



**Issues, Etc.**<sup>TM</sup>  
Christ-Centered Cross-Focused Talk Radio

## TRANSCRIPT

*Rev. Todd Wilken, Host*

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### **2015 *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week “Challenges to Lutheranism: Rationalism”**

**Guest:**

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**WILKEN:** Reason is a good thing. We like to operate in our lives rationally, don't we? We find things that are irrational not only confusing but also generally dangerous and, if kept in its proper place, reason is a marvelous gift of God. It's even numbered among the great gifts of God in Martin Luther's Small Catechism: "He has given me, among other things, my reason and senses and still preserves them." So how is it that a way thinking, a way of approaching

life and God's Word called "rationalism" could prove to be such a challenge, not just to the Lutheran Reformation, but to the Christian faith?

Welcome back to *Issues, Etc.*, live this Tuesday afternoon, October the 27<sup>th</sup>. I'm Todd Wilken. Thanks for tuning us in. *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week continues. We're talking about the challenges to Lutheranism, past and present. Today we'll

take up the challenge of rationalism with Dr. Martin Noland. He's pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Evansville, Indiana, past Director of the Concordia Historical Institute. He has a PhD in Church History from Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

Dr. Noland, welcome back to *Issues, Etc.*

**NOLAND:** It's great to be with you again, Todd.

**WILKEN:** You've had firsthand experience with this in the academy, where these things really flourish. I mentioned there your PhD from Union Theological Seminary – paint a picture for us, if you would. You were a newly minted pastor back in the late '80s, you go for your doctoral degree at the home of rationalism. Talk about the fruits of rationalism that you saw there in the academy.

**NOLAND:** I think it's fair to say that the old guard was fading away when I was at Union Theological Seminary in New York in the late '80s. There were professors, and they were usually upper echelon: they were tenured, often they had Chairs, and they were looking at retirement. And these guys, I would say, fell into three classifications: there were Barthians, those that would see Karl Barth as maybe their most important influence. There were Tillichians, those who followed Paul Tillich, and then there was my own doctoral advisor, whose expertise was in Albrecht Ritschl and that school, so I learned a lot about that. There were a few of those, and all of these would see reason as a tool – but not only as a tool; we grant that – but as a norm by which to judge the Scriptures. So when you would go into the exegetical departments that study the Old and New Testaments, if there are things in the Old and New Testaments that don't seem to make any sense or defy common sense experience today, they would say these things didn't happen. Well, then, how did the writers come up with this? Then you

have to come up with some other explanation. That was the old guard. The newer generation of faculty that were coming in, and almost all the student body, were all what we would call liberation theology of various types. There are a lot of liberation theologians who really don't have a lot of respect for, would you say, philosophy, or the hardworking type of rational arguments. So it was quite a contrast. I would go to the older school, which would be, in the definition that I'm talking about, rationalism. And these were tolerant men, who, even though I was Missouri Synod and a Bible-believer, we could talk. They wouldn't attack me, and we could have a lot of conversation about things, even though we differed. And then I would talk to the liberation theologian people, and they would see me as, "Well, you're a heterosexual white male, you come from the power basis of European-American class structure; therefore we're not even going to talk to you." So it was like there were two different schools. Now, it's been twenty-five years since I've been there. I can't tell you what it's like today, but the school of liberation theology is still strong. They don't have a lot of appreciation for the old ways of doing things. But I don't think that the rationalist approach will ever go away, because if it does, the liberation theologians have no philosophical ground to stand on. That's my experience, looking back at Union Seminary 25-30 years ago.

**WILKEN:** You've kind of brushed up against this, but if you would, give us a brief definition of rationalism. What does the term mean? What kind of movement is it talking about?

**NOLAND:** Well, first we have to distinguish between rationalism in philosophy and rationalism in theology. The first, rationalism in philosophy, is defined in opposition to empiricism, although both approaches to knowledge acknowledge the role of reason and empirical experience. But in terms of

what's your starting point and what's your judge, the rationalists would say reason is' the ideas of reason. René Descartes was an example of a rationalist. David Hume would be an example of an empiricist.

When we go to theology, it's a little bit different. It has some parallels to rationalism in philosophy, and they're often confused for that reason. Rationalism in theology means the use of reason and/or empirical experience to 1) serve as a source of religious doctrine, 2) to judge religious doctrine, including the Scriptures, and/or 3) to determine that propositions and divine Scriptures are in error. And this is in opposition to the Formula of Concord, which is our position as Lutherans, which says as a fundamental principle that Scriptures are "the pure and clear fountain;" in other words, the source of theology, and the only truth according to which all teachers and teachings are to be judged and evaluated. So rationalism is entirely opposite the Lutheran Book of Concord's definition of your fundamental theological principle.

Today, rationalism in Christian theology is generally skeptical toward propositions of theology found in first the Bible, second in church tradition – so that knocks out a lot of things in Orthodoxy and Catholicism – or ecclesiastical authority. Anything that is contrary to the common sense of the dominant culture is rejected or considered from a skeptical standpoint. And generally, that is how rationalism is used in Christian theology.

