

# The LUTHERAN CLARION



Lutheran Concerns Association  
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## Chief Issues in the LCMS by Decade

*Editor's note: The list of issues below that the LCMS has faced over the years will serve as helpful background for delegates and other participants during the 2019 LCMS Convention in Tampa, FL, July 21-25, 2019. As readers will quickly see, several of the same concerns and conflicts cross from one decade to the next and do not get resolved.*

**2010-2019:** Partial resolution of unresolved conflicts from prior decades through the synodical "Koinonia Project." Encroachments on religious liberty in the civil realm, due to the Health and Human Services decision of the Affordable Care Act and due to other cases related to LGBT rights. Conflict over proper ecclesiastical and doctrinal supervision, as illustrated by the Matthew Becker case. This serious problem, which threatens the doctrinal unity of the synod, was addressed by the Commission on Constitutional Matters 2016 Opinion #16-2791 and by 2016 Resolution 12-14.

Concerns about the Lutheran identity of Missouri Synod universities, which were addressed by 2016 Resolutions 7-01A, 7-02B, and 7-03A.

Concerns about licensed lay deacons and other lay ministry, which were addressed by 2016 Resolutions 6-02, 6-03, 13-01A, and 13-02A.

Concerns were expressed about methods of textual criticism and about the acceptance of theistic evolution in our universities and seminaries.

Change in focus in international missions, so that "Lutheran missions lead to Lutheran churches."

Change in focus in charitable work both domestically and internationally, so that "Mercy work is located with Word and Sacrament ministry."

**2000-2010:** Conflict over participation of Atlantic District President David Benke in a "civil-religious event" at Yankee Stadium. This issue was addressed by the 2004 CTCR document "Guidelines for Participation in Civic Events," adopted in 2004 Resolution 3-06A. A fuller discussion of these issues was published in: David Adams and Ken Schurb, eds., *The Anonymous God: The Church Confronts Civil Religion and American Society* (CPH, 2004).

A fuller discussion of the issue of women serving in Word and Sacrament ministry was published in: Matthew Harrison and John Pless, eds., *Women Pastors? The Ordination of Women in Biblical Lutheran Perspective* (CPH, 2008).

The synod had unresolved conflicts regarding:

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## Book of Concord

Reproduced from *Affirm* February 23, 1978  
*Affirm* October 1987

History is a good teacher, provided we are willing to learn from it. The Missouri Synod is trying!

In recent times the Synod has been marked by gradually increasing disharmony and controversy culminating in the removal of the president and 90 per cent of the faculty at our St. Louis Seminary, and accompanied by divisions within the Council of District presidents, the districts, congregations, pastors, and people. Its source was a doctrinal erosion starting some 30 years ago.

Such problems are not new. Even a casual reading of the Apostle Paul's letters shows that together with his clear and beautiful statements of sound doctrine he found it necessary to spell out and warn against false teachings which were infecting the congregations.

Nor are these problems new to Lutheranism. Following Luther's death in 1546, the loss of his steady hand at the helm found the ship of Lutheranism wallowing badly and often aimlessly in heavy seas. Controversy and disharmony mounted.

Luther's good friend and fellow professor at Wittenberg, Phillip Melancthon, did not have Luther's stout heart and straight spine. His answer to controversy was compromise. Facing doctrinal differences, he attempted to speak vaguely enough to satisfy everyone. This, in effect, watered down doctrine, saying less than Scripture says. This, alas, was answered by some who said more than Scripture.

Thus it went for some 30 years. The answer? The great statement of faith known as the Formula of Concord of 1577, which was then put together with the nine other Lutheran Confessions into the Book of Concord in 1580. In essence, the Formula reasserted what the Lutherans had declared when it all began as they confessed their faith

**The road to concord does not lie in the direction of agreement to disagree.**

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## Chief Issues in the LCMS by Decade

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- women's other roles in the church,
- open communion,
- contemporary worship,
- Lutheran identity of CUS universities and colleges,
- licensed-lay deacons, and
- lay ministers.

