

# **The Doctrinal Situation of Three Merging Churches**

**LCA (Lutheran Church of America)**

**ALC (American Lutheran Church)**

**AELC (American Evangelical Lutheran Church)**

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## **ENTHUSIASTICALLY UNITING**

Expectations and tensions ran high on the afternoon of September 8, 1982 as the time arrived for announcing the delegate voting results of the separate but simultaneous conventions of the ALC, LCA and the AELC. The approved resolution would trigger steps toward union of those three bodies.

Polls had shown solid majorities in each church favoring union. The ALC seemed to be the big question mark in all of this.

At 4:00 PM (Eastern Daylight Time) the voice of church historian Martin E. Marty came over an audio system connecting the three conventions. The LCA was in Louisville, Kentucky. The AELC was in Cleveland, Ohio. The ALC in San Diego, California. Bishop James Crumley announced the LCA vote: 669 yes and 11 no. Bishop William Kohn reported the AELC vote: 136 yes, none against. Presiding Bishop David Preus gave the ALC vote: 897 yes and 87 no. The delegates applauded in jubilation. One wonders if the angels in heaven also rejoiced.

Actually this coming union which should be completed in 1988 is only a natural outgrowth of what these churches teach especially on a leadership level and also to a great extent on the laity level. It is no great secret that there is great doctrinal deterioration in the seminaries of these three church bodies and an abandonment of much that is distinctly Lutheran. Yet it is true that the regular rank and file for the most part are not aware of this doctrinal change. If they were there might be a real revolt, especially by the seemingly more conservative laymen of the ALC. But paid professionals will usually have more say than laymen who volunteer their time and effort. As I see it, the conservative part of these churches will face eroding support although in some areas they are making themselves heard. Since all three churches are basically liberal, and since most consider difference in doctrine no barrier to union, it is only natural that they would join together.

As you examine what is being taught and practiced you will realize that our differences with these liberal Lutheran churches involve much more than inter-communion, ecumenism, evolution and women pastors. It involves most basic doctrines. Even if their official confessions are good sounding there is a great deal of divergence in practice. Doctrinal discipline is practically non-existent.

I have talked to ALC and LCA pastors and they tell me that they really believe the same as I but that their practice is a bit different. After all they accept the same confessional writings. But if you pursue this a bit further and ask if they believe in the office of the papacy as the Anti-Christ and the verbal inspiration of Scripture there comes a lot of heming and hawing. Older pastors have assured me that there is no doctrinal change in their respective synods and that the vicars they have had believe no different doctrine. It seems to a certain extent they are burying their heads in the sand and are not really fully aware of what is going on.

## **TRIVIA ABOUT EACH CHURCH**

The LCA has been pushing for Lutheran union for a long time. It would even accept the Wisconsin Synod if we wanted to join them as long as we would allow their members to believe what they want to believe and not be divisive. LCA leaders for the time being are giving up in an effort to include the Missouri Synod in a

Lutheran union because of what seems to them stubborn conservatives have taken over. There is room for almost any shade of belief as long as it is not divisive.

The ALC is the most cautious of the three churches. Joining with Missouri now seems to be out of the question. They have more conservative believers than the other two churches. They will also be the ones to lose the most in this coming union. Since they are not doing so well on a fund drive to raise money for the union, they may lose some clout. No doubt some congregations will leave the ALC when the merger comes. Some have already left and joined a conservative organization called Lutherans Alert based in the state of Washington.

Another organization is trying to impress conservative views from the inside. They call themselves FELLP (Fellowship of Evangelical Lutheran Laity and Pastors). What spurred FELLP leaders to organize was the issuance of a liberal statement on homosexuality by the Minnesota Council of Churches (several LCA and ALC districts were involved) in late 1982, and the discovery that sexually explicit films were being used in counseling programs of Lutheran Social Services of Minnesota. They held a convention in which 1,079 persons attended. At the convention and elsewhere they were particularly disturbed by questions of Bible authority. They feel that the words referring to the Bible should include the terms *infallible* and *inerrant*. They also want disciplinary measures against theologians and clergy in seminaries and colleges who deny the virgin birth, deity of Christ, the resurrection and do not speak out against abortion, homosexuality, and other gross sins. So far many have stayed in the ALC and LCA although some have withheld funds for the synod.