**WILKEN:** You've used a couple of the names before, but just give us a catalog of the leading lights of rationalism.

**NOLAND:** Well, there's one name that is probably not familiar to our audience today, and that is the Sozzinis – Lelio and Fausto Sozzini, from which we get the name "Sozzinians." These were Italians that lived in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, so they are contemporaries of Philip Melanchthon and

Martin Chemnitz. They are really the originators of rationalism in the form that we know it in the West and were very important for the history of it, as we may talk later. Names that are probably more well known are, for example, René Descartes. Descartes is well known for his discovery of analytic geometry, which befuddles most juniors in high school today. His book on *Meditations of the First Philosophy* sets forth a defense of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, purely by rationalistic means. He doesn't refer to Scripture or to revelation at all. Now, Descartes was not a skeptic toward the Scriptures. He was really supportive of the Church, but his approach to theology in that book in particular sets the stage for most rationalist approaches to theology that followed. Another name that's known is Spinoza. He was basically a pantheist, but he had a lot of influence in this approach. Among the English, John Locke is also a rationalist in theology, although he is an empiricist in philosophy. Other well-known names in France: the deists, Voltaire and Rousseau. In the United States, Thomas Paine and the other deists that were among our founding fathers; all were rationalists. In Germany, Gottfried Leibniz, Christian Wolff, who we might talk about later – very important: when the facts [of rationalism] came to the United States, they were thinking about people that prepounded the philosophy of Christian Wolff. Immanuel Kant, Gotthold Lessing, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Albrecht Ritschl. Those are all Europeans. And then we can look at just about any liberal Protestant in the United States, beginning with William Ellery Channing in the late 18<sup>th</sup>/early 19<sup>th</sup> century in the United States in Boston, and a whole string of professors and preachers that proclaimed the social Gospel and various forms of liberal Protestantism would all be included in this category of rationalism.

**WILKEN:** Dr. Martin Noland is our guest. It's *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week on this Tuesday afternoon, October the 27<sup>th</sup>. The theme for this week is "Challenges to Lutheranism." Today we're talking about the challenge of rationalism. [Dr. Noland] is pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Evansville, Indiana, past Director of the Concordia Historical Institute, and he has his PhD in Church History from Union Theological Seminary in New York.

**[BREAK]**

**WILKEN:** Welcome back to *Issues, Etc.* I'm Todd Wilken. It's *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week; we're talking about challenges to Lutheranism – today, rationalism with Dr. Martin Noland.

Let's walk through some of the important things to understand here about rationalism, and so we don't throw the baby out with the bath water, you want to begin by emphasizing the fact that rationalism is itself a *misuse* of the good gift of reason. What would you say there?

**NOLAND:** Yeah, rationalism is a misuse of reason. Our pastors learn in seminary that there is what they call "ministerial" and "magisterial" uses of reason. "Ministerial" means that reason is a wonderful tool given to mankind by God, but it has its limits. "Magisterial" use of reason says that reason itself, without God's revelation in the Scriptures, can come up with a true knowledge of God and His will. Now, it is true that reason can intuit, that it kind of has a sense for God's existence, attributes, and power. This is what Paul says in Romans 1:19-20. But reason *cannot* determine God's thoughts, will, purpose, or action without God revealing that Himself, whereas rationalism can say that we can do that. So the first important thing to say is that reason is important. We're not rejecting it in general.

**WILKEN:** You also say that rationalism is the most serious threat to Christianity in general, not just to Lutheran theology. Why is that?

**NOLAND:** Well, if you understand what saving faith is, it's not just "Oh, I look at Jesus and I believe in that picture or image that imprints itself on my brain." What justifying faith is as we know it from Scripture, is that God someday will be judging all mankind, and when you stand before the judgment seat of God, there is this condemnation in God's wrath because of sin. And so on the day of judgment, if you say, "God, you'd better let me in because I've been good to my wife and my kids, and I did my duty and my job," and He'll say, "That's not good enough." The Christian message, the Gospel – when we talk about the Gospel as Lutherans, we're saying that what we are saved by is not our own works or merits or virtues, it's only by the atonement – the work of Christ, His suffering and death on the cross that paid for the sins of the world. And if I believe in that, in that atonement – not the doctrine, per se; the doctrine is a statement, a verbal thing – but if I believe that Jesus actually *did* die on the cross and that that pays for my sins, that is faith. That is justifying faith, it's saving faith, and that will save you. Now, what is common to all these versions of rationalism that I'm talking about is they reject the doctrine of atonement, and therefore people who believe the doctrine of rationalism do not believe in the atonement, and therefore they cannot have justifying faith, according to the Scriptures, and therefore they cannot be saved. So this is a fundamental doctrine that I would think all true believers, in whatever Christian denomination you talk about – Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, what have you – any true believer that believes in Jesus' suffering and death on the cross and that that is what saves me and justifies me in God's eyes, anybody's got to agree, this

doctrine of rationalism, with regard to the atonement, is the most serious thing that we can imagine.

And so rationalism is our common adversary among all the Christian believers around the world. They may not know that, but that is the truth.

