantianism in this era would find it so important to critique Hegel. In opposition to Kant, Hegel maintained that reality is accessible to human reason due to the fact that reality is by nature self-expressive and self-revealing, particularly in and through the human spirit (*Geist*). That is, reality is coming to itself more and more in the history of the entire cosmos and that its fullest embodiment is in

its diremption in human beings, particularly coming to expression in philosophical thinking that is able to comprehend the entire itinerary of reason. For Hegel, this truth is mythologically expressed in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the witness to Christ encountered in the church. Later twentieth-century theologians like Wolfhart Pannenberg, Eberhard Jüngel, and Jürgen Moltmann would especially appeal to the thought of Hegel in their quest to establish a view of God which sees God as deeply interconnected with the world, who suffers not only for the world, but with the world.

Our cohort of theologians would be more apt to encounter Hegel quite indirectly in the thinking of Karl Barth (1886–1968), the Reformed “neo-orthodox” theologian who on occasion affirmed the need to “hegelize.” The form of Barth’s thinking is shaped through the lens of Kant, i. e., that the human mind automatically sets the conditions for human perception of the world, but with the important exception that it is not the human but God himself who offers the conditions for our knowledge of God. In other words, humans are able to understand God and do theology because human cognitive powers are usurped by God’s self-revelation: revelation is not subject to the human potential to receive it and indeed revelation negates and surpasses our ability to receive it. Nevertheless, the content of Barth’s view of God who reveals himself in covenant and creation as centered in the eternal God-man Jesus Christ conveys a Hegelian aura, comparable to divine self-revelation in finite things found in Hegel. Many of the theologians found here were strongly anti-Barthian, especially Elert, Althaus, and Wingren. However, some, such as Bonhoeffer, Iwand, Ebeling, and Käsemann relied on Barth to various degrees.

Schleiermacher grounded religious truth not in practical reason like Kant nor in reality evolving from empty “substance” to content-laden “subjectivity” like Hegel, but instead in the immediacy of intuition. Schleiermacher appealed to a “feeling of absolute dependence” at the core of all humans, whose “whence” is best answered by God. Similar to Kant, for Schleiermacher we do not deal with God *per se*; rather, we deal with human experience of God particularly as it is mediated through the church which through the ages has held forth the image (*Bild*) of Christ as the redeemer, and which in turn conveys the power to sustain the church. Our lineup of theologians have different reactions to Schleiermacher. While many are willing to concede the importance of a God-centered spiritual dimension as a context (but not a source) for theological reflection, most seek their bearings from scripture.

A reaction to these philosophers above that impacted many twentieth-century Lutheran theologians would be that of existentialism, especially as presented in the thinking of Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855). For Kierkegaard, thinkers like Hegel were far too “objective” in their approach to truth. Instead, faith matters are wholly “subjective”—not in the sense that they are arbitrary, but instead in that they must be inwardly appropriated and lived out if their truth is to be honored. Again, our cadre of theologians react in different ways

to Kierkegaard—the majority seeking to find objectivity not in a metaphysical landscape like Hegel but instead in an objective word conveyed through scripture and publically presented in proclamation.

Forward to Luther

The late nineteenth- and twentieth- centuries saw a renewed engagement in Luther's thinking, particularly as early Luther lectures were discovered. In light of renewed engagement with Luther in the nineteenth-century, seen especially here in the work of Karl Holl, Werner Elert, Paul Althaus, Hans Joachim Iwand, Gerhard Ebeling, and Gustaf Wingren, as well as confessional renewal, each theologian in his own way challenges the legacies of Orthodoxy, Pietism, Rationalism, and Confessional Renewal theologies as they bring Lutheran identity to bear on crucial topics of Christian dogmatics, such as the authority of scripture, the relationship between law and gospel, between faith and reason, between church and state, and the relevance of Christian proclamation. Confessional Renewal theologies could be found in the Neo-Lutheran movement which emphasized the experience of rebirth, the centrality of the revealing word of Scripture, and the Lutheran confessions as fulfilling the patristic tradition. Voices in this movement included Erlangen theologians such as Johann W. F. Hoefling (1802–1852), Gottlieb C. A. Harless (1806–1879), Johannes C. K. von Hofmann (1810–1877), and Gottfried Thomasius (1802–1875). Their pioneering work was paralleled by a more conservative churchly—even “catholic”—movement led by Theodor Kliefoth (1810–1895), Johann K. W. Löhe (1808–1872), and August F. C. Vilmar (1800–1868).

While some Lutherans responded to these changes by attempting to protect the confessional heritage with a “repristinating” theology, others found ways to accommodate in some way or other to newer views. For instance, some appropriated an existential approach to the faith, while others sought a more political and social approach, and yet others appealed to the scriptural narrative itself as a way to re-center faith. Additionally, the raise of the Third Reich posed a crisis for European Lutherans, especially in Germany, and many theologians found strength in the confessional tradition to challenge this ideology. For many, a Lutheran challenge to Nazism centered on responding to the Ansbach agreement that those of Jewish descent should not serve as pastors in the German church. While some theologians sympathized with this proposal, at least to a degree, it led others, such as Iwand, Bonhoeffer, Käsemann, and Ebeling into the “confessing church,” which stood against the “German Christians.” However, even Elert, who was sympathetic with Ansbach, ultimately would not favor Nazi beliefs and ideology. Overall, the reaction of the majority of our theologians counters the charge against Lutherans as quietistic. Instead, we see our theologians' engagement in the

Confessing Church as intense and fruitful. Their behavior in the face of oppression testifies to the fact that while before God we are wholly passive, we are indeed active in the world for the common good.

