

# The Doctrinal Statements of the ELCA

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Eleven days ago, the official existence of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the official dissolution of its constituting bodies, the Lutheran Church in America, the American Lutheran Church, and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, became a reality. In the eyes of observers of the religion scene at large, glaring absent from this new church body is the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. In the eyes of orthodox Lutherans, also glaringly absent are the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Unlike most previous mergers of Lutheran synods, this merger has little to do with ethnic and linguistic backgrounds or geographic considerations. It fairly can be assumed that, whatever the compelling reasons for merger, the synods which are not joining in the merger are not doing so for doctrinal reasons. Therefore an examination of the doctrinal position of the ELCA, as set forth in its doctrinal statements, is in order for WELS pastors.

This paper will be limited to an examination of some key doctrinal issues raised by the booklet, *Report and Recommendations of the Commission for a New Lutheran Church* (RRCNLC). Additional information will be provided by the chief dogmatics textbook used by the seminaries of the ELCA. Without roaming too far afield, a few other issues not explicitly dealt with in the above two sources will be examined based on published papers and quotes by ELCA spokespersons. Finally, a short reaction and evaluation will be made by this writer.

The chief written doctrinal statement of the ELCA is its Confession of Faith, Chapter 2 in RRCNLC, printed below.

## Chapter 2: Confession of Faith

2.01 This church confesses the a Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

2.02 This church confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the Gospel as the power of Cod fur the salvation of all who believe.

a. Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom everything wax made and through whoa life, death, and resurrection God fashions a new creation.

b. The proclamation of God's message to us as both Law and Gospel is the Word of God, 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.

c. The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by Gods Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce 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.

2.03 This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and lift.

2.04 This church accepts the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds is true declarations or the faith or this church.

2.05 This church accepts the Unaltered Augsburg Confession us a true witness to the Gospel, acknowledging as one with it in faith and doctrine all churches that likewise accept the teachings of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession.

2.06 This church accepts the other confessional writings in the Book of Concord, namely, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles and the Treatise, the Small Catechism, the Large Catechism, and the formula of Concord, as further valid interpretations of the faith of the Church.

2.07 This church confesses the Gospel, recorded in the Holy Scriptures and confessed in the ecumenical creeds and Lutheran confessional writings, as the power of God to create and sustain the Church for God's mission in the world.

An old quiz show of the 1960's used to end with the host, Tom Kennedy, saying, "It's not what you say that counts, (studio audience chimes in) It's what you don't say!" We might add that any doctrinal statement considered out of its context doesn't tell the whole story. Who has ever seriously studied the Book of Concord without also studying Reformation history to a greater or lesser degree? Accordingly, the ELCA Confession of Faith must be examined both for what it says and for what it doesn't say, and some background information will prove helpful in understanding the Confession and the makeup of the confessing group.

Few WELS members would state that there are any articles in this Confession with which they clearly disagree. Is it a valid confession of Christian, Lutheran faiths Certainly. Is it sufficient, and sufficiently unambiguous, to truly unite late 20<sup>th</sup> century Lutherans in one biblical, God-pleasing fellowship? Certainly not. After years of disagreement and terminations of fellowship in the Christian church at large and within Lutheranism over the doctrine of the revelation of Holy scripture, it's unconscionably naive of the ELCA to think that it can glibly dispense with the matter simply by not mentioning the words "infallible" and "inerrant." In fact, the absence of those words in the Confession states loudly and clearly that they've been intentionally omitted. This should be especially obvious to former members of the ALC, whose synod in 1960 accepted the statement:

The American Lutheran Church accepts all of the canonical books of the Old and New Testament as a whole and in all their parts as the divinely inspired, revealed and inerrant word of God, and submit to this as the only infallible authority in all matters of faith and life.

