

**Is The
Evangelical Lutheran Church
in America
Truly Lutheran?**

David Jay Webber

1988

ELS

FOREWORD

On January 1, 1988, three Lutheran church bodies merged to form the new Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Those three bodies were the Lutheran Church in America, The American Lutheran Church, and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches.

Since then many people have been asking questions such as, "What does this new church teach?" "Has it retained the old truths which we learned in our catechism?" "Has it remained faithful to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions?" These, and other questions, are troubling many sincere Christians who are concerned about their faith.

Our Evangelical Lutheran Synod is not a part of this merger. We are convinced that the new church body has departed from some of the most basic teachings of the Lutheran faith. Therefore, because the Bible says, "Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear," (I Peter 3, 15) the Board for Publications of our ELS offers this little booklet for your study and consideration.

The author is the Reverend David Jay Webber. He is the pastor of Scriptural Lutheran Church of Cape Girardeau, Missouri, and is a clergyman of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

75¢ / copy | Additional copies of the booklet may be ordered from the Lutheran Synod Book Company, 734 Marsh Street, Mankato, Minnesota 56001.

The Board for Publications
Evangelical Lutheran Synod
447 North Division Street
Mankato, Minnesota 56001

November 1988

INTRODUCTION

The new Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) was formed in 1987 by the merger of the Lutheran Church in America (LCA), the American Lutheran Church (ALC), and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC). The normative doctrinal position of this new church can be determined on the basis of a two-volume work entitled Christian Dogmatics, published by the LCA's Fortress Press in 1984 with contributions from three leading theologians of the LCA and three leading theologians of the ALC. Christian Dogmatics was edited by Carl E. Braaten, a professor at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and by Robert W. Jenson, a professor at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Gettysburg. It is now being used as a primary theology textbook in ELCA seminaries for the training of future ELCA pastors.

What exactly are ELCA seminarians being taught by their professors about the authority of Scripture, the person and work of Christ, and other cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith? Will the majority of ELCA ~~seminary~~^{seminary} graduates accept the traditional beliefs of historic Lutheranism, or will they be teaching something else to their catechumens and parishoners? The doctrinal position of historic Lutheranism is summarized in the Book of Concord (1580), which contains the three ecumenical creeds (Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian), the Augsburg Confession and its Apology, the Smalcald Articles, Luther's Small and Large Catechisms, and the Formula of Concord. The Evangelical Lutheran Synod, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, and other confessional Lutheran bodies adhere to these documents as correct statements of the teaching of Holy Scripture and of the faith of the

Christian Church. Do the leading theologians of the ELCA also adhere to these traditional standards, or have they departed from them in such a way as to forfeit the right to be called "Lutheran" in the historic sense of that term?

HOLY SCRIPTURE

According to the Formula of Concord, Lutherans pledge themselves "to the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments as the pure and clear fountain of Israel, which is the only true norm according to which all teachers and teachings are to be judged and evaluated" (Book of Concord, Tappert edition, pp. 503-04). Luther also writes in the Smalcald Articles that "the Word of God shall establish articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel" (Tappert p. 295). Carl Braaten writes in Christian Dogmatics, however, that for modern theologians:

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. (I, p. 76)

According to Braaten Scripture is no longer to be allowed to interpret itself, but it must be interpreted in view of the current theories of science and history.

Regarding the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture, the Formula of Concord teaches that we are "to abide by the revealed Word which cannot and will not deceive us" (Tappert p. 496). Luther also writes in the Large Catechism, "My neighbor and I -- in short, all men -- may err and deceive, but God's Word cannot err" (Tappert p. 444). Braaten admits in Christian Dogmatics that "Luther believed that the literal meaning of Scripture is identical

with its historical content; things happened exactly as they were written down." He then immediately adds, however, that:

Today it is impossible to assume the literal historicity of all things recorded. What the biblical authors report is not accepted as a literal transcript of the factual course of events. Therefore, critical scholars inquire behind the text and attempt to reconstruct the real history that took place. (I, pp. 76-77)

ELCA seminarians are clearly not taught to submit to the Holy Scriptures as the inerrant Word of God and the only rule and norm for faith and practice.

THE HOLY TRINITY

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession proclaims historic Lutheranism's:

faith and teaching that there is one undivided divine essence, and that there are nevertheless three distinct and coeternal persons of the same divine essence, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We have always taught and defended this doctrine and we believe that the

Holy Scriptures testify to it firmly, surely, and irrefutably. We steadfastly maintain that those who believe otherwise do not belong to the church of Christ but are idolaters and blasphemers. (Tappert p. 100)

Do the leading theologians of the ELCA also adhere to the classic doctrine of the Trinity, namely that there is one true God who eternally exists in three divine persons? Robert Jenson writes in Christian Dogmatics that "Instead of interpreting Christ's deity as a separate entity that always was -- and proceeding analogously with the Spirit -- we should interpret it as a final outcome, and just so as eternal, just so as the bracket around all beginnings and endings." Such a reinterpretation of the trinitarian theology allows Jenson to conclude that "Truly, the Trinity is simply the Father and the man Jesus and their Spirit as the Spirit of the believing community" (I. p. 155). Confessional Lutherans would respond that truly, this is simply not the biblical doctrine of the Trinity!