A Vista of Twentieth-Century Lutheran Theologians

The first two theologians we examine, Francis Pieper (1852–1931) and John Philipp Koehler (1859–1951) represent an orthodox approach to dogmatics bequeathed to them from the confessional renewal movements in Europe in the nineteenth century. In many respects, this renewal of theology, in opposition to the prevailing Rationalism and Pietism of the time, can be traced to the efforts of Pastor Claus Harms (1778–1855) who on the three-hundredth anniversary of the Protestant Reformation in 1817 called for confessional fidelity. This call to faithfulness was amplified by those Lutherans who opposed the union of Lutheran and Reformed churches in the Kingdom of Prussia at the behest of the Prussian royal family around this same time. When these dissidents experienced retaliation and oppression from the government, some chose to immigrate to North America or Australia.

The paradigmatic representative of this confessional theological approach in this country is that of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod theologian, Francis Pieper. Pieper was averse to any theological method that seeks to base truth on a religious dimension of human experience, as presented by Friedrich Schleiermacher, the father of Protestant Liberalism, instead of scripture. As seen in Pieper, Lutheran orthodoxy favored an objective approach to theology, noting that in this heritage springing from C. F. W. Walther (1811–1887) any salvation that appeals to human response apart from the gospel promise is eschewed. Likewise, this Waltherian heritage has been tilted towards preference for a scholastic method in theology akin to the age of Lutheran Orthodoxy. Such a method is seen in a formal approach to theology that favors Aristotelian deduction.

Nevertheless, in distinction from Pieper's scholastic approach to theology, John Philipp Koehler, a professor of theology in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod in the early twentieth century, offers an alternative orthodox approach to dogmatics that is grounded less in proof-texting and more in exegesis of scriptural narratives in their entirety. An advocate of what came to be known as the "Wauwatosa Theology," Koehler claimed that theology must be done alongside an appreciation for music, history, and the classics. Due to political factors, his leadership would be rejected by his own Wisconsin Synod; nevertheless, aspects of his theology as based on narrative convey a contemporary appeal. At the risk of generalization, for Koehler, dogmatics is to be grounded in exegesis and not exegesis in dogmatics.

As noted above, interest in Luther studies, indicating some differences in

content and style between Luther and Lutheran confessional orthodoxy, increased in the nineteenth century. Particularly the work of Theodosius Harnack (1817–1879) and Julius Köstlin (1826–1902), as well as the appearance of a critical edition of Luther's works, the *Weimarer Ausgabe* starting in 1883, would powerfully impact Luther studies. Karl Holl (1866–1926) was a leading researcher in this Luther Renaissance. He centered much of his theology on discerning Luther's "evangelical breakthrough," particularly in the early 1515 Lectures on Romans. For Holl, Lutheran Orthodoxy unjustifiably separated humanity's being made righteous through faith from God's forensic declaration of sinners to be just. Throughout the twentieth century, Holl's research and that of his students would reshape an entire generation of Luther studies and how this bears on theology.

In spite of confessional renewal, pietism was by no means dead in twentieth-century Lutheranism. Few embodied the goals of this movement better than Ole Hallesby (1879–1961), a professor of theology at the Menighetsfakultetet in Oslo, Norway. Hallesby's theology of prayer had a profound impact on the spirituality of North American Scandinavian-Americans and the entire world for that matter. With roots in nineteenth-century Norwegian revivalism, indebted to Hans Nielsen Hauge (1771–1824) and the Swede Carl Olof Rosenius (1816–1868), Hallesby sought an approach to dogmatic theology which honored human experiential response to the gospel and which led believers to live lives of holiness. While fostering a theologically conservative agenda, Hallesby also devised psychological categories by which to interpret the impact of faith on life. Throughout his career he was opposed to theological liberalism, especially universalism, the view that all will be saved even apart from faith in Christ. Along with other resisters, Hallesby opposed Nazism in Norway.

In the work of Pieper above, we see one form of Neo-Lutheranism, the reassertion of Lutheran identity as a distinct group, with a renewed focus on the confessions, and traditional doctrine and liturgy. This form is repristinating, seeking to present Lutheran teachings in the same way that the classical Orthodox theologians of the seventeenth century did. Another form, that of the Erlangen theology, which sought to mediate Lutheran confessional theology in the modern world, is expressed in the work of Werner Elert (1885–1954). A leading voice of the Erlangen perspective, Elert was a major contributor in retrieving Luther's notions of God as hidden and revealed, and of the law as accusing and the gospel as comforting. For Elert, it is axiomatic that God has two words—command and promise—and not just one word. He adamantly opposed the Barthian supposition that revelation was limited to God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ and argued that instead God is masked throughout all creation. Likewise, Elert saw Lutheran ethics as incompatible with Kant's categorical imperative but he nevertheless configured anthropology in light of Kant's transcendental ego, along with an appreciation for community.

Sharing an anti-Barthian stance with Elert, Paul Althaus (1888–1966) saw God's revelation as not only in the message aligned with Jesus Christ but also in nature and history. Ever an advocate of Luther's two-kingdoms doctrine, Althaus argued that resistance to the government could be justified if it failed to serve its citizens, a position ironed out through his increasing disillusionment with the Nazis. Althaus believed that Elert's opposition to a third use of the law needed revision since it could be misunderstood as antinomian. For Althaus, God's law as command applies to the believer and faith ought to lead to the new obedience.

Hans Joachim Iwand (1899–1960), similar to Elert, was deeply influenced by the Luther renaissance as mediated through the work of Karl Holl. Iwand, in opposition to the Kantian insistence on a free will, argued for a bound will, at least with respect to ultimate matters. That is, we humans are bound to invent and venerate gods/idols for our own security and self-justification. Again, in opposition to Kant, Iwand saw one's identity not as something given but as a gift: we are given ourselves in and through Christ.