Just how important is the omission of those two little words, "inerrant" and "infallible"? WELS Christians would assent to the fact that if we can't agree about a matter of Christian faith or life based on what Holy Scripture teaches about it, then there can be no God-pleasing agreement. But if the Bible itself isn't trustworthy, then what will our agreement be based on in other words, if the Bible is not inerrant and infallible, then why in the world should it be used as "the authoritative source and norm of a church's proclamation, faith, and life"? Indeed, if the Bible can be mistaken, then in the areas in which one believes it to be mistaken, one almost certainly will not use it as an authoritative source and norm. And, in practice, this has proven to be true in denominations which have weakened or discarded their articles of faith which make a clear statement regarding the inspiration, inerrancy, and infallibility of Holy Scripture.

Although this article of the Confession (2.03) does not have chronological priority in the confession, it is being dealt with first in this paper because of its prime importance in evaluating our relationship with others who share the names Evangelical and Lutheran with us. If the Scriptures are not believed to be all God in the Scriptures themselves declares them to be, and if they are not the sole source and norm of a church's proclamation, faith, and life, then a denomination which believes this must be "of a different spirit" from us, and we must not only mark and avoid them as those who, by their very union, are causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which we have learned, but also in a spirit of love warn them that they're in peril of basing their faith on imagination, guesswork, and philosophical trickery, rather than on the reality of God's revelation. In whatever other areas we disagree with the ELCA, all disagreements can ultimately be traced back to disagreement regarding this article.

The opening article of the confession, 2.01, sounds acceptable and indeed could hardly be worded better. Here, however, it's interesting to look at some of the background involved in the formulation of this article, and

what almost wasn't said in it. The influence of feminists resulted in an AELC members of the CNLC moving to delete this reference to God as exclusively male. The vote was 33-30 to retain the traditional wording. We applaud this decision. At the same time, we can only be perplexed about the fact that 30 members of the CNLC were willing to discard the traditional, historic, biblical terms with which God refers to Himself. Again, a different spirit is clearly at work among these people who claim to be evangelical and Lutheran. If God had revealed himself as Mother, Daughter, and Spirit, we would be happy to refer to God by those terms. But the simple fact that He hasn't is sufficient reason not to do so.

The final article in the Confession which we must look at is 2.06. Besides the fact that the confessional writings of the Book of Concord mentioned here are subordinated to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, mentioned in the previous article, the phrase "further valid interpretations of the faith of the Church" is extremely weak. Apparently, they are accepted only in so far as they agree with Scripture (or some other standard), not because they agree with Scripture. And the question is left open, "What other valid interpretations of the faith of the Church are there?" The Thirty-nine Articles of Anglicanism? The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent? The Westminster Confession of Faiths? Or perhaps all of these, as we'll see later.

Some other matters, while not explicitly dealt with in the *Confession*, are dealt with in other parts of the RRCNLC, and therefore can be taken as representing the doctrinal position of the ELCA. The first of these falls into the area of church and ministry. The points under article 7.10, "Relationships between Congregations, Synods, and the Churchwide organization.." make it clear that the ELCA will be following a position more like that of WELS than of LCMS regarding the relationship between congregation and synod. As I understand it, the "Old Missouri" answer to the question, "is the synod the church," is "No," whereas we in the WELS recognize both the local congregation and the synod as the church. Specifically, in Article 7.11, RRCNLC, it is stated: "This Church shall seek to function as people of God through congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization, all of which shall be interdependent. Each part, while fully the church (emphasis mine)..." Perhaps a greater area of concern for us in church and ministry is one in which we don't agree with the ELCA, namely, who can be a candidate for the public ministry? Article 10.22 states:

An ordained minister of this church shall be a person whose commitment to Christ, soundness in the faith, aptness to preach, teach, and witness, and whose educational qualifications have been examined and approved in the manner prescribed in the documents of this church; who has been properly called and ordained; who accepts and adheres to the Confession of Faith of this church; who is diligent and faithful in the exercise of the ministry; and whose life and conduct are above reproach. A minister shall comply with the constitution of this church.

