

meaning, and leadership in the face of impending crisis. What do they find? More often than not, they will be subjected to a glut of feel-good praise choruses, guitars and drums, and pithy sermons on anything but the appointed text for the day—not to mention such Christian symbols as “God Bless America” and prayers that amount to: “Lord, keep us steadfast while the U.S. military bombs Afghanistan back into the stone age.” What they will not find (in most cases) is the hope of the Gospel offered through Word and Sacrament. Nor, by and large, will they learn about the *significance* of Christ’s Incarnation (a point of particular importance in the face of Islam), Christ’s Cross (which brings up the nasty subject of what put Him there), His Resurrection (the basis of all Christian hope), or His Ascension (which points to His present reign and His future return as Judge of the quick and the dead).

Why not? After all, these are not complex points of esoteric dogma: They make up what C.S. Lewis calls “mere Christianity”—that which is common to all Christian denominations. There is, to be sure, a core of truth that we can call “mere Christianity.” However, as the Oxford don points out, there is no such thing as a “mere Christian.” Human beings are complex creations of God, made up of one or several ethnic backgrounds, racial traits, regional and local identities.

Furthermore, there is no such thing as a “mere Christian church,” devoid of a history of theological conflict over fine points of doctrine and existing apart from a real community of people who share familial and ethnic ties and tradition. “Mere Christianity” exists in the foggy realm of ideas; real people must encounter mere Christianity in real churches that preserve real, historic traditions. Attempts to create mere Christian churches—such as the many evangelical or “nondenominational” sects—eventually default into one of the convoluted traditions that are mostly Anabaptist or Pentecostal. Bereft of any coherent heritage, these groups experience high turnover and quickly degenerate into dog-and-pony shows.

These nondenominational, big pink churches now surround our American cities, slapped up overnight next to the Wal-Marts and mini- and maxi-malls. But just as quickly, our traditional churches within our crumbling cities are being spray-painted and converted into little pink churches for you and me. It is nearly impossible to find Lutheran churches, for example, that even stick to the new hymnal, with its tame liturgy—let alone the old one full of “archaisms.” Try to find a Catholic church where there is no guitar mass, let alone a parish that celebrates the *Tridentine* one. Good luck locating a Presbyterian church where you will hear from the Westminster Confession instead of from a Ned Flanders clone who bears the title of “Drama Team Pastor.”

Experts offer any number of explanations as to why American churches have lost their nerve, all of which contain a nugget of truth. Some Protestants blame Romanizing tendencies in the churches, some Catholics blame Protestant individualism; some lament a loss of transcendence, others, a loss of immanence. Some see latent gnosticism, the New Age movement, secular humanism, modernism, or postmodernism at the source of the problem. Jack Van Impe blames the European Union. But at the root of all these tendencies is a common factor: American churches are beginning to look much the same, the result of a simultaneous and collective loss of identity.

Lutherans, Catholics, Presbyterians, Episcopalians—clergy and laity—have capitulated to the great homogenizing force

that is America. Every aspect of their lives (theological confessions, not to mention ethnicity, culture, place), they have let erode into the American sea. Once this erosion occurs, “mere Christianity”—that deposit of faith that is guarded at the core—is free to float away, as well.

With this loss of identity comes a loss of nerve, precisely because nerve is a function of identity. Bold defiance of an enemy can only come from someone who clearly understands who his enemy is. In order to know who your enemy is, you must know yourself. That means discovering and engaging your own tradition, which is precisely the opposite of the impulse of every major Christian denomination in America.

Recent examples abound. In the immediate aftermath of the World Trade Center bombing on September 11, a nationally televised “prayer service” bore witness to the deracination and related lack of nerve of American churches. The Reverend Oprah Winfrey presided over the solemn event, during which, according to the AP,

representatives of New York’s broad spectrum of faiths took the field of Yankee Stadium . . . “We need faith, wisdom and strength of soul,” said New York’s Roman Catholic archbishop.

The service—billed as “A Prayer for America”—mixed solemn words with patriotic and inspirational songs, culminating in Lee Greenwood’s rendition of “God Bless the USA.” The crowd waved their flags, sang along and shouted “USA! USA” at its close.

Still, said the Rev. David Benke, president of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod’s Atlantic District, it was a day when “the field of dreams turned into God’s house of prayer.”

Despite the presence of the Reverend Benke, no one was singing “preserve us from the murder of the Turk.” After all, as the AP reported, the event progressed as “one after another, members of the clergy—Jews, Roman Catholics, Muslims, Hindus, Protestants, Sikhs, Greek Orthodox—stepped up to offer prayers.” Where was the Reverend Benke’s nerve when “the crowd also rose to its feet when Imam Izak-El M. Pasha pleaded, ‘Do not allow the ignorance of people to have you attack your good neighbors. We are Muslims, but we are Americans’?”