**WILKEN:** Talk a bit about how rationalism has flourished, not only in the academy as we have talked about it before, but we can really have real-time test cases for rationalism and its effects on the church by looking at the so-called “Seven Sisters” of mainline liberal Protestantism.

**NOLAND:** Yeah, it’s sad to say, but what are known as the mainline churches, or some people call them the “Seven Sisters of Protestantism” have really been affected, and this is the dominant theology in their seminaries, in their church administration. In some cases, no pastor can get into their ministry if they hold to the traditional doctrine. This is something that Richard John Neuhaus, who was originally out of the Missouri Synod and went to the ELCA, finally he realized this, and he left the mainline Protestant organizations and everything and went to Roman Catholicism, because he finally realized that this really jettisoned the Gospel in its entirety. And the denominations that are in the Seven Sisters, that is, the biggest of the mainline churches that accept this theology, are the Episcopalians; the United Church of Christ; the Presbyterian Church in the USA – that’s the PC-USA; United Methodists – I think they’re actually the largest of all these groups; the Evangelical Church in America – that’s the ELCA; the American Baptists; and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Those are the seven that are the largest, and they’re most devoted to this type of theology. And they are also well represented at the divinity schools, such as Union Theological Seminary in New York; Chicago Divinity School – that’s University

of Chicago; Harvard; Yale; Clermont; and places like that.

**WILKEN:** Is rationalism well understood by church historians?

**NOLAND:** That’s a good question. I don’t think that church historians have used this terminology, and the reason that I came up with this was I remember reading in my seminary courses in church history, and I think it was in our lectures, too, about how the Saxons, the young pastors like C.F.W. Walther and Gotthold Leiber and some of those guys who came over with Martin Stephan, how they were being affected by and they were in conflict with their older church supervisors – which would be like our district presidents today – over this issue of rationalism, because the younger men that were in this group were in traditional theology. They believed the Bible was the Word of God. But their supervisors were not [in traditional theology]. So many of these younger pastors left Germany over the issue of rationalism. And then when I studied this in philosophy, I thought, “Well, that doesn’t make any sense, because rationalism is a philosophy.” And so I don’t think this has been well understood even by historians, and I think the confusion is partly because rationalism has two different meanings, either in philosophy or theology. But I think the bigger issue is that people think that the organizing idea of rationalism, the thing that is common to all its various types, is the problem of reason and revelation. How much of either one of those do you take? Which is the judge of the other? The truth is, though, that the organizing idea of rationalism, if we look at it historically, is what today is called “moralistic deism.” I know you’ve talked about that moralistic therapeutic deism; some authors have used that term. So in this theology, the atonement of Christ is rejected, and people are thought to be saved only by their merits, effort, and virtues. And this is even further in that

direction than Pelagius ever was. So the atonement of Christ is thrown out entirely, and all it has to do with salvation is morality and virtue. And so then since the later 19<sup>th</sup> century, since the time of Ritschl, the church has been seen to be primarily an agency of moral improvement, peace, and social justice. “God will just let us into heaven because we’re all good.” That’s the idea.

**WILKEN:** With a few minutes here before we take a break, when did Lutheran theology first formally encounter this idea of rationalism, and how did it respond?

**NOLAND:** We’ll talk about that just briefly. If you look at the very end of the Book of Concord, in the Formula of Concord, Epitome Article 12 and Solid Declaration Article 12, you’ll see that they reject the Anti-Trinitarians and the New Arians. And what this is – they’re not just making something out of the blue – is these Sozzinians that I mentioned before. They were originally northern Italians who moved to south central Poland, because as they began to teach their doctrine in Italy, it was recognized as being heretical. So they went to south central Poland, where they helped organize what’s known as the Polish Brethren into a church. Already, these doctrines they denied: the traditional doctrines of the Christian church, of the atonement, of original sin, justification by faith alone, predestination, the divinity of Jesus, the means of grace, the sacraments, and the doctrine of the Trinity. They did affirm the necessity of the revelation found in Scripture, but the whole purpose of Scripture is to teach us to know and to do the will of God. It’s *not* to tell us about God’s work for our salvation; it’s what we have to do to earn our own salvation. This is what was rejected already at the time of the Formula of Concord.

**WILKEN:** So we have, at least, there, a nascent kind of rationalism that they’ve

encountered, they’ve noted, and they’ve clearly rejected.

**NOLAND:** Exactly.

**WILKEN:** Then with about a minute here before we take our break, does rationalism find its way into the halls of Lutheran theology at any point?

**NOLAND:** Not originally. Because of the alertness of the Lutheran pastors and professors in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, they got that into the Formula of Concord, and whenever and wherever Sozzinians showed up in the early days, they were not able to make any headway. Wherever there was orthodox theology, as long as it was in control and accepted, Sozzinians had no opportunity. Where this began to affect Lutheran theology, at least in Germany, was the pietists. The pietists got rid of the orthodox theologians and had no answer – we can talk after the break about how pietism was then destroyed by the rationalist philosophers.