**1990-2000:** Conflict over the termination of Robert Preus as president at the Fort Wayne seminary and his exoneration by a unanimous vote of the Commission on Appeals in 1992. This conflict resulted in the denial of calls to thirty-two innocent seminarians, the dismantling of the former Adjudication and Appeals system, the elevation of the Commission on Constitutional Matters and/or Commission on Theology and Church Relations to be the final authorities in adjudication cases, and the refusal of seminary authorities to reinstitute the exonerated Robert Preus.

Conflict over women's roles in congregations and synod and its agencies, which was addressed by the 1994 CTCR document "The Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices," adopted in 2004 Resolution 3-08A.

Conflict over "open communion" policies, which was addressed by the 1999 CTCR document "Admission to the Lord's Supper," adopted in 2007 Resolution 3-09.

Conflict over "contemporary worship," which was addressed in the next decade by the 2004 Commission on Worship document "Text, Music, Context," adopted in 2004 Resolution 2-04.

Continued conflict over the "church-growth movement" led to the formation of the "Church Growth Study Committee" and their 2001 report "For the Sake of Christ's Commission."

Concerns were expressed over 1989 Resolution 3-05B regarding licensed lay ministers.

**1980-1990:** Church fellowship between the Missouri Synod and American Lutheran Church (ALC) was abolished in 1981.

Conflict over the increasing practice of "open com-

munion," which was addressed by the CTCR document "Theology and Practice of the Lord's Supper," adopted in 1983 Resolution 3-12.

Conflict over the participation of women in church roles, which was addressed by the CTCR document "Women in the Church," adopted in 1986 Resolution 3-09.

Conflict over the growing influence of the "church-growth" movement, which was addressed by the CTCR document "Evangelism and Church Growth," adopted in 1989 Resolution 3-16 and 1995 Resolution 3-09.

**1970-1980:** The investigation of false doctrine ("higher criticism" and neo-orthodoxy) at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, resulting in the "walk-out" of the majority of the seminary faculty in 1974, and the formation of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church (AELC) in 1976. The Missouri Synod position regarding inerrancy, "higher criticism," neo-orthodoxy, and related issues was set forth in "A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles," issued by President J.A.O. Preus, and adopted by the national convention in 1973.

Conflict over the growing influence of the charismatic movement, as promoted by the organization "Renewal in Missouri" (RIM). The Missouri Synod position about the charismatic movement was set forth in 1977 Resolution 3-10A, and two CTCR documents "The Charismatic Movement and Lutheran Theology" (1972) and "The Lutheran Church and the Charismatic Movement" (1977), adopted in 1979 Resolution 3-10. Nothing else was done at the synodical level about the charismatic problem until the mid-1990s, when President Barry initiated meetings between his office and RIM.

**1960-1970:** The teaching of "higher criticism" of the Bible and neo-orthodox theology at Saint Louis seminary and many Missouri Synod colleges created a large, growing, and influential "liberal" faction in the synod.

Accompanying this liberal theology was the promotion of ecumenism, as could be seen in the books: John Tietjen, *Which Way to Lutheran Unity?* (CPH, 1966); and Dean Lueking, *Mission in the Making* (CPH, 1964). Church fellowship was approved between the Missouri Synod and the ALC in 1969.

**1950-1960:** Conflict between the Missouri Synod, on one side, and the Wisconsin Synod (WELS) and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS), on the other side, over issues described in "Another Fraternal Endeavor" (1954). The issues were: religious unionism, prayer fellowship, military chaplaincy, unionistic religious programs and federations, negotiations with the ALC, and scouting. The conflict resulted in the end of Missouri Synod fellowship with the ELS in 1955 and the WELS in 1961, and thereby the end of the "Synodical Conference." The full story on this conflict may be found in: Mark E. Braun, *A Tale of Two Synods* (Northwestern Publishing House, 2003).

