

# **A Doctrinal Study of the ELCA in 2012—Part I**

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ELCA***By Professor John Brug*

With more than 5 million members at its founding, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) was and remains the largest Lutheran church in the United States. It is the second largest Lutheran church in the world, trailing only the state church of Sweden. It was formed with more than 11,000 congregations, which were organized into 65 synods. Its greatest concentration of members is located in an arc anchored by Pennsylvania and Ohio at one end and Minnesota, Iowa, and the Dakotas at the other end.

The ELCA is one of the newest Lutheran churches since it is the product of a 1988 merger of the Lutheran Church in America (LCA), the American Lutheran Church (ALC) and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC). However, the ELCA includes in its membership the oldest Lutheran churches in America, churches whose history extends back before the American Revolution.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is a merger of mergers. The ELCA has swallowed up nearly all of the previous mergers of American Lutheranism (See chart). The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is the only large Lutheran church in the United States which remains outside this merger. The Wisconsin Synod make up the greatest part of the remaining Lutherans who have shunned the big mergers or who have fled from various mergers along the road to Lutheran unity.

The ELCA is the American Lutheran church which has departed the farthest from the doctrinal position of confessional Lutheranism. Some of the church bodies that merged into the ELCA were the pioneers in introducing negative criticism of the Bible and compromising ecumenical tendencies into American Lutheranism. However, some of the Lutheran churches swallowed up in the ELCA were once quite close to the doctrinal position of the old Synodical Conference. At one time the doctrinal differences between the Wisconsin Synod and some of the predecessor bodies of the ELCA involved disagreement about non-fundamental doctrines of Scripture, such as church fellowship, millennialism, and the Antichrist. Today the wide gap which separates the Wisconsin Synod from the ELCA involves the most fundamental doctrines of Scripture.

To see how this doctrinal gap widened we will undertake a two-step study of the ELCA. Before we examine the present doctrinal state of the ELCA, we will look at the doctrinal heritage which the ELCA has received from the synods and churches which preceded it so that we can compare and contrast the ELCA's present position with its past.

### **THE PREDECESSORS OF THE ELCA**

The history of American Lutheranism confronts us with a confusing tangle of mergers, splits and re-mergers. But we need to understand at least the basic trends of this process if we are to understand how American Lutheranism got to its present state. As we survey this history, we will see in the ELCA the sad, but inevitable culmination of trends which have been present in American Lutheranism from the beginning, but we also see a shocking degeneration from the doctrinal position which many of the predecessors of the ELCA once held and defended.

We begin our study by tracing the origins of the church bodies that merged into the ELCA.

## **I. THE LCA**

The Lutheran Church in America (LCA) was the largest contributor to the ELCA. Its 3 million members and 6000 congregations were most heavily concentrated in Pennsylvania, Minnesota, and Illinois.

The LCA was more liberal in doctrine and had a longer heritage of liberalism than the other merging bodies. Its predecessor, the United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA), pioneered the acceptance of negative criticism of the Bible and the undermining of the doctrine of Scripture in American Lutheranism. The LCA merely carried on what the ULCA had begun. The ULCA/LCA's ecumenical efforts were the earliest and most far-ranging in American Lutheranism. They led the way in looking beyond inter-Protestant ecumenical efforts toward ties with Roman Catholicism and other churches with bishops. The LCA put a greater emphasis on the roles of the pastors and the synod in the governing of the church. The LCA was the greatest numerical contributor to the feminist, gay-rights, liberation theology lobbies which often hold the ELCA hostage.

The ULCA contributed almost 80% of the membership of the LCA. The LCA, like the ULCA, was a true heir of the compromising party of old, eastern Lutheranism. The Swedish Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church and the smaller Danish, Finnish, Slovak and Icelandic churches which joined ULCA/LCA at various stages of the merger process were swallowed up in the theological liberalism of the united church.

### **A. THE ULCA**

The United Lutheran Church in America was the result of the 1918 merger of the three pieces of old, eastern Lutheranism: the General Synod, the General Council, and the United Synod, South. In many respects the formation of the ELCA was simply the completion of the 1918 merger. From its beginning the ULCA was more confessional on paper than in practice. But even on paper it was not very confessional. From the time of its 1920 "Washington Declaration" the ULCA was the leader of ecumenicity in American Lutheranism. Its presidents Frederick Knobel and Franklin Clark Fry were the leading spirits of American Lutheran ecumenism. The inerrancy of Scripture was already thoroughly, but cleverly, compromised by the time of the ULCA's 1938 "Baltimore Declaration."

#### **1. The General Synod**

The General Synod was the descendant of the Pennsylvania Ministerium and other eastern synods. Its goal was practical Lutheran unity, based on organizational unity, rather than on agreement in doctrine. Already in its early days it blurred distinctive Lutheran doctrines. As it was successively reincarnated in the ULCA, LCA, and ELCA, the General Synod ultimately proved that its real doctrinal roots were in the rationalism of F.H. Quitman (d. 1832), who rewrote the Lutheran catechism, and in the confessional compromise of S.S. Schmucker (d.1873), who rewrote the Augsburg Confession. In the end this rationalism and compromising

spirit overwhelmed the mild-orthodoxy and pietism which the General Synod had inherited from its patriarch Henry Muhlenberg (d.1787).

## **2. The General Council**

In 1866 The General Council developed as a conservative backlash against the liberalism of the General Synod. Its failure to remain a strong voice for confessional Lutheranism is one of the unhappy stories of American Lutheranism. Despite the strong theological leadership of Charles Porterfield Krauth (d. 1867), the General Council failed to reach complete doctrinal agreement with the more confessional midwestern synods, and it was ultimately resubmerged in the lax theology of the General Synod/ULCA. The General Council's failure to practice biblical principles of church fellowship and doctrinal discipline led to the loss of the generally sound theology of Krauth and others like him.

In its early days the Wisconsin Synod briefly flirted with the idea of joining the General Council, but abandoned the idea because of disagreement on the “Four Points” of millennialism, lodge membership, pulpit fellowship, and altar fellowship.

## **3. The United Synod, South**

The General Synod, South broke away from the General Synod because of the Civil War, not because of confessional reasons. The Tennessee Synod, which joined the GSS in 1886 to form the USS, had a strong confessional tradition under the leadership of the Henkel family. Although the United Synod, South was somewhat more conservative than the General Synod, it was reabsorbed into the liberal stream of eastern Lutheranism by the ULCA merger of 1918.

## **B. THE AUGUSTANA SYNOD**

The Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church was in some respects a latecomer to the liberal Lutheranism of the LCA. The Augustana Synod was the end product of the concern of Swedish mission societies for the Swedes who had come to America in the late 1800's. It had a reputation of being more concerned about doctrine, piety, and missions than the ULCA. Its concerns had been one of the moving causes behind the adoption of the Galesburg Rule (Lutheran pulpits and Lutheran altars for Lutheran pastors and people) by the General Council. Augustana stayed out of the 1918 (ULCA) and 1930 (ALC) mergers. However, new faculty members began to introduce historical criticism at its seminary at Rock Island, Illinois, already in the early 1930's. For a while Augustana had a close relationship with the synods that made up the American Lutheran Church, but Augustana was submerged into the LCA in 1962.

## **C. THE DANES**

The Danes brought an interesting doctrinal heritage into the LCA and ELCA. The “happy Danes” had followed the view of Nikolai Grundtvig (d.1872) that the Apostles' Creed was the true expression of the Word of God, which was only “contained” in Scripture. Through the Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church (later called the American Evangelical Lutheran Church) the happy Danes entered the LCA in 1962. The “sad” or “holy” Danes influenced by

Vilhelm Beck were noted for earnestness and moral vigor. As the United Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church (later UELC) they, together with a breakaway group from the Grundtvigian wing of Danes, entered the American Lutheran Church in 1960.

#### **D. THE OTHERS**

The Slovaks, Icelanders, and Finns did not bring special theological emphases to the united churches, but the Slovak Zion Synod is notable as the only non-geographic ethnic synod of the LCA and of ELCA.

### **II. THE ALC**

The American Lutheran Church contributed two and a half million members and 5000 congregations to the ELCA. The ALC was strongly concentrated in the Midwest.

In some respects the story of the American Lutheran Church is sadder than the story of the LCA, because many of the ALC's constituent synods were once much closer to the sound confessionalism of the Synodical Conference than the synods of the ULCA had ever been. Even when the ALC had begun to deteriorate badly, it tried to hold the middle ground between the Missouri Synod and the LCA. The doctrinal compromises necessary to create the Lutheran mergers of the 20th century generally met with much greater resistance in the synods of the ALC family than in the LCA group. Nevertheless, compromise and laxity always prevailed in the end.

The ELCA church historian Todd Nichol characterizes the development of the ALC thus:

Most of the leaders who built the ALC were steeped in the conservative theology of 19th century Lutheran confessionalism. ... To a European tradition of emphasizing the inspiration and authority of Scripture they added the American Fundamentalist insistence on the use of the term inerrant to describe the Scriptures. Their traditions made them exceedingly cautious about ecumenical relations beyond the Lutheran household.

But the makers of its mergers did not have the last word on doctrine in the ALC. Changing winds were blowing through the seminaries of the merging churches even before they united. Theologians were introducing new ideas from both European and American sources. Inerrancy was widely rejected by the theologians, and historical criticism of the Scriptures broadly endorsed. The Lutheran Confessions were interpreted historically and critically. Theological variety was the order of the day. ... Turning from inherited Lutheran questions to a ceaselessly changing agenda, they more often spoke of options than of answers. ... Even before they merged, the churches on their way to becoming the new ALC were moving away from the doctrinal position which made their merger possible.

*(All These Lutherans, p. 93-94.)*

When the ELCA merger was first proposed, neither the ALC nor its leadership were very enthusiastic. Differences between the ALC and the LCA which posed some problems to the creation of the ELCA were the stronger congregationalism and aversion to bureaucracy in the ALC and the greater percentage of ALC members who were concerned about the inerrancy of

Scripture. The ALC also had a much stronger tradition of pietism and lay leadership than the LCA.

The ALC formed in 1960 was the nearly equal merger of the German synods of the old ALC and the Norwegians of the ELC, with a handful of Danes thrown in for good measure.

## **A. THE GERMANS - THE OLD ALC**

The predominately German Ohio, Iowa, and Buffalo Synods united in 1930 to form the old ALC. The sad fact about the history of this group is how far it deteriorated from the confessional theology which once made this group relatively close to the doctrinal position of the Synodical Conference.

### **1. The Ohio Synod**

M. Loy (d.1915) kept the Ohio Synod out of the General Council because of the council's lax practices in regard to fellowship, millennialism, and the lodge. Ohio then turned toward the Synodical Conference until this relationship was broken by the controversy concerning the doctrine of election in the 1880's. Richard Lenski (d.1936), the author of a series of commentaries widely used by WELS pastors, was the outstanding heir of Ohio's theological tradition in the 20th century.

### **2. The Iowa Synod**

Theologically the Iowa Synod was always the weakest of the midwestern German synods. During the 19th century the Fritschel brothers demonstrated this weak theology of Iowa by advocating the "open questions" approach to doctrine, which allowed theologians to hold different opinions about questions settled by Scripture, and by supporting the "historical interpretation" of the Lutheran Confessions, which limited the binding nature of these confessions for Lutherans today. J.M. Reu's willingness to compromise on biblical inerrancy in the 20th century is another example of Iowa's theological weakness.

### **3. The Buffalo Synod**

Buffalo is best known for the hierarchical views of church government advocated by its founder Grabau. The Buffalo Synod suffered early defections and never really grew. It had fewer than 10,000 members when it entered the old ALC. H.C. Leupold, author of a number of widely used Old Testament commentaries, was its one of the better sons of the Buffalo Synod.

## **B. THE NORWEGIANS**

The Norwegians in America have passed through a confusing array of breaks and mergers. However, by 1917 most of them were united into the Norwegian Lutheran church which was ultimately called the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC). The Lutheran Brethren, the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS), the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations (AFLC), the American Association of Lutheran Churches (AALC), and many of the other ALC congregations which refused to enter ELCA are all examples of predominately Norwegian groups which rejected the mergers that ultimately led to the ELCA.

## **1. The Norwegian Synod**

The old Norwegian Synod was a member of the Synodical Conference until it withdrew as a result of the election controversy in the 1880's. It entered the 1917 merger of Norwegian synods on the basis of a "settlement" of the dispute about election which was no settlement at all, but an agreement to let the two views on election co-exist. The other parties in the 1917 merger were the United Church, which included the Norwegians who had opposed the correct scriptural doctrine advocated by the Missouri Synod during the election dispute, and Hauge's Synod, which had a strong emphasis on personal piety and lay leadership. Our sister synod, the ELS, developed from the part of the Norwegian Synod that refused to enter the 1917 merger.

The Norwegian Synod/Evangelical Lutheran Church produced a number of strong theologians. Vilhelm Koren was a strong leader during the early years. At the time of the Chicago and Minneapolis Theses (1919) H.G. Stub of the Norwegian Synod took a strong stand on inerrancy, unlike the weak position of Reu during the same era. Some leaders of the ELC opposed historical criticism into the 1950's. The Preus brothers, well known in recent Missouri Synod history, trace their roots back to the Norwegian Synod/ELC. That the Norwegian Synod failed to maintain its stance of confessional Lutheranism is one of the sad stories of American Lutheranism.

## **2. The United Church**

At the time of the 1917 merger which formed the ELC the United Church was the largest of the three large Norwegian bodies. It occupied the middle ground doctrinally and practically. It aimed to avoid what it regarded as the presumptuous piety of the Haugeans and the authoritarian theology of the Norwegian Synod. By name and design it was intended to be inclusive rather than exclusive. Its leader, Gjermund Hoyme, is one of the heroes of ecumenical Lutherans for the way in which he pressed for unity.

## **3. The Lutheran Free Church**

The Lutheran Free Church split from the United Church in 1897 because of a dispute about the role of Augsburg College and Seminary. The LFC strongly emphasized the autonomy of the congregation and the role of lay leadership. The LFC twice refused to join the ALC of 1960 during the time that its convention had voting open to all adherents of the synod. When a switch was made to a representative form of government, the LFC became a tardy entrant into the ALC.

### *The ALC in the ELCA*

It appears that the biggest losers in the ELCA merger were the conservatives in the ALC. Many voices in the ALC were raised against the ELCA merger. The Fellowship of Evangelical Lutheran Laity and Pastors (FELLP) and the Iowa Committee for Lutheran Co-operation opposed the merger or tried to influence it in a more conservative direction. The merger was voted down by more than 800 ALC congregations during the ratification process. Yet only

about 40 ALC congregations refused to enter the merger and withdrew. Why this great discrepancy?

It appears that the conservative movement in the ALC (and the lesser movement in the LCA) failed to have any significant effect on the merger because it was a house-divided from the very beginning. It was a shaky coalition of orthodox Lutherans, fundamentalists, evangelicals, charismatics, neo-orthodox, and people alarmed by the promotion of sexual immorality in the LCA and ALC. There was no true unity on the doctrine of Scripture or on the principles of fellowship. Many of those who held the strongest views on Scripture eventually departed for the AALC (and a few for the LCMS), but even they had very inadequate concepts of the biblical principles of fellowship and of the dangers of the charismatic movement. Long before the merger was finalized, many of the conservatives had made it clear that they would go along with the merger even if their views were ignored. This certainly undermined any credibility their testimony might have had. Many charismatics stayed with the merger in the naive hope that their spirituality could somehow revitalize the new church. A significant reason for the failure of the conservative movement to have much impact on the merger may have been that so many of its adherents were more oriented toward personal experience than toward sound doctrinal statements. In the end most of them placed personal ties and group loyalties ahead of doctrine. Many other ALC members sympathized with the moral and doctrinal concerns of the protesters, but they remained silent on the sidelines while the battle was lost. Although a few who remain in the ELCA contend for biblical truth, an official public witness for the doctrine of Scriptural inerrancy has been silenced in the ELCA.

### **III. THE AELC**

In 1976 the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches was formed as a result of the departure of the Seminex faction from the LCMS. The AELC brought about 100,000 members into ELCA. Its acceptance of historical criticism, of ecumenical ventures, and of ordained women made it right at home in the ELCA.

The AELC had an influence on the merger which was disproportionate to its small size. The AELC was in some respects the catalyst which created the merger, since from the beginning it regarded itself as an interim denomination and issued a call for union already in 1978. The AELC's congregationalism and its demands for a definition of the ministry broad enough to include Christian day school teachers were a significant factor in creating the ELCA's conflicts concerning synod power and the doctrine of the ministry, which are discussed below. In recent years ELCA "conservatives" place a disproportionate share of the blame for the doctrinal and sexual extremes in the ELCA on the immigrants from the AELC.

### **CONCLUSION**

When the three synod conventions gave initial approval for the ELCA merger, the AELC approved 136-0, the LCA 669-11, and the ALC 897-87. When discussions and votes were held to implement the merger, there was practically no discussion of doctrine except for a few skirmishes over the inerrancy of Scripture which were quickly squelched. The only other major doctrinal concern during the merger process was the definition of the public ministry. Points of contention were the roles of bishops and deacons and whether the ministry also includes such called workers as Christian day school teachers. When it became clear that this dispute could not

be solved by the deadline for the merger, the topic was tabled for five years of further study. (This dispute was not really resolved by the decision to accept Episcopal ordination, which is discussed below. It appears to have been placed on the back burner.) The main sources of contention during the final stages of the merger process were funding the pension plan and the location of the headquarters. How could two thirds of American Lutherans rush to merge with so little concern for doctrine?

Our overview of history makes it clear that the ELCA merger was not much different than most of the previous mergers of American Lutheranism. In one merger after another the more confessional group made its protests, but ultimately went along with the merger, and soon found itself and its theology submerged in the widening liberal mainstream. In almost every case it was failure to practice the scriptural principles of church fellowship which led to the absorption and finally the death of confessional theology. In many cases there was godly piety among the conservatives, but it was piety in search of a theology. Without a sound doctrinal foundation and lacking the convictions to break ties with the adherents of false teaching the protesters had no strength and staying power to resist the juggernaut to merger and doctrinal compromise.

The ELCA merger simply followed the pattern of numerous mergers which had gone before. The only difference was that the nearly universal acceptance of negative historical criticism among the leaders of the ELCA merger made the results more deadly than before. Now the question was no longer, "Will firm confessional Lutheranism survive?" The question now is "Will basic biblical Christianity survive in the majority of American Lutheranism?" As we will see in the next parts of this study, there is good reason to fear that the answer will be "No."

The ELCA merger was driven by special interest groups promoting sexual and political liberation. The quota system for selecting delegates allowed such groups to dominate the planning commission and the first governing boards of the ELCA to a degree disproportionate to their strength within the membership of the ELCA. The theologians provided little guidance. They had turned away from such unresolved inter-Lutheran questions as lodge membership, millennialism, the Antichrist, and election and adopted a ceaselessly changing agenda of theological fads. They were more ready to speak of options than to offer scriptural answers to urgent doctrinal and moral questions.