The AELC is the maverick among the three churches. At their convention a woman preacher said that we sin when we are more worried about Trinitarian language than the suffering people of Namibia. One layman commented to his pastor, "I didn't realize that we had to make a choice between orthodoxy and compassion." Richard John Neuhaus, a liberal Lutheran, in his *Forum* letter (Oct. 26, 1984) stated in reference to the above remark that there is still a much needed consciousness raising with their lay people.

At that same convention the real big news was that Will Herzfeld became bishop and in the process became the first black leader of a U.S. Lutheran body. He announced that he was a bishop for people of color. This note was struck so incessantly that some delegates of non-color began to mumble about whether they still belonged in the AELC. One bishop confronted Bishop Herzfeld in a smaller meeting and said, "Well some of us are wondering whether there is still a place for us in this church." At which it is reported that Bishop Herzfeld "went white," and assured "all and sundry" that he will be bishop of "all and sundry." Colorful stories were told which elicited laughter from those who enjoyed seeing "whitey's" stage being taken over to expose his "honky hypocrisies." Some of the delegates thought the stories and the mood to be somewhat off color but they were sharply reminded that they've been running things long enough and had better get used to an inclusive church.

When the AELC members left the Missouri Synod, they had hoped that a thousand congregations would join them. But only 150 congregations left with a membership of a little over 100,000. It has no national program, and left to themselves they would look like small potatoes. But since they consider themselves the catalyst to the big Lutheran merger they can now sit with the big boys in world Lutheranism and ecumenical councils. Many of the AELC are looking on until 1988 when the merger comes and they can move into the center ring under the "Big Top" of the new church. Perhaps Tietgen might become the first president of the merged church.

How does the AELC, ALC and LCA view the Missouri Synod (LCMS)? LCMS President Bohlman brought greetings to the ALC convention and according to Neuhaus (*Forum*, November 23, 1984) sounded a little forced in urging "closer and higher levels of cooperation and unity" among Lutherans despite what he termed "diverging courses." According to Neuhaus that may be due to the night before. Bohlman shared an elevator with an ex-Missouri-now ALC pastor, who did not know Bohlman was in the elevator. As ex-Missourians do with anyone within hearing, he went on how the Missouri Synod "went to hell in a handbasket with the 1969 election of J.A.O. Preus and hadn't improved much since." Only later did the pastor realize why the other people in the elevator were trying to shush him.

## MAIN CONCERNS NOT NECESSARILY DOCTRINAL

I haven't yet talked much about doctrine in the three churches. There is concern by some about doctrine in the coming merger. Conservatives are pushing their concerns, and they have won some skirmishes. Some added conservative emphasis has been added to the Statement of Faith and Statement of Purpose for the new Lutheran church. Listened to some extent now, they will—I feel—be ignored more and more in the future. The main concern for the Commission on the New Lutheran Church (CNLC) seems to be the organizational structure of the church, whether it will be a three expression or four expression (level) church. It will probably become a three level church like the LCA, and this means that the national leaders will wield more power and authority. The ALC is pushing for more local authority and a four level church such as the Methodists have now. There was also major concern about the official national publication, support of seminaries, pensions and many other practical things not specifically related to Scripture. Since they are making the new church an inclusive church they have made quotas for voting delegates in synodical and national conventions. Forty percent are to be pastors. The lay representatives are to include an equal number of women and men and ten percent of these voting delegates are to be what we could call minorities. At the present minorities make up of a little over 1% of the ALC and almost 2% of the LCA. A big problem was the matter of who would be considered pastors or ministers. The three synods disagree on this. For the time being they will consider as ministers all ordained pastors including bishops, commissioned and certified lay professionals, parochial school teachers and consecrated deacons and deaconesses. Grandfathered in for now, it may present a problem to be resolved in future conventions.

