
Word & World: Theology for Christian Ministry

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Word & World was born on January 1, 1981, with its first issue on the theme of “Evangelism.” The journal turned thirty-five on January 1, 2016, with an issue on “Masculinity.” Those two themes mark something of the scope of the journal’s interests: Evangelism as an essential activity of the church (“Word”) and Masculinity as a relatively recent social concern (“World”). In between have been issues on almost every book of the Bible, pastoral matters such as “The Funeral” and “Prayer,” and ethical concerns, such as “The Land” and “Water.” For the editor, working through the articles for each issue has been something of a continuing education course in that particular area. Our hope is that the same is true for our readers. We remain a thematic journal with largely solicited articles.

Early decisions

Obviously, there had to be planning prior to the publication of that first issue on Evangelism. Interest in putting out a journal arose within what was then the “joint faculties” of Luther-Northwestern Seminaries (now Luther Seminary). In January 1979, those faculties, meeting and acting together, elected a faculty board to begin its work.

What’s in a name?

A matter of central importance was the selection of a name for the journal. The board considered this for some six months before narrowing down the list of suggestions to four finalists: *Simul*, *Martyria*, *Accent*, and *Word and World*.¹¹ Deciding on *Word and World* (the “and” was later changed to an ampersand) was, in my opinion, crucial. While *Simul* and *Martyria* are rich theological terms, even in 1980 they would not have been immediately understood by many—especially the “nonspecialist” readers the journal was meant to reach—and now most would look at them like, in Luther’s famous words, “cows at a new gate.”²² Those terms would not have worked, nor would have “*Accent*,” simply because there is nothing there to point potential readers to the mission

1. Information about this early work and the suggested names was shared with the faculty in a letter dated March 12, 1980, from the first chair of the Editorial Board, Paul Sponheim. The letter is in the *Word & World* files.

2. Luther used this German proverb more than once, the best known place being in “On Translating: An Open Letter,” in *Luther’s Works* 35:188, where Luther is speaking about how his Catholic opponents gaze in bewilderment at his insertion of “sola” into his translation of Rom 3:28.

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The first editor, James Burtness (now deceased), discussed the significance of the name in his first editorial,³³ and I have subsequently written on our website:

At *Word & World* we take our conjunctions and prepositions seriously.

We are Word and World: Things flow both ways across an “and.” Word is in conversation with world. We seek to inform and to be informed. We speak and we listen. We welcome the open connection because we believe both word and world belong to God.

We are Theology for Christian Ministry: There is direction in a “for.” Theology is for the work of God in the world; it is for the ministry of the church; it is for the gospel. We recognize that if theology is for ministry, neither theology nor ministry will remain unchanged. Such change we do not fear for it is the change that comes with life and growth.⁴⁴

Relation to Luther Seminary

The original plan was to give the journal independent legal status, and all the paperwork had been established to make that happen. But then the board reconsidered. As Sponheim pointed out in his letter:

I believe the essential point is that independent legal incorporation might mean that the journal would tend to drift away from the seminary or be perceived to do so. There is strong conviction that the journal belongs with the seminaries and that independent legal incorporation, while it may have some advantages, seems to compromise that connection with the seminaries.

3. James Burtness, “The Word for the World,” *Word & World* 1/1 (1981), 3–6.

4. On the *Word & World* website (<http://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/about.aspx?m=4024>).

Again, this was a crucial decision. *Word & World's* integral relation with the seminary has been beneficial to both. The journal has a firm base, a “home,” and a purpose not unlike the seminary itself, as the subtitle suggests: “Theology for Christian Ministry.” That push, theology for ministry, has helped shape the mission and direction not only of the journal but also that of the seminary’s curriculum. Theology is not merely an academic enterprise—though it must be rigorously academic—it is engaged for the sake of ministry; nor is the seminary’s work merely “practical.” Ministry without a strong theological base quickly becomes shallow and amorphous.