Of course, if a Lutheran pastor fails to understand why he should not participate in a joint prayer service with a Roman Catholic bishop, we should not be surprised when he offers prayers alongside an Islamic Imam. Ain’t that America?

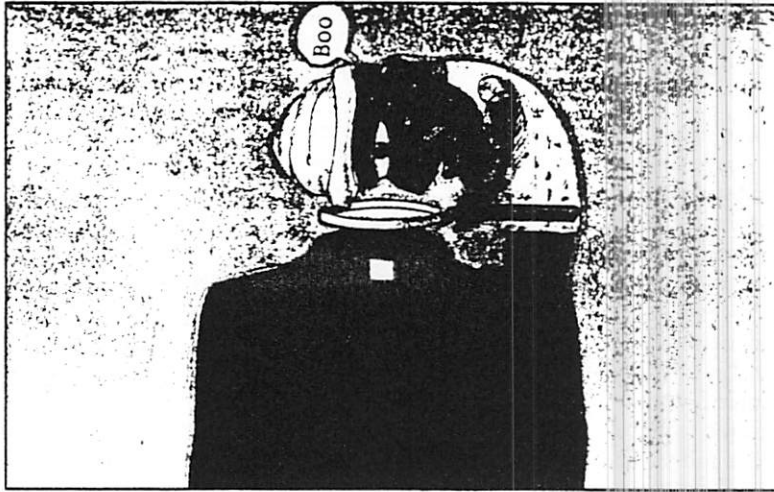
In recent years, Missouri-Synod Lutherans have regarded Concordia Theological Seminary in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, as our conservative seminary. One of the featured speakers for the seminary’s theological symposium, held in January, was Fr. Richard John Neuhaus. Neuhaus is, among other things, a former Missouri Synod pastor who betrayed his vows and defected, first, to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and, then, to the Roman Catholic Church. After achieving fame for doing so, he has spearheaded such ecumenist ventures as “Evangelicals and Catholics Together,” a meeting of American evangelical and Catholic celebrities that in 1997, produced a document called “The Gift of Salvation.” The signatories concluded that

As Evangelicals who thank God for the heritage of the

Little Pink Churches for You and Me

Ain't That America

by Aaron D. Wolf



For pietist Lutheran pastors in America, it was an embarrassment that would not go away. Since the Reformation, it had always been one of the people's favorite hymns, penned by Martin Luther himself—second only to “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” Written in 1541, “Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Thy Word” had been an anthem—sometimes even a battle cry—during the Thirty Years War. But the pietists' goal—to transform Lutheranism from what they perceived to be the victim of “dead orthodoxy” to a religion of inner feelings, more in line with American evangelicalism—would be thwarted if the common folks in the pews sang militant songs rooted in the past.

Fortunately, in the late 19th century, British proto-feminist Catherine Winkworth set about the task of translating the old Lutheran standards into tamer English versions. By doing away with the German *and* toning down the words, Winkworth ensured that generations to come would forget both the culture and theology that had shaped their identity as Lutherans.

Lord, keep us steadfast in Thy Word
Curb those who feign by craft and sword
To wrest the Kingdom from Thy Son
And set at naught all He hath done.

When Luther wrote “*Erhalt uns, Herr, bei deinem Wort*,” he had not been vague about those who “feign by craft and sword.” He had named names.

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Lord, preserve us steadfast in Thy Word
From the murder of the pope and the Turk
Who from Christ Jesus, Thine only Son
Would wrest from Him His glorious Throne.

In Luther's assessment, the Turk was the physical enemy of Christendom, and the pope, its spiritual foe. Both embodied the spirit of Antichrist: one, by setting himself up in the Temple and proclaiming himself to be Christ's vicar; the other, by assaulting the people and places of Christendom. Likewise, in the eyes of the Catholic Church (according to Pope Leo X's bull *Exsurge Domine*), Luther was the “wild boar” from the Black Forest, running amok in the vineyard of the Lord, worthy of excommunication, if not death.

For today's churchgoers who live in John Mellencamp's “little pink houses,” every stanza of Western Christianity—Lutheran, Catholic, Presbyterian, Baptist—has been translated into a tame English version. Even words like “craft” and “sword” seem out of place among “conservative” Lutherans of the Missouri Synod, where the only real enemy seems to be irrelevant language—words like “the murder of the pope and the Turk.” Parishioners are confused by such references, especially since they have no idea why Luther might have considered the pope to be a spiritual murderer, and even now, in the face of terrorist attacks from the world's great “religion of peace,” “Turkish murder” sounds like what you might do on the night before Thanksgiving.

American churches have lost their nerve at a time when people seem to be flocking to them *en masse*, looking for solace,

Reformation and affirm with conviction its classic confessions, as Catholics who are conscientiously faithful to the teaching of the Catholic Church, and as disciples together of the Lord Jesus Christ who recognize our debt to our Christian forebears and our obligations to our contemporaries and those who will come after us, we affirm our unity in the Gospel that we have here professed.