## THE MAJOR ERROR

Time to time reports have come up that there are people in these churches about to merger who deny such basic doctrines as the deity of Christ, the resurrection of Christ and the full inspiration of Scripture. People from these churches will vehemently deny this. *Christian News* has made quite a number of charges of false doctrine. Many of these basic denials of basic truths seem to be supported by books put out by Muhlenberg (Fortress) and Augsburg publishing houses. I wonder how strictly controlled they are by their respective synods. If there is any control, it seems to be lax. Every book published by these publishing houses is probably not the official position of the LCA and ALC members. They are written by scholars who are in the vanguard of the church. Respectability given by the publishing houses will do a lot of damage and will eventually lead lay people down the road of error if not to destruction. I don't think the picture is as black and white as *Christian News* presents it, but there is abundant evidence to convince one of mass apostasy—at least by leading scholars, professors and leaders of the three Lutheran Church bodies. The whole thing revolves around the inspiration of Scripture and subscription to the Lutheran confessions. This is the cause of the great cleavage between liberal Lutherans and those of more conservative Lutherans. Before we go too far, let us look at the Statement of Faith (as revised February 18, 1985, found in *Lutheran Perspective*, March 18, 1985):

On the basis of the Holy Scripture, the Church's creeds, and the Lutheran confessional writings, we confess our faith in the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit:

—who as Creator made all that is, gives and preserves life, and acts in judgment and mercy, intending that all enjoy the goodness of creation;

—who as Redeemer frees us from bondage to sin and death for life as God's people now and in the age to come;

—who as Sanctifier brings us to faith, empowers us with new life, unites us in fellowship with all believers, and enlivens us for service in the world.

We confess our faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, who in his life, death, and resurrection for our justification has reconciled us to God and is the foundation for our trust in God's promise of

forgiving love, for our lives of love and service in the world, and for our hope of the coming of God's kingdom.

We confess the Gospel as the power of God that saves all who believe and that creates and sustains the Church for God's mission in the world.

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 authoritative source and norm of the Church's proclamation, faith and life.

Together with the Christians through the centuries, we confess as our own the faith confessed in the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian creeds.

Together with all Lutherans, we confess as our own the faith confessed in the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. We affirm the other Lutheran confessional writings in the Book of Concord, namely, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles, the Small Catechism, the Large Catechism, and the Formula of Concord, as valid expressions of the faith confessed in the Augsburg Confession and its central teaching of justification by grace through faith alone.

We affirm the importance of the Nicene Creed and the Unaltered Augsburg Confession for ecumenical relations, and the value of Luther's Small Catechism for the nurture of adults and children.

We affirm that the whole Church and all its members are called constantly to the action of confessing and witnessing to their faith, especially as new issues and challenges arise.

We believe the above statement to be the historic faith of the Church, rooted and grounded in God's revelation as recorded in the Holy Scripture and affirmed and confessed in the Church's creeds and the Lutheran confessional writings.

At first glance this seems to be a commendable confession. But as you look closer, you see certain omissions. What really is God's mission in the world? Note the threefold distinction made of the Word of God. Many theologians will say that Christ and the Gospel as the Word of God are infallible and inerrant, but not that Word recorded in Scripture which talks about Christ and the Gospel. The ALC in their present constitution call the written Word of God to be infallible and inerrant, but it is omitted here because it is felt that it could be misunderstood. Some seem to be concerned that if somebody finds a mistake in the Bible they will throw it out. They feel that they can better defend the Bible without those terms. The direct statement that the "Scriptures create and sustain Christian fellowship and faith for service to the world," was voted down because as one ALC theologian (Gerhard Forde of Luther Northwestern Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota) put it, "Lutherans believe that the proclaimed Word in preaching, not the Bible itself creates and sustains faith." (*Lutheran*, November 21, 1984, p. 21)

The authors of the Statement of Faith consider the Nicene Creed and the Unaltered Augsburg Confession as primary confessions of faith which they will insist on for ecumenical relationships. The other Lutheran Confessions are considered as valid confessions of faith but not necessarily binding. Some liberal theologians talk about continuing revelation. When they say that the Church may have to confess its faith if new issues arise, this is carefully explained that this is to be done in an ecumenical manner together with other churches they are joined to or will join in the future.