**WILKEN:** Dr. Martin Noland is our guest. It’s *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week. We’re talking about the challenges to Lutheranism; today we’re discussing rationalism. We’ll pick it up right there – when the pietists got rid of all the decent Lutheran theologians, they were left defenseless against the onslaught of rationalism. Stay tuned.

**[BREAK] 27:24**

**WILKEN:** We’re talking about rationalism, past and present, as a challenge to Lutheranism for this *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week on this Tuesday afternoon, October the 27<sup>th</sup>. Dr. Martin Noland is our guest. I’m Todd Wilken; this is *Issues, Etc.*

Dr. Noland, you left us hanging there with this notion of German Lutheranism bedeviled by one error that we talked about yesterday with Dr. Larry Rast: pietism.

Really, in a lot of ways, [Lutheranism was] theologically eviscerated by pietism. You mentioned pietism getting rid of or driving off all the decent theologians, and here's where I want to pick up – that pietism essentially left itself essentially defenseless against rationalism. Tell us the story.

**NOLAND:** Well, that's true. The pietism that was dominant in Germany in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century was really activist. Dr. Rast talked yesterday about Spener and how things started, but under August Hermann Francke, [pietism] became really involved in social welfare. Then when that was seen to be a success, the Prussian princes and kings said, "Hey, let's get in on the action here." And so it was very activist-oriented, very politically connected, and there is good historical evidence – it's uncontested that in 1713, August Hermann Francke, who was the leader of the University at Halle, met with Friedrich Wilhelm III, and he was asked by the Prussian king, "Will you ever preach against any of my wars?" because the Prussians were known for starting wars. Francke was very diplomatic and indicated that he would not. After that, the pietists at Halle were under the protection of the Prussian kings. Not only at that institute, but then their influence went into all the universities. So what you have is instead of the traditional approach, which Melancthon had set forth, of a study of theology, a study of the classics, a study of the Scriptures, it was all oriented – today we might call it practical theology and social welfare. So the whole generation of students really had very minimal, at least by our standards, training, and there is a philosophy of theology even in the Scriptures under the pietists. What happened was in 1706, a professor named Christian Wolff was called to be Professor of Philosophy at the University of Halle. He was actually a philosopher. And in 1721, he gave a lecture called "On the Practical Philosophy of the Chinese," and at the time, the Germans were beginning to figure out what the Chinese were really all about from

a cultural standpoint. [Wolff] showed how the philosophy of Confucius, how natural reason, without the Scriptures, without the Church, can reach moral truth and goodness and a stable society. A couple years later, he was teaching classes with a thousand students while August Hermann Francke, who was the pietist founder of Halle and the president, was teaching to an empty classroom. These students were thirsting for knowledge of the world around them and "good thinking" type of theology and philosophy, whereas the pietists didn't have anything to offer them. Then in 1723, Wolff compared Jesus, Moses, and Mohammed to Confucius, and he was accused by Francke, the pietist leader, of atheism. Then he was fired. And he was put under threats of heresy and execution – to be executed as a heretic. So he went to the University of Marburg and increased enrollment by 50%. Obviously, he was a dynamic speaker and he knew his stuff. Then after the death of the pietist prince Frederick William in 1740, the German prince known as Frederick the Great, well known for his military accomplishments, invited Christopher Wolff back to Prussia. Wolff came back to Halle with accolades and a triumphant procession in December 1740. He became Chancellor of Halle in 1743, was bestowed the honorific title of Baron in 1745, and everybody flocked to Halle not to be a pietist, but to be a Wolffian and a rationalist. Really, Wolff's ideas were not all that different from those of Gottfried Leibniz, who was using the Cartesian method – so definitely a rationalist in philosophy. But Wolff also applied this to theology, in a similar way that Descartes had done. So this is how the German theology, in its university setting, anyway, became rationalistic. And that's the setting in which the founders of the Missouri Synod found the universities at the time they went through.

**WILKEN:** That's another vein of history that we don't have time to pursue with you. I do

want to talk about another aspect of rationalism that is somewhat – it's not unique to the American experience, because of course Western Europe is now thoroughly rationalistic. Rationalistic Christianity has essentially – that's what northern Europe essentially is now. I want to talk about that in a few minutes, but let's talk about the American experience with that, because the American founding – you mentioned before, deists who are also deeply rationalistic – the American founding is essentially one of the fruits of rationalism, and it's built into American history and into American thought. What would you say about that?