**1940-1950:** The unofficial "Statement of the Forty-Four" (1945) questioned the role of synodical resolutions and, implicitly, the *Brief Statement* (Thesis Two), argued

## The Lutheran Clarion—2019 Convention Issues

We are in our 11th year of the *Clarion* as we strive to present and uphold the truth of God's Holy Word. We hope to help delegates to the 2019 LCMS Convention in Tampa, FL, by providing them with information on the myriad of issues they will face as they vote. We could use your help.

If you can help with our costs, there's an enclosed envelope so you can mail your check to Lutheran Concerns Association, 149 Glenview Drive, New Kensington, PA 15068-4921. Do it now. **Thank you!!**



against using Romans 16:17-18 and 1 Thessalonians 5:22 in church fellowship decisions (Thesis Five), argued that each congregation should make its own fellowship decisions (Thesis Six), rejected the idea that the "Gospel" is a set of doctrines (Thesis Seven), argued for a more open practice of prayer fellowship (Thesis Eight), and argued that church fellowship is possible without complete agreement in doctrine (Thesis Eleven). Thesis Eleven was a restatement of Wilhelm Loehe's position that had been rejected by the Missouri Synod in the 1850s. Meetings between the authors of the 1945 "Statement" and the College of District Presidents did not resolve differences. Eventually the "Statement" was withdrawn as a basis for further discussion and the Synod President's office issued five studies on the issues raised.

The 1945 "Statement," which was supported by the "American Lutheran Publicity Bureau" (ALPB), opened the door to the activity of politicized factions in the Missouri Synod, along with "unofficial organizations" and their publications, positions, and election campaigns.

**1930-1940:** Fellowship discussions between the ALC and the Missouri Synod. The Adolph Brux case (1924-1935) caused ongoing conflict over issues of church fellowship and prayer fellowship. The Missouri Synod's doctrinal position was explained in the "Brief Statement," whose chief author was Francis Pieper. It was adopted by the 1932 national convention originally for use in the ALC fellowship discussions. The "Brief Statement" was later adopted as a general platform of Missouri Synod doctrine at its 1959 national convention, with clarification about its relationship to the Scriptures and Book of Concord at the 1962 convention.

**1920-1930:** The linguistic transition for all Missouri Synod German congregations and schools, from German to English.

**1910-1920:** The experience of anti-German sentiment and activities in the US.

**1900-1910:** The work with English language missions, and the relations between the "German Synod" and "English Synod" of the Missouri Synod.

**1890-1900:** Conflicts over membership in labor unions by synod lay members and the challenges to the church by socialists in the United States. The Missouri Synod position was discussed at districts, e.g., the Central District in 1900.

**1880-1890:** The experience of anti-parochial school legislation in Midwestern States, especially in Wisconsin and Illinois. The Missouri Synod position was explained in an 1890 convention resolution. Anti-parochial school legislation recurred in the 1920s in Nebraska and Oregon.

**1870-1880:** The Predestination Controversy in "The Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America" rearranged Lutheran alignments. The Missouri Synod position was explained in C.F.W. Walther's

"Thirteen Theses" (1881). As a result of this controversy, the Ohio Synod and the Norwegian Synod dropped out of the Synodical Conference, in 1881 and 1883 respectively. After this schism, the synods that remained in the Synodical Conference included: the Missouri Synod, the Concordia Synod of Pennsylvania and Other States (later merged into the Missouri Synod), the Minnesota Synod (later merged into the Wisconsin Synod), and the Wisconsin Synod. Synods that joined the Synodical Conference later included: the English Synod and Slovak Synod (both later joined the Missouri Synod), the Michigan and Nebraska Synods (both later joined the Wisconsin Synod), and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS).

**1860-1870:** The Civil War. The Missouri Synod position on the war and abolitionism was explained in C.F.W. Walther's prefaces to *Lehre und Wehre* in 1861, 1862, and 1863.