Noticeably absent is any reference to a requirement that the ordained minister be male, or, for that matter, an explicit statement that the candidate for the ministry may be either male or female. In fact, one has to read ahead 18 pages, to Chapter 14, Officers, 14.10, Bishop, 14.11 for the statement: "...The bishop may be male or female, as may all other officers of this church." And even there, only officers are mentioned, not all candidates for the ministry. One can only arrive at an answer to the question of whether women may be ordained as ministers (apart-from an argument from silence) by means of a syllogism: Bishops are ordained ministers. Bishops may be male or female. Therefore, ordained ministers may be male or female. And, of course, we know apart from doctrinal statements that that is the practice of the synods which have constituted the ELCA, contrary to the teaching of Scripture.

Our Wisconsin Synod, with deep regret, formally suspended fellowship with the LCMS in 1961. One of the major factors responsible for the suspension of this relationship was the unscriptural practice of church fellowship in the Missouri Synod. We also regret that the ELCA will surely be involved in church fellowship relationships which will be contrary to Scripture. Article 7.41 states:

The congregations, synods, social ministry institutions and agencies, and churchwide organization may establish or affiliate with inter-church agencies and councils in relationships which will reflect this

church's objectives of sharing with other faith communities in study, dialog; and common action (emphasis mine), in accordance with adopted policies governing such associations.

And the "adopted policies governing such association" do not include agreement in doctrine and practice. Furthermore, individual congregations are given broad latitude in their own fellowship practices. Under "congregations - functions," article 8.41 states: "The congregation shall ...foster and participate in ecumenical relationships consistent with churchwide policy." Again, "churchwide policy" does not include agreement in doctrine and practice. A section toward the end of RRCNLC encourages continued "interim sharing of the eucharist" with the Protestant Episcopal Church, and continued study of the relationship of the ELCA with the Presbyterian Church (USA) and Reformed Church in America. It should also be mentioned that the ELCA is a member of the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches.

This brings to an end the doctrinal statements of the ELCA. However, it doesn't tell the full story. Apart from the official doctrinal statements of a denomination, perhaps the next most important area to look at in order to determine what will be taught in that denomination is the type of dogmatics which will be studied in the denomination's seminaries. This will also shed light on how the official doctrinal statements will be interpreted and applied.

The dogmatics textbook used at all of the seminaries of the AELC is *Christian Dogmatics*, Braaten/Jensen, Fortress Press, 1984. Editors and contributors to this book are all members of the AELC, and many serve as seminary professors, so it can be assumed that what is taught in this textbook gives an adequate picture of what is being taught in the classroom. Excerpts from the book representing key doctrinal areas are printed below.

- 1) The Bible: "Today it is impossible to assume the literal historicity of all things recorded." Vol. 1, p. 67
- 2) Words of Jesus: "Such passages; in their present form at least, are usually regarded as having come not from Jesus himself but from later interpretative traditions." Vol. 2, p. 13
- 3) Miracles: "...it should not be excluded that some of the miracles attributed to Jesus may have no historical basis and serve only to emphasize his exceptional status." Vol. 2, p. 283
- 4) Deity of Christ: "In the age of Christendom, the dogmas of the Trinity and of Christ, as formulated in the Nicene and Athanasian creeds, were necessary to believe for salvation. Now the biblical critics could apply the Scripture principle of Protestantism to show that these dogmas cannot be required for faith, since they lack solid biblical support." Vol. 1, p. 73
- 5) The Trinity: "Truly the Trinity is simply the Father and the man Jesus and their Spirit as the Spirit of the believing community." Vol. 1, p. 155
- 6) The Virgin Birth: "Finally, the history and phenomenology of religions have called our attention to the mythic character of the incarnation. The notion of the preexistent Son of God becoming a human being in the womb of a virgin and then returning to his heavenly home is bound up with a mythological picture of that world that clashes with our modern scientific world view." Vol. 1, p. 527
- 7) Atonement: "But what is the import of this traditions Put in its most crass form, this view would hold that Jesus' death is a sacrifice in which he is a substitute for us who pays the divine justice what is due for human sin and /or appeases the divine wrath. As we shall see, there is a long tradition, especially among Western conservative Christians, which has taken this line. There seems to be a virtual consensus among contemporary biblical scholars, however, that this tradition finds little support in the Scriptures, either in the Old or New Testament." Vol. 2, p. 15
- 8) Resurrection: "Mythological symbolism contributed to the interpretation of the event of the resurrection. The question has become acute in modern theology whether in the resurrection we are dealing only with a myth or with a truly historical event." Vol. 1, p. 549
- 9) Immortality of the Soul: "In recent years, especially under the impact of a renewed listening to the biblical documents, the idea of an immortal soul has become increasingly suspect." Vol. 2, p. 565