The result is that a commitment to confessional, biblical theology has disappeared from the official levels of the ELCA. Some voices still speak out against the more shocking sexual and political theories coming out of the ELCA officialdom and against the most flagrantly unchristian and un-Lutheran doctrinal aberrations, but such voices as the *Lutheran Forum* and the protest groups within and alongside the ELCA can be called confessional only in a limited sense. Overall, there is no voice left for biblical Lutheranism at the official level (although very vocal and vehement protest against the ELCA, especially concerning the acceptance of homosexual pastors, is still being expressed by some professors who appear to be headed for the door). The only battle left is for the hearts, minds, and souls of individuals at the congregational level.

When we look at the ELCA, it is shocking how great the gulf is that separates us from them, but when we look back over American Lutheran history, it is equally surprising how close many of the pieces that make up the ELCA puzzle once were to us. The decline and fall of groups like the General Council, the Ohio Synod, and the Norwegian Synod stand as a strong warning to take heed lest we fall.

In the next sections of our study we will see how this decline of American Lutheranism has led to the denial of even the most fundamental doctrines of Christianity. We must fear whether most of American Lutheranism will remain Christian, yet alone Lutheran.

## **A Doctrinal Study of the ELCA in 2012 —Part II THE OFFICIAL POSITION OF THE ELCA**

The ELCA's official doctrinal position is limited largely to the doctrinal preface of its constitution. It does not have an equivalent, for example, of *This We Believe*. There are a number of reasons for this very limited doctrinal position.

One reason is that in its relatively short history the ELCA has not had occasion to declare itself on many doctrinal issues. Official statements will likely multiply as time goes by, but more of them will be social statements rather than doctrinal statements.

The basic reason for the very limited doctrinal platform is that most in the ELCA do not want to have their doctrinal stance too narrowly defined. Very little doctrinal discussion preceded the formation of the ELCA. The merging bodies proceeded toward merger with the assumption that they already had a sufficient degree of doctrinal unity to form one church body. This does not mean that they assumed that they were in complete doctrinal unity. Quite the contrary, they realized, for example, that they could not reach agreement on the doctrine of the ministry. This lack of agreement could not be allowed to hold up the merger, so it was set aside to be resolved later. In their opinion this disagreement was not fundamental enough to prevent the merger even though this lack of agreement meant that some called workers had to enter the merger without any assurance of what their ultimate status in the new church body would be.

The only prerequisites for merger were a common confession of faith in the Triune God and in Christ as Lord and a constitutional claim of allegiance to the authority of Scripture and to the Lutheran Confessions. Such a paper confession is what the planning commission produced and what the ELCA ratified in its *Confession of Faith (COF)*. The *COF* is limited to some very basic statements.

### **I. THE CONFESSION OF FAITH**

**The Trinity** - *This church confesses the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. COF 2.*

We and many members of the ELCA are very happy to see this statement as the foundation of the ELCA's confession. This part of the confession we could endorse wholeheartedly if we did not know what lay behind it. It is clear from the circumstances which surrounded its adoption and from public explanations of it that this confession is whitewash which hides an ugly reality.

First of all, the ELCA's confession of the basic principles of the ecumenical creeds and the Lutheran Confessions is intended to give the unwary the impression that the ELCA is a church which remains faithful to the doctrinal traditions of the church. It is claimed that such a confession makes the ELCA a conservative church. Agreement on this basic core allegedly gives the church freedom to differ on other matters. (See *The Lutheran*, Sept. 7, 1988, p. 9)

This allowance for doctrinal diversity is bad enough in itself, but there is serious reason to doubt whether even these very basic doctrinal affirmations can be taken seriously. When the

planning commission was drawing up the ELCA's confession of faith, Elwyn Ewald (AELC) proposed that the words "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" be dropped from the confession to avoid sexually exclusive language. Other representatives opposed the deletion on the grounds that the language is taken directly from Scripture and that deletion of the words could prove offensive at a time when the church's language is in transition. After the opposing viewpoints had been presented, the motion to delete the reference to the persons of the Trinity failed by only three votes, 30-33 (ALC Press Release, Feb. 27, 1984). Debate about the necessity and desirability of using the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in baptism has continued in the ELCA. Some continue to advocate baptism in a gender-neutral name for God. One suspects that ELCA Lutherans have not heard the last of the question of "Father, Son and Spirit." (See the discussion of baptism below.)

**Christ the Lord** - *This church confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the Gospel as the power of God for the salvation of all who believe. COF 2.02*

This article can be understood correctly, and it is soothing to the conservatives in the pew, but its language is vague enough to allow a mixed bag of teaching about Christ and salvation as we shall see later in this study.

## **The Scriptures**

The critical doctrinal battle during the formation of the ELCA was the dispute about whether the church should retain the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. We must, therefore, examine this issue at greater length.

*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. COF 2.02*

Lull comments:

Why is this section so long? Perhaps misunderstanding is likely at this point. In our society "Word of God" is likely to be heard as Bible or Holy Scripture. That is part of the meaning. But Lutherans intend something more than praising the Bible when they attribute faith to the power of the Word. (*The Lutheran*, Nov. 2, 1988, p. 17)

It is clear from sections a and b of the confession and from Lull's remarks that these two sections (although true in and of themselves) are intended to detract from the unique importance of Scripture as the only primary source of the Word of God which we have available to us today. The confession does not clearly state whether Scripture actually reveals specific, true statements from God or simply conveys testimony about the religious experience of its writers. Sections b and c imply that present-day preaching from Scripture and our act of listening to preaching from Scripture are on the same level as the inspiration of Scripture. They minimize the importance of the historical content of Scripture and exalt our experiencing of revelation. That this is deliberate is clear from Lull's commentary on this article:

Lutherans turn to Scriptures for personal study or community teaching knowing already that at their heart is to be found not many things, but one thing: the saving knowledge of the Triune God revealed in Jesus' preaching. We confess what we have learned there—that God's chief purpose has been to shower love and salvation on us, not primarily to fill us with information nor to make us moral people. These things are in the Bible too, and it is a key task of faith to see how they are related to the central message of Jesus Christ.

For the Bible to be the Word of God in this strong effective sense, it cannot be a dead book—however perfect or inspired. It must be a living medium through which the Spirit moves us to believe the good news that we read there. This is why the Spirit is mentioned both as inspiring the authors—and equally important—as speaking to us “to create and sustain Christian faith.”

Some of what Lull says can be understood correctly, but the intention is clearly to reduce the content of Scripture which must be believed to a gospel core and to permit the view that the effect the Bible has on us is more important than what the Bible says. How are believers to relate the moral commands of Scripture to the central message of Scripture about salvation? Are we to use the commands as a guide for gospel-motivated Christian living or may we dismiss them as secondary, unessential matters? How is the historical information in Scripture to be related to the central truth of the gospel? Is it a fictional framework for the message or an account of the real events through which God carried out his plan? Both possibilities are left wide open in the ELCA.

The vague, non-committal nature of this confession is clearly illustrated by the two key statements on Scripture:

*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. COF 2.02*

*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. COF 2.03*

The confession twice declares the ELCA's loyalty to Scripture as the inspired Word of God. This may deceive the unsuspecting, but anyone who paid any attention to the merger negotiations could see that this wording was a deliberate watering down of the statement concerning Scripture in the ALC constitution, which had included the term "inerrant." There were immediate pleas to retain the concept of inerrancy, but they were decisively rejected. Lull comments:

What is the ELCA's specific view of the authority of Scripture? The confession simply affirms that the Bible is "the inspired Word of God." Some Lutherans are disappointed that there is no claim that the Bible is infallible, inerrant, or non-contradictory. But it serves us well not to rush by "inspired" without considering its strong claim. The ELCA affirms that God has spoken and still speaks through the Bible to bring us to faith. Adjectives are not piled up to emphasize the meaning of "inspired." Instead, the confession makes a sweeping claim about the Bible's function. (*The Lutheran*, Nov. 23, 1988, p. 17)

The ELCA's confession is clearly intended to reject verbal, plenary inspiration and to allow for the view that there are many errors in Scripture. As a result of the pre-merger debate about this section of the confession *The Lutheran* ran an article to explain the intention of this paragraph to its readers (*The Lutheran*, Oct. 15, 1986). After identifying "inerrancy" as a Fundamentalist term borrowed by some Lutherans, the article summarizes the views of the ALC and LCA concerning Scripture.

When the LCA and the new ALC appeared on the scene in the early 1960's, many people wondered, "Why two churches instead of one?" One reason was a division of opinion over Scripture. The leaders of the churches that formed the ALC insisted on the position their predecessors had taken in 1919 and 1930, when they described the Bible as "the divinely inspired, revealed, and inerrant Word of God" in the constitution of the new ALC. The LCA constitution, on the other hand, shows the influence of the historical-critical approach.

It is clear which approach won out in the ELCA statement. The more liberal ULCA/LCA approach is the clear victor. However, the victory did not require much of a battle, because it is clear that the 1960 ALC confession was a sham from the start. From the beginning the ALC's confession of scriptural inerrancy was merely a ploy to calm the conservatives. Even while the leading theologians were accepting the word "inerrant" in the constitution, they were publicly rejecting its real meaning.

In their efforts to calm ALC conservatives and justify the omission of "inerrancy" from the ELCA constitution, ALC officials explained that the word "inerrancy" in the ALC constitution never had any real and final meaning. In *The Lutheran Standard* (Dec. 12, 1986) Lowell Erdahl cited the autobiography of Fredrik Schiøtz to substantiate this claim and concluded, "Let's stop scrapping over the ambiguous, confusing, misleading, unnecessary word 'inerrant.'"

The only positive thing that can be said about this whole development is that the former deception and cover-up of historical-critical conclusions about the Bible have been replaced by an open rejection of inerrancy and by an attempt to educate the laity to the "virtues" of critical methods of Bible study. A concerted effort has been made to inform the laity and to win them over to the negative critical method. One can only hope that the ELCA theologians have overplayed their hand and that their open propaganda for their critical views will open the eyes

of some laypeople and that they will reject the package they have been sold. However, it seems overly optimistic to expect that many ELCA members will be moved to action. Any who had their eyes open should have known what they were getting in the ELCA confession. Its implications were clearly revealed before ratification, yet very few refused to go along with it.

If members of the LCA and ALC were formerly unaware of how completely their theologians had abandoned the inerrancy of Scripture, they no longer have any excuse for such ignorance in the ELCA. The abandonment of any meaningful understanding of inerrancy and the adoption of the conclusions of negative criticism of the Bible are not hidden away in obscure writings of ELCA dogmaticians. They are being proclaimed in *The Lutheran* and in the educational publications of the ELCA. Those who remain in the ELCA in spite of this false teaching can hardly claim ignorance as a plausible defense. How heartbreaking that so few have been willing to take a stand for the truth.

## **The Confessions**

Genuine Lutherans teach and defend the teachings of Scripture as they are set forth in the Lutheran Confessions. Does the ELCA really deserve the name Lutheran? It claims:

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

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

*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. COF 2.06*

Anyone who knows how flagrantly this fine sounding confession is disregarded by ELCA theologians will not be impressed by this paper pledge. But even the wording of the ELCA's confession contains adequate clues as to its emptiness.

The ecumenical creeds are accepted as "true declarations of faith," but not as the only true teachings, which are binding on all members in a literal sense. The Augsburg Confession is elevated above the other Lutheran confessions as the only confession necessary to establish church fellowship. It is endorsed as "a true witness to the Gospel." Such an affirmation does not require acceptance of all its teachings, only of its gospel message. It also permits other "true witnesses" to be accepted as alternative interpretations of the faith, and it permits full fellowship with non-Lutheran churches. In a similar way the other Lutheran confessions are accepted as "valid interpretations of the faith," but not as doctrinal statements which are binding on all teachers of the church in all their points.

Any real binding nature of this subscription to the confessions had been publicly repudiated, even before the ELCA confession was ratified. For example, Carl Braaten, a leading ELCA theologian, observed:

It is wholly erroneous to say that these confessions are not our confessions because we would not write them that way, or because we are not fully convinced of everything they say. (*Principles of Theology*, p. 34)

Even the series of articles in *The Lutheran* which explained to the laity the significance of the ELCA's confession made it clear that acceptance of the Confessions' doctrine was limited. Concerning the Apostles' Creed Lull observes:

At times Christians may experience discomfort when saying these words. Some people may be puzzled or discouraged by the creed. Perhaps they do not understand the words. Perhaps they understand but they are not sure that they believe. ... But we can give the impression that our community has no identity and our faith has no content if we are not concerned about what we believe, or if we say only those parts of the creed about which we personally are certain. Reciting the creed puts a helpful pressure on us to be clear about what we believe. This pressure helps us grow into the fullness of the church's faith. (Dec. 19, 1988, p. 17)

Lull claims that the Formula of Concord, Lutheranism's most thorough confession, tends not to settle doctrinal controversies, but to set boundaries for debate (May 3, 1989, p. 15). It is incredible that a dogmatist could make such a statement about the most precise confession ever written. Once the determination has been made to leave the doors open to doctrinal laxity, it seems that no confession, no matter how precise, will be allowed to stand in the way.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear that although the ELCA's confession may seem to commit the church to traditional doctrine, in fact, its ambiguous language leaves the door wide open to all sorts of doctrinal diversity, as we shall see in the next section.

## II. OTHER STATEMENTS

Though there is a plethora of social statements on the ELCA homepage, there does not seem to be a section on "doctrinal statements" *per se*. There have been a number of statements of doctrinal topics such as the sacraments, but they have emphasized practice rather than doctrinal. The topic "ecumenical statements" yields much more information. It is these ecumenical statements that are most revealing of the ELCA's doctrinal position.

## THREE ECUMENICAL STATEMENTS

The real doctrinal position of the ELCA has been exposed by three ecumenical agreements: the agreement on joint communion with several Reformed churches, the agreement on justification with Rome, and the acceptance of the historic episcopate for the sake of fellowship with the Episcopalians.

**A. Lutheran Altars for Reformed Communicants**  
**Reformed Altars for Lutheran Communicants**  
**Reformed/Lutheran Altars for Everybody**

At its 1997 convention the ELCA declared full altar fellowship with three Reformed churches: the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ. This resolution ignored the critical differences between Lutheran and Reformed beliefs concerning the Lord's Supper. It does not appear that there was any in-depth theological discussion of the issue of the "real presence" as a foundation for this declaration of altar fellowship. Michael Rogness, a professor at Luther Seminary in St. Paul commented, "Our people realize that these differences exist, but they don't believe they are—in official language, church dividing, or in unofficial language, a big deal." At Marburg Luther thought that the Zwinglian denial of the real presence in the Lord's Supper was a big deal and refused fellowship with the Reformed. Unfortunately, the majority of Lutherans in America no longer agree with him.

The ELCA has since approved altar fellowship with the Episcopalian Church and with the Moravian church (1999). Although ELCA does not have formal altar and pulpit fellowship with all churches, for all practical purposes most of its congregations have totally open communion.<sup>1</sup> Some local ELCA congregations offer open invitations to communion without any limitations or qualifications. Not even a belief in the real presence of Christ's body and blood is required for attending. One congregation I visited had the following announcement:

The Table is open regardless of age or faith tradition.

Another said:

Holy communion is open to those who accept the real presence of Christ.

This sounds like a limitation until "real presence" is understood in the light of the statement of another ELCA congregation:

Every baptized person who trusts the promise and presence of Jesus Christ in this meal is welcome at the Lord's table. Our Lord promises that when bread and wine are set aside, blessed and offered to us to eat and drink and received by us in faith, he is present in us.

Is there any Reformed church in the world that could not accept this statement? It does not refer to the presence of Christ's body and blood in, with, and under the bread and wine, but only to Christ's presence in the hearts of believers. No wonder intercommunion between the ELCA and the Reformed is "no big deal." (See the further discussion on the Lord's Supper below.)

*See report in the Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Winter 2000, p 52-54.*

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<sup>1</sup> There is a difference between open communion and joint communion. In open communion members of different churches are welcomed at the celebration of one church. In joint communion clergy of different churches join together in celebration of the sacrament. In a joint communion the pastor of one denomination consecrates, but a pastor of another church does the eucharistic prayers and joins in the distribution.

## B. Agreement on Justification with Rome

In Augsburg, Germany on Reformation Day, 1999, the ELCA and other Lutheran World Federation churches implemented a Joint Declaration on Justification with the Roman Catholic Church ( not to be confused with the earlier American Lutheran-Catholic “convergence on the topic). The ELCA adopted the declaration in the summer of 1997. The central affirmation of this agreement states:

Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.

The declaration can state that Lutherans and Catholics agree that we are justified by grace alone. This is possible because they are using two different definitions of justifying grace. The Reformers taught that justifying grace is an attitude of God by which he forgives our sins by grace alone through faith alone, not by works. Rome teaches that justifying grace is power that God puts in us that enables us to complete our justification. Catholics and Lutherans have always agreed that we are justified by grace, but they have disagreed what that justifying grace is. This agreement sweeps that difference under the carpet.

Notice also that the word “alone” is attached to grace. It is not attached to faith. The essence of the Declaration is a knowing denial of “by faith alone.” It can be granted that there is some intended ambiguity in the Declaration, but there are no mixed signals from Rome. Rome has obtained from the Lutheran World Federation a repudiation of the basic principle of the Reformation, *sola fide*.

Also to state that “by grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God” is not the same as saying that “through faith alone we have complete forgiveness of sin and are freed from all the punishment which God imposes on sin.” “Acceptance” may be understood to refer to acceptance into the process of justification.

Point 15 states, “Justification thus means that Christ himself is our righteousness, in which we share through the Holy Spirit in accord with the will of the Father.” This allows Osiander’s indwelling Christ as the cause of justification, the Christ-in-us rather than the Christ-outside-us.

In spite of all the ballyhoo the Declaration itself admits that it is not a full agreement on justification.

After a lengthy list of unresolved “differences of emphasis” between Catholics and Lutherans, point 40 explains, “The understanding of the doctrine of justification set forth in this Declaration shows that a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification exists between Lutherans and Catholics. In light of this consensus the remaining differences of language, theological elaboration, and emphasis in the understanding of justification described in paragraphs 18 to 39 are acceptable. Therefore the Lutheran and the Catholic explications of justification are in their difference open to one another and do not destroy the consensus regarding the basic truths.” In other words “we have agreed to disagree.” Even ELCA observers have acknowledged that the agreement is a “differentiated consensus.”

That this is not a real agreement is further demonstrated by Rome’s behavior between the adoption of the agreement and its official signing. The Vatican published a new promotion of indulgences shortly before the signing of the Joint Declaration. ELCA spokesmen were reduced

to labeling this as “enormously disappointing.” When the pope issued the proclamation of indulgences Father Jared Wicks, a theologian at Gregorian University in Rome, said, “Conservative Catholics would find it intolerable that, for ecumenical considerations, the church put into the closet a practice affirmed by the Council of Trent, and John Paul II is not one to do anything like that.” Rome is making no attempt to hide the fact that the Declaration has not brought about any change in its doctrine and practice. Rome’s promotion of the sale of indulgences was the spark that set off the Reformation, yet the Vatican had the nerve to promote new indulgences on the eve of the Augsburg signing. This certainly makes any unbiased observer wonder, “How real is this agreement on justification?”

