

THE ELCA –What To Expect

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Another wonderful Lenten season has gone by again! A wonderful Lenten season culminated with that celebration of the Day of days, a season where we had the opportunity to focus our special attention on THE CROSS, has come and gone. Oh to be sure, the crucified and risen Christ will be a part of the message spoken all year. But nothing beats the emphasis we can expect to find during the Lenten-Easter season. We can expect to hear how grievous our sins are to our God, but, by God's grace alone, we can also expect to hear again and again what Jesus has done to pay for them. We can expect all this because the message, its need and its author will never change.

In view of the expected and wonderful message of Lent and Easter, God has every right and desire to expect something from us --not in contribution to it but in response to it. Having had faith worked in our hearts from this message, God expects that we confess that faith, that is show it to Him and express it to others. God expects this from individual Christians and He expects it from groups of Christians. We usually call the latter a "church." Knowing that God expects a response, we, too, expect the kind of response God expects.

By now all of you are aware that a new church has officially begun its existence. As of January 1, 1988 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has become a definite entity which must be "reckoned with." A name such as theirs may seem to tell us everything we can expect from them. "Evangelical" would seem to tell us that this is a Gospel orientated church, a church which is dedicated to the "good news" of salvation from sin provided by Christ Jesus. "Lutheran" would seem to tell us that we can expect this church to stand on the sturdy, tripod of salvation--Scripture alone, grace alone and faith alone. "Church" would seem to tell us that we can expect them to be found with Christ as their Head and Cornerstone, according to their spiritual mode of existence, and having a solid, organized administration, according to their fleshly mode of existence. Finally, "America" would seem to tell us where we can expect to find either their principle scope of interest or their place of origin. Yes indeed, with a name like that, we may expect much greater things to come from Chicago (the location of the ELCA headquarters) than Nathanael did from Nazareth. But lest we find ourselves judging on the basis of what seems to be, let us do as Philip encouraged Nathanael: "Come and see."

I. EXPECTED CAUSE

One could be easily swayed to simply open up a book of Dogmatics and begin to examine their teachings and know quite readily what to expect. However, upon examining the Seminary's essay file I have found that this has been done almost ad nauseam already not to mention that it would also take too long for our purposes here. There are, though, a few areas we can concern ourselves with that are practical to this type of Conference and will allow us to get a sufficient overview of things we can expect from the ELCA.

Whenever a church carries out what others see, there are always one or more causes behind its actions. Viewed as basically as possible, the only cause we should concern ourselves with is what the church confesses, teaches and practices with regard to God's Word.

Remember that in the Old Testament, it was God's intent that the various denominations or tribes of Israel should all have this one thing in common: that they adhere to the word of the Lord. Also in the New Testament where there were Christian churches spread out widely between Israel and Italy, they were all nevertheless bound by God's Word handed down to them from the prophets and apostles.

At first glance the ELCA may seem to be in perfect agreement with us then. They would admit that they adhere strongly to the premise that all faith and fruits of faith proceed from the Word of God. In speaking of the new era in the Lutheran Church, Herman G. Stuempfle, Jr., president of one of the ELCA seminaries says, "The merger of three Lutheran bodies into a single church structure does not of itself assure renewal of a church's life. Renewal and reformation have their source only in the Word of God." (*The Lutheran*, February, p.3) When one couples a statement like that with the following confession of faith, one might be tempted to be impressed--initially. Here is the confession of faith upon which the ELCA is founded:

Chapter 2.

CONFESSION OF FAITH

2.01. This church confesses the 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 God for the salvation of all who believe.

a. Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom everything was made and through whose 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 God's 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 life.

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

2.05. This church accepts the Unaltered Augsburg Confession as 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.

We want to make the word "initially" refer to the shortest amount of time possible. President Stuempfle's words which immediately follow those quoted above begin to tell us why. He says, "There is no reason to believe that a new church will allow itself to be governed either more or less fully by that Word than have its antecedent bodies." To give you just an inkling of what is implied with that statement, President Stuempfle goes on to say, "The Seminaries will be about their historic task of preparing women and men to be faithful and competent ministers of the Gospel." (Note the inclusiveness not to mention the order of those involved.)