A journal of the faculty

All of the original documents and decisions presuppose that *Word & World* is a journal of the seminary faculty, not controlled by the administration or a tool for the development office; the board is elected by the faculty, and the board, in turn, elects the editorial staff. Without this proper “separation of powers,” the journal could not have received the recognition that it presently enjoys. I have sometimes compared the work of the journal to that of a tenured faculty member, though that analogy is not perfect. While fully committed to the mission and work of the school—like a tenured faculty member—the faculty board has full control over the content and themes of the issues without fear that someone is looking over their shoulder. This relationship has generally been respected by all parties and has frequently worked to their benefit. Only once has a member of the administration (in this case a development officer) objected in advance to an issue, because it might prove too controversial (the issue was on “Sexual Identity”); and on one occasion, when a donor wrote to the president complaining that a particular author was an out-and-out heretic (which, in our judgment, he was not), the president was able to explain that the journal was not a “house organ” and that its individual authors spoke not for the seminary nor, for that matter, for the faculty or the journal.

An important element in the journal’s thriving within the seminary and without has been an insistence and practice of representing the whole faculty, not one faction of the whole nor one department or division. Attention has been paid to this in the election of the board and selection of staff. Burtness, a systematic theologian, served as editor for only the first three issues before departing for sabbatical leave. He was followed by Arland Hultgren, a professor of New Testament. Hultgren served until 1988, when I, an Old Testament professor, was elected editor. According to present plans, I will be succeeded by Mark Granquist, a professor of church history.

The present

How “Lutheran” are we?

This issue of *Currents* features articles by editors of several “Lutheran publications,” according to the invitation. How does that work for *Word & World*? A happy fringe benefit of not adopting the name “Simul” is the avoidance of the immediate Lutheran connections with that term. *Word & World* does not at all shy away

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from its Lutheran heritage, and it is happily ensconced in a Lutheran institution. But the journal has always sought to represent and reach a broader community. Its authors have never been exclusively Lutheran, and its readership is increasingly ecumenical. And, of course, the seminary itself is a different place than it was in 1980, when all of the board members were Lutheran, as was almost the entire faculty. This is no longer the case, insofar as the board and staff now include also Methodists and Episcopalians, Baptists and Presbyterians, and one self-defined as “nondenominational,” while the faculty itself is an even more ecumenical group.

What do these changes imply? Will denominations survive in anything like their present forms? Will Lutheranism continue to splinter or find its way back together? What will be the impact of global Christianity? We have considered such matters in several issues, particularly in two: “Whither Lutheranism?” (11/3) and “Whither Denominations?” (25/1). Not surprisingly, both times people have suggested that we should have dropped the first “h” in “Whither”! Thus, coming in 2017 will be an issue on “Life without God,” considering among other things the growing percentage of the “nones” in North American life and beyond.

Our mission

Surprisingly—or perhaps not—the description of the mission of the journal found in the earliest documents and editorials has changed little. Obviously, the “world” has changed dramatically in the past decades and so have our understandings of the divine “word”—at least some of them. Things change, and they must. Our first board chair, Professor Sponheim, along with his colleague, Terry Fretheim, might argue for changes in God as well. Both have written about this in the pages of *Word & World*.⁵⁵ Yes, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb 13:8), but the point there is that the gospel, God’s total and reliable commitment to the divine promises, remains unchanged, despite the fact that Jesus himself “grew and became strong” (Luke 2:40), just as our understandings of God and Christ must grow. Things change, even Jesus.

As our understandings grow, so must our theology and our notions of ministry. Word and world continue to define our identity, and theology for Christian ministry defines our purpose, but the sense of every term in those descriptions necessarily changes with times. Otherwise, why plan ahead for new issues? Why not rerun the old ones, many of which remain surprisingly useful and relevant? *Word & World* seeks to look back at the best of our traditions (historical theology), to look carefully at the sources

5. See, for example, their articles in *Word & World* 19/4 (1999), both titled, “To Say Something—About God, Evil, and Suffering.”

that ground us (biblical theology), to look and think carefully about God and faith (systematic theology), to look around at our present world (ethics, environment, social concerns), and to look forward to what is coming and what will be needed for pastoral ministry (once practical theology, then pastoral theology, and now “leadership”—everything changes!). In this, we probably do not differ greatly from our counterparts, but we continually need to name these things for ourselves and our readers.