**1850-1860:** Conflict with Wilhelm Loehe's missionary organization in Neuendettelsau, Franconia, over the democratic-congregationalist polity of the Missouri Synod, and whether agreement in all statements of the Book of Concord was necessary for church fellowship. Loehe argued that such complete agreement was not necessary. This led to a break in fellowship between the Missouri Synod and Loehe's pastors and missionaries. The Missouri Synod position on the fellowship issue was explained in C.F.W. Walther's article "Why Should Our Pastors, Teachers, and Professors Subscribe Unconditionally to the Symbolical Writings of Our Church" (1858). The Buffalo Synod excommunicated the entire Missouri Synod in 1859.

**1847-1850:** Conflict with the Buffalo Synod regarding the democratic-congregationalist polity of the Missouri Synod and how that related to the authority of the pastoral office. The Missouri Synod position was explained in C.F.W. Walther's "Church and Ministry" (1852).

**1845:** In the initial correspondence that led to the formation of the Missouri Synod, C.F.W. Walther wrote to Pastor Adam Ernst: "My desires concerning this matter are chiefly these: 1) that in addition to the Word of God, the synod be founded on all the Confessions of our Church...2) that a special paragraph of the constitution eliminate and exclude all syncretistic activities of members of the organization; 3) that the chief activity of the synod be directed toward the preservation, nourishing, and supervision of the unity and purity of Lutheran doctrine" (Walter Baepler, *A Century of Grace*, p. 86).

**The Rev. Martin R. Noland, Ph.D.**  
Grace Lutheran Church, San Mateo, CA

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## Book of Concord

Continued from page 1

50-years earlier before Emperor Charles V in the basic Lutheran Confession, the Augsburg Confession.

The answer to almost a half-century of controversy lay in the Formula of Concord's clear, explicit, Bible-based doctrinal statements, "We believe, teach, and confess...", together with the necessary opposite, "We, therefore, reject..."

This, then, if we will learn from history, is the answer to Synod's present pain and shame. The road to concord does not lie in the direction of agreement to disagree. If some have strayed from beneath the tent of Synod's doctrinal position, the answer does not lie in a bigger tent. The end of that road is apparent in the sad history of many Protestant denominations which teaches us that a cultivated and deliberately fostered laxity in doctrine and practice produces only the peace of the ecclesiastical grave yard.

So, said Missouri at Dallas last summer, "Back to the Word of God! Back to the Lutheran Confessions." A vigorous two-year effort, "That We May Grow," involves eight Bible study guides and four on the Lutheran Confessions, all prepared with the laity in mind, for use on the parish level.

Another thrust of that "That We May Grow" program began with a three-day Theological Convocation last November. Noting that 1977 was the 400th anniversary of the Formula of Concord, the representative theologians heard and discussed three splendid essays based on the Formula of Concord and on the Lutheran Confessions in general: "The Basis for Concord" by Dr. Robert Preus, "The Way to Concord" by Dr. Martin Warth, and "The Celebration of Concord" by Dr. Ralph Bohlmann.

But this meeting was only the beginning. The essays, together with Dr. Karl Barth's keynote address, are now in a printed booklet which has been sent to all pastors and teachers. Budgeted time for the careful study of this 93-page booklet is recommenced and essential.

That study, in turn, will make all the richer and beneficial the regional pastors' and principals' conferences scheduled for the various districts of Synod during 1978. Here the rubber really begins to hit the road as the leaders in our congregations and schools sit and study, yes, and

even debate together under God's Word and the Lutheran Confessions.

Laymen, meanwhile, may wish to study these essays on their own. They may be ordered from Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations, at Synod's headquarters, 500 N. Broadway, St. Louis, Mo. 63102 [now 1333 South Kirkwood Road, Saint Louis, MO 63122]. As books go, it is small, less than 100 pages. But it is by no means casual bed-time reading. It is strong meat, but it will put strength into your theological

## Reverend Herman John Otten

March 3, 193 - April 24, 2019

The Chairman of the *Lutheran Clarion* Editorial Board knew the Reverend Herman Otten for decades. He can say from personal knowledge that Reverend Otten had significant impact, on multiple LCMS issues, such as Altar and Pulpit Fellowship with the old American Lutheran Church in 1969 and following years; the LCMS "Battle for the Bible" focused in large part on Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in the 1960's and 70's with then President John Tietjen being

rightfully removed from office by the Board of Control followed by a majority of that faculty engaging in a pre-planned walkout; the issue of ordination of women; the issue of the LGBT movement and the very recent issue of a "plastic text" of the Bible. Reverend Otten for decades promoted the Authorized American Version of the Bible which largely was then the work of long sainted Professor William Beck of Concordia Seminary.