The reason such statements can be made and yet accompany this seemingly impressive confession of faith is due to some qualifications that have been put on the Word of God, which hopefully none of us are used to hearing. For example, Professor Dobberstein, of our Seminary, writes with regard to a combined constitutional convention of the three church bodies which now make up the ELCA,

Any voice which questioned the wording or suggested a change in the articles of faith, such as adding the word "sole" to the declaration that the Bible is the "authoritative source and norm of (the church's) proclamation, faith and life," or request to retain the words "inerrant" and "infallible" was easily outvoted. (WLQ, Winter 1987, p.74)

The logic for such a qualification of God's Word is as follows, quoting from the ELCA Task Force on Theology:

These terms can be used in a way that implies a precision alien to the minds of the authors of the Scriptures and their own use of the Scriptures. These terms can be used to divert attention from the message of salvation and the instruction of righteousness which are the key themes of the Scriptures. They may encourage artificial harmonization rather than serious wrestling with the implication of scriptural statements which may seem to agree, (Quoted from "The Shape of the New ELCA" by Pastor Curtis Holub of the WELS)

Statements like these can be made in good conscience by theologians within the circles of the ELCA because of the method of biblical interpretation used. That method is called the historical-critical method of interpretation. Instead of taking God's Word as God's inerrant message for all people of all times as God commands we should, this church believes the teachings of God's Word should be opened to human scrutiny. Perhaps Professor Brug of our Seminary sums up this process best in his review of the 2 volume book entitled *Christian Dogmatics*-a book expected to be the standard dogmatics textbook in the seminaries of the ELCA. He writes, "Dogmatics have been reduced to a stimulating exchange of criticisms of the doctrinal traditions of the various churches and effort to restate the basic principles of faith in formulations which will be acceptable to our time." (WLQ, Spring 1986, p.128)

In order to know what we can really expect from the ELCA with respect to their faith, a few samples from this book might be interesting to hear.

Pertaining to the Bible itself, we "learn" things like this: "The ultimate authority of Christian theology is not the biblical canon as such, but the gospel of Jesus Christ to which the Scriptures bear witness--the 'canon within the canon.'" (*Christian Dogmatics*, Fortress Press, v.1, p.61) This also sounds "interesting" to say the most:

This valuation of the Bible as the Word of God is asserted with greater difficulty today than in Luther's time and with greater awareness of the historical problems involved in biblical interpretation. First of all, the theological task is not so easily limited to the interpretation of the Bible, as it was for Luther. The God whom Scriptures attest is Creator and Lord of all, active in all spheres of life and human experience. Therefore, whatever theology asserts about God on the basis of Scripture must in some way be correlated with what can be learned about God's world in nature and history from other disciplines. (*Ibid*, p.76)

Concerning the Apostles' Creed we are told:

The statements of the Apostles' Creed are so bound up with its mythological form that to get rid of the myth would destroy the creed in toto. Can modern people still be expected to accept the creed, with its mythological elements? We know that in the scientific picture of the world, the categories "above" and "below" do not make sense. Therefore the story of the descent of the Son of God to earth and his ascent into heaven cannot be taken literally...Myth and its symbols are indispensable to express the reality of God in the person of Jesus. Myth is an appropriate form of

language for expressing the events and meanings of God's revelation in history. (*Ibid*, p. 528-529)

Perhaps the new news regarding the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and our own resurrection could best top off this sampling. "Mythological symbolism contributed to the interpretation of the events of the resurrection. The question has become acute in modern theology whether in the resurrection we are dealing with a myth or with a truly historical event." (*Ibid.*, p.549)

Furthermore: "Contrary to other 'resurrection' stories in the Bible, Jesus is not perceived as having returned to this life. His resurrection was not a resuscitation indicating that in certain exceptional instances people can be returned to their former state of life."(*Ibid.* v.2, p. 558) Of our own resurrection we are told, Since we are endowed neither with divine qualities nor with an immortal soul in the Platonic or gnostic sense, meaningful existence beyond death must be resurrection of the dead. This hope is expressed in the Apostles' Creed, where we say that we believe "in the resurrection of the body." This does not mean a biological revivification, such as is found in the case of the young man in the village of Nain (Luke 7:15) or of Lazarus (John 11:44).

Perhaps here the obvious question being thought is why is the historical-critical method of interpretation being used? I believe is a direct result of what could be called "itching ear syndrome." Listen how Paul's words to Timothy fit this situation perfectly. "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths." (2 Timothy 4:3, 4) You see, under the guise of this method of interpretation, the church is free to do just about anything they want with the Bible in order to have the desired effect on themselves and the world around them.

It is here then that this essay turns from the expected cause to the expected effects that the ELCA will have. Those effects can be seen in their church, in the world, and then on the WELS. In every instance, there will be the attempt to scratch itching ears.