The lack of a true agreement is also made very clear in an explanation of the Declaration published in the October 14, 1999 issue of *Origins*, the magazine of the Roman Catholic bishops of America. The article clearly states that justification is both forgiveness of sins and being made righteous before God. This is the Catholic teaching, not the Lutheran teaching. It clearly states that there is not yet agreement on key points such as the definition of sin. Much has been made of the fact that the Roman Catholic Church no longer condemns the Lutheran doctrine of justification. In fact, the Roman Catholic explanation says, “The teaching of the Lutheran churches *presented in this declaration* does not fall under the condemnations of the Council of Trent.” It is not the Lutheran doctrine presented in the Lutheran Confessions which is no longer condemned by Rome. It is the non-Lutheran doctrine of this Declaration which is not condemned by Rome. Of course not. How could Rome condemn this doctrine? This doctrine is the Catholic doctrine, not the Lutheran doctrine.

As a summarizing statement *Origins* quotes Lutheran theologian Herbert Anderson, “Lutherans can no longer assume that the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformers were right and the church of Rome was wrong. Roman Catholicism never denied justification through grace. It simply focused more on the struggle of the transformed sinner than on the exclusive divine origin of his or her transformation. Salvation is a divine human drama. It is what God does and what human beings do because of what God has done and continues to do. In order to preserve the primacy of God’s grace, Lutherans tend to minimize what humans do in the equation of salvation. Both perspectives are true. Our common task is to learn to live in that paradox.” This is the real meaning of the Declaration. Lutherans have accepted that salvation is a joint work of God and man. This is the Catholic teaching. It is a repudiation of the Reformation.

To add insult to injury, after the ELCA reached “agreement” with Rome on justification, they learned that Rome did not even consider them to be a church. On September 6, 2000 Rome released the statement *Dominus Jesus*, which said that “ecclesial communities which have not preserved the valid Episcopate and the genuine and integral substance of the eucharistic ministry are not churches in the proper sense.” A letter from the Vatican advised bishops not to use the term “sister churches” to refer to Protestants, but to call them “ecclesial communities.” In the eyes of Rome the ELCA is not even a church. The ELCA is working to rectify that shortcoming by means of the document we will consider next.

*See the full text of the Declaration on the ELCA home page and the reports in the Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Winter 1998, p 46-48; Winter 1999, p 61-65; Spring 2000, p 129-134.*

### **C. Common Ministry with Episcopalians**

In August of 1999 the ELCA churchwide assembly approved full communion with the Episcopal Church after three days of civil but intense debate. The final vote of 716 to 317 met

the requirements of two-thirds of voting members by just 27 votes. The document, “Called to Common Mission” (CCM) was written after the ELCA failed by six votes to approve a Concordat of Agreement with the Episcopalian Church at its 1997 assembly in Philadelphia. The

Episcopal Church’s General Convention had overwhelmingly approved the Concordat. CCM stirred passion in a corner of the ELCA in a way that no other ecumenical agreement committed by the ELCA has done. The failure of the Concordat in 1997 and the close call for CCM in 1999 were not due to any scruples about entering fellowship and full communion with the Episcopal Church without doctrinal agreement, but to unwillingness on the part of some to accept the historic episcopate as a condition for such fellowship and to fears that CCM was a move to strengthen the power of bishops in the ELCA. In some ways this is the last round of the fight between the ALC and LCA concerning the ministry which was apparent at the time of the merger. A small number of congregations left the ELCA over CCM.

In approving CCM, the ELCA agreed to accept the “historic episcopate,” the concept that those who ordain new bishops and pastors must be from a line of bishops stretching back to the earliest days of the church. For their part, for the purpose of implementing the agreement the Episcopalians have agreed to suspend their 17<sup>th</sup> century rule which rejects the ministry of priests not ordained according to historic succession and to accept the ministries of all current ELCA pastors and bishops under a kind of “grandfather clause.”

The basic affirmations of CCM are:

We believe that a ministry of pastoral oversight (*episkope*), exercised in personal, collegial, and communal ways, is necessary to witness to and safeguard the unity and apostolicity of the church.

The churches will over time come to share in the ministry of bishops in an evangelical, historic succession.

The mechanics for the ELCA to establish the historic episcopate were outlined as follows. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America pledged that at least three bishops already sharing in the episcopal succession would be invited to participate in the installation of its next Presiding Bishop. These participating bishops would be from churches of the Lutheran communion which share in the historic episcopate. In addition, a bishop or bishops would be invited from the Episcopal Church to participate as a symbol of the full communion now shared. Synodical bishops elected and awaiting installation could be similarly installed at the same service, if they wished. Further, all other future installations of bishops in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will be by other bishops, at least three of whom are to be in the historic succession. Bishops shall regularly preside and participate in the laying-on-of-hands at the ordination of all clergy. Pastors shall continue to participate with the bishop in the laying-on-of-hands at all ordinations of pastors.

The agreement is really an agreement in practice not in doctrine since each church “remains free to explore its particular interpretations of the ministry of bishops in evangelical and historic succession.” The Episcopal Church is free to maintain that sharing in the historic catholic episcopate, while not necessary for salvation or for recognition of another church as a church, is nonetheless *necessary* when Anglicans enter the relationship of full communion. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is free to maintain that this same episcopate, although

pastorally *desirable* when exercised in personal, collegial, and communal ways, is nonetheless *not necessary* for the relationship of full communion. Other elements of the doctrine and practice of the ministry are left unresolved. The ELCA may continue to elect bishops to limited terms. The role of deacons was left unresolved and the agreement does not require the ELCA to ordain deacons as the Episcopal Church does. Concerning other doctrines the agreement states, “In this Concordat, the two churches declare that each believes the other to hold all the essentials of the Christian faith, although this does not require from either church acceptance of all doctrinal formulations of the other.”

This agreement to disagree in doctrine necessitates the endorsement of triangular fellowships since the ELCA is in full communion with non-episcopal churches such as the Reformed Church of America and most churches within the Lutheran World Federation. “This Concordat does not imply or inaugurate any automatic communion between The Episcopal Church and those churches with whom the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is in full communion.”

What impact did this vote have on the Lutheran character of the ELCA? Actually, very little. The real loss of that status already occurred with the justification agreement with Rome and the willingness to commune with Reformed churches which was already established by previous agreements. The general doctrinal affirmations of CCM are actually relatively good. The three ecumenical creeds are reaffirmed and the section on the Lord’s Supper states, “We believe that the Body and Blood of Christ are truly present, distributed, and received under the forms of bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper. We also believe that the grace of divine forgiveness offered in the sacrament is received with the thankful offering of ourselves for God’s service.”

When the ELCA was formed, the only doctrinal concern of note was controversy about the forms of the ministry. Even where there is general indifference to doctrine, the doctrine of the ministry cannot be ignored because it determines the day-to-day government of the church. The opposition to the Concordat and to “Called to Common Mission” was really a continuation of this struggle in the ELCA. It had relatively little to do with the Episcopal Church. This was reflected in the willingness of even opponents of “Called to Common Mission” to have fellowship with the Episcopal Church. The willingness to accept an episcopal form of government was one of the less harmful ecumenical moves of the ELCA. The real damage had already been done.

Resistance to CCM did not quickly die out. In February 2000, seventeen concerned persons, including five bishops of the ELCA, endorsed “The Common Ground Resolution” (CGR) and submitted it to the ELCA Conference of Bishops. The CGR’s objections to “Called to Common Mission” are that it changes the role of bishops in the ELCA and that accepting and implementing the historic episcopate in the ELCA would threaten Lutheran identity. After discussing the CGR, the Conference of Bishops (the ELCA’s 65 synod bishops, the presiding bishop, and the ELCA secretary) published a pastoral letter suggesting the possibility of exploring ways to allow exceptions to the requirement that in the ELCA a bishop must ordain pastors. On the first day of debate Bishop Miller suggested how the bishops might address the CCM issue, “We must find a way to proclaim Christ, affirm CCM, and have some ‘wiggle room,’” he said. In April 2000, however, the ELCA Church Council adopted a resolution reaffirming its commitment to implementing CCM as agreed upon and declaring that the ELCA’s ecumenical commitments and church-to-church relationships are decisions for this whole church made by the Churchwide Assembly as the church’s highest legislative authority,

under the governing documents, and are not legislated on a synod-by-synod basis (in other words, synods and individuals can't opt out). Future pastors of the ELCA are stuck with historic succession whether they want it or not. A rearguard action to obtain exemptions from CCM continued. In the spring of 2001 the ELCA bishops approved a bylaw change to allow synods to grant exceptions to CCM. This was approved by the ELCA Church Council and the Churchwide Assembly. The Episcopal church was willing to live with this compromise for a while.

*See the full text of CCM on the ELCA home page and the report in the Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Winter 2000, p 52-54.*

With the adoption of these three ecumenical agreements the ELCA created official ties with a wider spectrum of Christian churches than any other church body.

### **WHAT ELSE?**

Fellowship talks moved next to the United Methodist Church. A February 19, 2002 press release announced Lutheran-United Methodist dialogues which reached agreement of sorts on the sacraments. It reported that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the United Methodist Church (UMC) both accept two sacraments – Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Members of the Lutheran-United Methodist dialogue, which met in Orlando, Florida, "found significant agreement among the churches' histories and doctrinal teachings" on the sacraments, according to a communique from the dialogue chairs.

"Baptism is understood to be the entry into church life; the Lord's Supper is the regular gathering around the holy meal for faith communities," according to the communique. "The two church bodies have these sacraments in common and these are the only rites considered sacraments by these church bodies." According to one of the co-chairs of the dialogues the two churches may have different understandings of the sacraments, but "we quickly came to realize these differences are basically in terms of nuance."

Both traditions believe in the "real presence" of Jesus Christ in the Lord's Supper. While Lutherans emphasize Christ's presence in the bread and wine, United Methodists focus on the Holy Spirit. The Methodist co-chair said, "When we partake of the bread, we are, in fact, remembering who Jesus really was and is. Once we partake of Holy Communion, Christ's spirit empowers us and sends us forth to do mission and ministry in the world."

According to the Lutheran co-chair, "We are hitting our stride now as our dialogue really gets under way. We have identified some areas of wonderful convergence, but we also know there is some work to do. There are lots of questions yet to be answered, but there's a lot of exciting conversation."

On the basis of these principles the ELCA entered full communion with the United Methodist Church in 2009.

### **STATEMENT ON THE SACRAMENTS**

The ELCA in 1997 adopted an extensive statement on the use of the sacraments ("The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament").

## The Lord's Supper

As noted above, at its 1997 convention the ELCA declared full altar fellowship with three Reformed churches: the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ and has since declared altar fellowship with the Episcopalian and Moravian Churches. How do these decisions square with the official statement on sacraments?

Principle 33 of the ELCA statement on the sacraments does assert a belief in the real presence.

### *Jesus Christ is Truly Present in this Sacrament*

*Principle 33.* In this sacrament the crucified and risen Christ is present, giving his true body and blood as food and drink. This real presence is a mystery.

*Background 33a.* The Augsburg Confession states: "It is taught among us that the true body and blood of Christ are really present in the Supper of our Lord under the form of bread and wine and are there distributed and received." The Apology of the Augsburg Confession adds: "We are talking about the presence of the living Christ, knowing that 'death no longer has dominion over him.'" *Background 33b.* "The 'how' of Christ's presence remains as inexplicable in the sacrament as elsewhere. It is a presence that remains 'hidden' even though visible media are used in the sacrament. The earthly element is... a fit vehicle of the divine presence and it, too, the common stuff of our daily life, participates in the new creation which has already begun."

The quotation from the Augsburg Confession asserts the sacramental union, but the way the reference to the living Christ is used seems to raise questions whether the focus is on the real presence of Christ in, with, and under the elements or on the living Christ who is present for spiritual eating by those who believe.

Principles 49 and 50 officially endorse open communion and state the goal of expanded joint Communion.

### *We Practice Eucharistic Hospitality*

*Principle 49.* Believing in the real presence of Christ, this church practices eucharistic hospitality. All baptized persons are welcomed to Communion when they are visiting in the congregations of this church.

*Application 49a.* Admission to the sacrament is by invitation of the Lord, presented through the Church to those who are baptized. It is a sign of hospitality to provide a brief written or oral statement in worship which teaches Christ's presence in the sacrament. This assists guests to decide whether they wish to accept the Lord's invitation

### *Lutherans Long for Unity at Christ's Table*

*Principle 50* Because of the universal nature of the Church, Lutherans may participate in the eucharistic services of other Christian churches.

We see that open communion is pretty much at the discretion of the communicant. Joint communion requires inter-church agreement. Any sense of responsibility for the proper preparation of the communicants is absent.

The ELCA's practice of open communion and joint communion creates a whole range of possibilities in the celebration of the Lord's Supper: Reformed communicants who do not believe in the essential presence of Christ's body and blood in the elements may receive the Sacrament at the altar of Lutherans who do; Lutheran communicants who believe in the essential presence of Christ's body and blood may receive the Sacrament at the altar of Reformed Christians who do not; Lutherans may attend joint communion with Episcopalians, some of whom hold the Lutheran view of the Supper, some of whom hold the Catholic view, some of whom hold the Zwinglian view, and some of whom hold the Calvinistic view; there may be joint celebrations in which it is unclear what the respective views of the consecrator, distributors, and recipients are. In which of these cases are the communicants receiving the true body and blood of Christ? Whose belief and intention takes priority here, that of the officiant or that of the host church?

In reality, dealing with this issue is quite simple. We should have no practical problems here. All of the aforementioned celebrations of the Lord's Supper are illegitimate celebrations which a true Lutheran should shun. We should warn the Reformed recipients at a Lutheran celebration against the danger of receiving Christ's true body and blood to their condemnation. We should warn Lutherans against the sin of receiving the Lord's Supper where the real presence is denied and against the sin of distributing the Holy Supper to Reformed communicants who are unprepared to receive it. In some cases it may be very clear that Christ's words of institution have been emptied of their meaning by an open repudiation of their meaning like the denial of the Zwinglians which is condemned by our confessions. In other cases there may be such a muddle of views that we can't say definitively whether the sacrament is really being celebrated according to Christ's institution or not. We do not have to be able to unravel every case. We fulfill our responsibility when we have done two things: kept away from all such celebrations and warned others against them. We can leave judging the individual cases to the Lord.

### **Infant Communion**

“The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament” endorsed infant communion. This statement provided for “communion of the baptized,” while an earlier guideline had indicated that “communing infants is precluded.” Baptism is now the only required preparation for Communion (though it is recommended that infants be old enough to eat before they commune). In many cases, instruction will now follow reception of the Lord's Supper rather than preceding it. The new statement, while not mandating or even promoting infant communion, endorses a practice that has long been advocated and practiced by some members of the ELCA. Paul R. Nelson, ELCA director of worship, said, “This will articulate the ELCA churchwide understanding of how administration of the sacraments should be practiced. It will encourage congregations and their pastors to discuss the sacraments, teach the sacraments, and reflect on the way churches practice the sacraments in light of what the larger church says.”

We will quote a portion of this statement:

*The Holy Communion is Given to the Baptized*

*Principle 37.* Admission to the Sacrament is by invitation of the Lord, presented through the Church to those who are baptized.

*Application 37a.* When adults and older children are baptized, they may be communed for the first time in the service in which they are baptized. Baptismal preparation and continuing catechesis include instruction for Holy Communion.

*Background 37b.* Customs vary on the age and circumstances for admission to the Lord's Supper. The age for communing children continues to be discussed and reviewed in our congregations. When "A Report on the Study of Confirmation and First Communion" was adopted, a majority of congregations now in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America separated confirmation and reception of Holy Communion and began inviting children to commune in the fifth grade. Since that time a number of congregations have continued to lower the age of communion, especially for school age children. Although "A Statement on Communion Practices" precluded the communion of infants, members and congregations have become aware of this practice in some congregations of this church, in historical studies of the early centuries of the Church, in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, and in broader ecumenical discussion.

*Application 37c.* Baptized children begin to commune on a regular basis at a time determined through mutual conversation that includes the pastor, the child, and the parents or sponsors involved, within the accepted practices of the congregation. Ordinarily this beginning will occur only when children can eat and drink, and can start to respond to the gift of Christ in the Supper.

*Application 37d.* Infants and children may be communed for the first time during the service in which they are baptized or they may be brought to the altar during communion to receive a blessing.

*Application 37g.* When an unbaptized person comes to the table seeking Christ's presence and is inadvertently communed, neither that person nor the ministers of Communion need be ashamed. Rather, Christ's gift of love and mercy to all is praised. That person is invited to learn the faith of the Church, be baptized, and thereafter faithfully receive Holy Communion.

*The Age of First Communion May Vary*

*Principle 38.* Common mission among the congregations of this church depends on mutual respect for varied practice in many areas of church life including the ages of first Communion.

Arguments advanced in favor of infant communion are the claim that it is supported by tradition, that baptism is the only requirement for Communion, that it is the right of the baptized to commune, and that refusal to commune baptized infants casts doubt on infant baptism.

It is true that infant communion has been practiced in the Eastern church, but Lutherans do not base their doctrine and practice on tradition or the example of others. It is clear from Paul's statements in 1 Corinthians 11 that infants should not commune because communicants must be able to examine themselves and discern the presence of Christ's body and blood. While we do not set an arbitrary age when these qualifications can be met, we have no evidence they can be met by infants and very young children.

It appears that the ELCA decision was based on sentiment, a desire to allow maximum diversity of practice, a desire to allow an ecumenical accommodation to the Eastern church, and a failure to give careful consideration to the qualifications set in Scripture for attending the Sacrament with blessing.

The main practical problem that this new practice raises for us is that occasionally former ELCA families may come to us who have relatively young children who have already been communing for many years. If they are still quite far from the age at which the other young people of the congregation will begin to receive the Lord's Supper, it would be wise to ask them to discontinue their attendance at the sacrament until they are confirmed, so as not to introduce diverse practices into the church. If they are relatively close to the age of confirmation, the pastor should examine them to see if they are prepared to attend the Lord's Supper. If they give evidence of proper preparation, they might be allowed to continue attending. In no case should they be permitted to attend without clear evidence of proper preparation.

### *Summary*

Taken as a whole, the ELCA statement affirms loyalty to the Lutheran teaching of the Sacrament, while allowing for many practices that are not in harmony with that view. It is noteworthy that the statement is more concerned with the ecclesiastically-prescribed use of the sacrament than with the right doctrine of the sacrament as derived from Scripture.

### **Trinitarian Baptism?**

Here the key question is whether the baptism of the ELCA is trinitarian? At first glance it would seem the answer is obvious. As we saw above (p 1) the official ELCA confession declares:

*This church confesses the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. COF 2.*

We also saw at that point that other actions and writings of the ELCA cast considerable doubt on this claim. The writings of prominent ELCA theologians also raise doubts about whether the ELCA is truly a trinitarian church. In the next session we will see how Braaten and Jenson's *Christian Dogmatics* casts doubt on the Trinitarian faith of the ELCA.

The 1997 sacramental statement does affirm trinitarian baptism, but contains some ominous phrases.

*We Baptize in the Name of the Triune God*

*Principle 24.* Holy Baptism is administered with water in the name of the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Baptism into the name of the triune God involves confessing and teaching the doctrine and meaning of the Trinity. . .”  
*Background 24a.* The Church seeks to maintain trinitarian orthodoxy while speaking in appropriate modern language and contexts. While a worldwide ecumenical discussion is now under-way about such language, we have no other name in which to baptize than the historic and ecumenically received name.