The majority of German theologians described in this volume had to confront Nazism in one way or another. Some, like Bonhoeffer, lost their lives in their resistance. A few, such as Elert in the early years of Hitler's regime, could concede the "Aryan Clause," i. e., that pastors serving in the German church should not be of Jewish descent. Nevertheless, even Elert condemned the *Deutsche Christen*, those Protestants who fully embraced Hitler as *der Führer*. In this volume Richard Bliese takes a new look at Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), seeing him as a Lutheran confessor. In this perspective, Bonhoeffer as a martyr, poet, or prisoner is best understood from the communal praxis implied by his confessional stance against the corrupt governmental power of his time.

Two of the theologians presented in this volume are especially to be singled out for their work in ecumenism. First, Hermann Sasse (1895–1976) ever had an eye for cooperation and was involved in ecumenical dialogues. However, for Sasse, true ecumenism could never entail compromise of the truth—as it is discerned from the ancient church fathers or the Lutheran confessions. His work lends itself to a distinctively pastoral and churchly approach to theology. Second, Edmund Schlink (1903–1984), in addition to being a major historian of the Lutheran confessions, distinguished himself as one of the twentieth century's most important ecumenical theologians. Nevertheless he saw the Lutheran confessions as the basis by which to establish unity. Such unity is fostered through critical dialogue between and among confessional traditions.

In the work of Ernst Käsemann (1906–1998) we see a Lutheran exegete at work. In response to Bultmann, Käsemann initiated the new quest for the historical Jesus since he found the agnostic disparity between a historical Jesus and a biblical Christ as unacceptable. Likewise, he affirmed that since the New Testament indeed has conflicting trends and voices within it, we are free to affirm justification by faith alone as the canon within the canon even if this

stymies ecumenical ideals. For Käsemann, the doctrine of justification is the constant while a historical-critical approach to reading scripture is a variant, in which various critics will disagree with one another.

Helmut Thielicke (1908–1986) was a Lutheran with an eye to both apologetics and pastoral theology, especially preaching. In his day, Thielicke functioned as a pastor's theologian, at least for many American Lutherans. His relevance remains apparent in several respects. First, his approach to ethics is one liberated from the need to justify the self since we are free to live ethically from forgiveness in Christ. Likewise, Thielicke established an apologetic strategy to theology which challenged a Cartesian or anthropological standpoint (as seen in Lessing, Schleiermacher, and Bultmann) and argued for a non-Cartesian approach which does not reprivatize past achievements but conveys the gospel address in a contemporary idiom. Finally, for Thielicke, Bultmann's program of demythologization is proven to be inadequate since the scriptures themselves historicize myth.

Gustaf Wingren (1910–2000) wanted to make it clear that Lutheranism cannot be limited to the focus of an "I-Thou" relationship between the believer and God. The doctrine of justification bears not only on how individual sinners are reconciled with God, but also opens them to the place in creation and the church. Wingren offers a powerful reading of the Lutheran tradition through the lens of the early theologian Irenaeus. In this perspective, Lutheranism can no longer be seen as a "Unitarianism of the second article of the creed." Instead, it is open to creation as gift and task. Humans are not merely redeemed from the power and guilt of sin but are also liberated for engagement in life and community, genuinely worldly tasks. Ultimately God is at work perfecting creation.

Last but not least, Gerhard Ebeling's (1912–2001) approach to Lutheran theology can be described as existentialist. He sought a Luther who transcended substance ontology and redefined reality in terms of relationships. The word which justifies humanity should be described as a "word event," a happening akin to a vertical, mathematical point which however has horizontal dimensions, and alters and redefines human nature, leading it to a cruciform reality of service. The word (*Wort*) evokes responsibility (*antwort*) in and for the world.

Moving Forward by Moving Back

What issues relevant for today's theologian surface from a reading of these specific twentieth-century Lutheran theologians? It seems to me at least four important matters arise.

First, there is no question that these theologians deal with a tension of wanting to mediate the Lutheran confessional heritage into the modern world

without accommodating it to contemporary society. All too often theologians perceive that they must accommodate theology to the modern world—allow that world to set the parameters for theology—or theology will grow irrelevant and fail to address contemporary concerns. The tradeoff of accommodation to the modern world is the ability of theology to stay faithful to its heritage or tradition. The problem with such accommodation can be illustrated with how Bonhoeffer, Hallesby, Käsemann, and others responded to Nazism. It is clear for these thinkers that accommodating to Nazism would sell out the faith! While some of our theologians employ language from secular philosophy—on occasion Elert borrows Kantian phraseology as an explanatory tool while Ebeling appeals to aspects of Existentialism—overall, their thinking is grounded not in an *a priori* commitment to a specific philosophy or worldview but instead to scripture and the confessions. Nevertheless, the interchange between mediation and accommodation has become a fixture in theological inquiry and method and we can see it played out in this selection of thinkers. It raises then the question of where we need to stand today.

Second, most of our theologians have been influenced by a renewal of Luther Studies. For some, this fact guarantees the relevance and vibrancy of these thinkers. In contrast, others will deplore the lack of ecumenical sensitivity that these theologians may seem to foster (other than Schlink). Which way for Lutheranism? Should Lutheran theology move outside a parochial, confessional ghetto and not only engage ecumenism with Rome, Constantinople, Canterbury, and Geneva, as many member churches of the Lutheran World federation do? Would such engagement tone down its distinctive traits or would it be a way for Lutheranism to reclaim an underlying catholic core? Or instead should it up the ante of its distinctive traits even at the risk of ecumenical insensitivity and promote this uniqueness as a plus in the agora of public affairs and ideas? At stake for many Lutherans would be the status of the gospel as promise, in contra-distinction to the law as command and directive. The gospel as promise is a word that does what it says and says what it does, a word that in fact conveys grace for troubled sinners. In the gospel, sins are forgiven and new life is actually granted in Jesus' name. It would seem that Lutheran ecumenism must be loyal to this latter stance no matter what.