Reverend Herman Otten was never certified by Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, for the Office of Holy Ministry and thus never ordained in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. That was true even though then Synodical President Ralph Bohlmann requested the then Commission on Appeals—then Synod's highest and final adjudicatory body—to review the earlier decision of the former Commission on Appeals in a case brought by Reverend Otten. The then Commission on Appeals found that Concordia Seminary stipulated Concordia Seminary would bear the burden of proof which it failed to do when the earlier Commission on Appeals decision resulted in a 4-4 tie vote. Thus on review, the then Commission on Appeals unanimously held Reverend Herman Otten was the prevailing party.

Reverend Herman Otten, like hundreds of saints before him, unquestionably paid a significant price for his adherence to Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. His decades long fight for orthodoxy is much appreciated and will be etched in the history of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.



bones and sinews!

To summarize: Disharmony and strife in the church are not the disease; they are symptoms pointing to the real malady of doctrinal disagreement. Doctrinal agreement in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod means agreement based on Scripture as the only source and norm of faith, and the Lutheran Confessions as a clear exposition thereof.

Outward peace and concord are a blessed product of inner unity. There is a unity we have, it is God-given through conversion, in Christ. Its foundation is the "apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone." From that, and that only, flows the harmony we seek.

The Missouri Synod cherishes the Bible. Let it begin to study it. The Missouri Synod subscribes to the Lutheran Confessions. Let us find out what they say. Let us go back to the sources of our doctrinal foundations. Let us seek God's strength there. Then we will find Him blessing us with peace.

**Dr. Ewald J. Otto, Pastor**

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church  
Quincy, Illinois

Rev. Dr. E. Otto wrote "Book of Concord," which *Affirm* published February 23, 1978, and October 1987. What Dr. Otto wrote represents his deep faith and commitment to Scripture and the Book of Concord. It is as timely today as it was after the 1977 LCMS Convention in Dallas, TX, and in 1987.

Rev. Dr. Otto began his ministry in 1940 by starting a mission in Quincy, IL. He served there until retiring in 1982. He was elected to the Board of Control (now Regents) of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in 1973 and was promptly elected chairman. He was very much aware of the doctrinal stance and teachings of the then seminary administration and faculty majority which had been published in "Report of the Synodical President of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod" dated September 1, 1972. That Report showed that the great majority of the faculty had quietly tried to undercut God and His Word in respect to inspiration, inerrancy and authority, etc.

Some of the biographical information above is also from *Affirm*, Vol XI, No. 10, October 1987. Both are published with permission.

## Reports and Overtures for the 2019 Convention

In late April, the "Convention Workbook / Reports and Overtures" for 2019 was posted at the LCMS web site (<https://www.lcms.org/convention/downloads>). An overview of the 590 page document shows that before the overtures, there are nearly 400 pages of reports from officers, offices, committees, commissions, task forces, districts, colleges and seminaries. The "Biographical Synopses and Statements of Nominees" is posted at the same web site. The delegates have a lot of reading to do before July!

Based on the overtures, some important items that may be addressed at the convention:

- An attempt to prevent district adjudication cases, in matters of doctrine, from moving forward into the synodical level

### New Student Aid Endowment Fund! Concordia Theological Foundation, Inc.

In early 2018, in honor of Mrs. Ginny Valleau's contributions to the publication of the *Lutheran Clarion*, a **Concordia Theological Seminary Student Aid Endowment Fund** was established at **Concordia Theological Foundation, Inc.**, which is recognized by the Internal Revenue Service as a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) religious charitable organization. Contributions are tax deductible as permitted by federal and state law. As of March 31, 2019, the fund assets were \$9,080.07.