*Background 24b.* ...What “Father” and “Son” mean, in biblical and creedal perspective, must also be continually reexamined. The doctrine of God teaches us the surprising theology of the cross and counters “any alleged Trinitarian sanction for sinful inequality or oppression of women in church and society.”  
*Application 24c.* Some Christians, however, are received into our congregations from other churches in which they were baptized “in the name of Jesus Christ.” ...We will do well to avoid quarrels over the validity of these Baptisms.

*Application 24d.* Outside the context of trinitarian life and teaching no Christian Baptism takes place, whatever liturgical formula may be used.

We can say that this statement affirms the necessity of using the triune name and of the intention to baptize in the name of the Triune God. One wonders, however, what lies behind Background 24a: “The Church seeks to maintain trinitarian orthodoxy while speaking in appropriate modern language and contexts. While a worldwide ecumenical discussion is now under-way about such language, we have no other name in which to baptize than the historic and ecumenically received name.” We fear we have not heard the end of this.

### *Conclusion*

Although there are many abuses present in ELCA’s use of the sacraments and there is reason to be concerned that growing departure from the teachings of Scripture may destroy the validity of their sacraments, the present evidence does not justify a blanket conclusion that the ELCA is not celebrating the sacraments validly. The performance of the sacraments by a woman pastor would not make the sacraments invalid, but it would make them illegitimate as pastoral acts. In some individual cases the abuses may be so serious that the validity of the sacraments is destroyed (for example, when alien elements or baptismal formulas are substituted for what Christ commanded). We need to examine such situations on a case by case basis. We will also need to continue to speak against an illegitimate use of the sacraments in such abuses as open communion and neglect of proper instruction.

## **CONCLUSION**

In its official statements and actions the ELCA has repudiated fundamental doctrines of Lutheranism and the Christian faith. Prominent theologians of the ELCA go even further in their private writings, as we shall see in the next session.

## **A Doctrinal Study of the ELCA in 2012—Part III**

# THE DOGMATICS OF THE ELCA

In the last section we saw the room for doctrinal diversity which the ELCA's confession of faith allows to its theologians. In this section we will examine how this freedom is used by the dogmaticians who teach at ELCA seminaries. We will not talk about their views of the Antichrist, lodges, election, objective justification, and other disputed questions from the history of American Lutheranism since they have long ago given up concern about such issues. We will confine ourselves to examining their teachings on four basic doctrines of Christianity: the nature and sources of theology, the doctrine of God, the person of Christ, and justification. If these doctrines are corrupted, there is little reason to be optimistic about the rest.

Our primary source will be the textbook, *Christian Dogmatics*, which was written by six leading theologians of the ELCA in the hopes that it would become the standard text for teaching doctrine in their seminaries. This two-volume text, published in 1984, is generally called Braaten and Jenson after its two editors, who at that time were professors of systematic theology at Chicago and Gettysburg. If the approach to doctrine which is typical of this text dominates the seminaries of the ELCA, the prospects for the survival of truly Lutheran, biblically-based doctrine in the ELCA are bleak indeed. Indeed, it needs to be stressed that Braaten and Jenson are relatively conservative in the theological spectrum of the ELCA, and it appears that the views of Braaten and Jenson are now somewhat marginalized in the ELCA. Many of the books published by Fortress or Augsburg go much further than Braaten and Jenson in abandoning biblical doctrine.

This text makes for unpleasant reading, not only because of its doctrinal content, but because of the obscure jargon and philosophical language which its authors favor. Nevertheless, it is necessary for us to examine it in order to form an impression of the kind of dogmatic instruction ELCA pastors have received.

## The Nature and Source of Theology

Already in the preface the authors state quite frankly that an acceptance of diversity of doctrine in the church is one of their basic presuppositions. They say:

Although all of us stand within the Lutheran tradition, the differences among us and the consequent inconsistencies in the book are considerable. ... At some points the authors simply disagree, and this disagreement occasionally reaches the point of contradiction. We leave it to the readers to discover the places where it occurs. (I, xvii)

The sad fact is that for the authors of this book the goal of doctrine is no longer the orderly presentation of the truths revealed in Scripture. Instead the task of the dogmatician is to criticize the doctrinal traditions of the various churches and to make proposals for rewording the teachings of the faith in ways which will be acceptable to advocates of negative criticism of the Bible and to evolutionists. Dogmatics is done not so much to defend the doctrine of the church, but to criticize it. (I,5,7)

## Scripture

It is not surprising that careful study of Bible passages is almost totally absent from Braaten and Jenson's work. Their presentation consists almost entirely of analysis and criticism of the traditional teachings of the churches, followed by their proposal for changing that doctrine to make it more appropriate for today. This approach is the natural result of the authors' rejection of the Scripture as a reliable, authoritative source for dogmatics. Although they call Scripture "the source and norm for the knowledge of God's revelation which concerns the Christian faith," they limit the authority of the Bible for Christian theology to the gospel of Jesus Christ to which the Christian Scriptures bear witness. This is made very clear in the chapter on Scripture, which was written by Braaten.

The introductory thesis for Braaten's chapter on Scripture is reproduced here in its entirety:

The Holy Scriptures are the source and norm of the knowledge of God's revelation which concerns the Christian faith. 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." Jesus Christ himself is the Lord of the Scriptures, the source and scope of its authority. (I,61)

Notice that for Braaten the Scriptures are no longer written revelation from God, but the source of knowledge of revelation about faith. This means that Scripture does not reveal facts about God which are the basis for our faith, but tells us about the faith experiences of the apostles so that we can have the same experience. This makes Scripture less than the "very words of God." (Ro 3:2)

We certainly agree with Braaten that the gospel is the heart of Scripture, but all other doctrines serve the gospel. The correct biblical teaching of a specific doctrine must be based on all of the passages which speak about that specific topic, not on some vague personal opinion deduced from a "principle of the gospel." For example, the terrible reality of hell cannot be denied on the basis of the gospel proclamation of God's love since many other passages clearly speak of hell. The role of women in the church must not be based on imaginative interpretation of some alleged "gospel principle of equality," but it must be based on the passages which specifically address the issue of women's role in the church. Every passage of Scripture is authoritative for the specific topic which it addresses.

A basic premise of Braaten is that the historical critical method has made the traditional view of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture obsolete. His grounds for abandoning the doctrine of biblical inerrancy are the alleged exposure of many errors and contradictions in the biblical text and an alleged desire to avoid elevating the Bible as an idol above Christ. The doctrine of the Word which characterizes this book is that the Bible is the Word of God only in a derived way. The Bible is the Word of God, not so much because it was given by inspiration of God, but because it conveys the message of salvation. According to this view it is not possible to assume the literal historicity of events recorded in the Bible.

Braaten says,

In modern Protestant fundamentalism [Braaten's term for groups like the WELS], which ironically claims to bear the legacy of the Reformation, the authority of Scripture is extended to include infallible information on all kinds of subjects. Fundamentalist biblicism is rejected by most theologians and is out of favor in

most of the seminaries that train clergy for the parish ministry. They reject biblicism not merely because historical science has disclosed errors and contradictions in the biblical writings, but rather because the authority of the Bible is elevated at the expense of the authority of Christ and his gospel. Non-fundamentalist Protestants [i.e. ELCA] also accept the Bible as the Word of God in some sense, but they point out that the concept of the Word of God, as Barth made clear, cannot be confined to the Bible. (I,74,75).

Today it is impossible to assume the historicity of the 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,76)

This section gives a pretty good idea of what impression, if any, ELCA seminary students would get of WELS. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary certainly cannot be classified among the “great theological schools” by Braaten’s standards. ELCA theologians “accept the Bible as the Word of God in some sense.” Do ELCA laypeople realize this is the real meaning of their confession’s statement “This church accepts the canonical Scriptures as the inspired Word of God”?

Braaten and Jenson reduce the Bible to a source book for the imaginative reconstruction of church doctrine. The disastrous effects of this approach upon any attempt to produce a biblical dogmatics are exposed by a statement which concludes the introduction:

Critical attention to what the texts actually say has exploded the notion that one orthodox dogmatics can be mined out of Scripture. There are different theological tendencies and teachings in the various texts. Ecumenically this has led to the practical conclusion that the traditional demand for a complete consensus of doctrine may be wrong-headed, if even the Scriptures fail to contain such a consensus. (I, 77)

It appears that Braaten and Jenson came to realize, at least in part, the disastrous effects of their views for the church.<sup>2</sup> In 1995 they edited and published a collection of essays, *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*. They admit that the Bible has become lost to the church through the historical-critical method and that the church needs to reclaim the Bible from the academy. They and their collaborators want to distance themselves from the way that the higher-critical methodology has been applied by the Jesus Seminar, the ELCA sex study, and Bishop Spong, but they maintain that there is no going back from the historical critical method. It must be retained, but it must be practiced in communication with the tradition of the church. It is understandable why Lutherans who have savaged the Scriptures contemplate returning to Rome or Constantinople.

## **The Confessions**

If this is the treatment accorded to Scripture, we can hardly expect the Lutheran Confessions to receive much better.

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<sup>2</sup> For Braaten’s final confession/apology see the end of part five.

The right wing appeals to the confessional principle to exclude all new developments in modern theology. ... Here doctrines become laws, creating a climate of doctrinal legalism in the church, snuffing out the freedom which is the church's birthright from the gospel. (I,51)

Dogmatics can look for insights in the creeds and confessions of the church without being archaistic, and it can learn new ways of thinking without becoming modernistic.

[The confessions] are not so much a legal requirement as an evangelical witness, not legally binding canonical norms, but human testimonies of faith in the Word of God. (I,51,52)

Here we see exposed the real meaning of the ELCA's confession, "We accept the creeds as true declarations of the faith of this church." According to the ELCA the Confessions do not bind today's theologians to teach according to them. They merely show us how past generations confessed their faith. They remind theologians not to get too far from the traditional language of their denomination. Lutheran liberals have to sound like Lutherans, Catholic liberals have to sound like Catholics, even if they believe (and disbelieve) the same thing.

Braaten's presentation is certainly a gross distortion both of the true confessionalist's attitude toward the Confessions and of the original aims and purposes of the Confessions. Neither the confessors of the Reformation era nor their heirs think of the confessions as a law to be enforced on the unwilling. But neither do they think of them as a tentative suggestions for the church. The Confessions were written to be subscribed to and adhered to by all real Lutherans. They also distinguished Lutherans from other Christians and served as a basis for resolving theological disputes.

Luther and the other confessors would not have been ready to surrender or to declare optional a single article of the Confessions unless it would have been proved to them from Scripture that their position was wrong. This is a far cry from the kind of confession offered by Braaten and Jenson who are ready to surrender not only the distinctly Lutheran articles of the Confessions, but even the ecumenical trinitarian articles which are their foundation.

## **The Trinity**

The chapter on the trinity was written by Jenson. In the spectrum of the ELCA it is relatively conservative since it rejects the feminist elimination of "Father and Son" and maintains, "In functional continuity with biblical witness, 'Father, Son, and Spirit' is the proper name of the church's God" (I,87). However, after reading Jenson's presentation one cannot be sure if Jenson believes in the three persons of the Trinity in the traditional sense of the term. I think not. This section, like much of the text, is written in an obscure jargon. Readers cannot help wishing that Braaten and Jenson had remembered that one of the chief goals of theological writing is to communicate clearly. Does Jenson's view clearly communicate the doctrine of the Trinity? Judge for yourself.

The trinitarian name did not fall from heaven. It was made up by believers for the God with whom we have found ourselves involved. “Father” was Jesus’ peculiar address to the particular transcendence over against whom he lived. Just as by this address he qualified himself as “Son” and in the memory of the primal church his acclamation as Son was the beginning of faith. “Spirit” was the term provided by the whole biblical theology for what comes of such a meeting between God and a special human being of his. It is involvement in this structure of Jesus’ own event—prayer to the “Father” with the “Son” in the power of and for “the Spirit”—that is faith’s knowledge of God. Thus, “Father, Son, and Spirit” summarize faith’s apprehension of God. ...But in the event so summarizable “Father, Son, and Spirit” came together also simply as a name for the one therein apprehended, and apparently did so before all analysis of its suitability. (I,93)

Jenson appears to be claiming that the names “Father, Son and Spirit” are simply words for describing different ways that we may experience a religious “encounter” with a vaguely revealed divine being. His further elaboration of his theory supports this interpretation.

“Father, Son and Spirit” is a slogan for the temporal structure of the church’s apprehension of God and for the proper logic of its proclamation and liturgy. (I,99)

For Jenson the names “Father, Son and Spirit” respectively seem to correspond to past, present, and future aspects of religious experience. There are three persons of the Trinity because our religious experience can be thought of as past, present, or future (I,129).

Jenson explicitly rejects the eternal pre-existence of the Second Person of the Trinity:

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. Jesus’ historical life was a sending by the Father, the filial relationship between this man and the transcendence to whom he turned temporally occurred. ... Truly the Trinity is simply the Father and the man Jesus and their Spirit as the Spirit of the believing community. (I,155)

In later sections of his book Jenson tries to soften or blur the preceding statements. He denies that his teaching implies that the Father and Spirit are created by Jesus and that it destroys all individual terms of the persons. Jenson’s method is to make provocative statements like the ones quoted above and then to surround them with a confusing fog of orthodox terms and philosophical gobbledy-gook. He would undoubtedly be amused by our approach of taking isolated quotations from this presentation and protest that such excerpting is unfair to his overall message and does not catch the subtlety of his thought. But despite his disclaimers to the contrary, Jenson’s doctrine of God must be classified as a strange brew of temporal modalism (the belief that God is not three distinct persons, but has different ways of appearing) and process theology (the belief that God evolves along with the world). He effectively denies the clear distinction of the three persons of the Trinity. The most favorable construction one could put on Jenson’s work is that he leaves the existence of a personal God in doubt. What a tragedy that the

simple proclamation of the Triune God found in Scripture and the clear, if somewhat overly philosophical statements of the early centuries are submerged in obscure theorizing which is neither clear nor simple.

At the mid-point of our dreary journey through Braaten and Jenson we find that they leave us with no dependable source of doctrine and with nothing but vaguely defined religious experience as our god. They provide no real knowledge of our creator and no real awareness of the seriousness of sin.

Since the doctrine of theology and the doctrine of God provide foundations for all the rest of theology, errors in these doctrines inevitably affect the whole system of doctrine. If these foundations are shaky, we may expect the whole building to fall. It is, therefore, not surprising that in the ELCA there are significant problems with almost every doctrine of Scripture.

But what about the doctrine of the person and work of Christ? Has this doctrine upon which the church stands or falls been preserved in the theology of the ELCA? Sad to say, we will see that even this indispensable core of Christianity has been obscured and corrupted by the leading theologians of the ELCA. Again we will use *Christian Dogmatics* as our main source.

### **The person of Christ**

The section of *Christian Dogmatics* dealing with the person of Christ was written by Carl Braaten. Braaten begins by describing the method for establishing our belief about Christ.

Christology is the church's reflection on the basic assertion that Jesus is the Christ of God. Its aim is to construct a comprehensive interpretation of the identity and meaning of the person of Jesus as the Christ, under the condition of contemporary knowledge and experience. (I,473)

It will always be necessary for the church to test its christological interpretations by referring to the biblical picture of Jesus the Christ. The biblical picture of Christ, however, is not like a single snapshot. It is more like a montage of portraits sketched by several artists, from various angles and at different times and places. For this reason, scholars now speak of a multiplicity of christologies in the New Testament. Nevertheless, all of them stem from the earliest witness of the apostles to Jesus of Nazareth, his life and teachings, and particularly his suffering, death, and resurrection. (I,481)

Braaten sees three basic sources of christology which do not necessarily agree with each other: what Jesus thought about himself, what the early church preached about Christ, and what the church throughout the centuries has taught about Christ. We must use critical methods to separate Jesus' own views of himself from those of the early church since these two strands are woven together in Scripture.

Since Braaten believes that there is no unified doctrine of Christ in Scripture, it is not surprising that he has trouble producing one of his own. Nevertheless, he goes about the task by analyzing the three sources and then "constructing" his own christology based on those three sources, adjusted to conform to contemporary knowledge and experience. It is not surprising that the Christ that emerges from this process is a pale reflection of the God-man revealed in Scripture and confessed in the creeds of the church.

Consider Braaten's presentation of the true humanity and true divinity of Jesus Christ. We realize all is not well already in Braaten's lead-in to this part of his presentation. He seems to speak of the divine and human natures in Christ as our theological inventions when he states:

In predicating divine and human natures, as well as divine and human attributes, of the one Lord Jesus Christ, we are giving expression to the knowledge of faith that God has entered history as the power of final salvation of humanity and the cosmos. (I,514)

If we have our doubts whether the statement that "God has entered history as the power of final salvation of humanity and the cosmos" is really the equivalent of the biblical truth that the eternal Word who always dwelt in the presence of the Father became flesh and dwelt among us, all uncertainty is removed by Braaten's explanation of the deity of Christ.

The confession that Jesus in his person is truly God means that God's decisive and final word to the world has been communicated once for all in his Word made flesh.

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 the mythological picture of the world that clashes with our modern scientific world view. (I,527)

Braaten seeks a middle ground between the conservative's rejection of biblical criticism and the liberal's demythologizing of the Christian faith, which rejects the myth of the incarnation as non-essential to that faith. Braaten accepts the story of the incarnation as a helpful myth which contains symbolical elements which are not to be taken literally, but which has some historical aspects and therefore should be retained in the church. (I,528)

The Christ who is invented by Braaten is God in name only, not in essence. Although Braaten tries to retain ties with the traditional christology (or at least its terms), he so thoroughly redefines them and mixes them with philosophical abstractions that the God-man of Scripture is hidden in a cloud. Although he is willing to call Jesus Christ "God," this cannot be understood in the biblical or creedal sense. Braaten's confession that Jesus is God does not involve the entry of the eternal, preexistent Son into the world by becoming man. For Braaten "incarnation" means that God somehow presents the message of salvation in Jesus.

In confessing the true divinity of Jesus Christ, we are saying that in Jesus God is revealed as the finally valid answer to all our ultimate questions about the meaning of existence and the future life. As the exclusive medium of God's final word of judgment and hope, Jesus is the one through whom the knowledge of ultimate salvation enters history. ... Jesus can be our God because the power of God's absolute future was shown to be effectually present in his person and ministry." (I,538)

The preexistence of Christ is an integral part of the myth of the incarnation. References to the preexistence of Christ... say that Jesus is the eternal Son of God because the salvation he delivered to humankind has its origin in God. (I,545)

With the doctrine of the incarnation so emptied of meaning it is not surprising that Braaten empties the creedal statements concerning Christ's humiliation and exaltation of their historical content.