If this is the theology which will be preached from ELCA pulpits, we must ask not only whether this new Lutheran Church should be calling itself Lutheran, but also whether the Christian faith itself can survive for long in a group which manifests so little regard for the clear, literal meaning of Scripture.

There are two more issues which will be considered in passing. Since the ELCA has made no clear “doctrinal statements” regarding these issues, they will have to be considered in the context of “It’s not what you say that counts, it’s what you don’t say,” and, perhaps, “Actions speak louder than words.” These issues are homosexuality and abortion.

Bishop Chilstrom of the ELCA has stated that no homosexual will be permitted to serve as a minister of the ELCA unless he/she agrees to be celibate. Although this sounds good, it unfortunately does not address the issue of whether or not the individual recognizes homosexuality as sinful and is repentant. A celibate minister who affirms the “dignity” of homosexuality is hardly better than a minister who’s a practising homosexual. Furthermore, there are other indications that the matter of homosexuality will be glossed over in the ELCA. The former ALC’s Division for Service and mission awarded a grant of \$2,000 to Lutherans Concerned for Gay People to enable them to get started, and later provided the publication *The Gay Lutheran*, now retitled *Concord*, with a grant of \$5,000. In 1986 the former LCA produced a report called “A Study of Issues Concerning Homosexuality” at a cost of \$127,000. The content of this document can be inferred from the fact that Lutherans Concerned professed itself to be exceedingly pleased with the report, which also acknowledged Lutherans concerned as a resource in the course of the committee’s 18 month study. Although the ELCA does not recognize “A study of Issues Concerning Homosexuality” as an official statement of its position on homosexuality, neither does it repudiate it.

Both the former ALC and LCA officially disapprove of abortion on demand as a form of birth control. This is fine as far as it goes, but is hardly a strong statement of opposition to the murder of the unborn. The official policy of the former LCA is spelled out in the paper, “Sex, Marriage, and the Family,” adopted by its Fifth Biennial Convention in Minneapolis in July of 1970:

On the basis of the evangelical ethic, a woman or a couple may decide responsibly to seek an abortion. Earnest consideration should be given to the 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 the consequences for society.

In other words, maintaining a perceived minimum standard of living, the fact that the pregnancy isn’t very far advanced, or worries about contributing to the problem of overpopulation could all be acceptable reasons for “terminating a pregnancy,” as long as a responsible choice is made.

Further concern that the ELCA will adopt the unscriptural position of the former LCA is warranted by a consideration of an article written by an LCA pastor, Joy Bussert, which appeared in the March 7, 1982 issue of *The Lutheran*, the national publication of the LCA. Pastor Bussert is also a signer of “A Religious Statement on Abortion: a Call to Commitment,” a pro-choice document issued by the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights. Pastor Bussert writes:

For many women the decision to terminate a pregnancy can be an expression of reverence and concern for life, not only for her own life but also for the quality of life of the fetus or future child. Since women often intuitively know when they can or cannot care for a child, the termination of an unwanted pregnancy is often an expression of serious concern for life, so serious that woman is not willing to bring into the world a life for which she cannot adequately care. Clearly, reverence for life means that every child has the God-given right to be brought into the world under conditions conducive to love.

Perhaps the strongest voice of caution in the area of abortion is sounded by the Presiding Bishop of the ELCA, Herbert Chilstrom. In an article which appeared in The New York Times on May 2, 1987, he is quoted as saying that abortion is “a tragic option.” The article further describes his personal position as “somewhat more restrictive than that of the merged denominations,” and says Chilstrom apparently feels that abortion “should be exercised only when the health of the mother is at risk or in the case of rape.” Once again, although it’s encouraging to hear this note of restraint, it falls far short of a scriptural position, and is far too isolated an example to have any real impact. Finally, it can be added that the synods which merged to form the ELCA were supporters of Lutheran Social Services, which leaves a recommendation for or against abortion up to the individual case.