**NOLAND:** Yeah, that's a whole other area. The people that founded the United States were either English or they had studied at Oxford or Cambridge, or they were deeply imbued by those ideas. The Americans in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century really had not had time or resources to develop their own areas of thought. So when they looked back to England (in their minds they were also looking west), they were looking at the frontier and their political issues through the eyes of the deists, which they inherited. So John Locke – I remember when, a couple years ago, I visited the Monticello, and in Jefferson's study there are two very large portraits: one of Isaac Newton and the other of John Locke, and the tour guides are supposed to tell you that. So the ideas of what Locke said, for example, that what is in Scripture is reasonable, and he tried to argue that it was, and that only things that are reasonable should be acceptable to us. But Locke really established the notion of reason as the dominant tool. So he put reason on top and Scripture on the bottom. And all the deists that followed Locke in England really started using that to criticize and to use skeptical force against the Scriptures. So the American founding fathers accepted this to a greater or lesser degree. Thomas Jefferson, for example, was a thorough-going deist, and was

accused even of atheism. Other Americans – Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, they were also deists. George Washington really was not a deist; he was a nominal Episcopalian. You might argue that all Episcopalians are nominal, but that's today; that's not back then. He was a Mason, though, and because of his connection to the Masonic order, people think that he was a deist. But theologically, we really don't know what Washington believed because he kept those things to himself. So that gives you some idea, at least, of our founding fathers, and the most well known deists, in terms of writings and lectures, was Thomas Paine. The Age of Reason advocated deism, promoted reason and free thought, and argued against the institutional religion and the Church in general.

**WILKEN:** So this should be of particular concern to American Lutherans, because we're really getting it from multiple fronts. We're not just getting it from the rationalistic religious types, but we're also getting it from – it's the air we breathe in American society, in a lot of ways.

**NOLAND:** Well, that's correct. And for example, everybody knows about Harvard. It has prestige, because it was the first institution of higher education. People don't know that in 1805, the Unitarian Henry Ware was appointed as a Professor of Divinity at Harvard College, and from 1805 on, Harvard Divinity School was Unitarian. Now, today they don't run around saying "We're a bunch of Unitarians." They're just a bunch of liberal Protestants, and I would say – at the time that I was at Union, it was estimated that of those farthest to the left in the United States divinity schools, Harvard was far to the left and Union thought they were a little bit farther to the left than Harvard was. They don't even use the term "Unitarian" anymore because the whole notion of the Trinity has been thrown out. Now, they don't make a big deal about that because they don't want to upset people in

the pew that have a traditional view. But to their students and anybody who is willing to listen to them, it is really no different than the Sozzinian view, which is anti-Trinitarian. And that was Harvard Divinity School in 1805, and everybody since then in the United States looks to them to be the epitome of theological reason.

**WILKEN:** On the other side of the break, we'll talk a little bit about seeing where rationalism ends, and what the Church ends up looking like under rationalism. There's a laboratory for that – we call it northern Europe.

Dr. Martin Noland is our guest. It's *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week and we're responding to one of the challenges to Lutheranism, rationalism. He's past Director of Concordia Historical Institute and has his PhD in Church History from Union Theological Seminary in New York.

**[BREAK]**

**WILKEN:** Dr. Martin Noland is our guest. Ten more minutes with him in *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week, talking about the challenges to Lutheranism; today, rationalism.

Dr. Noland, let's talk about Northern Europe, which really is kind of the laboratory where we have seen the experiment of rationalism come to its conclusion. What do we see there?

**NOLAND:** Well, today in Europe we have mostly the state churches and we have Roman Catholicism. The state churches that are Protestant would be in Germany, the Evangelical Church in Deutschland, you have the Anglican church that is actually in Great Britain, you have the Swedish. And all those state churches that are Protestant have definitely bought into one form or another of liberal Protestant theology. Now, if you go into those churches – and I've visited a couple times; my wife and I went to

Europe while she still worked for the airlines. And we'd go in and we would go to a church service, and I understood German, and it doesn't sound too bad. The language sounds like the religious language of Lutherans or Protestants; the symbols that are on the wall – not in Switzerland, but in Lutheranism – the rituals they use, the bowing, it all looks like it's tradition. But this is actually a strategy that was devised when the rationalists found that their ideas were not accepted by the Church. I think the earliest person that talked about this was the founder of English deism, Edward Herbert, who is related to George Herbert, the poet, first Lord of Cherbury, end of the the 16<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He maintained that all religions have five common ideas: that there's a god who should be worshiped; virtue is the chief element of worship, in other words, what you do as your duty or good work; repentance for sin as a duty; and there's another life with rewards and punishments. He argued that [these things] are found in all religions, and this is what he would call the religion of nature, or natural religion. And then there's positive religion, which is religion as it's actually expressed in history and various cultures. So the rationalists of the time figured out, "Well, if we affirm and don't cause too much trouble to what's going on in the daily worship life of the congregation and the preachers learn to use that language, but to spin it in a different way, then we can have our cake and eat it too." So it does require some discernment. Of course, if you don't know those languages in Europe, then it's difficult. But if you go, for example, to Great Britain, and you listen to some of their sermons and what they're talking about, it's a little bit more clear. What you really have to do is sit down with the pastor or the priest and say, "What do you *really* believe? Not what are you telling the people out there, but what do *you* really believe?" When you start discussing the theology that we believe, they're going to look at you and say, "You're