The question of human passivity and activity raised by our theologians merits attention. As seen above, most of our theologians urged action in the face of Nazi oppression. We are grateful for their faithful witness. Nevertheless, modern views of humanity tend to reduce the human to agency: what specifically does any given human do to help usher in a better world, contribute to on-going economic, educational, and political progress? Such secular approaches to human nature reinforce the notion that humanity is the measure of all things. Modern humans are akin to Atlas, carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders. Self-creative to the core, we fail to receive or claim a Sabbath rest.

Perhaps the Lutheran critique that human *poiesis* is only possible because human capacities for making are gifts from God can curtail the conviction that *autopoiesis* (self-making) is at the center of human sensibility. When the story of the world is not centered on us, but on God, then we can see that we do not carry the whole onus of a grand project to perfect ourselves. Instead, we can receive of God's goodness, enjoy and be grateful for life, and seek to serve others in need. The public wellbeing for such a direction would be in finding a non-exploitative approach to life.

Finally, the majority of our theologians are sensitive to distinguishing law from gospel, another hallmark of Lutheran theology. Only this distinction guarantees that the promise will be spoken as promise and not a directive or information. The law-gospel distinction is at the core of Lutheran approaches to theology and proclamation. Recent critique has suggested that this distinction makes Lutheranism to be a "thin" tradition, lacking the richness of two-thousand years of reflection evident in catholic tradition. Is this critique in fact true or is it a ruse? It would seem that law-gospel distinction need not be an alternative to the wider catholic tradition but a compass by which to assess how effective that tradition is at any given point to convey the gospel.

Conclusion

The following essays invite further exploration into each of these thinkers. Readers will find appropriate material within the essays to journey further into each thinker and the specific issues he was addressing. What is the next stage for Lutheran theology? Whatever it might be, it will only be successful to the degree that it takes stock of the theologians found here. They have explored themes raised by the renewal in Luther studies, ecumenism, the modern world, political movements, and the modern philosophies outlined above in Kant, Hegel, Schleiermacher. Pondering the paths these theologians have journeyed will empower us for our work as well.

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David P. Scaer

Francis Pieper (1852 – 1931)

Francis (Franz) August Otto Pieper was born on June 27, 1852, in Carwitz, Pomerania, where his father was mayor. He enrolled in the Gymnasium in Koeslin and received the Abitur in 1870 in Kolberg. In same year he immigrated with his mother and three younger brothers to Wisconsin to join two older brothers. Reinhold, an older brother, later became professor of homiletics and then president at Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois, now in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Younger brother August became a professor at the seminary of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and inaugurated the theological program known as the Wauwatosa theology. Pieper attended Northwestern College of the Wisconsin Synod in Watertown; at graduation, he delivered an address in Latin: “Which characteristics of the German people should be retained in this country and which should be discarded?” When he died in Saint Louis on June 3, 1931, he was arguably the most influential confessional Lutheran theologian in America. His *Christliche Dogmatik*, translated as *Christian Dogmatics*,¹ made his name recognizable by nearly all Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS) pastors.² Publication of the German and English editions was authorized by separate LCMS conventions and so his dogmatics has a near canonical status. In 1931, his

1 *Christian Dogmatics*, 3 vols. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950 – 53) appeared in the order of how the three volumes were numbered. The order of *Die christliche Dogmatik*, 3 vols. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1917 – 1924) was different. Volume two was published first (1917) to coincide with the 400th anniversary of the Reformation. The third volume came next in 1920. In volume one, which was the last to appear (1924), Pieper explained that it was logical the third volume on the means of grace would follow the one on grace. (*Christliche Dogmatik* 1:iv; *Christian Dogmatics* 1:ix.) The LCMS authorized the English translation in observance of its centennial. Theodore Engelder was chosen as the chief editor but died before completion of the second volume. John Theodore Mueller finished the second volume and Walter W.F. Albrecht translated the third volume and indexed the whole work in a fourth volume which appeared in 1953.

2 The continued high regard for Pieper in the LCMS is seen in the current English translation of his lectures *Die lutherische Lehre von der Rechtfertigung* and *Die Evangelische-Lutherische Kirche, die Wahre Kirche Gottes auf Erde* (Saint Louis: Seminary Press, 1916) under the title *The Church and Her Treasure: Lectures on Justification and the True Visible Church*, tr. O. Marc Tanger (Northfield, SD: The Luther Academy, 2007).

influence also continued in *A Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and other States*.³

Pieper's career spanned a critical transition for the Missouri Synod. He joined the faculty of Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, in 1878. The synod's estimated membership then stood at 150,000. Pieper served as synod president from 1899 to 1911, a period of exceptional growth. At his death in 1931, the LCMS had more than a million members, and German had been replaced by English as the primary language. His memory is honored by the Pieper Arch in the seminary's Gothic buildings which were constructed during his presidency.⁴

His early religious education was in a congregation of the Prussian Union created by that country's rulers as an administrative union between Lutherans and Reformed in 1817 and a liturgical union in 1830, but he makes no mention of how this was a factor in his theology. As a student at Concordia Seminary he became the protégé to Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther in whose footsteps he would follow as professor of theology and seminary president and for a time synod president. Although both the German and English editions of his dogmatics appeared in the twentieth century, he really belonged to the nineteenth century. By the time the English *Christian Dogmatics* appeared in the 1950's, seminary professors were paying less attention to him and began to direct students to neo-orthodox and conservative Reformed theologians and biblical scholars. While a need was seen to supplement his *Christian Dogmatics*, they are still found on the shelves of most LCMS pastors. Tributes at his death noted that his theology revolved around the doctrines of grace and Scriptures, but did not analyze his theology or identify the historical influences shaping it. His passing left a gaping hole in the LCMS theology which no one saw himself filling.⁵ Outside of the synod it received scant

3 It was written in German as "Thesen zur kurzen Darlegung der Lehrstellung der Missourisynod," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 2 (1931): 321–36. The English translation appeared in the next issue 2 (1931): 400–16. At the 1959 LCMS convention it was given virtual confessional status. In 1962 this was reevaluated, but it is still regarded as an official LCMS statement of faith.