Actually when it comes down to it, they do not want further statements to be added to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. President David Preus of the ALC said when the LCMS in 1973 adopted “A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles” that the Missouri action was a narrowing down of the confessions. In an article called “ALC President Deplores Missouri Synod Firings” Preus is quoted as saying:

It is my conviction that the LCMS action in adopting “A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles” has had the effect of narrowing down the Confessions of the Lutheran church. In so doing the “Statement” has been divisive and destructive—tearing down instead of building up the fellowship. The Lutheran Confessions provide a full and adequate understanding of the Christian faith. To narrow Lutheran confessional subscription to a particular way of interpreting those confessions only causes confusion, bitterness, and a diversion from the essential mission tasks of the church. The ALC believes the differences that exist within the LCMS are not destructive of a confessional unity among Lutherans. We continue to urge the members of the LCMS to witness to their internal confessional unity and to their external confessional unity with other Lutheran churches. (*The Lutheran Standard*, April 20, 1976)

As I mentioned before, stress is put on the Gospel being true and not necessarily the words of the Bible which reveal it. In some cases, what actually happens is that the Gospel is reduced to a few simple slogans such as “Law and Gospel” or “justification.” It finally does come to be watered down to just a matter of just affirming one another. It consists of helping people to be really human and to have good self-images about themselves remembering that they are children of God and have human dignity and self-worth. Essentially what is left is humanism. This is what some liberal Lutheran scholars are promoting.

What has done damage to true Bible doctrines is the historical-critical method promoted in ALC and LCA seminaries. Using the historical-critical method in which the Bible is judged and studied as an ordinary human book, theologians have placed themselves above the Bible. Miraculous stories of the Bible are thrown out and considered to be legend. Historical-critical methods used in the three uniting synods will weaken its already watered down doctrine so that the future liberal Lutheran scholars will say that we do not know the real Jesus and that he did not intend to apply to himself Messianic titles. Most lay people do not accept this now, but this will seem to be the wave of the future. *Christian News* makes the claim that there are no LCA, ALC or AELC theologians who actually believe in the full inspiration, infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture. This taking away of the facts upon which the Gospel is based will not only reduce the Gospel but destroy it.

Liberal Lutheran theologians engage in a great deal of doubletalk. While they will say that the authority of the Bible is the authority of God who works in and through it, they will also say that its effectiveness as a means of grace is not dependent on its factual inerrancy. Some ALC theologians will incorporate the mention of inerrancy and infallibility within their perspective, but not in the formal sense of the text of the Scripture. Often it is said that the historical-critical interpretation of Scripture has made it clear that there are more or less diverse—if not contradictory—theologies in the Bible itself. They see great value in the historical-critical method because it helps them explain the seeming inconsistencies in the Bible. Carried to its conclusion modern questions and insight have replaced Scripture as the sole source and absolute norm of Christian theology. The Bible *is not* the word of God but *contains* the word of God. The message of modern theologians and scholars are continuing to be in effect inspired messages, truer and more correct than the Bible. Richard Simon Hanson makes this statement in an article entitled “Scripture and the New Church” (*The Lutheran Standard*, February 17, 1984):

These Scriptures cease at a point in time. Yet God continues to send inspired messages through speakers, including persons such as St. Augustine, Moses Maimonides, St. Francis of Assisi, Birgitta of Sweden, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, and Martin Luther King Jr., to name but a few. The process of revealing truth to and through people still continues.

If you understand the difference between how real Lutherans and liberal Lutherans treat Scripture, you can understand why there is such a difference between Lutherans. Sometimes it is much easier to agree with conservative Roman Catholics than with liberal Lutherans.

### **LOSS OF VERBAL INSPIRATION LEADS TO OTHER ERRORS**

When the doctrine of full inspiration is questioned, this leads to questioning of other doctrines. You may use Lutheran presuppositions with the historical-critical method, but what a weak foundation that becomes. Once you lose part of Scripture, this leads to a process where you will lose all of it. So it is not surprising that book's put out by liberal publishing houses and liberal scholars deny the Trinity. Some talk about the being of God in a modalistic fashion, as though God puts on three faces rather than being three individual persons.