a bunch of fundamentalists!” And, well, no, we’re not; they don’t know our history, either. But that’s really what it is. Schleiermacher, in his speeches, *To the Cultured Despisers*, which was early 19<sup>th</sup> century, he made this clear to his fellow German rationalists – that if they were going to survive, they had to say one thing in the pulpit and something different in the academy, or in their publications, because what was being taught at the university and being published was too far out, and it really rejected traditional doctrine and Scripture. Another example of this, in the development of neo-Orthodoxy: one of the things that Carl Barth said, in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was, “We can’t preach Harnack’s theology.” He was a student of Adolph von Harnack, one of the greatest theologians of the day at the University of Berlin. [Harnack was] one of his students, as was Hermann Sasse, and he said “We can’t preach that theology.” So [Barth] went back to the Scriptures and found a way that he could preach a social Gospel to the people of Switzerland in a way that they understood and that did not upset their religious viewpoints. So you have to be discerning. You can’t just take everything you hear straight up. You have to ask those preachers and theologians “What do you really believe?” and point to the Scriptures and say, “Do you believe this? And do you believe that?” And then you’ll find out where they really stand. Today, most of Europe is either atheist or deist or rationalist, and very little – there are small churches, like the ones we [the LCMS] are in fellowship with in Europe that believe in the Scriptures and traditional theology, and the Roman Catholic church still upholds much of that, but it is a sad state. And you could say that Europe could use another reformation, for sure.

**WILKEN:** I would like you to stick with us for a few minutes on the other side of the break that’s coming up here, Dr. Noland. In the meantime, we’ve got a couple minutes here.

Our church body, the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, in its recent past, has grappled with rationalism in its seminaries and in its teaching institutions. How did we respond to that, in a nutshell?

**NOLAND:** Our most famous case was at the St. Louis seminary, and after about 6 or 7 years, Jacob Preus, who was the president of the Synod at the time, set in course a process of investigation. Those professors that were preaching contrary to the Scriptures, contrary to our Lutheran theology, they were put under probation. The president of the Seminary was terminated, and when he was terminated the professors that knew they were on probation left with him. So instead of us having to terminate all those faculty, they voluntarily left and started an institution known as “Seminex,” [Seminary in Exile] which eventually ended up in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America today. So you wouldn’t say exactly that it was a purging, but it was definitely a disciplinary process by which this teaching was held to be not tolerated in our church body, and eventually it was put aside. I’m not aware that any of our official schools teach this. There may be some professors; there may be some pastors out there that teach this on the side. We just recently had a case where one of the professors that’s one of our clergy was removed – or was going to be removed and he resigned. So we do keep tabs on it. We do not tolerate this sort of theology in our church.

**WILKEN:** Dr. Martin Noland is our guest. That’s a big question for the other side of the break: why can Lutheran theology simply have no compromise or toleration when it comes to this philosophy of rationalism, and how would you know if your pastor is imbibing in this? He said something very important a few minutes ago, and that is one of the tactics of rationalism is to say, “Well, don’t preach this, don’t actually say this in Bible class.

You can believe it privately, but still make it sound like, to your people, if you're a pastor, to your parishioners and your people, that you still believe in things like the atonement, the resurrection, a 6-day creation, and you can pass for a Lutheran, although you may be privately a rationalist." Why is that not a solution, and how does the average parishioner know whether or not they're sitting at the feet of a closet rationalist in Lutheranism?

We'll answer all those questions with Dr. Martin Noland on the other side of the break. It's Tuesday afternoon, October the 27<sup>th</sup>; it's *Issues Etc.* Reformation Week and we're talking about challenges to Lutheranism, past and present. Rationalism is our subject. Dr. Martin Noland is pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, Evansville, Indiana, and past Director of Concordia Historical Institute. Stay tuned.

**[BREAK]**

**WILKEN:** Welcome back to *Issues, Etc.* I'm Todd Wilken. Our conversation with Dr. Martin Noland this *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week continues on this Tuesday afternoon. We're talking about the challenges to Lutheranism, past and present: rationalism.

Dr. Noland, you mentioned there that really, we can't, as confessional Lutherans, tolerate the encroachment of rationalism, and yet it still manages to find its way in from time to time. You said one of the strategies of rationalism was that you weren't supposed to preach it. No pastor is going to get up there and preach these things. He's going to use language wherein he can express his beliefs, perhaps by ambiguity, where his people will hear what the Bible teaches, but he doesn't have to mean it. Why is that so important for the rationalists?

**NOLAND:** First off, the position of rationalism in its various forms – the Sozzinians, the rationalists in Holland, the

deists – they were politically persecuted. So they learned, early on, various ways in which they could teach their doctrines without getting into trouble with the authorities. And this is actually why the Lodge and the Masonic Order came into being. Everybody knows that they are a secret order, kind of like the Mormons. You don't know, really, what they teach or what they do. The reason for that is they were persecuted. So they learned various techniques of teaching, of preaching; they'd say one thing to one group and something to the other group. But the question is, once it became legal – John Locke was a rationalist, and I think he may have had a little bit of suspicion toward him, but generally he was accepted. It was the people that followed him that really got into trouble because they were attacking the Scriptures. So how do you determine today, when we have complete freedom of thought in the United States? This is a bedrock, and this is one of the reasons the United States was founded – at least from the standpoint of many of the founding fathers. They did not want to have politicians looking over their shoulder at what they were teaching or what they were preaching. So you can't expect that you're going to have the same type of situation that you had in Europe for so many years, but the fact is that this is still very attractive theology – that is, the rationalist theology. Because, like the pietist theology, it makes a big deal about who I am. It elevates your pride in who you are. The whole idea that I have to go to God and say that I'm a sinner, and I have to rely completely on Jesus for my acceptance by God, that's a very humbling thing for most people, and very difficult for them. Whereas the rationalist theology says, "Where did all these things come from? They're not really true, it's two thousand years old. And besides, it's a bunch of fundamentalist theology." That's how they'll typically argue today. So how does this stuff come out? I think, ultimately, the big issue is, as I stated at the beginning of the talk, the atonement