The Board of Directors of the Lutheran Concerns Association invites *Lutheran Clarion* readers and friends to contribute to the Fund which can be done by sending your check marked Valleau Endowment Fund to:

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of adjudication. This relates to 2016 Resolution 12-14 (Regarding the Right of an Accuser to Appeal when a District President or President of the Synod Fails to Act or Declines to Suspend) and the resulting Synod Board of Directors' May 2017 decision regarding Resolution 12-14. See overtures 10-16 to 10-30.

- Whether to allow districts and congregations to send their own missionaries without synodical involvement; this has come up in the past and refers to Commission on Constitutional Matters Opinion 14-2724; bylaw 3.8.3 and the Board of International Missions as the only sending agency for missionaries. See overtures 2-03 to 2-10.
  - The importance of teaching the six-day creation. See overtures 5-11 to 5-24.
  - Whether to ask the Commission on Theology and Church Relations to revise their documents on the role of men and women in the church in order to provide better guidance. See overtures 5-37 to 5-41.
  - Revisions to prior decisions about Licensed Lay Deacons. 2016 Resolution 13-02A established the process for bringing onto the roster licensed lay deacons doing regular pastoral work. See overtures 6-12 to 6-15.
  - Whether to modify aspects of the Specific Ministry Pastor program. See overtures 6-03 to 6-10.
  - Issues surrounding the Concordia University System, i.e., governance, funding, faculty qualifications, issues at Concordia University, Portland, and the closure of Concordia College, Selma. See overtures 7-01 to 7-30.
  - The matter of recognizing, endorsing and/or clarifying altar and pulpit fellowship with various overseas churches. See overtures 5-01 to 5-05.
  - Whether to continue to publish delegate mailing addresses. See overtures 9-29 to 9-32.
- And much more!

## Cremation: What Every Lutheran Should Know

This article is not about the current craze of making funerals “fun,” although recently a Minnesota Lutheran added some “ashes” of his cremated father to the fireworks that he shot into the sky one fourth of July. Rather, it is about how and why Christians once opposed cremation, and why they still need to do so.<sup>1</sup>

The early, faithful Christians firmly rejected pagan Rome’s cremations. Caecilius, a Roman pagan critical of Christians, in about AD 195, angrily stated that Christians “execrate our funeral pyres and condemn cremation” (Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 11:4). In short, Christians did more than just spurn cremation for themselves.

Sometimes Christians were persecuted for condemning cremation. In AD 177, in Lyons, Gaul (modern France), Christian-hating persecutors rushed into Christian homes, brutally killed many, burned their bodies, cast their charred bones into the Rhone River, and then mockingly shouted: “Now let’s see if their bodies will rise again . . .” (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5:63).

In time, the Christian opposition bore fruit. By the mid-fourth century, Rome’s cremations had mostly ended. But in some regions, pagans still clung to it. This prompted Charlemagne the Great in AD 789 to declare cremation a capital crime throughout the Holy Roman Empire. And as Christianity expanded geographically by the mid-eleventh century earth burial had replaced cremations in Denmark, Britain, and Scandinavia. Christians opposed cremation so firmly that when pagans converted, they had to promise never to be cremated.<sup>2</sup> Earth burial had become Christianity’s first major institutionalized cultural change in the West.

Then, for almost a millennium, earth burial was the only method of disposing of the dead in all Europe. Inhumation had also become the exclusive practice in the New World, where Christian values had a large impact. But by the early 1800s some deists, atheists, universalists, and a few erring Christians, motivated by the philosophy of the Enlightenment, brought cremation back to Europe, and by the latter 1800s it came to the United States.