Casting aspersions on the deity of Christ is being done although I do not believe this is widely held. Much of this error seems to be adoptionistic. So it is not surprising that a Lutheran Council of the United States of America (LCUSA) studies a document entitled "Who Can This Be? Studies in Christology," published as a guide to study and discussion, avoids the direct assertion that Christ is God except by way of quotation from traditional creedal materials. This study guide intimates strongly that Christ was a child of his times. According to this article, he was probably unaware of the resurrection that lay beyond the criminals death on the cross next to him. It strongly suggests that we find the most unique manifestation of divinity precisely at those places where he most clearly identifies himself compassionately with his fellow human beings, that when he is a most compassionate man he is simultaneously most clearly divine. Subsequently all miracles reporting Jesus' control of nature are either coincidences or exaggerations of actual events or symbolical representations of spiritual realities.

If you deny the deity of Christ the resurrection account will also be emptied of real facticity. Pointing out so-called contradictions in the resurrection stories, certain liberal Lutheran scholars maintain that it is possible that the corpse of Jesus decayed in the grave and that the bones are still there but that Jesus is at the same time truly resurrected. Professor Robert Scharleman, who at one time followed more liberal ideas at St. Louis Concordia Seminary, made a statement to this effect in the 1962 *Dialog*, a theological publication put out by liberal Lutherans.

Liberal Lutherans will read the words of the agenda at funerals and yet will deny the essence of these words in scholarly religious discussions and magazines. In connection with this I remember a true story that our sainted Professor Becker used to tell. A Lutheran pastor was preaching a funeral sermon and talking about eternal life. This apostate pastor said that he didn't know whether this man would be resurrected and live in heaven but that he would still have eternal life for he would live on in the memory of his friends and loved ones. But getting back to the subject of the resurrection of Christ, many liberal Lutherans are influenced by Bultman. He basically considered the resurrection of Christ to be a rise of faith in the disciples' heart.

### **CHIEF ARTICLE DENIED**

What was Christ's work here on earth, his major task? There seems to be a lack of clarity on this subject in LCA, ALC, and AELC publications. With many moderns there seems to be a revulsion against blood theology, against the idea that Christ was an atoning sacrifice. This is true also among liberal Lutherans. This seems to be a common element in excluding hymns from the joint Lutheran hymnal put out by the LCA, ALC and LCMS. This shocking statement is quoted from the *Lutheran* (official publication of the LCA) January 21, 1970:

And the Scriptures declare that it was God's will that he (Christ) should die. This was not because God demanded, or even wanted his death as a payment for sin. Or that God required the

shedding of blood to appease his anger. But God willed the death of Jesus because it is only through human suffering and weakness that God's power is made known.

There was a complaint correctly made about the CNLC "Statement of Faith" by a conservative theologian of the ALC that they put too much stress on the idea of God and man being reconciled with the result that Christ's payment for sin is overshadowed and not really stressed as should be the case.

Many liberal Lutherans really deny what they claim to be the chief article of faith, namely, justification by faith. Some suggest that justification is more like liberation which you can receive in other ways than through Christ. Seeds of universalism are present.

At this point I would like to bring into our discussion a book called *The Evangelical Catechism* put out by the ALC. It is an English translation of a German edition. Some say that this is the most significant book put out by the ALC since the ALC came into existence. This book is not meant for children but for adults. To say the least, this book does not make a clear confession of what is true. It presents contradictory ideas of famous people which you more or less have to decide for yourselves. I would like to give you an idea of what it has to say about sin first of all. It emphatically states that sin cannot be traced to one man and denies that he made the whole human race guilty and caused us to inherit a depraved and corrupt human nature. It denies the existence of Adam or that there was a historical fall into sin. Sin is described not as the transgression of God's Law but only as forces that pull society apart. Sin is not really something that one does against God nor is it something that damns. Guilt is only a feeling we have and not a status we have before God. God is not really angry about sin and against sinners.

Next let us consider what this *Evangelical Catechism* has to say about the atonement. No mention is made of Christ's vicarious atonement. The closest you get to the doctrine is the vague statement, "In words and actions through the cross and His resurrection Jesus made it possible for all human beings to come into a new and just relationship with Him, to be justified." One would like to have a fuller, more Scripture-oriented statement than that. Justification is never said to be a forensic acquittal of man, an absolution, but only as a reconciliation as of being brought back into a relationship with God. This book explains terms which talk about Christ's salvation, redemption, propitiation and atonement (actual results of his substitutionary obedience of life and death) as only figurative expressions, "metaphors," "theories of the atonement" designed to explain how we are brought back into a relationship with God.