How shall we WELS members respond, then to the ELCA and its doctrinal statements? As a church body, of course, we did not enjoy fellowship relations with the three synods which merged to form the EL CA, and the doctrinal statements of the post-merger denomination make it clear that the idea of our entering into fellowship with the ELCA is, if anything, even more out of the question. We shall take a firm stand for the truth of Scripture and for our confessional position, and shall clearly point out error when we have the opportunity. Concern for the souls of others compels us to do this not only as a denomination, but also as individual believers.

However, a caution may be in order. We must recognize and expose the doctrinal errors of others, yet this must always be done in a spirit of love and concern. And in order to do this, we may need to do some soul-searching and examine our own motives and attitudes. A cavalier dismissal of nearly six million people who profess to be Lutherans is not in order, nor are snide, cynical, or demeaning remarks. The Eighth Commandment is still part of the moral law. Do we pray for the ELCA, and the restoration of pure doctrine and practice in it (I don’t)? Do we regularly include petitions for God-pleasing union and reunion among Christians in our prayers.

Furthermore, we can rejoice that the ELCA has allowed a glimmer of understanding to peek through in certain areas. Article 10.29.01 of RRCNLC states:

After the organization of this church, no person who belongs to any organization other than the church which claims to possess in its teachings and ceremonies that which the Lord has given solely to the Church shall be ordained or otherwise received into the ministry of this church, nor shall any person so ordained or otherwise received by this church be retained in its ministry who subsequently joins such an organization. Violation of this rule shall make such minister subject to discipline.

Are you surprised to discover that an ELCA pastor may not be a member of a lodge? I was. Although this again falls short of a statement recognizing the unchristian and anti-Christian nature of the lodges, it is something to be thankful for.

The ELCA could also be an agent of some salutary conscience pricking for us in the WELS. Under “Statement of Purpose” in RRCNLC is listed article 9.02.c.:

Serve in response to God’s love to meet human needs, caring for the sick and the aged, advocating dignity and justice for all people, working for peace and reconciliation among the nations, and standing with the poor and powerless and committing itself the ELCA] to their needs.

Although we can expect the ELCA to carting on the commitment to social gospel and liberation theology which were part of its constituting members, the above statement cannot be lightly dismissed. It represents a necessary and Gospel-motivated response to the message of the prophets, apostles, and of the Lord Himself, and it is this author’s contention that such a statement is perfectly appropriate in a statement of purpose, one which we in the WELS would do well to seriously consider.

Again, despite its weak theology, the ELCA appears to have a genuine concern for promoting a vigorous and vital practice of the Christian faith among its members, according to 4.02.f. in the Statement of Purpose:

Nurture its members in the Word of God so as to grow in faith and hope and love, to see daily life as the primary setting for the exercise of their Christian calling, and to use the gifts of the Spirit for their life together and for their calling in the world.

We who sometimes stress adherence to doctrinal formulations over sanctification almost to the point of deprecating the latter need to focus on an article like 4.02.f from time to time in order to foster a proper, scriptural balance in our priorities. And we pray that our Lord would enable the ELCA to carry out this article of their Statement of Purpose. Indeed, except for the references to unscriptural fellowship practices and ecumenism, the entire Statement of Purpose is quite commendable. And, as an added item of interest, financial contributions, and support of employees of the church, are left until the last two items under how to fulfill the purposes listed in the Statement of Purpose. Judging from the ever-expanding role these considerations play in our own church life, we wonder whether the ELCA will be able in practice to keep them at the end of the list.

Finally, although it again does not involve a doctrinal statement, we can expect the ELCA to continue to occupy a position of leadership in the areas of liturgies, church history, and church music. For our part, we'll continue to accept what is good and discard the chaff.

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