THE PERSON AND WORK OF CHRIST

Luther's Small Catechism teaches, on the basis of God's Word, that Jesus Christ is "true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary" (Tappert p. 345). It is indeed difficult to comprehend how God's Son, who is fully divine, can also fully share in our humanity. The authors of the Formula of Concord therefore write:

Since the Holy Scriptures call Christ a mystery over which all heretics break their heads, we admonish all Christians not to pry presumptuously into this mystery with their reason, but with the holy apostles simply to believe, close the eyes of reason, take their intellect captive to obey Christ, comfort themselves therewith, and rejoice constantly that our flesh and blood have in Christ been made to sit so high at the right hand of the majesty and almighty power of God. In this way they will be certain to find abiding comfort in all adversities and will be well protected against pernicious errors. (Tappert pp. 609-10)

However, Carl Braaten and theologians like him are unwilling to submit their

human reason to the mystery of the incarnation as taught in Scripture.

Braaten writes in Christian Dogmatics that:

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 the world that clashes with our modern scientific world view. (I, p. 527)

The Augsburg Confession teaches that:

God the Son became man, born of the virgin Mary, and that the two natures, divine and human, are so inseparably united in one person that there is one Christ, true God and true man, who was truly born, suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried in order to be a sacrifice not only for original sin but also for all other sins and to propitiate God's wrath. The same Christ also descended into hell, truly rose from the dead on the third day, ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God, that he may eternally rule and have dominion over all creatures, that through the Holy Spirit he may sanctify, purify, strengthen, and comfort all who believe in him, that he may bestow on them life and every grace and blessing, and that he may protect and defend them against the devil

and against sin. The same Lord Christ will return openly to judge the living and the dead, as stated in the Apostles' Creed. (Tappert pp. 29-30)

In contrast, Braaten writes in Christian Dogmatics that:

The main 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. The question is whether the meaning of the myth of the incarnation can be saved without taking it literally, yet without getting rid of its mythic structure. (I, pp. 528-29)

According to Braaten:

The story of Christ in the Gospels is a mixture of historical events and mythological symbols. The purpose of the myth is to interpret the significance of the events. Today we must search the myth for the existential meaning of the events, and not take the myth at face value. We must ask about the existential significance of the myth of the preexistent Christ and of his cross and resurrection. To accept these as

objective descriptions of a supernatural realm of happenings is to miss the point of the myth: to relate the apostolic kerygma to human existence. (I, p. 529)

What the Apology of the Augsburg

Confession asks in regard to the popes of the sixteenth century might therefore also be asked in regard to ELCA theologians:

How many of them care anything for the Gospel or think it worth reading? Many openly ridicule all religions, or if they accept anything, accept only what agrees with human reason and regard the rest as mythology, like the tragedies of the poets. (Tappert p. 173)

Concerning the virgin birth of Christ the Formula of Concord teaches that:

Mary, the most blessed virgin, did not conceive a mere, ordinary human being, but a human being who is truly the Son of the most high God, as the angel testifies. He demonstrated his divine majesty even in his mother's womb in that he was born of a virgin without violating her virginity. Therefore she is truly the mother of God and yet remained a virgin. (Tappert p. 595)

However, Braaten writes in Christian Dogmatics that "The primary interest of dogmatics is to interpret the virgin birth as a symbol and not as a freakish intervention in the course of nature." He maintains that it is important "not to let the story get bogged down in biology, but to read it as a symbolic witnessing to the truth of the kerygma" (I. p. 546).

On the significance of Christ's suffering and death for our salvation, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession declares that "by undergoing the punishment of sin and becoming a sacrifice for us, the sinless Christ took away the right of the law to accuse and condemn those who believe in him, because he himself is their propitiation, for whose sake they are now accounted righteous" (Tappert p. 131). Gerhard O. Forde, a professor at Luther Northwestern

Theological Seminary in St. Paul, offers the following comments on this subject in Christian Dogmatics:

Jesus himself, though he might have and quite possibly did reckon with a violent death at the hands of his adversaries, seems not to have understood or interpreted his own death as a sacrifice for others or ransom for sin. Such interpretation apparently came as the result of later reflection. Even in their final redaction the synoptic Gospels contain little direct or explicit interpretation of Jesus' work. Mark 10:45 has Jesus say that the Son of Man came to give his life "as a ransom for many," and the accounts of the Last Supper speak of Jesus' blood as his "blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many" (Mark 14:24) and "my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:28). Such passages, in their present form at least, are usually regarded as having come not from Jesus himself but from later interpretative traditions. The same is true of the instances where Jesus predicts his own death and resurrection, such as Mark 8:31ff. and 9:31, and parallels in the other Synoptics. They are interpretations attributed to Jesus after the fact. (II, pp. 12-13)

CONCLUSION

The foregoing quotations from Christian Dogmatics make it all too obvious that the ELCA does not stand for historic Lutheranism as this would be defined by the Book of Concord. This is not to say that the ELCA is not perpetuating many aspects of its Lutheran heritage, or that it does not contain a significant number of faithful laypeople and pastors who may not be aware of all the changes that have taken place in their church. But if the general theological character of a church body is measured by the public doctrine of its theological leaders, then we must regretfully conclude that the ELCA, as an institution, has fallen away from the faith of its fathers. It does not deserve the loyalty of the true Lutherans who remain within it, and it does not

deserve any outside recognition as a legitimate heir to the Lutheran Reformation.

"Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever. Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings..."

Hebrews 13:7-9a (NASB)