With the downgrading of Christ and what he has done, the idea is popular in ecumenical circles that no religion is superior and that Christianity is not the only saving religion. So you can see the damage that has been done to what Luther called the "first and chief article" of our faith. This liberal theology is not being preached so much in sermons, but it does come up in Bible classes and other supposedly more mature discussion groups.

## **EVOLUTION SUPPOSEDLY BEST THEORY**

Evolution seems to be swallowed hook, line and sinker by all the leading professors and theologians. So much so that Otten in *Christian News* says that there are no professors in the LCA and ALC who are willing to take a stand against those in the LCA and ALC who deny the inerrancy of Scripture and teach the evolutionary origin of man and the universe.

Dr. Robert Paul Rothe, professor at Luther Northwestern Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, wrote in the *Lutheran* (Nov. 21, 1979):

Evolution is the best theory we have about the development of life but not the last.... Biblical story must never be taken as scientific record. The language is not literal but analogical.... It is a serious mistake to confuse language by saying creation is an alternative to evolution.... The scientific theory of evolution does not contradict the Biblical account of creation.... Evolution is scientific theory, creation is theological story.

## MIRACLES QUESTIONED

All miracles in the Bible are subject to critical questioning by liberals in the LCA, ALC and AELC. The Bible does not bring exact history. Rather it is meaningful history called “salvation history.” One is told to be more concerned about the meaning of events than a careful record of what took place. The miracles that happened on that first Christmas—including the Virgin Birth—are largely considered to be mythical. This is the position of Dr. Robert Marshall in his book, *The Mighty Acts of God*. This is part of the LCA’s Sunday School curriculum for adults. The documentary hypothesis is here presented in a very favorable light.

To show the deterioration in doctrine among the LCA and ALC I would like to quote some statistics given by Dr. Lawrence Kirsten who made a scientific study of U.S. Lutherans in the Detroit and surrounding area. He writes in *The Lutheran Ethic*, “Only one in ten LCA and less than one in five ALC clergy view the Bible as God’s Word and entirely true. More than three-quarters of the LCA and more than half of the ALC clergy indicate that belief in the virgin birth of Christ no longer is necessary to be a good Christian. Nearly a third of the LCA clergy say that belief in Jesus Christ as Savior is not essential to salvation.”

## NEW IMMORALITY GIVEN SOME APPROVAL

Since the clarity of Scripture is questioned, there also is fuzziness as far as moral issues are concerned. Literature about morals from liberal Lutherans will more or less explore and discuss the issues rather than come out with a straightforward condemnation found in the Word of God for deviant behavior. Although “fun sex” and “recreational sex” are spoken against, the door seems to be open to situation ethics and the new morality. The *St. Louis Globe Democrat* (July 3, 1970) entitled a story about the LCA convention, “Liberalized Sex Ethic Lutherans’ Basic Stance.” It reported that at its fifth biennial convention in Milwaukee the LCA upheld the value of the legal marriage contract but yet maintained that a “covenant of fidelity” is more important than a legal contract. A dynamic, life-long commitment of one man and one woman in a personal and sexual union should exist within the legal marriage but could exist outside legal marriage. Dr. Paul Orso of Baltimore on the LCA Board of Social Ministry explained that the document’s ethic would allow Lutherans to look favorably on the development of a sexual relationship between a married person and someone other than his marriage partner, if, for legal or personal reasons, a divorce cannot be obtained and the “covenant” has ceased to exist in the legal marriage. Lutheran scholars have been saying that the monogamy talked about in the Bible has been historically conditioned and does not necessarily apply in the same way today.

A book published by Augsburg called *Embodiment—An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* written by Dr. James B. Nelson (not an ALC theologian) is praised by many ALC theologians. Nelson says:

I do not see the traditional form of marriage retaining its monopolistic sway. I see, rather, a future of marital options. Traditional marriage will remain one option.... Premarital coitus may be a good thing because it frees the couple for more effective coping with the myriad other adjustments which they must make to each other.