### *The Virgin Birth*

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. ... It is important then not to get bogged down in biology, but to read it as a symbol witnessing the truth of the kerygma. The truth of the conception by the Holy Spirit is that God was the author of salvation through Christ from the beginning, not first in his resurrection, nor on the cross, nor at the baptism, but from the moment of his conception by Mary. (I,546)

### *Jesus' Death*

The crucifixion of Jesus happened once and will never happen again. Nevertheless, the meaning of the historical cross was transmitted in the suprahistorical language of mythological symbolism. ... When the cross is viewed mythologically, and not simply as one historical event alongside others, it receives redemptive significance of cosmic proportions. (I, 547,548)

### *Jesus' Resurrection*

We can call the resurrection an historical event because it happened in a particular place, in Palestine, and at a definite time, a few days after his death and prior to Pentecost. ... On the other hand, the nature of the reality that appeared to the witnesses was more than historical. It was an eschatological event. (I,551)

What has Braaten left for us—an incarnation and virgin birth which are just mythical symbols, a crucifixion which is a means of salvation only when it is mythically interpreted, and a resurrection which has historical reality only in the minds of the witnesses. With foundations like these it is no wonder that Braaten believes in salvation detached from the historical deeds of Christ, salvation which can be obtained without knowledge or faith in Christ. If biblical Christianity still exists in the ELCA, it is found in the preaching of some faithful pastors and in the hearts of God's captive people. It is not found in the teachings of its chief dogmatists. But perhaps this verdict is premature. We still have not looked at *Christian Dogmatics'* treatment of justification. Since liberal theologians have maintained that the only doctrine necessary for the unity of the church is the doctrine of the gospel, perhaps we will find something better there.

## **The Work of Christ**

The doctrine of justification by grace through faith is the central doctrine of biblical and Lutheran theology. It is shocking that *Christian Dogmatics* has no chapter on justification. One would think that to label a book without a chapter on justification as a Lutheran dogmatics or even as a Christian dogmatics would be a contradiction in terms.

Perhaps this should not surprise us since the central place of justification in Christian theology was denied already in their introduction:

At some points in the history of Lutheranism, a full reception of the catholic dogmatic tradition has been hindered by an attempt of Lutheran confessionalism to deduce the whole of the church's life and teaching from the special principle of Lutheran theology—the article of justification by faith alone. Whenever this reductionist error has been committed, it has produced a particularly inhumane form of Lutheran sectarianism. (I, xviii)

After this statement nothing which follows in *Christian Dogmatics* should surprise us. We should not be shocked that theologians who share the viewpoint of Braaten and Jenson have surrendered the biblical teaching of justification in their dialogues with Rome. “Agreement in the gospel” no longer means acceptance of the biblical, Pauline, Lutheran doctrine that our sins are freely forgiven by the gracious verdict of God, not because anything which we have done, but solely on the basis of Christ's perfect payment for sin. Today “agreement in the gospel” has been reduced to the belief that somehow or other our salvation is ultimately dependent on God.

Things get no better in *Christian Dogmatics's* main discussion of justification which is contained in Gerhard Forde's chapter entitled “Christian Life.” A survey of the highlights (or lowlights) is enough to impress us with how devastating the decline of Lutheran theology has been in ELCA.

Forde cannot come to grips with the biblical concept of justification because he has downgraded the biblical concept of law. For him law and gospel are not distinct biblical teachings which assert certain truths. Law and gospel are defined as two different types of religious experience. Law is defined as “one way in which communication functions when we are alienated, estranged, and bound.” (II, 400) The doctrine of the Christ's payment for sin is stripped of its legal aspects. In his earlier chapter on the atonement Forde states:

Jesus came and died because God is merciful, not to make God merciful. We killed him because he forgave sins, not to make forgiveness possible.

The historical account is a code, a surface manifestation of a real meaning to be found on a different and transcendent level. The historical event must be translated into eternal truth about the satisfaction of God's honor, or elevated to a sublime example of dedication to whatever religious people are supposed to be dedicated to, or transcribed into a story about the deception of cosmic tyrants. None of that is evident from the event itself. It comes from the moral, mythological and metaphysical baggage we carry with us. (II,79)

With a starting point like this it is not surprising that Forde cannot deal with the legal aspects of the atonement and justification in a biblical manner.

Forde explains the significance of Jesus' death by a parable which is intended to develop a nonreligious concept of sacrifice (II,89). In the parable each of us is represented by the driver of a truck which accidentally runs down Jesus and "splatters him on the front of our machine." What is the meaning of this accident? Listen to Forde's own explanation.

The one splattered against the front of our truck comes back to say "Shalom."  
There is no strange transaction that takes place somewhere in celestial bookkeeping halls to make it universal. The one we killed, the one no one wanted, is raised from the dead. That is all. (II,92)

If that vague parable is all there is to the gospel, what peace is there for troubled consciences? In response to doctrine like this we can only say, God preserve us from "gospel" preaching like this, preaching based on no real payment or sins, preaching with no proclamation of a verdict of forgiveness for all, preaching with nothing to offer except a vague emotional appeal, expressed in unclear jargon and mysterious parables.

That such views are not a "far-out" extreme in the ELCA is illustrated by a Fortress publication by Mark Lewis Taylor:

Christian scapegoating interpretations of Jesus' death bear a significant responsibility for today's theatrics of terror, as we suffer it in the form of prisons, endemic police brutality, and state-sanctioned executions. Christians who wish to counter this theatrics of terror with something really new must lay aside the scapegoating myth of Jesus' death. Jesus' execution was not a salvific event, and I have not presented it as such in this book. (*The Executed God*, p. 108).

In ELCA dogmatics the biblical message that Christ paid for the sins of the whole world and that God has credited that payment to the whole world has been watered down to a ill-defined religious encounter. This is the greatest tragedy of ELCA dogmatics. To those who cherish the clear proclamation of the scriptural doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone as their greatest joy and privilege, the thought that two thirds of the Lutheran pastors in the United States could receive their understanding of justification from a text like this is heartbreaking. Imagine, if you can, having such a pastor instruct your children or grandchildren. Imagine him speaking to the heathen on your behalf. Imagine her comforting you after the death of your husband or wife or visiting you on your death bed.

The gap between the theologians of the ELCA and the theologians of WELS is not just a matter of such doctrines as election, millennialism, lodges, fellowship and the role of women. It involves the most basic foundations of faith—the doctrine of God and the doctrines of the person and work of Christ. The differences between the theologians of the ELCA and the theologians of WELS are greater than the differences between Lutherans and Catholics at the time of the Reformation. We can hardly justify calling the theology of the top theologians of the ELCA Lutheran or even Christian.

We can only hope that some pastors and laypeople in the ELCA will preserve the precious doctrine of justification and the other doctrines of Scripture in spite of the views of their leaders. In our last section, we will see that the leaders of the ELCA are making it increasingly difficult for the people to do so, and things have gotten even worse since the era of Braaten and Jenson.

## FROM WORST TO WORSTER

The picture of ELCA theology painted by Braaten and Jenson has not been pretty, but it gets worse. If Braaten and Jenson produced the ELCA dogmatics for the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ted Peters attempts to create an ELCA dogmatics for the 21<sup>st</sup> century (or, at least, for the first decade of it).

In *God: The World's Future, Systematic Theology for a Postmodern Era*<sup>3</sup> Peters introduces a theology more post-modern (i.e., New Age) than Braaten and Jenson. Braaten in his blurb for the book says of Peter's theology, "There is nothing quite like it on the American scene."

The new twist in Peter's version of Lutheran theology is the panentheistic element (though Peters claims that his view is not panentheistic). Peters sees his view as moving beyond four standard views of God: 1) *deism* which thinks of God as separated from and non-involved in the world; 2) *theism* which thinks of God as separated from but-involved in the world; 3) *pantheism* in which God and the world are the same thing; and 4) *panentheism* in which the world is included in God, but God is not contained within the world. Peters calls his synthesis *proleptic theism* or *prolepticism*. He explains:

It is a proleptic view in that it depicts God as constantly engaged in drawing the world out of nonbeing and into existence with the aim of consummating this creative work in the future. God's present work in and for the world anticipates the final work. This view is also theistic in that it affirms that God is active *in*, yet transcendent to, the work. It is not pantheistic or panentheistic because it does not grant that God's presence in the world is ontological in character—that is, there is no continuity of being between the nature of God and the nature of the world. God is not stuck in the world. God is *a se*. God is not dependent upon the world for God's own being. This is true save in one respect. The full realization of God's power is dependent upon the cooperation of the cosmos. By parting chance and freedom to the world processes, God has jeopardized the possibility that God's "will be done on earth as it is in heaven." So God is dependent upon the world in one respect—namely, God will not be fully God until the kingdom comes in its fullest and God's will for the creation is fulfilled. (p 132 or 125)

Peters grants that his view is *eschatological panentheism*. In this view God is larger than creation, but creation is part of God. God in some ways guides the creation but he does not control it. God evolves along with creation and his fulfillment is dependent on creation.

It is not surprising that a theology with an evolving God is an ever-evolving theology.

### The Nature and Source of Theology

Peters defines the task of the theologian.

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<sup>3</sup> There are different versions (1992 and 2000) and printings of this work, so page numbers may vary. In some instances I give both page numbers to give an idea of the degree of difference.

One can identify the modern theologian as a person who is willing to jump off the island and attempt to swim amid the currents of modern consciousness. He or she is aware of the risks of leaving the dry land of biblical naiveté behind, but hopes that farther out at sea another island of meaning will appear. If none does appear, then perhaps with strong faith one can simply learn to enjoy the unending swim. (p 5)

## **The Word of God**

Scripture, of course, can have no central or governing role in such a theology.

I am defining theology as the explication of Christian symbols, and I am designating the gospel as the norm of this explication. What is the role of scripture? [sic] It functions as the source of primary symbols, and because of this it plays a unique if not criterial role. ... Now the question: what is the relationship between the Bible and the gospel? Are they equivalent? No. Although they have a very close relationship, they can be distinguished. The Bible contains the gospel, yet it contains more than the gospel. Because it appears we have no access to the gospel prior to its transcription in scripture, the Bible functions for us as the author and hence the authority of the gospel content...Think of a baby in a cradle. The cradle is the form, and the baby is the material content. The Bible is the “cradle of Christ,” Luther said frequently. (p 55-56 or 51-52)

The gospel is oral proclamation, personal conversation, and this takes priority over the written word. (p 61)

Whatever scripture as canon means, it cannot mean that scripture stands in a sharp contrast over against ecclesial tradition. It is not a purely independent norm. The canon itself is a product of doctrinal confession. (p 58)

To affirm scriptural infallibility by no means commits us to affirming that every sentence or proposition or allusion is error-free. Rather, in the very act of employing the Scripture in a criterial role we are implicitly affirming that we trust its reliability to impart the truth of the gospel. (p 67)

In the case of the plenary authority theory of the Bible, the fallacy is committed when one argues from the premise that the Bible as a whole is the word of God to the conclusion that individual parts are the words of God. It is quite possible to think of the scripture taken as a whole (that is, the book in its entirety plus its ongoing life directed by the Holy Spirit) as the word of God without attributing equal authority to each and every word or phrase that appears on its pages. (p 64)

But treating scripture this way as the sole norm does not settle all matters. The question of how to interpret the norm keeps the discussion going indefinitely. There can be different techniques for interpreting what the Bible says, just as there can be different groups who claim the privilege of offering the authoritative

interpretation. This raises the issue of authority. Who has the right to offer the official interpretation? ...Hence, it does not necessarily simplify things to designate the Bible as norm. (p 57)

It is difficult to draw the line where scripture ends and subsequent tradition picks up. Assessments of early church history show a reciprocity between scripture and ecclesial tradition that prevents any simple identification of scripture as norm independent of tradition. (p 58)

### **To the Unknown God**

We have symbols that we can employ like names—that is, Yahweh, God, the Lord, and such—but they only point toward a divine reality that remains holy and beyond understanding. (p 94)

The preeminent apophatic [negative, contrasted to human experience] attribute of God is ineffability. The divine essence is unknowable. (p 93)

With classical theists, Christians also say God is eternal. . . . What can eternity mean today? In our own modern and postmodern context, we cannot intelligibly conceive of timelessness ontologically as a static state of being with no succession of events. For us in the modern world, the dynamic of events constitutes reality. An eternal state of existence without the succession of events would constitute eternal death, not the eternal life. (p 94-95)

### **The Trinity??**

There are not three personalities in God, although we certainly might speak of a personality of God. The one God is fully present and active in each and all modes of being and action; yet God is not distinguishable except in one or another of these modes of being and action. One or another of the faces is required to identify the one God. (p 104)

God's relationship to the world is internal to the divine life. God's relation to the world in redemption and consummation is not merely external, not merely an add-on to a God whose being is intact. God is not a simple monad existing somewhere in eternal isolation who occasionally turns on a celestial television news show to observe what is happening on earth. Rather, God's involvement in the course of world affairs is so intimate that the character of divinity itself is shaped by it (p 112-113).

In sum, we might say there is only one divine reality, but it has three distinguishable and interrelatable identities.” (p 105)

Theologically, however, we must say that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not three distinct, divine rational beings, three subjects, or three separate selves. Nor

are they distinct parts of a single divine self, which, in its oneness, hovers unseen behind or above separate faces.” (p 109)

### **Cosmic Christ**

What is “Prolepsis?” The world has been given God's promise that in the future all things will be made whole. Jesus embodies the promise because he anticipates in his person the new life that we humans and all creation are destined to share. Prolepsis is the anticipation of future reality in a concrete pre-actualization of it. Jesus is the future made present. The life of Jesus reveals to us proleptically the promised destiny of the whole creation by showing us how God's promise of future wholeness affects our lives now amid a world of brokenness. Is this cosmic Christ the Christ of Scripture?

The two-natures discussion is a response to an event in which God altered our definition of what constitutes divinity. In the incarnation God ceases to be God in a previously stereotypical sense and enters fully into the plight of human suffering. The history of Jesus is divine history. Through the resurrection of Jesus—and eventually the eschatological consummation wherein the Spirit unites all of creation to its Lord, Jesus Christ—God sweeps the human reality up into the divine life proper. What appears at first to be alien to God, is in fact, God. God defines the Godself through historical action. Our interpretation of this action reveals to us that God is a Trinity.” (p 201)

### **Salvation - Imagine There's No Heaven**

The symbol of heaven represents the transformed reality promised the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It does not refer to a geographically remote region to which disembodied souls fly when released from their anchor on earth. It is present here and now amid bodily life in a proleptic way. (p 331)

What the Bible says about hell should be interpreted in keeping with “its literary character of 'threat-discourse' and hence [is] not to be read as a preview of something which will exist some day. ... Whether literal or metaphorical, the function of hellfire in the New Testament is clearly that of a warning and a challenge for us to make a decision in the face of the possibility of being everlastingly separated from God. Hell signifies that our rejection of God can result in everlasting estrangement. (p 336)

Whether or not an everlasting hell exists is a difficult matter to settle . . . . We cannot overlook the fact that the threat of hell belongs indelibly to the New Testament symbol system and that its purpose, like that of judgment, is to reaffirm the justice of God in a world of sin. (p 337)

### **Proleptic Salvation**

The imago Dei is the divine call forward, a call we hear now and respond to now but a call that is drawing us toward transformation into a future reality. . . . Through divinization humanity as the imago Dei becomes fulfilled in us. If this is what is meant by theosis, then it expresses in other language what I have here been referring to as the call forward to true humanity. (p 157, 159)

### **Proleptic Ethics**

If we are evolving along with God and the world, we then are created co-creators with God of a new ethics of liberated love, not law.

An evangelical ethic is not concerned primarily with discerning the proper rules and then fulfilling them. It rather seeks out opportunities for love to become expressed and to do its work in edifying God's creatures and in building community. There are no ledgers to measure the degree of responsibility fulfillment. Nor is there a straight road of moral self-discipline down which we should march, looking to neither the left nor the right.

The dynamic movement of love within this world has a creative character because it seeks constantly to create wholeness where previously there was only brokenness. Hence, an ethic based upon liberated love establishes a new relationship with law. Instead of determining what is right by measuring its degree of conformity or nonconformity to an already established law or moral precept, a proleptic ethic leads us to create new laws for the purpose of fostering new levels of community.

This approach is very practical. We might call this a teleological or even a “holophronetic” approach. It consists in making judgments and taking actions in the present situation that we believe will serve the long-range good of the whole. We confront concrete problems, and the most loving thing we can do in most cases is pursue the solution that works best, that is most effective in light of the long-range view. In the social and political sphere this most often means the creation of positive laws that aim at bringing people together peacefully so that they can best enhance one another's well-being. Love produces positive law for the purpose of “co-creating new forms of human community and uniting those who have been separated,” writes Wolfhart Pannenberg. “The law that is produced by love is not some ideal order with a claim to timeless validity (and thus, in this case, it is not natural law) but the specific, concrete solution of concrete problems until something new arises; that is, until a new situation demands new solutions.” Thus, the production of just laws is not the end. It is the means for creating a wholesome community. (p 358-359)

### **The Chickens Come Home To Roost**

Given all I have said about eschatology and the open future, it is logical for me to stress that—regarding ordination of women as well as of gay and lesbian

persons—there is room to be creative and to make changes even where traditions have long been ensconced. (p 316)

### **Birds of a Feather**

Interestingly, I found Peter's chapter on proleptic ethics reproduced with his permission on the web page of *The Urantia Book*. *The Urantia Book*, first published by Urantia Foundation in 1955, claims to have been presented by celestial beings as a revelation to our planet, Urantia. The writings in *The Urantia Book* instruct us on "the genesis, history, and destiny of humanity and on our relationship with God the Father. They present a unique and compelling portrayal of the life and teachings of Jesus. They open new vistas of time and eternity to the human spirit, and offer new details of our ascending adventure in a friendly and carefully administered universe." They explain why they are placing Peters' writing on their web site:

While the language of this document is that of academic Christian theology, the concepts which it contains should be of great interest to readers of *The Urantia Book*.

If there is a difference between Peters' theology philosophy and New Age Gnosticism, it is more in terminology than in substance. The Urantians recognize a kindred spirit when they see one.

## **A Doctrinal Study of the ELCA in 2012—Part IV POPULAR DOCTRINE**

We have seen how the official doctrinal position of the ELCA leaves the door wide open for theologians to develop and promote all sorts of doctrinal diversity and how leading theologians of the ELCA have used this freedom to overthrow even the most basic doctrines of Christianity. In the ELCA concern for doctrine takes a backseat to church and world politics. On the organizational level of the ELCA there is virtually no testimony remaining for confessional Lutheranism.

But are the people in the pew aware of this? Is this doctrinal change hidden from them as it often is in the earlier stages of the capture of a church by false teachers?

This may have been true in the past. Thirty-five years ago, when I served a congregation composed primarily of former LCA members, I was told that the main problem they experienced with LCA preaching was not that it boldly and openly promoted false teaching, but that it did not clearly present the true teaching of Scripture, not even the doctrine of justification. They generally received bland preaching about how good God is and what good people we should be.

Although this analysis may still hold true of preaching, there has been a definite effort to bring the laity up-to-date with recent doctrinal developments in the ELCA. Even before the merger, both the LCA and ALC had programs to introduce and popularize the historical-critical approach to Scripture among the laity. In 1984 the ALC produced a series of essays published under the collective title *The Doctrine of the Word in the Lutheran Church*. This document was sent to all congregations as part of the pre-merger effort to win acceptance of the historical critical method. The ALC's *Search* and the LCA's *Word and Witness* programs were other

efforts toward this goal. Prior to the merger *The Lutheran* and *The Lutheran Standard* published numerous articles to increase the acceptance of the historical-critical method among the laity.