When cremation returned in the early 1800s in some areas of Europe, Christians, unlike their earlier ancestors, were notably silent. It was not until 1886, that Pope Leo XIII issued two anti-cremation decrees that barred Catholics from “demanding cremation for one’s own body or that of another.”<sup>3</sup> Then, in 1892, the Holy See issued a third decree demanding that Catholics were not to cooperate in any cremation activities. Next, in 1917, the Code of Canon Law “prohibited ecclesiastical burial of bodies that were to be cremated.”<sup>4</sup> And in 1926, Pope Pius XI condemned cremation saying its advocates were “enemies of Christianity.” He also declared that cremation de-emphasized the resurrection of the body.<sup>5</sup> But in 1963, Pope Paul VI made an about-face by contradicting the five previous de-

crees, and, worse, he said nothing about two thousand years of Christian opposition, as he now permitted Catholics to choose cremation. The Pope ignored Romans 12:2 (“be not conformed to this world”), as he succumbed to the secular culture without admitting it.

But even in 1963, who would have guessed most Westerners, including some erring Christians, would opt for cremation by the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? For in 1900, only .003 percent of deceased Americans (mostly atheists and agnostics) were cremated. To most Americans, the mere thought of cremation was “bizarre,” even in 1965, when only 3.56 percent of deceased Americans were incinerated. But by 2017, the American rate had risen to 51.6 percent. The Canadian rate was 70.5 percent; in the UK it was 77 percent; 50 percent in Germany; and Sweden’s rate stood at 70 percent.

When churches, conservative or liberal, accepted cremation, they turned a blind eye to the biblical facts of God’s frequent use of fire in the Old Testament to exercise His holy wrath. When Aaron and the Israelites molded a golden calf idol, God had Moses destroy it by fire and grinded into powder (Exodus 32:20). He used fire to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24). And he had Moses destroy Nadab and Abihu, two sons of Aaron, by incinerating them for their offering unauthorized incense and fire to the Lord (Leviticus 10:1-2).

Although God used fire to destroy idols and sometimes evil persons, He did not permit humans, absent His will, to burn deceased human bodies. This is evident from Moab’s king having burned the bones of the king of Edom. Given this action, the text says, “because he burned to lime the bones of the king of Edom . . . I will send a fire upon Moab, and it shall devour the strongholds of Kerioth, and Moab shall die amid uproar . . .” (Amos 2:1-2). In short, God did not even tolerate the godless to practice cremation. Thus, one Christian has stated, “If there is any verse in the Bible that positively emphasizes God’s disapproval of the burning of human bodies, it is this.”<sup>6</sup>

It is important to note when Catholics and Protestants, including Lutherans,<sup>7</sup> from 1963 onward began to accept the pagan practice of cremation, it seemed as if they did not know or care about the biblically based reasons Christians had used to oppose cremation for nearly two thousand years. They just drifted with the cultural flow. Thus, the *Lutheran Service Book Agenda* (2006) of the Missouri Synod now has a cremation funeral rubric. It reads, “In the case of cremation, the ashes are to be buried or entered at a cemetery plot, mausoleum, crypt or columbarium” (p. 124). Notably, the LCMS has never done an in-depth study of Christianity’s long-standing, biblically based reasons for condemning cremation. However, its sister body, the Lutheran Church—Canada, did recently issue a docu-

**...the Bible and many hymns talk about deceased bodies lying in a grave, a phenomenon cremation obliterates.**



ment on cremation, but it ignores the history of Christianity's anti-cremation stance, and it contains ambivalent, compromised statements. Theologically, it blows an uncertain trumpet.

In this context, it is important to note the words of J. Douglas Davies, a British theologian and a cremation advocate. But he rightly observes, "most churches have become deeply involved in it [cremation] but have paid relatively little formal attention to the theological issues involved."<sup>8</sup> Here I must add that churches accepting cremation seem unaware that the Bible and many hymns talk about deceased bodies lying in a grave, a phenomenon cremation obliterates.

Davies further states, "Cremation services could be fostering disbelief in the doctrine of the resurrection because of the implied assumption that resurrection has to do with graves and cremation has practically nothing to do with graves."<sup>9</sup> So, it is shocking that in less than two decades after Davies' remark, The Barna Research Group in 2006 reported 59 percent of American Evangelicals did not believe their dead bodies would ever be resurrected.