of Christ. Because that's really the center of the Gospel. According to the New Testament, that is the Gospel in a nutshell. We have Jesus talking to Nicodemus and pointing to Moses and the bronze serpent, saying, "Just like that, the Son of Man will be lifted up and those who look to Him will be saved." That's John chapter 3. It's the essence of what our Christian doctrine is all about, but it means to say that I am a poor, miserable sinner, and Jesus is the person that's perfectly wise, perfect, and good, and virtuous, and I really am not. It's a very difficult thing for people to accept. So if the Holy Spirit has not come into their heart through the Word of God, through Baptism, the means of grace, things that sound close to that sound attractive. But what happens is the atonement drops out. So if you don't have the doctrine of atonement, what's going to happen to this thing about the wrath of God and the judgment? Well, then it's got to be me. It's got to be me and my virtue. And then if the atonement was not there, then why did Jesus really come? He didn't need to be God if there's no atonement, so then Christ comes down to our level, which is the Sozzinian thing that's happening. It's the Arian thing that's happening. And then if Jesus is only like us, then we really don't have a doctrine of a Triune God, we have one God who's up in heaven. So once you lose that key doctrine of the atonement, everything else starts falling apart. What you can have in our Lutheran churches today is preachers that do uphold the atonement, but they pick and choose things that they know will be acceptable to the people of their day. And if they start getting too much pressure, they'll back off. So in that sense, these are preachers who are politicians, you might say. It's really hard, again, as I said before, to judge just based on what they preach, or maybe teach in Bible class. You have to sit down with them in private and say, "You yourself, Pastor Smith, what do you believe about this?" And if he affirms, for example, the Book of Concord, as being the God-

given truth of Scripture, then you know, at least in that sense, that he's made a confession. But just judging from what they say, it's sometimes very difficult. You can go into a pastor's library sometimes and tell by what he's reading. But if it's a church historian by me, please don't judge me! I have to judge everything, I have to look at everything. There's a lot more stuff out since the 16<sup>th</sup> century in rationalist theology of various types. But sometimes that'll be an indication – sometimes, where they went to school. So again, please don't judge me – I went to Union Seminary in New York! But if they went to one of the divinity schools and they praise their professors as being the leading lights and they don't say the same things about our professors or our theology, then that gives you some indication of where they're focused. But again, keep the focus on the doctrine of atonement – that Jesus died for our sins to appease the wrath of God. If that is not there, everything else is going to fall down eventually.

**WILKEN:** Finally, two questions. Is rationalism still alive and well in worldwide Lutheranism? And sadly, in the largest Lutheran church body in America – the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America?

**NOLAND:** Yes, it is still alive and well in all forms of Lutheranism, except where it's been kept out. So our Missouri Synod is a haven, as are the Wisconsin Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod in the United States, and other church bodies that we're in fellowship with. But they're very small; they're not very big. And sometimes you would say in some cases, they haven't gotten very far into this. Right now, in Australia, the Lutheran Church of Australia – I think it's the only church there that's Lutheran – has been debating the issue. I think they turned it down, but they were awfully close to accepting women's ordination. You cannot accept women's ordination if you accept Scripture as the norm of theology. You can only accept

women's ordination if you accept a rationalist approach. And there are several different ways that you can make arguments, from reason, for women's ordination. But you can't do so from Scripture alone. So even though the Lutheran Church in Australia is, generally, I think, fairly orthodox, yet if they accept this women's ordination, not only will they begin to have women pastors who are advocates for women's ordination and this approach to theology, but then things will start dropping down. Because you've accepted into it a philosophical principle, a reason that judges Scripture. And this anecdote may be helpful for our audience: when I was a student at Union Theological Seminary, every year of the four that I was there, I saw new students come in, most of them masters' students. Most of them would figure out who they were. There were members of the gay-lesbian organization that was encouraging students to support their costs, and they would sit down with the new students, especially the women, and they would have this discussion: "Why are you going to be a pastor?" "Well, because of such-and-such." "Well, don't you know that Scripture says such-and-such that you shouldn't be a pastor?" And then the female student would say, "Well, this is why I know I can be a pastor." And they'd say, "Well, the same argument that you use to become a woman pastor is the same reason we believe that gays and lesbians should be accepted into the church and should also be pastors." And they converted many, many people by that argumentation. So it's not always what you believe, it's how you argue, or your method by which you argue, that determines that you're a rationalist in theology.