II. EXPECTED EFFECTS

A. On the ELCA themselves.

We hear again from Professor Dobberstein's comments regarding the combined constitutional convention held prior to the final organization of this church. "As expected, the tone of the conventions was very ecumenical. The desire to become the fifth largest church body in the USA and to stretch out the hand of fellowship in many directions outweighed any real doctrinal and confessional considerations."(*WLQ*, Winter 1957, p.75) Certainly fellowship is a fine concept, but not at the expense of the truths of God's Word. The ELCA has fallen into the well-disguised trap of putting agenda ahead of credenda. The reason it is a well-disguised trap is because while it is wrong, it does bring results and it is very attractive to outsiders.

The current statistics of the ELCA show that it is made up of 5.3 million baptized members; it has 11,022 congregations, 65 synods and 9 regional centers for mission. Their goal is to claim 1200 new congregations in the first seven years. A church like that is easy to be impressed with. I have heard it said that the opportunities of the ELCA could be summarized with inclusiveness, ecumenism and service. The reason that the ELCA can carry out these goals in such a seemingly effective way is because the whole method of interpreting the Bible is based on catering to social issues that are bound to affect people, especially those who would otherwise feel persecuted in some way. This is especially noticeable within the realms of the divine call, an area which has very specific biblical guidelines. While we are told that the woman is not to exercise authority over the man, especially in church, the ELCA says it is perfectly alright for her to lead a congregation as a pastor. Some very itchy ears have been scratched and people, especially the females are impressed. In a somewhat satirical article in the March/April issue of *Lutheran Partners*, Pastor Steven McKinley and a fellow pastor were sharing some views on the present state of the new church. The fellow

pastor was rather distraught about the changes being made, saying that it was hard for the older pastors to keep up. The third part of the discussion between these two pastors centered on this fact: the older pastors are too theological for the church today.

Nobody cares what your theology is any more. When I hear some so-called Lutherans talk theology, they sound like Southern Baptists. Others sound like Roman Catholics. Some of them even sound like Unitarians. And that's okay! Nobody in the church minds that You can think whatever you want about theological questions, and that's okay. But by gosh (this is a quote mind you), you better hold the right position on social issues or you're "in big trouble. Nobody cares much about your theology, but you better be on target with your politics, or watch cut.

This pastor calls the old-type pastors "dinosaurs" and adds, "The glaciers are coming." (p27) Yes sir! The glaciers are coming but at least the ears are being itched! Then to whatever extent the *Christian News* can be trusted, one reads of the certification for a call into the ministry of openly homosexual individuals, not to mention those who are allegedly presently active in both these capacities at the same time. The obvious lack of consideration in calling sin what it really is and having the proper qualifications for the ministry are all indications of just a few of the expected effects of the ELCA on the ELCA.

B. The expected effects on the world

The expected effects this new Lutheran church will have on the world has a certain amount of carry over from the expected effects within the church itself.

It seems that more and more the world is looking for some way to keep on doing what they've always been doing, namely sinning, but then to simultaneously find an excuse to continue to do so. No where is that more apparent than in the claims being made for gay rights. In the second issue of *The Lutheran* since the ELCA became an official entity, the official magazine of the ELCA, an article appeared, written by a mother of a now deceased homosexual young man who died of AIDS. The article was the mother's appeal to the world and the church to accept these kind of people for who they are--individuals who will be in heaven, too. Promoted by the mother are such concepts as "constitutional homosexuality" (a concept which Bishop Chilstrom, President of the ELCA, also holds) which says that such people don't have a choice if this is their sexual tendency. She says that. the perception of God that they as parents had only made things too clear-cut. She writes, "But then what would we have done with our homosexual son? We were not ready to condemn him to hell." The solution which the mother found was to simply love and accept. Discipline and forgiveness, law and Gospel were no where to be found. In fact, while her son was searching for a meaningful relationship (with another man) she joined her son's prayer that he would "meet a special person, a Christian, to whom they could make a total commitment." Whatever happened to "Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest"? When singing the Christmas carols, the mother admits to praying, "Oh Come, Emmanuel--yes come and ransom these captives, these exiles, these lepers." No mention was made of the necessity of contrition and faith that make for repentance. The only indignity the mother saw in the situation was when her son had to finally be bathed and diapered. No mention made of the shame in knowing that this was a sin that contributed to the killing of the "author of life" and that no time of refreshing could come to him because there was no repentance. Then, here is the kicker. She writes, "As the mother of one of the gentle people who was wounded because he did not fit the norm, I say from the heart: Perhaps within the context of God's love it is time we looked positively on such relationships." What an abuse of objective justification! The only lesson this mother learned and wants to pass along is this: "We are accepted by God with all our weaknesses and warts" -- as if AIDS contracted by homosexuality, performed in unrepentance, is no more serious to God than a wart!

