

The New Lutheran Church  
and its Statement on Scriptures

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In 1988, three Lutheran church bodies in America will join into one large association. Those three Lutheran church bodies are the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC), the Lutheran Church in America (LCA), and the American Lutheran Church (ALC).

The numbers connected with this new body are staggering. About 5.4 million of the 8.5 million confessing Lutherans in America will be a part of this new association.

The Commission for a New Lutheran Church (CNLC) made up of committees from the three merging bodies have met officically on four different occasions over the last two years. Naturally, a great deal of work is involved in joining three different groups under one constitution. At these meetings the CNLC has discussed the content of the new church's constitution in such areas as Scripture, purpose, public ministry, and the organizational structure of the new body. Various revisions have been made on each subject of discussion, but the revisions have been minor. The report of the CNLC as recorded in the December 14, 1984, issue of The Lutheran Standard, the official magazine of the ALC, will be for the most part the final make-up of the new church body. Very few changes are expected.

It is on the statement on Scripture of the CNLC that this paper will focus. A true and fair evaluation of this new church body can be made by looking solely at its statement on Scripture. For just as a building's worth can be judged by the foundation upon which it is built, so a church body's worth and strength can be evaluated by its foundation--its view of Scripture.

By this paper, God willing, it will be clear that the statement on Scripture of the CNLC is weak and vague. Built on such a foundation the new church body and her 5.4 million souls will stray ever farther from the truth.

#### THE STATEMENT

Progress report #4 recorded in The Lutheran Standard of December 14, 1984, reads:

On the basis of the holy Scripture, the Church's creeds and the Lutheran confessional writings we affirm that:

The Word of God, through whom God created everything, is Jesus Christ, God incarnate, through whose person and life God fashions a new creation.

The Word of God is God's message to us, both Law and Gospel, revealing judgment and mercy through word and deed, beginning with the Word in creation, continuing in the history of Israel, and centering in all its fullness in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The Word of God is the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Inspired by God's Spirit speaking through their authors, they are the record and witness of God's revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God's Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian

faith and fellowship for service  
in the world. They are the  
authorative source and norm  
of the Church's proclamation, faith  
and life. <sup>1</sup>

This statement on God's word can be broken down  
into three parts. According to this description of God's  
word by CNLC the word of God is: 1.) Jesus Christ.  
2.) God's message to us. 3.) The canonical Scriptures.  
Each of these three parts will be discussed in the following  
pages.

#### THE WORD--JESUS CHRIST

The fact that Scripture speaks of Jesus Christ as  
the Word can not be contested. The Holy Spirit inspired  
the Apostle John to begin his Gospel, "In the beginning  
was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word  
was God.....The Word became flesh and lived for a while  
among us." (1:1,14)

What makes this first identification of God's word  
suspect is that it speaks of a limited use of the term "Word"  
before it makes clear its position on the whole document  
which contains that term "Word." This first statement on  
the word of God can not be made unless the validity of  
the document which contains the statement is first accepted.

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<sup>1</sup>"Progress Report #4," The Lutheran Standard,  
December 14, 1984, p. 40.

By placing first the identification of the Word as Jesus Christ, the CNLC has shown the marks of liberal and unscriptural views on God's Word. It is clearly an attempt to immediately draw the attention away from the verbal inspiration of each and every word of the Holy Bible and focus that attention instead on the message or just part of the Bible.

It is a typical ploy of liberals to first and foremost identify the term "Word" as Christ. Dr. Becker speaks of this ploy:

This fact (that the Bible does speak of the "Word" as Christ) is used very effectively and deceptively by some liberal Lutherans to undermine the divine character, the verbal inspiration, the inerrancy, and the absolute authority of Scripture. They will say that according to the Biblical view the Word of God is primarily and usually the Son of God. With that as a premise, they go on to conclude that the Bible should be called the Word of God only because it speaks about Christ, who is the real Word of God. They will sometimes even assert that the Bible may be called the Word of God only when it speaks about Christ or, at most, when what it says has a direct bearing on our salvation in Christ. They hold that the Bible is the Word of God only in a "derivative sense." They maintain that to speak of the Bible as the Word of God is only a figure of speech which must not be understood literally as though God were actually speaking in the words of this book. This is the thinking behind the oft-repeated assertions: "The Word of God is not just paper and ink....The Word of God is a person, not a book." <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Dr. Siegbert W. Becker. The Scriptures, Inspired of God, (Milwaukee: NW Publishing House, 1971, p. 21.