4 Pieper holds a prominent position in a series of three articles in *Lutheran Forum* by Richard E Koenig: "Church and Tradition in Collision," *LF* 6 (November, 1972): 17–20; "Missouri Turns Moderate: 1938–1965," *LF* 7 (February, 1973): 19–20, 29; and "Conservative Reaction: 1965–69," *LF* 8 (1974): 18–21. They later appeared together under the general title of "What is Behind the Showdown in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod?" n.d. with the title of the first article changed to "The Making of Tradition." Koenig calls the LCMS theology "the Pieper tradition" and "the Pieper Legacy." He was critical of Pieper's theology for rendering the LCMS incapable of consummating fellowship with churches not of its heritage.

5 In the year before he died, Pieper wrote the introduction for the first issue of *Concordia Theological Monthly* 1:1 (1930). In 1931, the year in which he died, the *CTM* contained tributes in his honor. Paul E. Kretzmann wrote the first of these, "Prof. Franz August Otto Pieper, D. Theol." with a three-page bibliography (*CTM* 2: 561–65). Others took note of various aspects of his work. W.H.T. Dau, "Dr. Francis Pieper the Churchman," said that, "Pieper, with his remarkable clarity of perception and his concise and pregnant style, has been the most forceful, eloquent, and convincing champion of the time-honored, Scripturally oriented view of theology that is part of the

attention.⁶ Later LCMS theologians would produce theological treatises, but to date no one has produced another comprehensive dogmatics.⁷ Pieper was so important for the LCMS that the last volume of his dogmatics in English translation appeared over a quarter century after his death. This was accompanied by an index volume of 1025 double-columned pages referencing topics, theologians, and the biblical and confessional sources, showing the depth of Pieper's mind and his theological knowledge. Synod preachers at a loss in interpreting biblical texts often went to Pieper. While he had never written anything resembling a biblical commentary, he had become to many an exegete. Publication of the index volume gave credence to the impression that Pieper's dogmatics was canon for the synod.⁸ With his *Law and Gospel*, C.F.W. Walther had earlier shaped the sermons of the synod's preachers and his *Church and Ministry* had provided the design for its congregational polity, but Pieper was its theologian.⁹ Forty years after his death, some would treat him less kindly.

The Christian Dogmatics

For Pieper the leader among “modern theologians” was F. Schleiermacher whose *Der christliche Glaube (Faith of the Christian Church)* was published one century before Pieper's dogmatics. Names in the *Index* volume show that he was acquainted with theologians from every era, but for him the modern

badge of honor and an heirloom of the Church of the Reformation” (CTM 2:731). John Theodore Mueller wrote “D. Pieper als Prediger” (2:761–762). L. Fuerbringer, in “D. F. Pieper als Theolog” (2:801–807), called him a most important theologian. In a double tribute to Pieper and W. H. T. Dau, who had since died, Theodore Laetsch wrote: “Doctores discriminis legis et evangelii” (2:948–949). Laetsch said that after hearing Pieper lecture one had the sense that “Gott hat mit uns geredet,” “God has spoken with us.” Theodore Engelder in “The Theology of Grace” (2:881–886) noted that gratia universalis and sola gratia were the foci around which Pieper's theology revolved (2:882). “Thus Dr. Pieper gazed into the full glory of the Gospel of grace – and how he loved it. He lived for it. He labored for it” (2:884). Iowa Synod (and later American Lutheran Church) theologian Michael Reu commended him and Walther for making grace central for Lutheran theology. *Kirchliche Zeitschrift* (1930) 55:433.

6 Ironically, those referencing the synod's position often cite John Theodore Mueller's *Christian Dogmatics*, which is actually a one-volume abridgement of Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1934, 1935).

7 The Reverend Rudolph P. F. Ressemeyer, D. D., Pieper's grandson, told me that his grandfather had told his children that his was not the last word on the subjects handled in his dogmatics. This has been largely ignored. In his preface to *What Luther Says*, Ewald Pless wrote that “the [Christian] Dogmatics are as refutable as Scripture itself.” (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House: 1959).

8 Walter W. F. Albrecht, *Index to Christian Dogmatics* by Francis Pieper (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957). The list of theologians cited by Pieper covers almost one hundred double-columned pages (914–1003).