To assess how this campaign has advanced in the ELCA we will consider four sources: the doctrinal leadership provided by the first presiding bishop, popular moral teaching, preaching, and the publications for the laity.

### **Bishop Chilstrom**

For better or for worse the doctrinal direction of a church will be influenced by its leader. As the first bishop of the ELCA Herbert Chilstrom had a unique opportunity to influence the direction of the new church. Unfortunately, his position on Scripture was made clear in an interview published even before the merger was complete (*The Lutheran*, March 21, 1984). The prescriptive method [of using Scripture] is based on the assumption that Scripture is used to discover final answers to questions. Thus, when confronted with a particularly thorny issue, one could go to Scripture, study carefully every text that addresses the issue and come up with a conclusive response. Scripture as “norm” means Scripture as answer book.

I suspect that most of us in the LCA come at these matters from the descriptive method. We see Scripture as no less important. ... But for us “norm” means “guide” rather than “rule.” Having informed ourselves of what Scripture has to say, we go on to ask questions about other ways in which God may be trying to enlighten us.

In the interview Chilstrom expressed the opinion that his view of Scripture is “very conservative.” With leadership like this is it any wonder that the troops are confused and doctrinal chaos reigns?

As Chilstrom’s successor the ELCA chose H. George Anderson, the most prominent ELCA participant in the dialogues with Rome. Is it any wonder *sola fide* has been abandoned?

In 2001 the ELCA elected its third bishop, Mark Hanson, who was elected on the fifth ballot, coming out of the pack to win a narrow victory. Ten ecumenical representatives participated in his ordination as bishop. He is the first ELCA presiding bishop to have apostolic succession as specified in the CCM agreement with the Episcopal Church. He has continued in the same vein as his predecessors in promoting both the ecumenical and sexual agendas.

### **Popular Moral Teaching**

We have not yet given any consideration to another major factor in the decline of the ELCA. Special-interest lobbies whose primary interest is not doctrine but the promotion of certain political, social, racial, or sexual goals have a very powerful influence in the machinery of the ELCA.

An example of this is provided by the 1991 and 1993 draft statements on sexuality which were circulated by the Division for the Church in Society of the ELCA. These study documents were presented as a preliminary step toward developing a sexual ethic “faithful to Scripture and tradition, which is nevertheless responsive to issues of our day.”

These drafts caused an uproar because they appear to condone homosexuality and extramarital sex. The following evaluations of the 1991 document are cited from the February 3, 1992, issue of *Lutheran Forum*, a newsletter which promotes “confessional Lutheranism” in the ELCA.

Although posing as a study document, the ELCA study is really an appeal to the members of the ELCA to take a fresh and sympathetic look at homosexuality and extramarital sex and to refrain from judging such actions if they are practiced in a loving, committed way.

ELCA pastor Tom Brock commented,

The people of my congregation are angry and I am personally embarrassed to be a Lutheran. I expected more of my church than the lies we get from sexologists on the Phil Donahue Show.

Then-ELCA Pastor Leonard Klein commented,

The publication of this recommendation of sin is as such a sin. This is no invitation to dialogue. It is a farewell to the Scripture principle. It is an act of war against the Christian faith.

Those are pretty strong statements. Are they justified by the content of the ELCA document? Klein continues,

You know you are in trouble early on when the preface says in the second sentence that this study is designed to stimulate “dialogue with Scripture.” Some of us thought that in such issues we were to be led, formed, and instructed by Holy Scripture. ... At the outset, then, the problem is clear. The long held belief of most Christians that there is in fact already a quite identifiable Christian teaching about sex is swept away in the eagerness to “hear the voices.” And in the interest of hearing the voices, Scripture is turned into a weak partner in the cacophony at the table and displaced as the sole rule and norm. ... Repeatedly through the document, standard positions on sexual ethics are listed alongside other options with no hint that one has or should have any priority. Our document... manipulates. It presents false and misleading options in the most pleasant of language.

The ELCA study document was a frontal attack on biblical, Christian morality. Some might call it a sneak attack, but its intentions were not very well disguised. It was aimed at overthrowing the authority of Scripture for establishing doctrine and morals. We share the anguish which some members of the ELCA suffered from this document as well as their embarrassment to have the name Lutheran associated with a document like this. But they should not be surprised by the document. Before the ELCA merger was finalized, its leaders’ views on Scripture were clear. Lip-service to the authority of Scripture could not whitewash the ugly reality revealed by the ELCA’s explicit rejection of biblical inerrancy. There was no secret

about the political and sexual agendas of the special interest lobbies hiding behind the quota system which the ELCA used for choosing their representatives on boards and committees. Some blame the ELCA's present sad situation on the quota system. There is an element of truth to this claim, but the heart of the problem lies elsewhere. The universal dominance of the negative critical approach to Scripture in the ELCA has destroyed laypeople's confidence in the clarity and authority of Scripture. When critical methods of scripture study reduce the moral statements of Scripture to a collection of contradictory, culturally-biased opinions of a bunch of unknown authors, is it any surprise that the church can reach no moral conclusions? The present confusion about moral issues in the ELCA is a natural outcome of its leaders' acceptance of negative critical approaches to Scripture. This study document on sexuality was a natural fruit of critical approaches to Scripture.

The sharp clashes aroused by this document continued to plague the ELCA for almost two decades. It took twenty years of relentless effort by the gay rights lobby to gain victory. In spite of several generations of study documents attempts to produce a social statement on sexuality were thwarted by inability to come to agreement especially on homosexuality and homosexual pastors. In 1996 the church council of the ELCA produced a message on sexuality which avoided the controversial issues and stuck to "those areas for which there appears to be consensus within this church." For example, it notes that the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:1-17) have implications for sexuality.

Christians are called to respect the integrity and dignity of all persons, whatever their age, gender, sexual orientation, or marital status; discern and provide guidance for what it means to live responsibly as sexual beings; support through prayer and counsel those facing questions about their sexuality.

Singles are offered the following guidance: "This church seeks to be a place where, as sexual beings, single adults can find guidance for their particular spiritual, ethical, psychological, and social issues. Knowing that they are loved by God can help single persons to be accepting of themselves and others. As a community of encouragement and healing, the church's acceptance and support of single persons is important as they experience growth, change, and disappointments in their relationships."

Marriage is upheld as a lifelong covenant of faithfulness between a man and a woman. In marriage, two persons become "one flesh" (Gen. 2:24; Mt. 19:4-6; Mk. 10:6-9; Eph. 5:31), a personal and sexual union that embodies God's loving purpose to create and enrich life, but the section on divorce says, "Regrettably, some marriages end in divorce. Divorce is tragic, a consequence of human sinfulness. It is a serious breach in the community God intends for marriage (Mk. 10:9). In some situations, however, divorce may be the better option. Continuing some marriages may be destructive and abusive to those involved. In such cases, those involved should examine their responsibilities for the breakdown of the marriage. Confession and God's forgiveness bring healing and new life to persons who divorce."

The message condemns adultery, abuse, rape, sexual harassment, promiscuity, prostitution, unsafe sex, pornography, and sexuality in media and advertising.

The explosive issue of homosexuality remained unsolved. The document closes with these observations:

The mercies of God continually sustain and undercut any simple division of the righteous from the unrighteous (Rom. 1:18 - 3:20).

On some matters of sexuality, there are strong and continuing differences among us. As we discuss areas where we differ, the power of the Holy Spirit can guide and unite us. Trust in the Gospel brings together people whose differences over sexuality ought not be a basis for division. We pray for the grace to avoid unfair judgment of those with whom we differ, the patience to listen to those with whom we disagree, and the love to reach out to those from whom we may be divided.

In the ELCA the resistance to wholesale abandonment of biblical moral values has been more successful than the resistance to the wholesale abandonment of doctrinal principles, but the foundations were crumbling here also.

The battle over homosexuality continued on two-fronts: church blessings for same-sex unions and ordination of practicing homosexuals. A 1996 letter of the Conference of Bishops welcomed gays and lesbians to “participate fully in the [ELCA] congregations, but did not endorse blessing same-sex unions or the ordination of practicing homosexuals. Some congregations and synods pressed ahead on their own.

In May 2000 the Milwaukee area synod of the ELCA voted by a substantial majority to allow its pastors to bless same-sex unions (but not “marriages”). Pastor Joseph Ellwanger of Cross Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, had been blessing such unions since 1995. A number of other synods have supported such actions. Pastor Dennis Bux of Livonia, Michigan said, “God calls people into the vocation or calling of being gay or lesbian. It only makes sense to bless these relations” (*The Lutheran*, Sept. 2000, p 37).

At least two ELCA congregations called openly gay pastors in defiance of church regulations. One was placed on a sort of probation by the synod president; the other was not disciplined. An “Extraordinary Candidacy Project” helped congregations find gay candidates who were not eligible through official church lists, and in this way practicing homosexuals entered the ELCA ministerium without synod approval. *The Lutheran* summarized, “ELCA congregations are speaking conflicting truths when it comes to homosexuality” (*The Lutheran*, Sept. 2000, p 38).

The conflict continued through most of the first decade of the new millennium. Attempts to adopt the sexuality statement failed. Strife over the ordination and calling of practicing homosexuals continued, with a great deal of dissatisfaction at both ends of the spectrum. One ELCA bishop resigned for participating in the ordination of a lesbian. Protest or reform groups formed and operated within the ELCA.

The war ended with victory for the pro-gay forces at the 2009 churchwide assembly. After prolonged discussion delegates voted on the sexuality statement, “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust,” which needed 2/3 approval. It passed by exactly that margin: 676-338. One or two votes would have changed the outcome. The *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* stated that the vote came near dinnertime and some delegates had already started to leave. Twenty-nine of the 1,045 registered voters did not vote on the statement.

The statement does not explicitly approve of homosexual relationships. Instead, it says:

We do not have agreement on whether this church should honor these relationships, uplift, shelter and protect them, or on precisely how it is appropriate to do so. In response, this church draws on the foundational Lutheran understanding that the baptized are called to discern God's love in service to the neighbor. In our Christian freedom, we therefore seek responsible actions that

serve others and do so with humility and deep respect for the conscience-bound beliefs of others. We understand that, in this discernment about ethics and church practice, faithful people can and will come to different conclusions about the meaning of Scripture and about what constitutes responsible action. We further believe that this church, on the basis of “the bound conscience,” will include these different understandings and practices within its life as it seeks to live out its mission and ministry in the world.

The heart of the matter was buried in the footnotes. “The difference between interpreters should not be understood as a conflict between those who seek to be 'true to Scripture' and those who seek to 'twist the Bible' to their own liking. The disagreements are genuine,” the document says. It continues:

When the clear word of God's saving action by grace through faith is at stake, Christian conscience becomes as adamant as Paul, who opposed those who insisted upon circumcision. . . . However, when the question is about morality or church practice, the Pauline and Lutheran witness is less adamant and believes we may be called to respect the bound conscience of the neighbor. That is, if salvation is not at stake in a particular question, Christians are free to give priority to the neighbor's well-being and will protect the conscience of the neighbor who may well view the same question in such a way as to affect faith itself. For example, Paul was confident that Christian freedom meant the Gospel of Jesus Christ was not at stake in questions of meat sacrificed to idols or the rituals of holy days. Yet he insisted that, if a brother or sister did not understand this freedom and saw eating this meat as idolatry to a pagan god, the Christian was obligated to “walk in love” by eating just vegetables for the neighbor's sake!

The statement presented the difference as disagreement in adiaphora, but the real and intended meaning of the statement for the church was made clear in the resolutions which followed. By a vote of 619-402 the assembly authorized “congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support and hold publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships.” By a vote of 559-451 the assembly resolved that the ELCA “commit itself to finding a way for people in such publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church.”

The decision set off a fire-storm of reaction which was reflected in the letters column of the *Lutheran* for several months. The *Lutheran* ran lists of congregations that were leaving the ELCA. More than 600 congregations have taken first votes to leave the ELCA and more than 300 have passed the second vote which is needed to leave. In some cases groups of members have left ELCA congregations which refused to leave the ELCA in order to start new, independent congregations. Likewise, groups of members have left congregations departing from the ELCA in order to start a new ELCA congregation in the area. All of this involves fewer than 5% of the ELCA's 10,000 congregations, so it seems clear that the majority of the 45% who opposed the ordination of gay pastors in the ELCA are remaining, comforted no doubt by the “bound conscience” clause that allows congregations that do not want to have homosexual pastors to refuse to call them (one wonders how long this escape hatch will be open).

The campaign is under way to gain acceptance of gay pastors. The *Lutheran* has published warm stories of the ordination of prominent practicing homosexuals (July 2011, p 32) and feel-good stories about a lesbian clergy couple that went to the “healing table” along with a member of the CORE protest group to be anointed together as an expression of unity and healing (February 2010). Homosexual clergy who previously were serving without church approval have been ordained, re-ordained, or received. As of July 2011 there were 47 openly gay clergy serving in the ELCA. Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries has launched Proclaim, a professional community for publicly-identified LGBTQ<sup>4</sup> Lutheran rostered leaders and seminarians. This network is committed to changing church culture and transforming society through their ministry as publicly-identified LGBTQ rostered leaders. It was reported that at the 2011 churchwide assembly it was all quiet on the sexual front.

The last Sunday in January is designated as a special welcoming Sunday for affirming the welcome to gay members and congregations are encouraged to have some recognition of Gay Pride Festivals which often occur in June. The identification for ELCA congregations which have adopted a proactively gay agenda is Reconciling in Christ. Most such congregations have a link to the Reconciling in Christ web site, which provides guidance at implementing their agenda.

## Periodicals

An important source for informing the laity is the official church magazine. The answers which people receive to their doctrine questions in that periodical are an important barometer for them of their church’s doctrinal position. What impression are people getting from *The Lutheran*. I have selected questions and answers from the “Since You Asked” column of *The Lutheran*, written by Norma and Burton Everist and later by Wayne Weissenbuehler. (Some of the questions and answers which follow are condensed from the original.)

*Question: There are rumors in my congregation that ELCA does not believe in the inerrancy of the Bible. Is this true?*

Please gently correct those who believe the rumors you have heard because they are false. ... The framers of the [ELCA] confession, following the insights of many Lutheran theologians, believe that this is a more accurate understanding of God’s intention for the Scriptures than the term inerrancy. The non-Lutheran, 19th century concept of inerrancy leads to many unhelpful misunderstandings and questions like inerrant in what way? Is the Bible inerrant in matters of history? genealogy, astronomy? These questions lead us directly away from the Scripture’s purpose, which is to declare Christ, that we might believe and be saved. The Bible is the source and norm of the church’s life, not because it gives us unerring information, but because God continues to speak through it. (July 13, 1988, p. 46)

*Question: Does the ELCA teach the inerrancy of the Scriptures the way fundamentalist churches do?*

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<sup>4</sup> Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer. To avoid potential offense due to the political incorrectness of the word “queer” the explanatory note is given that the Q was added because some prefer this designation.

No. This church accepts the canonical Scriptures the Old and New Testaments as the inspired word God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith and life (*ELCA Statement of Faith*). We believe the Scriptures because they proclaim Christ which was Martin Luther's practice. The Scriptures do not need us to defend them. Rather, we need to “read, mark, learn and inwardly digest” them, as Luther instructed, so that our words and lives proclaim Christ.

The fundamentalist approach sidetracks the meaning of the Scriptures, arguing that the Bible is inerrant in the fields of history, geography and nature. The ELCA takes the Bible seriously on its own terms-as the bearer of Christ. (January 2000, p. 19)

The second answer seems more honest than the first. The Burtons, who wrote the preceding answers were succeeded by Pastor Wayne Weissenbuehler. His view on Scripture gives no indication of a change for the better. In a response to a question on literal interpretation of Scripture, he says:

We believe the Spirit inspired the writers of these texts. Therefore we attend to them with all the intensity and openness that the Spirit works in us. After all, Scripture isn't so much about information as about transformation.... We must hear the texts accurately and honestly as the writers intended. So we use the best historical and literary tools at our disposal, and pray that the Spirit would help us discern what God calls us to in the texts. Common sense does not hurt either (*The Lutheran*, April 2001, p 31).

Naturally, with this view of Scripture, the interpretation of the message of Scripture is changed from Genesis to Revelation.

*Question: Is it now considered naive or even heresy for Lutherans to believe that Adam and Eve were real people?*

For centuries the church believed in the actual existence of Adam and Eve. Recent scholarship suggests that the significance of the Adam and Eve stories is not their literal truth or lack of it but the theological points they make about the creation of humankind in God's image.

If someone believes Adam and Eve were historic people, and this view is helpful to their Christian life, it is not good ministry to rip such a viewpoint from them. Nor should the faith of those who understand these stories in a symbolic way be questioned. (June 22, 1988, p. 42)

Concerning evolution the March 2009 issue of *The Lutheran* made the following observations:

Lutheran scholars have been leaders in “biblical criticism,” in understanding the Bible as a dynamic collection of stories and documents that evolved over

centuries. It's a collection that reflects the varied experiences and outlooks of its people and writers. It isn't all to be taken literally, and the use of terms like "legend" and "myth" may be helpful.

Consider the opening chapters of Genesis. According to the Creation Museum, there is one creation story that was directly revealed from God and must be taken literally. The Lutheran approach acknowledges that there are two creation stories in the first three chapters of Genesis, each from different times and experiences and not in agreement on all points. The stories are recognized as filled with symbolism and meaning that have continued value for Christians. ...

Lutherans (in the ELCA, at least) take a conciliatory view of evolution and encourage conversation, not confrontation. Since the Genesis stories do not present a factual account of creation, they do not contradict scientific views of how the world evolved. The common scientific view that humans evolved from ancestral primates about 130,000 years ago doesn't conflict with the belief that humans have a special place in creation—or that God was involved or is involved in the continuing process. ....

Going to the Creation Museum is a memorable experience, but not for everyone. ...Be alert to the misinformation presented in the displays—including the one that claims the support of Martin Luther, who Lutherans know was definitely not a biblical literalist. (p 28-29)

*Question: Is Genesis 3:15 a reference to the coming Savior?*

Nowhere in the New Testament is this verse mentioned as a prophecy of the coming Messiah. Christian tradition has understood the passage as a prophecy about Christ and Mary. Most New Testament scholars agree that the messianic prophecy of this passage is confusing. Most see it as the origin of the battle that has gone on for millennia between humans and snakes ...But this image is helpful in expressing the truth of what God is about in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.... (February 2002, p 31)

*Question: Some Lutheran churches do not ordain women, using 1 Timothy 2:11-15 as their primary justification. How can ELCA ordain women in light of this?*

Paul in 1 Timothy reflects the desire to continue the customs in which he had been trained before his conversion. He failed to see the full meaning of his own witness (Gal. 3:28). He was misled by the Pharisaic tradition. ... We do an injustice to Paul and to this text if we elevate his pastoral counsel to a divine, unchangeable law. But this inspired scripture does teach us how pastors counsel their people. (Nov. 23, 1988)

*Question: What does the church say about women becoming ordained? My daughter thinks women can be prophets but not preach in the pulpit. This really concerns me. My church just called a bright young woman who is a real gem.*

The decisions by many Lutheran church bodies worldwide to ordain women to pastoral ministry is tremendous change of the past century. Two ELCA predecessors, the American Lutheran Church and Lutheran Church in America, made that decision by constitutional changes 30 years ago. Still, as you indicate, the issue is new for each congregation when it calls a woman as pastor.