In placing the definition of the word of God as Jesus Christ in the primary position, the CNLC has begun work on a weak foundation. Even the most liberal among them will be satisfied with the first definition of the word of God.

The CNLC is ready to quote Luther in defence of their first definition of the word of God. Liberal Lutheran theologians claim that Dr. Luther also held that Christ and the message of the Bible was to be stressed above the actual words of the book.

To bring Luther to their defence liberal Lutherans quote the Reformer from a disputation concerning "Faith and Law." Luther wrote, "If the adversaries press the Scriptures against Christ, we urge Christ against Scriptures." (WA 39, 1, 44ff)<sup>3</sup>.

At first this quotation may seem to back the liberal ideas spoken of by Dr. Becker. Luther seems to be stressing the person of Christ over the words of Scripture. It may appear that Luther agreed that the word of God is "a person not a book." However, a brief look at the context of the Luther's statement brings the Reformer's Scriptural convictions to light.

This thesis was one of several drawn up by the Reformer for a debate which was to take place in September of 1535. The debate was to be held in Wittenberg. As with any thesis put forth for debate at the universities

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<sup>3</sup>Luther quoted by Dr. Siegbert Becker. "Luther and Inerrancy," 1982, p. 1.

in Luther's day, this thesis was "crouched in provocative terms, intentionally obscure in order to call forth debate."<sup>4</sup> Since the thesis was an intentionally obscure statement, it is totally unfair to use this quotation to summarize Luther's convictions on Scripture.

Further historical context to this statement of Luther is brought to light in Dr. Becker's "Luther and Inerrancy." In fall 1535, the same year in which Luther made the statement in question, the Reformer was delivering lectures on the third chapter of Galatians. In those lectures Luther speaks out against those who were using Scripture to prove their work-righteous theology. These false teachers were twisting God's word to make it verify their false teachings. It is at such false teachers that the thesis is directed. If these men insisted on using Scripture incorrectly, Luther would focus his attention on Christ and the cross alone. He writes:

If He (i.e. Christ) Himself is the price of my redemption, if He Himself was made a curse that He might justify and bless me, I care nothing about passages of Scripture, even if you were to produce six hundred in support of the righteousness of works against the righteousness of faith, . . . . I have the Author and Lord of Scripture, and I want to stand on His side rather than believe you.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p.1

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p.2



It is clear from historical context that Luther was not "urging Christ against Scripture" in the same sense as liberal Lutherans do today. In his words and actions Luther made clear his high regard for each and every inspired word of Scripture.

Luther can be quoted in connection with this first definition of the word of God by the CNLC. In his commentary on the Gospel of John, Luther calls the identification of Christ as the "Word" a "rare and unusual term." In fact, there are only three places in Scripture (John 1; Revelation 19:13; and I John 1:1) that the term "Word" is used for Jesus Christ. Such a rare and unusual use does not warrant first and primary position in the definition of the word of God.

In summary, then, the CNLC has chosen to identify the word of God as, first of all, Jesus Christ. While it must be agreed that this is a Biblical use of the term, nevertheless, it is a very limited use of the term. Beginning with Christ as the identification of the Word of God is typically liberal view on the word of God. Such a statement leaves open the door for liberals who wish to stress the message and person of Christ rather than the verbal inspiration of each and every word of Scripture. We are not passing judgment on the members of the CNLC. Many, we pray, would not have these liberal views. But the very fact that the statement on the word of God begins as it does makes the statement a weak one. It is impossible to leave the statement on Scripture open to liberal views and still remain confessional, Scripture-based Lutherans.