**WILKEN:** A couple other things here. Talk a little bit about the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and what we've seen of the fruits of rationalism there. How would you describe it?

**NOLAND:** Well, the ELCA today is a great disappointment for many people that started and put it together. There is a large group of people that have left. Some people have said that it's the largest, in a short period of time, the largest exodus out of a mainline denomination. They formed, for example, the North America Lutheran Church, CMC, and other things. The ELCA has gone on record, and I can't remember all the details, but they have affirmed church fellowship – which means that there really aren't any significant differences – between them, and I think I'm going to get this right, and if not, you can correct me, the Episcopalians, the Reformed Church of America, and I believe the United Methodists. This follows the fellowship agreements that were also made in Europe between Lutherans and those groups in Europe. So by saying, "We are in fellowship with you," they're saying, "All the differences that we have don't really count for anything." That's been significant – you're watering down, since its beginning, which was about 25 years ago – you're beginning to water down what was officially Lutheran doctrine in that church body. And then you have the constant, almost at every convention, there are political statements – usually in the area of social justice, but also in the area of global politics. So it's becoming more of a political faction in the area of secular politics than anything that really deals with theology or the Church. Women's ordination was accepted right up front, and then 2009 is when they had the big debate and accepted the ordination of gays and lesbians and the blessing of same-sex marriages, which preceded, of course, the political acceptance of that in the United States Supreme Court. How do they justify all these things that are contrary to Scripture? Well, they use the rationalist approach and say that either those things in Scripture are contrary to common sense and reason, which is a strictly rationalist approach, or they say it's outmoded. In other words, it was historically binding only to that day and age, and that's a historicist

argument developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is often used today.

**WILKEN:** So what about the Lutheran World Federation? Can we talk about it as the home of rationalism in world Lutheranism today?

**NOLAND:** Yeah, that is the main organization. They get their funding from the state churches, they get a lot of their ideas and support from the ELCA in the United States, but you could say Scripture is there some place in their theology. They have not entirely thrown out the Bible. They have not entirely thrown out Martin Luther or the book of Confessions. But none of that is really binding. It's what the organization decides from convention to convention. If you read Hermann Sasse's last series of letters – that's *Volume III, Letters to Lutheran Pastors*, he analyzes the first couple conventions of the Lutheran World Federation. He's really brilliant in his analysis and shows how, really, they think that they are the Holy Spirit speaking today. So you have a corporate form of the Pope. The Pope says he speaks for God, he has the Holy Spirit in his heart, so whatever the Pope speaks, *ex cathedra*, whatever he actually says is the Word of God. And Sasse points out that the Lutheran World Federation, in the way that it disregards Scripture and comes up with new doctrines, basically is doing the same thing. And the members are expected to uphold that. Now, they don't do a lot of theologizing, but they do a lot of politicizing. And they also are very much for advocating for women's ordination. So wherever they have some influence around the world, they'll give money to churches that support women's ordination, especially in third world countries that don't have a lot of money. And if they don't support women's ordination, they'll withdraw the money, and their pastors, well, they have to find another job. So they're very much pushing things at that level and

are totally committed to what I've described as rationalism.

**WILKEN:** Finally, Dr. Noland, what is a proper and, indeed, after our conversation, absolutely necessary confessional Lutheran response to the ideas of rationalism?

**NOLAND:** I would say that in my years of dealing with this, studying it since my seminary days – studying it at Union Seminary, and also then dealing with people at Union Seminary and thereafter who are rationalists of various types, I would say my response would be John 3:11, where Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, we speak what we know and we testify to what we have seen. But you people still do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe. How, then, will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven, the Son of Man." That's John 3:11-13, and I see that as a Biblical epistemology. Why do we know about God, who He is, His will, His purpose, His actions in history, His thoughts? We only know those things because God has revealed them. And He's revealed them most clearly through His Son Jesus, who was in heaven and saw heavenly things, and when He's on earth with His apostles, He speaks to them. He tells them of the heavenly things that He sees, and God's will and purpose, and most important, our doctrine of salvation. So all the objections that have come from the rationalists over the years to the Christian doctrine fall flat in the face of the doctrine of Jesus being the Son of God. And it's an either/or. If Jesus is the Son of God and He came from heaven, then what He tells us about God and theology is the truth. There's no higher truth that we can seek, and there's no way that we're in a position to criticize it. If He's not the Son of God, then all bets are off. And maybe these natural religion ideas or rationalism have a good bit of truth. It all depends on the deity of Jesus,

and our 16<sup>th</sup> century Formula of Concord knew that the new Arians, the Sozzinians, were that type of threat.

**WILKEN:** Dr. Martin Noland is pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Evansville, Indiana. He's past Director of the Concordia Historical Institute, and he has a PhD in Church History from Union Theological Seminary in New York.

Marty, thank you very much for your time.

**NOLAND:** It's good being with you again.

**WILKEN:** I'm Todd Wilken. Thanks for listening to *Issues, Etc.*

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