Professor Martin Marty of AELC fame is quoted in *Playboy* as supporting a pastor who encouraged a woman to have extra-marital intercourse. These are strong statements and may be played up a bit by the *Christian News*, but where there is smoke there is fire.

Abortion is being promoted in all three liberal church bodies. The editor of the LCA’s *Lutheran* wrote in the February 18, 1976 *Lutheran*:

Those who find abortion-on-demand distasteful and possibly immoral need to recognize that there is often a valid basis for abortions on demand. Women have a right before God to determine the use of their own bodies.



The LCA in its 1970 biennial convention passed a resolution that was reaffirmed in the 1978 convention:

On the basis of the evangelical ethic, a woman or couple may decide responsibly to seek an abortion. Earnest consideration should be given to life and total health of the mother, her responsibilities to others in her family, the state of development of the fetus, the economic and psychological stability of the home, the laws of the land and to the consequences for society as a whole.

The ALC is more conservative on this issue. It has adopted some pro-life statements although they have not been as clear as we would like. There are also many AELC members who oppose abortion, but they have not been able to get the AELC to condemn the sin of abortion upon demand. This issue will be a thorny problem for the uniting church to solve.

Another problem of immorality is homosexuality. A group called Lutherans Concerned for Gay Ministry (publisher of *Gay Lutheran*) have been pushing for acceptance of the homosexual life style and even for gay pastors. Those who push for these revolutionary ideas claim that Paul and others in the Bible were hindered by their limited world view and that with new scientific and psychological evidence we should approve homosexuality and the ramifications that go with that. First there was a push just to approve of homosexual orientation as though this was not sinful in itself. Now they are even pushing for acceptance of homosexual activity. Most laity are standing firm against acceptance of homosexuals but many clergy, LCA in particular, are taking an increasingly tolerant attitude toward homosexuality. To a lesser degree among pastors, this is true of the ALC and AELC.

The author of *Embodiment* referred to before says:

I came to believe that nothing less than full Christian acceptance of homosexuality and its responsible genital expression adequately represented the direction of both Gospel and contemporary research. While full acceptance means rather sharp turning from majority opinion in the Christian moral tradition about homosexuality, I am convinced that it does not mean an ethical change from the *central thrust of the Gospel*. (emphasis mine)

What a prime example of what Gospel reductionism will do! The author further argues for acceptance of homosexual acts because they are not really foreign. The same acts are often used by heterosexuals. But the drive for the acceptance of homosexuals in these liberal Lutheran church bodies will be a long and hard one and probably divisive.

### **FELLOWSHIP WITH JUST ABOUT ANYBODY?**

There are many more shades of theological belief in these three uniting churches than we in our sheltered Wisconsin Synod can possibly imagine. When they join together they will really be agreeing to disagree on many issues. Leaders of the church feel that there is plenty of room for different theologies.

You have heard about the inter-communion agreement these church bodies made with the Episcopalian church. By the way, the Episcopalian church in its 1967 convention resolution declared that heresy is an anachronism. Unionistic services have been going on for some time.

This union of the LCA, ALC and AELC will not stop with Lutheran churches. Talks with the Episcopalian Church are well underway as well as with the Roman Catholic Church and certain Reformed Churches. Dr. George Lindbeck, a member of the Task Force on Theology for the CNLC has played a big part in the dialogue team with the Roman Catholic Church. In a more recent LCUSA report featuring an article called "We'll Soon Dance Together", he says that Lutherans rather than Anglicans are the bridge church

between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. "Evangelical Catholicism" of the Lutheran movement necessitates "reunion with Rome," even if that does not now seem possible.

Ecumenism is one of the most popular items of the day, and the liberal Lutherans will push for unity with other churches besides Lutheran ones. It will just be a matter of time. Sad to say, many of the men and women who make up the Commission on the New Lutheran Church are very liberal and deny many so-called Lutheran doctrines. Although conservatives are giving them some static they will in the end prevail.