THE WORD--GOD'S MESSAGE  
THE WORD--CANONICAL SCRIPTURES

The second and third definitions of the word of God by the CNLC are God's message to us and the canonical Scriptures. Since these two are closely related, we look at them together.

By describing God's word as "God's message to us" and as "the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments," the CNLC has again left open the door to liberal thinkers. The committee has tried to separate the "message" from the actual "words" of the Holy Scriptures. Such a separation can not legitimately be made. The message is the words of the Bible; the words of the Bible are the message.

To the liberal theologian making the very words of Scripture God's word is "bibliolatry." A Christian believing that God actually gave each and every word to the authors of the books of the Bible is worshiping a book rather than God. The message is the important item to the liberal. Therefore, a distinction must be made between that message and the book that contains that message.

The rationale for separating the message from the words of Scripture is purely human. Some argue that it would be impossible for the thoughts of God to be expressed in human terms. Such men would say that God is too high and beyond human understanding to be described in human words.

Such human rationale does not reflect what God has told us about man's origin. God tells us in Scripture that he has created man and given him the ability to speak.

The Lord told the excuse-loaded Moses, "Who made man's mouth? ...Is it not I, the Lord? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say." (Exodus 4:11) Since the Lord has created man and given him the ability to speak, he can and has given the words of the Bible through inspiration.

Since the Bible does speak of God as the creator of man and his abilities in various places any attempts to separate the message from the words of Scripture must not be allowed to stand. It is pure human rationalistic thinking to try to do so. Dr. Becker wrote, "...the modern attempts to distinguish between the Word of God and the Bible must be rejected on the basis of the Bible's own testimony about itself."<sup>6</sup>

In summary, then, the idea of the message of God's word apart from the sacred Scriptures is vague and weak enough to satisfy many liberals within the new Lutheran church. The divided definition allows those who do not believe in the verbal inspiration of each and every word of Scripture to live comfortably within the new association.

#### WHAT THE NEW CHURCH BELIEVES ABOUT THE WORD OF GOD

What the new Lutheran association believes about the word of God as described in the three-part definition is more evidence of a weak and vague foundation which will lead to trouble.

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<sup>6</sup>Dr. Siegbert Becker, The Scriptures inspired of God. (Milwaukee: NW Publishing House, 1971, p.24.

The report of the CNLC speaks of the canonical Scriptures with these words: "Inspired by God's Spirit speaking through their authors, they are the record and witness of God's revelation...."<sup>7</sup> This statement is also weak enough to be twisted to fit the fancy of liberals within the new association.

In calling Scripture the "record and witness" of God's revelation, the CNLC has withdrawn one step from Biblical, orthodox doctrine. Worded as it is, Scripture to the CNLC is only the "record" of what God wants us to know rather than the actual facts. The CNLC is simply confessing belief in a "hear-say" record of revelation. Obviously, those who deny that God's word is each and every word of Scripture are satisfied with the wording of the CNLC.

The CNLC continues, "They (Scriptures) are the authoritative source and norm of the Church's proclamation, faith and life."<sup>8</sup> This statement also is not strong enough to hold off false doctrine and practice.

Noticeably missing are the words "inerrant" and "infallible." True, these words are not inspired or found anywhere in the Bible. However, a brief look at the reasons for including these words or not including them calls their omission by the CNLC into question.

First, it should be noted that the omission of "inerrant" and "infallible" was intentional. The CNLC

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<sup>7</sup>"Progress Reprint #4," The Lutheran Standard, December 14, 1984, p. 40.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 40.

made it obvious that it purposely left out these two words.

In an editorial column in The Lutheran Standard, Lowell G. Almen states that the words "inerrant" and "infallible" are "misleading and mischief-making words."<sup>9</sup> He goes on to say,

Perhaps "inerrant" and "infallible" once served a purpose for American Lutherans. But they have been misused and misunderstood, and they must not be perpetuated. As we begin the task of shaping the statement of belief for the new church, we have the chance to find better, clearer, fresher, and stronger words to witness to the authority of the Word for us and for our church.<sup>10</sup>

However, the very reasons that the words "inerrant" and "infallible" were brought into American Lutheranism should lead the CNLC to include them. Unless, however, they are not interested in truth and orthodoxy.