The point to all this is this, the ELCA is certainly giving credence to such views on sin by including this in the second issued of their official magazine. This is just the thing the world is itching to hear.

A similar liberal and tolerant position is also extended to the pro-abortionists. Dr. Elizabeth Bettenhausen, who was recently ousted from the Methodist Boston University School of Theology, has been promoted by Rev.

Barbara Lundbald of the ELCA as deserving in excess of \$35,000.00 for a sabbatical year to promote her theology. Unfortunately, this theology includes, being pro-abortion and pro-homosexual.

What about the world's religious community? One can certainly also expect that the ELCA will do what they can to extend as far as possible the right hand of fellowship. Recently, as reported also by *The Lutheran*, Bishop Herbert Chilstrom traveled to Rome where, upon meeting with the Pope, said he had come "to express visibly the deep commitment of my church and myself to the ecumenical movement and to the dialogues between our churches." A major point apparently thought of as being significant for an agreement between the two leaders was "that too many people think of 'justification by faith' in terms of individual salvation, whereas Martin Luther never separated justification from preaching and teaching." (The significance of that statement is beyond me.)

Again, in another report in the same issue of *The Lutheran* we are told, "A soon-to-be released proposal from an international Lutheran-Anglican committee will call for 'immediate full communion' between Lutheran and Anglican (Episcopal) churches." This full communion is later described as "full altar and pulpit fellowship."

Similar intentions are also being advanced toward the Reformed Church as was reported by Professor Dobberstein in the previously mentioned report.

All these actions of good will and ecumenism are impressive to the world. If the world is looking for ways to excuse and choose their own brand of morality and still remain "Christian," we could expect this church will open wide its doors to them. That's the license their brand of interpretation makes possible.

C. The expected effects on the WELS

There is no doubt that the members of the Wisconsin Synod, both the lay people as well as we who are the called workers, will be affected by this church, too. Certainly the devil will tempt individuals by impressing them with the success and attractiveness of this church body while we seem to always struggle to gain and afford what we've got.

There will also be those outsiders who will get the wrong impression of our church, thinking that since the word "Lutheran" is in our name either we are a part of what the ELCA is all about or we are extremely stuck up since we deny association with these people who allow and promote their method of biblical interpretation, a method fast becoming that which is held by the majority.

What should the WELS do to counteract such influence and opinions? First of all we need to pray that the Lord of the Church would keep us humble yet faithful to His holy, inspired and thus inerrant Word. If this is not learned and taught the way God intended from the classroom and the pulpit, we would soon produce the same kinds of teaching as the ELCA.

We are all aware that the previous action does not come without struggle. That means that we will have to make an increasing effort to explain our position, especially on the issue of biblical interpretation. One of the ways we can do this is to use our name as an excuse to explain how we are different than the pervading odor that is befouling the air of Lutheran Christianity. It is the opinion of this essayist that one of the worse things we could do at a time like this is to change the name of our identity as a Synod. Changing our name might seem to indicate that we, like the ELCA, are also changing our theology; while keeping our name the same might very well provide an excellent opportunity to witness to our separation from the ELCA's brand of Lutheranism. Granted, not all people are able to identify with Wisconsin. But what's wrong with taking time to explain that it is a part of our origin? Granted, people might get the wrong impression with the term "Lutheran." But while we're explaining Wisconsin why not also explain our strong position on the soundness of Luther's teachings of Sola Scriptura, Sola gratia and Sola fide. The same thing could also be done with the term "evangelical." Let's not let the heterodox steal away from the orthodox what is wholesome and then proceed to misrepresent everything it stands for. The ELCA is ample proof that even a near perfect name doesn't make the church.

As we look at our expectations of the ELCA, the now departed Professor Habeck's words spoken of the possibility of merger already back in 1982 ring even more true today after the merger has become a reality.

We shall remain interested observers ...We shall no doubt continue to be stigmatized as an insignificant minority of ultraconservative Lutherans. We pray that in the Lord's eyes we may continue to be found faithful to his holy and inerrant Word. Then we may still be a barb in the conscience of those who have veered away from the Word and hopefully be used to step: the tide which threatens to seep liberal Lutherans completely into a broad ecumenism which renders only lip service to the Bible and the Savior whom it reveals. (*WLQ*, Winter 1982, p. 62)