There are now 2,191 ordained female pastors in the ELCA, about 12 percent of the roster.<sup>5</sup> Women serve in all types of ordained service, including bishop; but each step has been slow. It was three years between election of the first and second female bishop, and it has been five years since then.

Although some women and men still don't accept women preaching from the pulpit, many young people have grown up not knowing otherwise. At seminary today are women who discerned their call through having a woman as their pastor. And, in some cases, that female pastor was ministered to herself by a female pastor—a “third-generation” effect.

All of us are called by the gospel to witness to Christ. None are to “keep quiet,” for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard (Acts 4:20). (January 2000, p.19)

*Question: The verse “wives submit yourselves to your husbands” really disturbs me. How can God, if God loves women, condemn us to this?*

Paul offered this verse as pastoral counsel within a society of domination. He could even urge slaves to obey their masters (Colossians 3:22). But his fundamental principle, “be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21-22), emphasizes our freedom in Christ. This has moved the church to reject slavery and submission of women to men.

Peter also wrote, “As servants of God, live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil” (I Peter 2:16). Each text calls for submission—to the Lordship and servanthood of Christ. Because God loves each of us, none of us is condemned to subjection to another person. Only Christ is Lord. Those who “lord it over” or dominate others (*dominus* means lord) make themselves an idol. Nor should we make any other person our God and subjugate ourselves. When our identity is firmly rooted in Christ we are freed to lead appropriately. First one may take the lead, then the other according to the situation. (February 1999, p 21)

Even the most fundamental doctrines are not safe from being reduced to one selection from a salad bar of doctrinal options.

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<sup>5</sup> Today it is about 21%.

*Question: Is it true Jesus was born so he could die on the cross?*

Jesus was born not to die, but to live for us. If Jesus was born simply to die, Herod's soldiers could have killed him as a baby. The cross is central to our preaching because it shows the depth of God's love for us. ...Some preaching describes Jesus' death as a payment to God's wrath. This approach stresses guilt as a barrier to our entry into heaven. There is truth here, but this is only one of many ways the Scriptures proclaim the meaning of Jesus for us. (March 30, 1988, p. 46)

*Question: Did Jesus think he was the divine Son of God, the second person of the Trinity?*

Jesus did not express himself in those categories. The term *Trinity* is nowhere in Scripture, nor is the expression *person* as used in the church's confessions, a term that Jesus used. Both terms arose as the church sought to proclaim who Jesus is—and is not—especially in the face of misunderstandings and heresies.

At his baptism, Jesus heard that he was God's beloved Son and immediately faced temptations to claim special privileges for himself. This temptation was echoed as he was dying: "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." In the Gospel of John, Jesus accepted Nathanael's confession, "You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel" (1:49).

Clearly, the witness of Jesus and the church's witness to him is so rich that Jesus cannot be defined. The creeds do not offer definitions of his identity. They proclaim the mystery of God and of God's love for us. They help us adore, trust and obey. [How can anyone who has ever read the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds peddle such a lie with a straight face?]

We are not to (nor can we) read Jesus' mind or unravel the intricacies of God. As baptized children of God we are called to marvel and to serve. (February, 1997, p 7)

In response to a member's concern "Must I believe doctrine to be a member in ELCA?" Weissenbuehler offered the following comfort.

Should I renounce my membership? I'm a committed follower of God, Christ and the Spirit, but I don't believe the Trinity theory. I've been told, "If you don't believe in the Trinity doctrine you can't be a Christian." How does one prove this doctrine?

You need not renounce your membership in the Christian church. Even Paul didn't ascribe to the doctrine of the Trinity since it wasn't defined until hundreds of years later. But I believe he would confess the truth of the revelation of God to which this doctrine bears witness.

The Trinity isn't meant to explain God. In fact, saying God is One but three persons proves that God can't be explained—only witnessed to.

The Trinity isn't some litmus test of intellectual ascent to a doctrine. Rather, it calls us to trust and commit to the God revealed as Father, Son and Spirit, which is precisely how you spoke of your faith. We can't *prove* the Trinity. But based on Scripture, church tradition and experience, the doctrine of the Trinity expresses the faith that we hold to be true and life-giving. We don't need to prove God. We only need to worship and obey God. This we can do!

Couldn't an Arian fit in as a member of the ELCA?

I'm distressed after hearing about a pastor who doesn't believe in the virgin birth. If that were true, who is Jesus and is he still the Son of God?

Our confession of faith, which says Jesus was born of Mary without a human father (Matthew and Luke) witnesses to God's gracious initiative in sending Jesus into our world for the salvation of all humankind.

The virgin birth testifies to the faith that Jesus is Son of God. But the “sonship” of Jesus bears witness to more than his genesis. It's an expression of his relationship to God in single-minded obedience to God's saving will. Jesus can be confessed as Son of God and Savior without specific reference to his virgin birth or conception as the Gospel of Mark does.

The virginal conception is only one way to witness to Jesus' uniqueness. Another is to point to his deeds and words which transformed people who met him in the flesh and meet him now in the Spirit.

Those who deny the virgin birth usually say it's not historically necessary or universally witnessed to in the Christian tradition. For me the virgin birth is a “minor” miracle compared with Jesus' death and resurrection so the likes of us could have eternal life through believing in him. (May 2002, p 31)

Universalism is now a valid option in the ELCA:

Are all people going to heaven because of Christ's work? What truth determines who will enter heaven and who won't?

We believe that whoever lives for time and eternity in God's saving presence does so only because of Jesus' death and resurrection. This faith relationship between human and God is also received and made real through the Spirit, who works through word and sacraments.

Whether or not one lives in God's presence is determined by one's relationship to the Son, Jesus. The New Testament has various ways of inviting all into this life-giving relationship. In the end God alone will determine and reveal the choices we will have made and the desires of our hearts (Matthew 25:31:46).

I have no doubt God wants everyone in God's presence forever, but we can turn our back on God rather than accept the "love that will not let us go." Exactly how this will work for all who have lived we have yet to see. I pray that we will be surprised—and happy (March 2003, p 35).

Not all the advice provided by this column is as dangerous as that cited above, but it is clear that ELCA members looking for solid doctrinal guidance cannot expect to find it in *The Lutheran*. There is little basis for the excuse that members of the ELCA do not know that their church is abandoning basic biblical doctrines. All of this is being done very openly.

Since the affirmation of gay pastors, which was based on an unscriptural hermeneutics, it seems that the campaign in the *Lutheran* to minimize the authority of Scripture has stepped up. Reader are told that Lutherans are "more interested in what the Bible does, than what it is," "that the authority is not in the text but in our encounter with it," "the Bible is authoritative only as it is a living word to us and for us" (November 2011) "the Bible keep accumulating meaning." (February 2011). Readers are urged to "search for the word within the text" and to avoid "a mindless devotion to every verse in Scripture as if an authoritative word from God." Readers are being trained to live with "tension in the Bible" so they can live with tension in the ELCA.

## **Preaching**

Certainly in a body as large as the ELCA, there will be a great variety of preaching. One ELCA pastor I interviewed told me to expect ELCA preaching to range from "very conservative to unrecognizable as Lutheran." The following comments are based on a study of 33 sermons preached by ELCA pastors. It hopefully provides a fair example of what can be expected from ELCA preaching.

None of the 33 sermons was based on an exposition of a biblical text. Often no sermon text was read, but the sermon was based on a thought derived in some way from the Gospel of the day. The usual format was that of a lecture or inspirational talk. In general, the sermons were well written and well delivered, and many people would find them interesting and appealing. Obscure jargon like that of Braaten and Jenson was very rare in the sermons I gathered from ELCA churches. Vehement, bold denials of basic doctrines of Scripture were rare. The most flagrant example, a blasphemous denial of hell, was from a published sermon, not from one of the sermons I heard. About 1/3 of the sermons had explicit doctrinal errors. Among the errors were the denial of hell, implicit denial of a personal devil, denial of male headship, confusion concerning the means of grace, denial of the biblical doctrine of church fellowship, "accepting Jesus as Lord," and praising doubt as a virtue. Doctrinal "sins of omission" were more frequent. None of the 33 sermons contained an explicit, clear presentation of the truth that Christ has made a full payment for our sins, and God has, therefore, declared the world forgiven.

Most of the sermons were moralizing. That is, they called for greater sanctification in some specific area of life, but they provided little or no gospel motivation for the change which they called for. In the ELCA, kindly sermons of the "be good people" type are very common,

but so are “prophetic messages” which sharply admonish the hearers to change their ways. There are regular admonitions to deny yourself and frequent warnings against “cheap grace.” The following catalog gives a taste of ELCA preaching.

- A Christmas Eve sermon on Luke 2 entitled “Christmas Memories and the Miracle of Life” talked about the miracles of memory, water, bread, and our lives, but not about the miracle of the incarnation and the virgin birth. “Consider this: the fact that you are here...the breath of life you breathe, that in itself is miracle enough. The rest is celebration.”
- A Good Friday sermon on John 19 described Jesus’ death in detail appropriate to a medical journal and concluded “It was not an easy death,” but offered no Gospel.
- An Easter season sermon on Thomas’s doubt, “Thank God for Doubt,” identified those who don’t doubt with the likes of Jim Jones, Rev. Moon, gurus, Stalin, Hitler, the Ayatollah, terrorists, and the Posse Comitatus. In ELCA preaching there is often a preoccupation with dealing with doubt.
- Moralizing sermons against a promiscuous life style, against materialism, against prejudice and labeling people, against anger, and against alcohol abuse are common.
- A pro-life sermon based on the sanctity of all life was not standard ELCA fare.
- Jesus at Nain was used as a model for compassion and doing good.
- A sermon on Mt. 15:21-28, “Who are the Dogs?”, took off on the word “dogs” in the story of the Canaanite woman. It concluded, “It was only recently and in my generation, that Roman Catholics and Lutherans could openly worship and share the Gospel with one another without judgment and criticism, and still we have a long way to go. In fact our church is unique in its relationship to the local Catholic parish. Your willingness to worship Christ in their house as well as your own, I believe makes God very happy. ... Whenever we exclude someone from our family of faith for whatever reason we are treating them like dogs, that is in the biblical sense—Jesus makes that point emphatically in today’s Gospel.”
- A sermon on the suicide of a gifted teenager twice referred to his baptism as a basis for hope, but otherwise spoke little of the grace of God. The focus was on forgiving him, forgiving God, and forgiving ourselves, settling aside bitterness and beginning to live again.
- In ELCA preaching there is frequently a confusion concerning the relationship of the suffering of a Christian and the will of God. ELCA preachers often deny that a Christian’s sufferings can in any sense be the will of a good God. In Christ God suffered along with us. We now share in God’s suffering. He sympathizes with us and turns evil to good.
- A sermon on Psalm 51 and Luke 15, entitled “God’s Repentance”: “When God plans to bring evil against sinners, he reminds himself of who he is. When God looks at sinners in Christ, he remembers who he is and doesn’t trash us as we deserve. How do we respond? Not so much with sorrow over sin, not so much with a promise to do better, but by rejoicing in his grace. God in Christ has changed his mind. Let’s be happy and say, ‘Yea, God.’ Amen.”

This was the best gospel sermon I heard, but does it take sin seriously or present any real payment for sin? Isn’t this the very “cheap grace” the ELCA claims to fear.

The following six sermons were preached by a husband and wife team at the ELCA church in Thiensville, Wisconsin, in Christmas-Epiphany 2011-2012.<sup>6</sup>

- Christmas Eve on the Christmas Story: Sisters and brothers, the shepherds were dirty, scandalous illiterates, yet we hear more about them in the Christmas story than about Mary and Joseph and Jesus. Christmas happens in the humdrum fields of life when God is with us in a new way. We are to be Christ for others and surprised by the holy. God is with us here and now just over the hill. [Listeners were given a mission but no message.]
- Christmas Day on John 1: God became a helpless baby and risked experiencing helplessness. God knows what it is that we need—a hand of grace. God is still here. He picks me up and wears my own flesh.
- The Sunday after Christmas on Simeon and Anna: What do you need to experience before you can die in peace? Simeon was an old guy like Woody Allen, Anna an old woman like Mother Theresa or Ann Bancroft. The Nunc Dimittis is used after we come to the table where we see salvation. Before I die, I want to see the Cubs win the World Series, I want to see world peace, I want to see every mouth fed. How would life look if God had already delivered his best promise? The best has already happened. Live as though God has already delivered. [What has he delivered?]
- Epiphany on the Magi: The Magi got lost and ended up in Jerusalem because they did not follow the star. Don't seek the places of power. We go looking in the wrong places, but God is leading us to the right place with a star. God is showing us another way to live. God poured out himself in sacrificial love to show the world a better way of living. We can go back by a different road. We can learn a new way of walking. The future is open. [Was that the gospel??]
- John 1:45-51 on "Can any good thing come from Nazareth?": Saying Jesus of Nazareth is like saying Billy-Bob from Texarkana. We should avoid stereotypes. We should look for blessing from God from unexpected places like the homeless man who was like an angel from God to me. [This was the only place where there was an insinuation against the reliability of Scripture in his statement that John did not get the memo that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.]
- Mark 1:14-20 on the call of the disciples: Sisters and brothers, the disciples were not called to follow Jesus and repent, they were not called to follow Jesus and believe, they were called to follow Jesus and participate. We are called to help catch people in God's big, gracious net. What is the good news? If we can't walk away from things, we can take comfort in this—Jesus is a really good fisherman. We need to be caught again and again.

The sermons were entertaining with interesting stories. Pastor Ann's did not always reflect well on her relatives. Pastor Jay's had a lot of humor. Personal short-comings were acknowledged. Sin and forgiveness were never mentioned. Not once.

## **Meditations**

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<sup>6</sup> grace53092.org

I also read six months of *Christ in Our Home*, Augsburg's family devotional booklet. In general the comments made about ELCA preaching apply to these devotions as well. Moralizing predominates.

- The "saints" commemorated in the devotional calendar include Florence Nightingale, Bernard of Clairvaux, Augustine, John Bunyan, Nikolai Grundtvig, Albert Schweitzer, Dag Hammarskjold, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Francis of Assisi, William Tyndale, Paul Gerhardt and Henry Muhlenberg.
- "God in love for us made his Son the payment for our disobedience, the restitution for our sin. The sting of death is but a temporary wound." "Jesus came bringing peace with his very life. Jesus became the reconciler, making peace by the blood of the cross." This was the clearest gospel in 33 sermons and 180 devotions. Several other fine statements occurred in the month's devotions authored by this pastor. However, he could also write that the fullness of God dwelling in Christ (Col 1:18-20) is love.
- I Tim 2:1-8: "God's offer is an unconditional pardon for sinners through the Son, Jesus Christ. We respond, "Yes, Lord, I receive you and believe that your salvation, your pardon restores our relationship." The second best gospel.
- On the narrow door: "Those who cannot let go of sin and accept forgiveness will not enter the narrow door. There is an urgency to our being reconciled to God and with all people. The kingdom will be populated with people who have learned to live in peace and love here on earth. Jesus is the one who can bring this about." The third best "gospel," but isn't this a conditional gospel, dependent on our actions?

ELCA preaching is not totally lacking of the gospel, but the gospel is too often smothered by moralizing, false doctrines, and vagueness. The most serious failure of ELCA preaching is not the explicit denial of biblical teachings (although this is all too common), but the almost complete absence of objective justification. Forgiveness of sins is too often preached as flowing from an arbitrary grace of God without a real objective payment for sin. The truth that Christ's death on the cross was a payment for sin, is treated as just one theory about the meaning of his death.

Although certain sins are condemned, the list is usually selective, and there is too often a lack of real gospel motivation for sanctification. There is frequent confusion of law and gospel. I am sure ELCA preachers would be shocked by this judgment, but based on a fairly large sample of ELCA preaching, I must conclude that ELCA preaching is strongly legalistic, that is, it tries to change behavior without adequate gospel motivation drawn from the atoning death of Christ. There is too often a tendency to speak of faith as a decision which we must make.

### **Practice of the Lord's Supper**

Although ELCA does not have altar and pulpit fellowship with all churches (because some like the Catholic Church refuse them), for all practical purposes it has totally open communion. Some local ELCA congregations offer open invitations to communion without any limitations or qualifications. Not even a belief in the real presence of Christ's body and blood is required for attending. However, one congregation I visited had the following announcement:

Holy communion is open to those who accept the real presence of Christ.

This sounds like a limitation until “real presence” is understood in the light of the statement of another ELCA congregation:

Every baptized person who trusts the promise and presence of Jesus Christ in this meal is welcome at the Lord’s table. Our Lord promises that when bread and wine are set aside, blessed and offered to us to eat and drink and received by us in faith, he is present in us.

Is there any Reformed church in the world that could not accept this statement? It does not refer to the presence of Christ’s body and blood with the bread and wine, but only to Christ’s presence in the hearts of believers. No wonder intercommunion between the ELCA and the Reformed and Episcopalians could sail through with little dissent. (See the discussion of this in session two.)

## **Conclusion**

The picture of the ELCA’s doctrinal position which we have seen in this study is not a happy one. The leading theologians of the ELCA have not only abandoned confessional Lutheranism. They attack and undermine even the most basic teachings of Christianity. Although there is lip-service to Scripture and the Confessions, the doctrines which they confess are not maintained in the ELCA. In the regular services and instruction the teachings of Scripture are often obscured by ambiguity or by false statements.

We can only pray that as long as the Scriptures are heard and the sacraments are administered, the Lord will preserve a small remnant in the ELCA and that some will be awakened to come out of her. The sad state of the ELCA calls for confessional Lutherans to redouble their efforts to sound a clear call to authentic Lutheranism at a time when its testimony has almost been silenced in the largest Lutheran church in America.

## **Postscript: the Decline in the ELCA and Departures from It**

With more than 5 million members, at its founding the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) was the largest Lutheran church in the United State. In its approximately 25 years of existence it has lost over 700,000 members and 1000 congregations. It is difficult to say how much of this is due to the changing religious and social demographics of America and of the ECLA’s heartland and how much has been due to the doctrinal deterioration of the ELCA and to the prolonged conflict over homosexuality and the ordination of homosexual. Another contributing issue to departures from the ELCA is the agreement with the Episcopal Church on the need for ordination through a succession of bishops.

The ongoing conflict has led to a number of organized protest movements and departures from the ELCA.<sup>7</sup> The most significant are the AALC, one of the earliest departures, and the North American Lutheran Church, one of the latest.

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<sup>7</sup> A number of these groups are discussed in the second edition of *WELS and Other Lutherans*,. Information is often of somewhat questionable reliability due to the shifting and informal nature of some of the groups.

## **The American Association of Lutheran Churches (AALC also TAALC)**

Congregations that resisted the creation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (these were from the American Lutheran Church, for the most part) formed their own fellowship in 1987. At that time there were 68 such congregations. Another 50 congregations who were sympathetic with the aims of the AALC refrained from joining.