9 Leigh D. Jordahl notes that Pieper's “teacher C. F. W. Walther was more influential in terms of defining Missouri's character. He never, however, produced any full scale systematic theology.” “The Theology of Franz Pieper,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 23 (1971):123, n 16.

world was the nineteenth century. Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics* can still introduce students to classical Lutheranism, with its distinctions between material and formal principles and such Latin phrases as *cur alii alii non* and *crux theologorum*, but that theological world has remained largely unknown to them. Works of lesser quality and more popular in nature have appeared,¹⁰ but Pieper's dogmatics could not be replaced. Without a recognized theologian to succeed him, biblical scholars replaced systematicians in prominence.¹¹

Although Pieper's theology was seen by some to center on biblical authority and inerrancy, its chief topics were actually Christology and grace as they undergirded justification by faith. Pietism, replacing justification with sanctification as the theological center, was short-lived, but made inroads among the people and prepared the way for the rationalist Enlightenment which not only made light of denominational differences, but also questioned the uniqueness of Christianity. Christianity was more about morality than doctrine and might be considered a superior but not exclusive religious expression. Pieper's reaction to rationalism surfaces throughout his dogmatics especially in "Christianity the Absolute Religion," a prominent portion of the prolegomena.¹² He also responds to Schleiermacher, who combined the pietism of his youth with his university acquired rationalist disregard for the supernatural to posit the collective consciousness of the Christian community as the source of religious truth. In Pieper's eyes, Schleiermacher was a pantheist.¹³ Some theologians attempted an amalgam between classical Lutheran theology and Schleiermacher to create what they called "the Christian self-consciousness" or "the regenerated I" as the source of doctrine. In the Erlangen theologians, named for the German university where some taught,¹⁴ Pieper found allies on some issues, but faulted them for not distancing themselves from Schleiermacher and rationalist biblical criticism.¹⁵ Pieper dubbed it Ego theology or *Ichtheologie* and insisted that Scripture was the only source of Christian theology. Emerging alongside the Erlangen theology was repristination theology, determined to revive classical Lutheran theology. Pieper saw himself in this group, but he was not part of the vanguard which included Ludwig Claus Harms, Wilhelm Löhe, Friedrich

10 To celebrate the synod's centennial, a collection of doctrinal essays by different authors, each devoted to one locus, was published under the title of *The Abiding Word* (3 vols.; Saint Louis: Concordia, 1947).

11 Richard D. LaBore, "Traditions and transitions: a study of the leadership of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod during a decade of theological change, 1960–1969" (Ph.D. diss.: Saint Louis: Saint Louis University, 1980), 254.

12 *Christian Dogmatics* 1:34–40. See also his 1926 essay, "The Christian Religion in Its Relation to other Religions."

13 *Christian Dogmatics* 2:6, 267.

14 *Christian Dogmatics* 1:114–15. Among the Erlangen theologians were Frank, Ihmels, Hoefling, Luthardt, Stephan Horst, Thomasius, and Heinrich Schmid.

15 *Christian Dogmatics* 1:30–31. Pieper holds that biblical criticism results in denying the Bible's authority which he correlates with the denial of vicarious satisfaction.

Adolf Philippi and Walther.¹⁶ With the exception of Philippi, the German theologians do not refer to Pieper, although he knows them well.¹⁷ Whatever differences their followers had, confessional Lutheranism was institutionalized in newly formed synods in Germany, America and Australia. Pieper was the bridge between LCMS's German and English eras and he stood between German liberalism on one side and American Protestantism on the other which was a combination of Calvinism and Arminianism. He repudiated nineteenth-century biblical criticism, but he did not address its methods.¹⁸ Foundational for Pieper were the Lutheran Confessions and theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth century.

Since chapters of his *Dogmatics* were transcriptions of his classroom lectures, their style is often conversational. Topics or loci are not evenly proportioned. Whereas only two pages are devoted to infant baptism, approximately two hundred are given to the means of grace and an equal number to Christology.¹⁹ Refuting false views takes up more space than setting forth his position. He refutes those who find no evidence for the Trinity in the Old Testament, but does not have a locus on this doctrine in the New Testament. Typically he quotes theologians at length and then refutes them with biblical and confessional references. The Reformed doctrines of grace and aspects of their Christology must be refuted and thus that section ends with a "Summary Critique of Reformed Christology."²⁰ Even in Pieper's day the real Christological question was not the communication of attributes, but the quest for the historical Jesus. His chief concern was setting forth classical Lutheran Christology over against Reformed views. In America, where the Baptists constituted a significant part of the population and were influential in shaping Protestant culture then as today, it has to be asked whether more should have been devoted to infant baptism.

Christology leads to justification, and any doctrinal error especially on

16 Pieper describes the revival of confessional Lutheranism in 1820s and 30s as the "awakening" and lists Franz Delitzsch and Ernst Sartorius as its representatives. He notes that it took place one hundred years before he wrote the preface to the first volume of his *Christliche Dogmatik* in 1924 (*Christian Dogmatics* 1:x). He here makes no mention of Wilhelm Löhe who in sending his students as pastors to America was as much responsible for establishing the LCMS as was Walther. Pieper has only negative comments about Löhe's doctrines of the church and ministry (*Christian Dogmatics* 3:447–49). He took exception to Löhe's teaching that the presbyters or ministers were appointed entirely by apostolic authority (3:453).

17 *Christian Dogmatics* 1:224. Pieper notes that Philippi in the third edition of his *Die kirchliche Dogmatik* (1883) had brought his position around to Pieper's.

18 Rather than analyzing a particular method, Pieper lumps them together and dismisses them, since they conflict with biblical infallibility. Pieper took the title of Adolph von Harnack's *Wesen des Christentums* (1900), the high point of nineteenth-century liberalism, for his own essay to the synod's 1902 convention (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1903). Agnostic biblical criticism reached its nadir with David Friedrich Strauss's *Jesus*. Pieper refers to him only through secondary sources (1:309; 497).

19 *Christian Dogmatics* 3:305–30; 56–279; 3:104–291.