Quoting Burtness in his first editorial:

There will be those who think we are too theological, who will not see the importance of theological investigation unless it is immediately usable. And there will be those who think that we are too tied to ministry, too practical, too superficial. There will be those who think we are too tied to the Word, and those who think we are too immersed in the world. We know that. But we also know that there are those who struggle very hard to work at the congruities and the disjunctions of Word and world, and we look forward to a long and lively conversation with those readers. We shall keep at it. And we are confident that we shall get better at it, that the journal will improve as we learn to know our readers and our subject matter better.

That remains our goal.

Our audience

Who are our readers? Who comprises our audience? What is the nature of our articles? There, too, things have changed. Early on, a reader would have found many uses of the rhetorical “we,” mostly descriptive sentences, and a much more “objective” tone. If an author used “I,” that almost guaranteed that the article would be consigned to the “Perspectives” section. That section still exists and still is used for pieces of clearly personal opinion or personal observation. But the person of the author has become increasingly visible in all our articles as the years go on—all in all, a good thing in my opinion, but even in our Face to Face feature, which is by definition a matter of different opinions or perspectives, we want something more than blogs. We want thought-out opinion, developed opinion, opinion well-argued, and not all authors or potential authors understand that. Have they been ruined by reading too many blogs and by their own blogging?

Nevertheless, though we want the journal to show up in libraries and classrooms, even more we would like to find it on pastors’ desks. My present “Instructions to authors” states:

Prior to all technical considerations, authors should commit themselves to write for the journal’s primary audience—parish pastors who are interested in the best fruits of study and reflection as these are addressed to them in their work. Articles should be written with creativity

and imagination in a style that is fully accessible to a careful but nonspecialist reader in the practice of ministry.

Or, following this paragraph, in another place:

To be sure, the journal is intended for scholars and students as well, and we seek to publish articles of substance that will honor our place in the academic community. We do this, however, with the goal of relating theology to ministry in the contemporary world.

I have sometimes stated that my “ideal” article would be one fully accessible to the nonspecialist reader who is interested in theological matters, but one that a scholar in the field, had she or he not read it, might feel they had missed something. Obviously, articles rightly fall at different places on this continuum, but that general description remains our goal.

Where to (or Whither) *Word & World*?

I dearly hope this is not another place where we can or should omit the first “h” from “whither,” though, as we all know, the future of print journals is troubled. Still, I read somewhere recently that if you want something you write to be read in a hundred years, you have to put it in print. No doubt true. Some things, of course, do not need—or deserve—to be read in a hundred years, but some things do, maybe even an article or two in *Word & World*. I have no way to read the floppy discs, on which much of my early stuff was written on my old Apple IIe. What happens to all of my stuff “safely” stored in “the cloud,” when the cloud is struck by lightning or a blast of radiation (perish the thought)?

So while for now *Word & World* has a stable core of faithful readers, we know we must think of ways to be more digitally present to this brave new world. We have begun a process to think about such matters. How do we have more direct contact with our readers? How do we allow responsible feedback? How might we work more directly in tandem with other Luther Seminary online enterprises such as Working Preacher and Enter the Bible? We are pretty much the same people, so working together ought not be difficult, but we have not yet done it adequately.

Beyond the Luther Seminary sites, how do we develop a more lively presence on Facebook or even Twitter—though, in my personal opinion, while Twitter works for some things, trying to address significant matters in 140-character “tweets” more often truncates or even prevents thought rather than stimulating it. But that’s part of why it’s time to turn things over to a younger generation—which I will do later in 2016—to discover and develop different ventures to keep the conversation going between word and world. Like my friend and colleague Jim Burtness thirty-five years ago, I am confident they will do so.