According to an article by Todd Nichol of Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary in St. Paul, the words "inerrant" and "infallible" first appeared in theological use in America around the late 1800's and early 1900's. Its use was to defend the once universally held views of verbal inspiration of Scripture. As more and more liberal views like historical criticism and Darwinism-evolution filtered onto the newly expanding American continent, the use of the words became wide-spread among theologians interested in the truth.

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<sup>9</sup>Lowell G. Almen, The Lutheran Standard. Oct. 15, 1982, P. 31.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.31.

The intentional omission of words used to secure truth and accuracy can mean only one thing.--The CNLC is intentionally not interested in truth and accuracy. The statement on Scripture of the new Lutheran church was purposely worded as it was to allow a wide range of views on God's word. Such a weak foundation can only lead to continued straying from the truth.

DANGEROUS RESULTS OF THE  
WEAK STATEMENT ON SCRIPTURE

With a weak, vague foundation like the CNLC is laying for the new Lutheran church, many dangerous results will certainly follow. All these dangerous results can be traced back to the weak statement on God's word. The words of Walther are surely true: "The least deviation from the old inspiration doctrine introduces a rationalistic germ into theology and infects the whole body of doctrine."<sup>11</sup>

The first result which has already infected the planning for the new Lutheran association is doctrinal indifference. Surely it is clear from this paper that the CNLC is willing to allow a wide range of theological and doctrinal views within her new walls. Such liberties our Lord has not given us. Christ says, "If you continue in my word, then you are really my disciples." (Jn 8:31) The CNLC has seemingly dismissed Jesus' words.

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<sup>11</sup>Dr. C.F.W. Walther quoted by Carl Mischke, "Unanimity in the Doctrine of Inspiration, an Absolute Pre-requisite for Unity." From WLS essay file, p.7

Doctrinal indifference will also allow the Historical Critical Method of interpretation and Gospel reductionism to run unchecked. The supernatural acts of the Holy Scripture will suffer. Everything from creation to the miracles of Jesus are suspect when the Scriptures are defined in the weak terms that the CNLC has set down.

Along with doctrinal indifference will come the Social Gospel. Religion will eventually be defined as "deeds, not creeds" rather than "both deeds and creeds." Concerns of the new Lutheran church will shift from the individual sinner to society. Law and Gospel will give way to new social laws and rules. The goals will not be to convert and sanctify but to improve the quality of life. The ultimate goal will not be heaven but a heaven on earth.

Another dangerous result of the weak definition of God's word will be unionism. Koehler lists the disastrous effects of unionism:

Unionism, which asks the various denominations to form union, or at least to maintain church-fellowship among themselves, despite their disagreement in doctrine--that allegedly being a matter of indifference--is a gross violation of the divine command. Furthermore, it does not serve the cause of unity, but perpetuates division, since it demands toleration of the original cause of division, false doctrine. It sins, further, against love; instead of warning the errorist and the erring Christians, it palliates errors. It is immoral; it pretends a unity that does not exist and operates with dishonest, ambiguous formulas of union. Finally, it involves a denial of the truth, since he who consciously compromises with error, compromises and betrays the corresponding truth, and since it springs from indifference and fosters indifference, it tends

to bring on the loss of the entire truth.<sup>12</sup>

The real loser from the weakness of the statement on Scripture of the CNLC will be the soul that the new church is to feed. Both those already within the new association and those who will be brought into her fold will be badly malnourished. Souls in need of comfort and forgiveness will find only a watered-down Gospel.

#### CONCLUSION

In 1988, the AELC, LCA and ALC will merge into a new, large church body. Although this body will be made up of over five million members, it will not be a strong, effective tool in the Lord's hand. She will fall short of her capability because of her own weakness. That weakness is her vague, weak statement on Scripture.

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<sup>12</sup>Edward W.A. Koehler. A Summary of Christian Doctrine. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1952, p. 249.



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