Here we need to remember one of the reasons why the early Christians spurned cremation was that they did not want to give any credibility to the pagan conviction that cremation prevented a dead body's resurrection. But now, even most American Evangelicals think like the pagans of Rome. Hence, Stephen Prothero, an American pro-cremationist, has recently stated, more pointedly than Davies, "Cremationists undermined the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead . . ."<sup>10</sup> If undermining the resurrection is not enough to make us Lutherans reject cremation, what then is?

Had our seminaries in the past closely examined Scriptures that reveal cremating human bodies was never a blessing in the Old Testament, and how and why Christians for nearly two thousand years condemned cremation, our pastors would likely have taught parishioners that cremation is a violent, unbiblical act, not intended for any Christian. But that did not happen. Thus, we have a lot of Lutherans today who do not even know that their early Christian forebears spurned cremation, much less why.

When Christians in Africa and in India hear of some Christians being cremated in the West, they are spiritually offended. And many are also offended here at home. Thus, it is important to remember what St. Paul taught Christians about not giving spiritual offense. In Corinth, some Christians were spiritually offended by those who ate meat once dedicated to pagan idols. So, Paul said, "If food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble" (I Corinthians 8:13). The application to cremation is obvious.

The biblical concept of death as "sleep" prompted the early Christians to give Roman burial sites a new name, *coemeteria* (sleeping places), from which we get "cemeteries" in English. The word *coemeteria* symbolized Christians awaiting the resurrection, an affront to the pagans. And let us remember bones do not burn. Thus, urns in the past were about eighteen inches tall to hold the

bones. Today, the bones are ground up; they are not really ashes but mostly bone granules, placed in a small urn, or worse, scattered some place. Both mock the biblical concept of death as sleep, which prompted Christians for centuries to inscribe grave stones, "Asleep in Jesus." Tragically, cremation contradicts this biblical metaphor. And who can envision "ashes" sleeping?

### Conclusion

In 1549, the *British Book of Common Prayer* introduced the committal phrase "**Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust**" to be spoken as the deceased's body was committed to the grave. It did not refer to cremation, as some erroneously think today. Cremation in 1549 was still a theological taboo. The phrase was a mere poetic alliteration, and in time other denominations mimicked it. In place of it, our pastors today would do well to use *Lutheran Service Book* 759, stanzas 1 and 2: "**This body in the grave we lay/There to wait the solemn day/When God himself shall bid it rise/To mount triumphant to the skies/And to the earth we now entrust/What came from dust and turns to dust/And from dust shall rise that day/In glorious triumph o'er decay.**"

Finally, Christians have always desired to be saved from the fire of hell, a place cited by Jesus in Matthew 25:41. Given this desire, one critic of cremation has asked, "How can it be theologically acceptable to destroy a Christian's deceased body by hell-like fire in cremation?"

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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- 1 For a book-length discussion of cremation, readers may read my book *Cremation, Embalment, or Neither?* (Bloomington, IN: West Bow Press, 2015). It's available from Amazon.Com.
- 2 John F. McDonald, "Cremation," *The Jurist* (1966), 206.
- 3 William Devlin, "Cremation," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1908), 4:460.
- 4 R. Rutherford, "Cremation," *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Detroit: Thompson and Gale, 2003), 4:359.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 James W. Fraser, *Cremation: Is It Christian?* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1965), 14.
- 7 The only major Christian denomination that still opposes cremation is the Eastern Orthodox Church.
- 8 J. Douglas Davies, *Cremation: Today and Tomorrow* (Brancote, England: Grove Books, 1990), 6.
- 9 Ibid., 13.
- 10 Stephen Prothero, *Purified by Fire: A History of Cremation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 71.

**Editor's Note:** Dr. Schmidt is an internationally award-winning author. His most recent book is *Hallmarks of Lutheran Identity* (Concordia Publishing House, 2017). Among his other eleven books is *How Christianity Changed the World* (Zondervan, 2004), which is now in nine languages. He is frequently interviewed by radio stations from different parts of the country regarding Islam, Christianity, and religious cults.

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