Had the evangelicals decided that justification was no longer by faith alone? That it was now, as Catholics confess, by "faith working in love"? Or had the Catholics capitulated, having been persuaded that baptized believers are, as Luther taught, *simul justus et peccator*? No: The signatories merely agreed on slippery, vague language that could be read differently by both groups.

In justification we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, through whom the love of God is poured forth into our hearts (Romans 5:5). The grace of Christ and the gift of the Spirit received through faith (Galatians 3:14) are experienced and expressed in diverse ways by different Christians and in different Christian traditions . . .

Evangelicals and Catholics, it would seem, are no longer in disagreement on the most fundamental aspects of salvation, but instead, simply espouse different (but equally true) versions of the "fullness of God's saving truth." Thus, there is no longer any need for either group to proselytize the other, since "We must not allow our witness as Christians to be compromised by . . . needlessly divisive disputes."

Of course, a few minor differences still remain.

Among such questions are these: the meaning of baptismal regeneration, the Eucharist, and sacramental grace; the historic uses of the language of justification as it relates to imputed and transformative righteousness; the normative status of justification in relation to all Christian doctrine; the assertion that while justification is by faith alone, the faith that receives salvation is never alone; diverse understandings of merit, reward, purgatory, and indulgences; Marian devotion and the assistance of the saints in the life of salvation; and the possibility of salvation for those who have not been evangelized.

I polled several hundred Lutheran laymen and pastors, asking "Why in the world would Ft. Wayne invite Neuhaus . . . to deliver what is being dubbed 'A Pilgrim's Report'—and in front of a bunch of seminary students?" I received a lone reply from a conservative Lutheran pastor who had left the Missouri Synod precisely because of what he perceived to be a loss of identity. He said, simply, "respectability." "That's why Neuhaus left Missouri in the first place. And now that he's a celebrity, that's why Missouri wants him back—even if just for an evening: They want respectability, too."

Lutherans and Catholics especially have been working overtime to white-out the nasty parts of their respective traditions—the Augsburg Confession and the Council of Trent—that anathematize each other. In 1999—on October 31, no less—members of the Lutheran World Federation and Pope John Paul II's council on Lutheran-Catholic dialogue signed the "Joint Declaration on Justification," which, according to Neuhaus' *First Things* magazine, stated that the historic con-

flicts between Lutheran and Catholic soteriology amount to "two [different] languages of salvation." As Fr. Avery Dulles wrote in the December 1999 issue of *First Things*:

What seems to be surfacing is a willingness to acknowledge that we have here two systems that have to be taken holistically. Both take their departure from the Scriptures, the creeds, and early tradition. But they filter the data through different thought-forms, or languages.

The Catholic thought-form, as expressed at Trent, is Scholastic, and heavily indebted to Greek metaphysics. The Lutheran thought-form is more existential, personalistic, or, as some prefer to say, relational. The Scholastics adopt a contemplative point of view, seeking explanation. Luther and his followers, adopting a confessional posture, seek to address God and give an account of themselves before God. In that framework all the terms take on a different hue. For a Lutheran to say that we are merely passive in receiving justification, that we are justified by faith alone, that justification is an imputation of the righteousness of Christ, that the justified continue to be sinners, that concupiscence is sin, that God's law accuses us of our guilt, and that eternal life is never merited—all these statements are possible and necessary in the Lutheran system. These statements find strong resonances in the Catholic literature of proclamation and spirituality.

He concluded by saying that

In view of [our] shared heritage of faith, we are confident that our doctrinal formulations, currently expressed in different idioms, can in the end be reconciled. Our readiness to declare the nonapplicability of the sixteenth-century condemnations on justification is based on this conviction.

There will be no passion for the truth—no nerve—in the hearts of Christians in American churches, unless Lutherans, Catholics, Presbyterians, Baptists, etc., rediscover their own identities. Until that happens, joint campaigns of resistance against common enemies such as militant Islam will also lack nerve, and probably will not even be mounted. That goes for efforts to restore the civilization of Christendom as well.

The best we can do is tell the truth and encourage real people to resist homogenization. But there can be no such thing as an "identity movement" that transcends unique people and places. We cannot simply write or speak about the loss of nerve and thereby transform the homogeneous "American church" back into something that has depth and guts. Reinvigorating the nerve of American churches by rediscovering identity requires real work, in the home and in the parish, before it can affect a denomination. It requires fathers to catechize their children, parishioners to resist whenever they hear "God Bless America" in church or see the inevitable announcement in the bulletin that the church is planning to add a little pink rock 'n' roll worship service, and pastors to express outrage whenever their superiors sign off on obfuscatory, ecumenist documents. For Lutherans, it may mean retranslating Luther's old hymn or learning the German version. Each of us must sacrifice the dream of "respectability" for which so many "conservative" leaders lust. As our Lord said, "They have their reward" (Matthew 6:2).