### **GOSPEL OR SOCIAL GOSPEL?**

A broad emphasis of the new Lutheran church to be formed will be social Gospel. It is generally felt that the Gospel has to be applied to issues of human need and justice. The church body should be committed to this approach. The three churches have become increasingly political and social minded. In their recent conventions they have passed resolutions on El Salvador (anti-Reagan), recognition of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, curtailment of investments in South Africa, disapproval of nuclear war preparations, Namibia, etc. The ALC in their last convention even supported civil disobedience in exceptional cases. The ALC in particular has shown a lot of concern about farm problems. Some of the causes these churches support are leftist. I even read in one place that Lutheran bishops were thinking of putting out a manifesto on economics similar to what the Roman Catholic bishops are coming out with. All of this is an outgrowth of the social gospel which is well spelled out in the "Statement of Purpose" put out by the CNLC. Quite a bit of space and words are used to spell this social Gospel out.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE (as revised February 18, 1985) in *Lutheran Perspective*, March 18, 1985.

**THE CHURCH IS A PEOPLE CREATED BY GOD IN CHRIST, CALLED AND SENT TO BE GOD'S CREATIVE, REDEEMING, SANCTIFYING COMMUNITY IN THE WORLD.**

1. *Therefore, this church shall:* (a-g omitted)

h. Work for peace in the world and dignity for all people by advocating justice and reconciliation among the nations, responding to human need, and standing in solidarity with the voiceless and the powerless, the poor and the exploited, the homeless and the hungry. (i-k omitted)

2. Therefore in order to fulfill these purposes, this church shall: (a-n omitted)

o. Study social issues and trends in the light of the Gospel for the purpose of advocacy, ministry, and institutional change.

p. Work to discover the root causes of oppression and injustice, and in faithfulness to God and neighbor develop programs of advocacy to address those persons, structures of society, and systems of power that contribute to such oppression and injustice.

r. Relate to civil authorities in areas of mutual endeavor to help maintain good order, protect and extend civil rights, establish justice and equality of opportunity, promote the general welfare and advance the dignity of all persons, while maintaining the institutional separation of church and state in a relationship of functional interaction.

s. Express the servant nature of the church by establishing, supporting, recognizing, and guiding institutions and agencies to minister to the spiritual and temporal needs of people in difficult circumstances.

t. Enter into relations with other Lutheran church bodies and with other Christian churches for the advancement of the mission of the Church in unity, service and witness.

u. Develop relationship with communities of other faiths for dialogue and common action.

- v. Determine appropriate relationship with independent movements, fellowships, coalitions, and ministries.  
(w-z omitted)

I have also added in this section—as you have noticed—a couple of statements regarding fellowship as well as the social gospel. The tie is that social gospel people who work for better physical conditions on earth often are ecumenical. Theological differences predicated on Scripture are given up in a search for making a better life for everybody on this earth.

An LCA pastor by the name of James A. Borchert of Fort Worth, Texas has criticized his own synod for making its main work to be social transformation. He claims that the issues of social justice, self-reliance and economic development are so harped on that the main mission of the church—to win souls for Christ—seems to be at times neglected, and even to a certain extent forgotten.

### **CONCLUDING STATEMENT AND TRIVIA**

I was supposed to write a paper defining the doctrinal position of the LCA, ALC and AELC. That was not so easy since it was something like a chameleon. I hope I gave you food for thought and discussion. Above all, we should thank God for causing our Synod to have uniformity of doctrine and practice based on the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions. The LCA, ALC and the AELC have been more acculturated than we, and the worldly influences have had their bad effect on the doctrinal status of the three uniting church bodies.

I just want to add—to your relief—that Milwaukee was eliminated in the running for the headquarters of the new Lutheran Church. The constituting convention will take place at Cleveland, Ohio on May 7-10, 1987. This seems to be a central location. It is in the middle of the Minneapolis-Philadelphia corridor where the new church will have most of its members. The church should be united in 1988.

One of the big problems—and I am sure that a lot of time will be spent on this—is determining a name for this new church. In times past we could call the ALC, the Almost Lutheran Church and the LCA the Lost Church in America. This new Lutheran Church will include almost two-thirds of all Lutherans in our country and have from five to six million members. They will be the third largest Protestant church group in our country and largely liberal. I feel that they should call themselves the Heterodox United Lutheran Church. Then if they would add the word incredible before it they could call themselves the Incredible HULC.