20 *Christian Dogmatics* 2:271–79.

justification was an affront to the doctrine of Christ. Since Roman Catholicism places works in its doctrine of justification, the pope is seen as the Antichrist.²¹ Theology is one cloth and a tear on one corner can rip the entire garment. True Christology also required an inerrant and infallible Bible.²² Pieper did not understand theology as an answer to philosophical issues, as revisionist theologians do, and he made no attempt to incorporate them into his program. His presentation of the loci typically begins with a statement and repudiation of the adversaries' positions. Then he presents his own, but often his position must be sifted from his negative polemics. Pieper can cite his opponents' opinions in support of his own arguments, but often without analyzing how they arrived at their conclusions.²³

Pieper wrote for both lay and pastoral readers and his convention essays especially reflect his understanding that theology was both an academic and a practical discipline. Theologians had to be ready to serve and even to suffer for their theology.²⁴ Serving as seminary professor and president and then as synod president (1899–1911) and as editor of the seminary's theological journal was physically taxing. The predestination controversy had led to the withdrawal of the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, known as the Norwegian Synod, from the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference. For his views on election, Pieper had to defend himself against the charge of Calvinism, as had Walther before him. Ironically, in Germany Lutheran opposition to Calvin's doctrines on Christ and the Lord's Supper was one reason for the emigration to America and the founding of the LCMS. Pieper's doctrine of election does have in common with the Reformed position the conviction that God and not the believer is cause of salvation; however, election is not a subcategory under divine sovereignty or providence, as in classical Reformed theology. It is concomitant to the doctrine of grace and belongs to Christ's work. Fittingly, Pieper places election at the conclusion of

21 *Christian Dogmatics* 2:552–55. Pieper's conviction that the pope is the Antichrist plays a prominent role throughout his dogmatics. See Index IV:26–28.

22 The following assessment of Pieper's theology was made at his death by Ludwig Fuerbringer, who succeeded him as seminary president. "Without any hesitation or doubt he committed himself to the highest principle of theology, that the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God, infallible and without error in matters of doctrine and life, and the so called side issues in historical, archaeological, geographical, astronomical and other things, the absolute and only source and norm of all doctrine." *Concordia Theological Monthly* 2 (1931): 724. (Translation by the present author.) Pieper held to the six-day creation, but absent in his dogmatics is a theology of creation in the classical sense (*Christian Dogmatics* 1:467–80).

23 For example, to demonstrate that the congregation is the source of all church authority he cites Karl Hase, who was indebted to rationalism and Schleiermacher. Pieper is seemingly unaware that Hase used the same arguments to deny that the office of the ministry was divinely instituted, a doctrine which Pieper firmly believed and which is given extensive treatment in his dogmatics (3: 443–449, 458 f.). The ministry could be exercised only by pastors but ultimately belonged to the *una sancta* and could only be given by congregations.

24 *Christian Dogmatics* 1:106–10.

his dogmatics and not at the beginning. Through it God comforts the sinner and there is no predestination to damnation.²⁵

In 1885 he took up the implication of election for the Christian life in his essay “The Certainty of Our Salvation Viewed in its Importance for Spiritual Life.” Again in 1928 he took up the subject in “How May a Christian Become Certain of His Eternal Election.” Election or predestination was a facet of salvation by grace alone and not strictly speaking a separate doctrine.²⁶ At the heart of the Synodical Conference controversy was the phrase *intuitu fidei*. It was used by the classical Lutheran theologians to mean that God in eternity elected those whom he knew would believe and so faith became in a sense a cause of salvation.²⁷ But Pieper saw any contribution believers made to their conversion as synergism, the distinguishing doctrine of Arminianism. This was denial of the *sola gratia*. For Pieper the doctrines of grace and election complemented each other and so could be discussed separately or together.²⁸ By placing election near the end of volume three, Pieper advanced his theological discussion of grace in volume two. The topic reappears in his *prolegomena*, volume one but the last to be printed, where it is the standard by which true and false religions and theologies can be identified.²⁹ Since he rejects any form of cooperation for salvation as synergism, he does not attempt to resolve the apparent contradiction between universal grace (*gratia universalis*) and salvation by grace alone (*sola gratia*). Calvinists correctly held to the *sola gratia*, but by denying universal grace, believers could doubt their salvation. Arminians correctly held to universal grace, but their denial of grace alone and election made man a source or cause of his own salvation. For Pieper the grace by which all men were saved was the same grace which was the cause of salvation for those who were ultimately saved. He could not resolve the tension of these two propositions and so they were for him the *crux theologorum*, a cross burdening theologians, an insoluble divine riddle. Favoring one over the other, he would fall into either the Arminian error, for whom salvation depended on human choice, or the Calvinist error of a limited atonement. At stake for Pieper was not only justification, but also Christ’s incarnation and atonement; thus both Arminianism and Calvinism were affronts to the doctrine of Christ.

Just as the doctrine of grace is the standard for theology, so the Scriptures alone are the only source of theology. *Quod non est biblicum, non est theologicum*. “What was not Biblical was not theological.”³⁰ Pieper’s commit-

25 *Christian Dogmatics* 3:473–506.

26 “According to Scripture, the doctrine of election is not the central article to which the doctrine of grace stands in subsidiary relation, but it occupies an auxiliary position to the doctrine of grace (*Christian Dogmatics* 2:417). Election “serves to corroborate the *sola gratia*. . . .” (3:473).

27 *Christian Dogmatics* 3:481; 501–3.

28 *Christian Dogmatics* 3:473.

29 *Christian Dogmatics* 1:9–33.

30 *Christian Dogmatics* 1:52.

ment to biblical authority was evident in not resolving the tension between passages supporting grace alone and those supporting universal grace. This belief is built on a detailed doctrine of verbal inspiration which does not take into account the historical origins of the separate biblical books.³¹ Confessional references support the biblical arguments.³² Still, Pieper's theological method rests not merely on biblical and confessional citations, but also on a carefully worked out doctrine of the incarnation which is found to be inadequate in Reformed theology. The *extra Calvinisticum*, the code phrase for Reformed position, allowed for only a partial incarnation of the Son of God in the person of Jesus. Thus their doctrine of a limited atonement was determined not only by their doctrine of election, but by a Christology which could not affirm that Jesus possesses the entire deity. Arminians were right about universal grace, but by placing a cause of salvation in man nullified salvation by grace alone and the atonement.

In Pieper's dogmatics Christology was the foremost topic and the foundation of justification. It was the substance of all doctrines.³³ His markedly polemical theology was for the sake of Christ. Calvinism and Arminianism are not simply contrary to the Bible, but are in fact attacks on Christ's person and work. Pieper's determination to keep his Christology intact accounts for his refusal to resolve the dilemma of *cur alii alii non*, "why some [are saved] and others not?"³⁴ Luther was led to his Reformation theology through concern over his own salvation. Pieper's concern was not for his own salvation, but for that of others. His dilemma so cut to the heart of his existence that it appears in his prolegomena and surfaces throughout his dogmatics.³⁵ The doctrine of universal grace seemed to contradict the view that anyone would be damned.

On Church and Fellowship

The doctrine of Christ surpasses all doctrines and provided them with their content, but for external church unity a specific agreement had to be spelled

31 Pieper opposed the then popular views that inspiration applied to the Scripture's content (*Realinspiration*), and to the writers (*Personalinspiration*), but not to the texts. *Christian Dogmatics* 1:217–18.

32 *Christian Dogmatics* 2:49–51.

33 Koenig faults Pieper for devoting 211 pages to the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures and only 66 to justification ("The Making of Tradition"). He fails to consider that justification for Pieper was a subsidiary to Christology to which Pieper devotes 339 pages (*Christian Dogmatics* 2:55–394) or that his discussion of election (3:473–503) is really one on justification.

34 Other Latin phrases used to express the dilemma were *Cur non omnes?* (Why [are] not all [saved]?) and *Cur alii prae aliis?* (Why some [are chosen] over others?). *Christian Dogmatics* 3:502.

35 *Christian Dogmatics* 1:28–34. Pieper rejects the *gratia particularis* of the Calvinists.

out. Without this there was no church unity. Pieper set forth his position in his 1888 essay, “The Unity of Faith.” Those who did not accept the Lutheran doctrines were conscious of their errors and that they had rejected clear biblical statements.³⁶ To hold this position, he assumes the clarity of the Scriptures, with some sections having a translucence which others do not. The clearer sections are called *sedes doctrinae*, literally “seats of doctrine,” the proof passages. These verses constitute an operative canon for interpreting the less clear passages and for doing theology.³⁷ Although the LCMS does not require agreement in exegetical interpretation for doctrinal agreement,³⁸ in practice it often follows Pieper’s method in requiring agreement on the *sedes doctrinae* that in doing theology these passages have a determinative role.³⁹ They serve as a canon within the canon. Pieper was neither a fundamentalist nor influenced by that movement but like them he cited biblical passages without attention to their historical circumstances.⁴⁰ His doctrine of verbal inspiration precluded a historical study of the Scripture, since it would presuppose a progressive view of revelation.⁴¹

In his 1889 essay, “The Difference between Orthodox and Heterodox Churches,” Pieper applied his principles of external fellowship to individual Christians: they must avoid churches that do not teach the truth and join those that do. Not permitted are receiving communion and serving as baptismal sponsors in false churches. Thirty years later, in “The Ecumenical Character of the Lutheran Church in Doctrine and Practice” (1919), he takes another tack to show that those who differ with Lutherans or belong to other churches can be included in the *una sancta* and so be saved. In spite of the doctrinal errors of non-Lutheran churches, those in them who hold to correct biblical interpretations are really Lutherans. He does not use the argument of the Augsburg Confession that Lutherans are the true Catholics, but the reverse,

36 “From Pieper’s writings it is obvious that he assumed the Missouri Synod was in possession of the truth in all its purity and were passing it on for the benefit of future generations.” Richard Koenig, “The Making of Tradition,” 20.

37 *Christian Dogmatics* 1:362. Koenig slightly overstates the case that for Pieper the Bible was from free “all ambiguity or uncertainty.” “The Making of Tradition,” 20. In setting up the category of *sedes doctrinae* Pieper acknowledges that some passages have difficulties in interpretation that others do not.

38 So *A Brief Statement*, “The [confessional] obligation does not extend to historical statements, ‘purely exegetical questions,’ and other matters not belonging to the doctrinal content of the symbols. All doctrines of the symbols are based on clear statements of Scripture.” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 2 (1931): 416.

39 *Christian Dogmatics* 1:201 – 02. Pieper’s method did provide a damper on biblical studies in the LCMS. The LCMS climate has changed and his interpretations are not above challenge.

40 Jordahl, “The Theology of Franz Pieper,” 130 – 32. Jordahl notes that for Pieper, “Every part of the Bible is essentially on the same level. No distinctions are made between a passage in Genesis, Isaiah, or John. Historical and literary context is irrelevant. The resurrection of the Lord, for instance, is already taught in Genesis” (131).

41 Jordahl, “The Theology of Franz Pieper,” 131. With the introduction of historical methods into the LCMS in the 1950s and 1960s, a clash with Pieper’s world was unavoidable.

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This collection of essays examines important twentieth-century Lutheran theologians, including European and North American voices. Each essay provides an overview of the life and thought of important confessional Lutherans who shaped theology with an ecumenical, world-wide impact. The focus here is on earlier twentieth-century figures. The essays composed over the last five years were initiated by Lutheran Quarterly in order to assess our recent past as we move into a new millennium. The goal of each author, each a leading theologian, has been to describe each thinker's life and vocation and how each thinker's work continues to impact theology today.

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