Statistics from 2007 show 86 congregations in 23 states with about 20,000 members (this is significantly higher than the reported membership for 2005). The 2004 report lists 25,908 inclusive members but only 11,771 communicants. It lists 187 clergy but only 55 pastors serving in congregations. Something is funny about these statistics. Perhaps part of the explanation is associate vs. regular or full membership.

The group's web site lists the following as their basic beliefs.

- The full authority of the Bible as the inerrant and infallible Word of God
- The Lutheran Confessions as a true interpretation of Scripture
- A purpose focused on the Great Commission with priority for Evangelism and World Missions
- The authority of the local congregation as the basic unit of the church.

This Association has some shared roots in the former Lutheran Free Church with the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations which emerged in the 1960s. It chose, however, to develop a fellowship of its own. The reason for this may be found in the AALC's own explanation of its origin as being a convergence of three strands of Lutheranism, namely, orthodox, evangelical, and charismatic. The intent was for each of the three strands to respect each other's differences and, in doing so, to learn from each other. In practice the various "strands" struggled for control. In the mid-90s, the renewal movement seemed to be ascendant. A handful of congregations split off from the AALC in 1995 to form the Lutheran Ministerium and Synod - USA, which is headquartered in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Beginning in 1989 representatives of the AALC and the LCMS met in a series of official and unofficial talks. In 2007 the two church bodies found themselves to be in substantial doctrinal agreement and declared pulpit and altar fellowship. The AALC joined the ILC, the LCMS equivalent of the CELC. The AALC seminary is closely related to the LCMS's Fort Wayne seminary.

Concerning relationships with WELS a 2002 statement of the AALC said:

Wisconsin maintains a high view of Scripture and the Confessions which is so stringently adhered to that fellowship between WELS and other Lutherans is not easily reached. Even joint prayer among Christians in general and with Lutherans in particular is viewed as an act of fellowship. However, what distinguishes WELS from other Lutherans is its position on Church and Ministry. For WELS, the church is not defined in congregational terms; rather, the entire Synod is the church. This practice is based on the position that the New Testament does not define any particular form for church and public ministry.

There are other practices which follow this stringent position. That would include "closed" Communion (officially referred to as "close(d) Communion"), opposition to the Boy Scouts (especially the oath and the Scout Law), and refusal

to participate in government-sponsored military chaplaincy (as a violation of the separation between church and state).<sup>8</sup>

The AALC website summarizes their own communion practice as follows:

We practice “responsible communion,” which is neither open nor closed. That is, according to the Bible we have a responsibility to tell people what we believe (“we receive the body and blood of Jesus Christ with the bread and wine, for the forgiveness of sins”), based on Matthew 26:26-28, Mark 14:22-24, Luke 22:19-20, 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, 1 Corinthians 11:23-28. The person has the responsibility to check with the Bible to ensure that it does teach that, and that the person agrees with that. Administration is left with the local pastor as part of his pastoral care.

It is not surprising their journey has taken them to Missouri. It would not be surprising to see them absorbed by Missouri since it appears that most of the traffic leaving the ELCA will not be coming their way.

### **North American Lutheran Church**

The North American Lutheran Church was officially formed in August 2010 as the culmination of a process begun by Lutheran CORE (Coalition for Renewal), a protest group with roots in the ELCA. This action came in response to the dissatisfaction of “conservatives” or “moderates” within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, which were perceived as moving away from the authority of the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions. A major issue of concern for these groups was a 2009 decision by the ELCA which changed its teaching and policy on sexual ethics, allowing pastors to be in committed same-sex relationships. It was felt that a new church body was needed for those Lutheran congregations who declined to join already existing groups, such as the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ; another “centrist” breakoff from the ELCA.

The NALC ordains both men and women clergy, a barrier that separates it from the LCMS. Leaders of the two churches nevertheless recently met, with NALC leaders minimizing the differences and LCMS leaders emphasizing that the differences are substantial. Further meetings are planned.

The NALC has a very flexible membership policy. Provided that member congregations' beliefs and practices are compatible with the NALC, congregations can simultaneously affiliate with other Lutheran church bodies. The church is led by a bishop elected to four-year terms. It appears that the NALC will try to be the church that ALC “conservatives” hoped the ELCA would be. Their confession is essentially the same as that of the ELCA Confession of Faith. The NALC reports more than 100,000 members in more than 300 congregations.

Other smaller groups that have departed from the ELCA include:

### **Lutheran Ministerium and Synod – USA**

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<sup>8</sup> Notice that almost all this information is incorrect. It appears to come from the Missouri Synod, not from discussing any of these matters with us.

The LMS-USA traces its roots to four American Association of Lutheran Churches (AALC) pastors, who met in Chicago in March of 1994 to organize an effort to counteract the perceived inroads of neo-orthodoxy and charismatic renewal movement theology in the AALC. These four pastors, with backgrounds, evenly divided in the former ALC and LCA, formed the AALC Forum as an instrument of reform within that church. At the June 1994 convention of the AALC, it became evident that all such efforts were futile. Following that convention, the Forum added another pastor and congregation and subsequently organized the first Indianapolis Conference on Inerrancy which met in Indianapolis in August of 1994. The result of that conference was the Indianapolis Statement on Holy Scripture, which was given final form and adopted as the position of the new LMS-USA at the Second Indianapolis Conference (1995).

Major theological emphases of the new entity include:

1. a view of Holy Scripture as “divinely inspired, inerrant, and infallible”
2. the complete autonomy of the local congregation
3. a practice of liturgical worship
4. an understanding of the Holy Spirit as working with the Church solely through Word and Sacrament.

This church aims to be a moderate/ middle conservative, confessional, liturgical, and non hierarchical Lutheran church body within the spectrum of Lutheran church options. It explains why a new synod was necessary:

Pastors transferring to the Conservative Church bodies were and are in most cases expected to undergo up to a full year of further Seminary training in addition to a probation period for observation prior to and after becoming a member. Congregations joining the conservative bodies while not subjected to quite the same rigorous examination are likewise treated in a probationary way. In these other Conservative bodies there is a sense of never becoming a fully accepted pastor or congregation.

In addition it is very difficult for even those who considered themselves as fairly conservative in the LCA, AELC, ALC or ELCA to feel totally at ease with a goodly number of the Biblical, Theological and Practical matters adhered to by the Conservative to Ultra Conservative Lutheran Church bodies. Thus there seems to be a need for a church body that takes a position such as that taken by the LMS-USA.

In 2005 the group reported 28 pastors and 8 congregations and 500 members

### **Evangelical Lutheran Conference and Ministerium (ELCM)**

The ELCM describes themselves as “a synodical federation, fellowship, and association of centrist Evangelical Lutheran congregations and pastors.” The point of origin for most of them has been the former Lutheran Church in America (LCA ) and its successor body the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The initial group made the decision to leave the ELCA in November of 1991. After that time they searched for a “centrist” Lutheran church body to join. . Not only WELS and ELS but even the LCMS and AALC were too “Middle Conservative” for them. While this is a narrower spectrum (smaller tent) than that supposedly held to in the ELCA, it is also a much broader concept (larger tent) than that held to in most of

the other Lutheran alternatives to the ELCA. ELCM also does not want a pronounced pietistic orientation, a charismatic focus, or a hierarchical polity of one form or another.

The founding congregations tried a stint as independent, free Lutherans and then gave the Association of American Lutheran Churches (AALC) a trial membership. Next they were part of a trial effort to establish the Lutheran Ministerium and Synod - USA (LMS-USA) and then they were back to an independent free Lutheran stance hoping that some of their relations from the Muhlenberg/General Council/ Augustana/ Suomi/United Synod of the South Lutheran tradition might join them in forming a genuinely centrist (moderate to middle conservative in range of views) Evangelical Lutheran synodical federation, fellowship or association. The group lists 1999 as its formal founding date. They are “open to folks (pastors and congregations) needing and seeking only a temporary safe haven to be a part of our fellowship while they decide where to permanently align or affiliate themselves.” “ELCM does not require congregations, pastors, or seminarians to give up their membership in the ELCA or in one of the other Lutheran groupings in order to become a member of ELCM.” It can serve as a way station for pastors on the move as there is no formal colloquy process or probationary membership.

With most of its initial membership concentrated in Pennsylvania, this group was a sort of a new version of the Pennsylvania Ministerium. It, however, became a synod of congregations, not just a ministerium. ELCM once claimed it was no longer primarily located in Pennsylvania but in eleven states of the USA and in two provinces of Canada. The current roster shows only nine congregations in four states. I did not find any statistics on the group.

### **Lutheran Confessional Synod (LCS)**

During 1994 a new church body was formed to serve as a haven for confessional congregations leaving the ELCA. According to one interpretation of the ELCA constitution, it was deemed to be difficult for a congregation to leave ELCA with their property and become independent if they had been members of the LCA, in which the larger body had a degree of control of the property. If the congregation wished to take any property with it, it had to name the church body it intended to join. The LCS was intended to give such confessional congregations, which are not yet ready to join one of the existing Lutheran bodies, a synod to join if they leave ELCA for confessional reasons.

Bishop Randy DeJaynes and his congregation of Decatur, Illinois, led the way in the founding of this group. This was at first essentially a bishop with one congregation. LCS was for a brief period in fellowship with WELS and ELS, but broke with those two synods because of differences in the doctrine of the ministry, and a possible difference in the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. After some departures and fractures and tragedy this group which was never more than a handful seems to have disappeared. Some of its former clergy have joined episcopal Lutheran groups or other apostolic succession groups

### **THE FUTURE?**

The battle over Scripture has long been over in the ELCA. It appears that the battle over sexual morality is also over. Those who disagree with the decision to allow homosexual pastors and to bless same-sex unions will either leave the ELCA or justify their remaining in an apostate church with the rationale that the “bound conscience” clause allows their congregation to refuse to call a homosexual pastor (one wonders for how long). I expect that the part of the protesters that remains in the ELCA will be the larger group. More than 30% of the delegates to the 2009 assembly voted against the statement on sexuality. Nearly half voted against the ordination of

homosexual pastors. Since that decision, more than 300 congregations have voted to leave the ELCA and a like number are considering the move. At this time, it appears that fewer than 10% of congregations will leave the ELCA. There are no specific statistics on how many individual members have left because of the statement on sexuality. This means that most opponents of the statement on sexuality will remain in the big tent of the ELCA since it is harder to imagine a greater outrage that would lead them to leave if they can stomach this.

The source and heart of the problems in the ELCA is the loss of Scripture as the norm for the church, but the sickness has progressed to such a degree that our defense of Scripture is meaningless to many in the ELCA. They have progressed or regressed so far from such questions. To be sure, we should still make this appeal to the small flock of faithful Lutherans who may remain there who can still be reclaimed for the three *solas*. But for the perpetrators of the decline of the ELCA this message sounds as alien as if it were delivered by a man from Mars. They have crossed over from the realm of Scripture and faith to the realm of “spirit” and “love”, from the realm of confession to the realm of” spirituality.”

This was brought home very clearly to me by a person who has observed the process from the inside, Steven Paulson, a professor of systematic theology at Luther Seminary in the Twin Cities. Paulson served as a reactor to a paper I delivered at the Lutheran Free Conference in New Ulm, Minnesota, November 10, 2011. While he welcomed what I said about Luther and the Word and Christ and the Word, he suggested that the sickness in the ELCA runs deeper than the downgrading of the Word. The ELCA has moved from the realm of the Word to the realm of “spirit”. Justification by faith has been replaced with justification by love. Here are a few excerpts from his remarks.<sup>9</sup>

I also want to thank [Professor Brug] for recognizing that we must learn from the sickness in the ELCA for the good of all Lutheran institutions and their people. I join with him, and yet suggest a different root to the problem. No doubt he is right, that ELCA lost track of the original source of Scripture, which is the inerrancy in the letters that come through an inerrant Holy Spirit. But we must go one step deeper, which is that ELCA has become enthusiasts, fanatics, who swallow the Holy Spirit, feathers and all. They are not immoralist, instead they are on a quest for a greater holiness than yours.

ELCA is a runaway train of piety which they believe is conducted by the Holy Spirit, who is the Perfector of the Law. To them, law is not universal and unchanging, but imbued by the Spirit with the power to evolve, develop, adapt and so to make new laws—that is, they have discovered what they consider to be the greatest part of divinity, which is the future, not the past—the Spirit, not the Father. They consider themselves to be the Pharisees, and you the Sadducees—and remember no Sadducees have survived.

Here they have tapped into a truly American principle: it is not the past, but the future that will save. This is called “zeitgeist” and it is a powerful brew. They have discovered that the laws of Scripture and nature that are universal, unchanging, permanent—kill (2 Cor. 3). But they think they have discovered an escape. Old laws kill, but new ones can give life if the new laws are merciful and

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<sup>9</sup> The full text of his remarks is available on the Lutheran Free Conference web site.

full of grace—specifically because they are inclusive—not exclusive. Thus, these new laws adapt to the one, future, perfect law of above all: love! They posited that God could not possibly have meant to kill with Scripture because God is love, not hate. God means to make us better—better Christians, better disciples, better churches that are a light to the nations, and who are the true body of Christ because they embody love etc.

Therefore, in order for God to reveal himself truly he must work, not only in Scripture, but beyond it, in the form of merciful, graceful, unconditional love. So, at the root of this fanaticism, lies a confusion of law and gospel, and so a demonic lie—that justification is by love—unconditional love. You can catch this in the quotations ...from Timothy Lull: “We confess what we have learned there [in Scripture]—that God’s chief purpose has been to shower love and salvation on us, not primarily to fill us with information nor to make us moral people.” [All of Dr. Brug’s quotations from *the Lutheran* magazine represent what is called foundationalism, rather than fundamentalism. There must be a foundation outside Scripture by which we are guided in Scripture.]

Once they discovered love, the ELCA tied Christ’s love to an episcopal ordering like you would find all the way back with Basil of Caesarea, and I daresay even our dear Irenaeus, in which historical succession of bishops is the means to get rid of fundamentalists, and brings us to the fulfillment of Christ’s promise, “I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” (John 16:12 NAS).

This verse has wreaked havoc, as it did with Rome, because its sets the limit, for them, of written Scripture and introduces the ecclesial power of bishops as those who are given a special spirit power bestowed through the laying on of hands to unfold the hidden, gnostic truths.

And if that were not enough, a competing congregational eccesiology was also introduced that says true church is a congregation of people who meet in moral deliberation under the Spirit’s gift of discernment by which they can adjudicate new, better laws of love.

The ELCA churchwide votes are a collection of these two fanatical movements. The problem is deeper than inerrancy. The chief article is confused here since we are justified by faith, not by love. Once love becomes the chief article, the gospel is confused for a law. For love is the fulfillment of the law.

I believe Paulson is correct in his analysis. There is abundant evidence to support his thesis in the statements that I have quoted in sections four and five. This evolutionary spiritism is epitomized in the philosophy of Ted Peters, which we surveyed in part three. The ELCA sees itself evolving along with God toward a future New Man and New Woman, justified by love.

There does not seem to be any turning back for the ELCA, only escape from it. With the departure of the most vocal critics it seems likely that the descent will speed up. The best that is seems reasonable to hope for is that the refugees will reach a safe haven, not a half-way house.

### WHAT CAUSED THIS TRAINWRECK?

The horrified yet strangely fascinated witnesses to a train wreck ask, “What caused this disaster?” An attempt to answer this question was presented in the recently published memoirs of Carl Braaten.<sup>10</sup>

Braaten says one cause of the train wreck was that the ruling coalition of minorities and feminists, who were more concerned about race and gender than crossing the t’s and dotting the i’s of doctrine, ignored the theologians as a bunch of white males spouting their own elitist ideology in the name of theology (p 125). There is some truth here, but could theology like that of Braaten and Jenson have prevented the crash?

Another cause of the crash was the quota system, which gave the radical elements who held a political agenda like that of Union Theological Seminary representation in the founding councils in the ELCA far out of proportion to their representation in the membership of the ELCA.

Another cause cited by Braaten is the role of the Seminex refugees (AELC) in the formation of the ELCA. “During the deliberations of the CNLC, the AELC representatives together with representatives of minorities, blacks, Asians, and the representatives of women formed a coalition to emasculate the ‘old boys’” (p 122-123). The ideology fostered by the Seminex gang “moved in a straight line from the rejection of the third use of the law to the support of the gay/lesbian agenda that has since taken the ELCA by the throat” (p 121). Again there is some truth here, but Braaten largely ignores the deeper underlying causes in which he is implicated.

Braaten observes that the tactics used in the formation of the ELCA were like those of the protesters against the Vietnam War. Tactics used against the state could be used in the church. But Braaten himself had supported the Chicago Seven and the Yippies (p 83-88).

Braaten laments the denial of the third use of the law by the Seminex gang, but his own theology and ethics are an *agape*-based morality, lacking objective law. Braaten’s own theology, tied as it was Tillich and Pannenberg, was woefully inadequate to slow down the rush to destruction.

Perhaps the second most important cause of the decline of the ELCA was the long established habit of moving from one merger to another without any real doctrinal unity, or putting it in our vocabulary, ignoring the biblical principles of church fellowship. The ELCA was founded as church based on the premise that agreement in doctrine was impossible and unnecessary. Braaten and his colleagues fully agreed with this premise.

But the most important cause of the ELCA train wreck was the view of Scripture which was fully supported by Braaten and his colleagues. The severity of the ELCA crash is perhaps shocking even to many in the ELCA, but all the ingredients were there from the start, and they were quite visible from the beginning. This is but another sad illustration of the truth: you reap what you sow.

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<sup>10</sup> *Because of Christ: Memoirs of a Lutheran Theologian*, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmanns, 2010. I wonder why it was not published by Fortress?

If the loss of Scripture is the cause, a return to Scripture, to all Scripture, is the only road to recovery.

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

John F. Brug, 'The Doctrinal Position of ELCA,' 1989. Five essays available from the files of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library. This first edition has more detailed information about the formation process.

John F. Brug, "Biblical Interpretation in 20th Century Lutheranism." The 33rd Annual Reformation Lectures, Bethany Lutheran College, S.C. Ylvisaker Fine Arts Center, Mankato, Minnesota, October 26 and 27, 2000.

John F. Brug, "The Sacraments of the ELCA: Are They Valid?" LaCrosse, Wisconsin, September 15, 1998.

John F. Brug, "Luther's Doctrine of the Word—The Incarnate Word in the Written Word" Presented at the Lutheran Free Conference, New Ulm, MN, November 10. 2011.

Patsy Leppien and Kincaid Smith, *What's Going On Among the Lutherans?*, Milwaukee. WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992. A very detailed doctrinal study.

David Jay Webber, "Is the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Truly Lutheran?" Mankato, MN: ELS Board of Publications, 1988. Brief pamphlet.

Paul Lehninger, "The Doctrinal Statements of the ELCA," Presented to the Southern Conference of the Southeastern Wisconsin District, January 12, 1988.

Richard A. Krause, "Higher Criticism and ELCA," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol 89, Fall 1992, p 243-265.

Siggelkow, Alan, "The Ecumenical Movement with Special Emphasis in the Lutheran Catholic Dialogue on Justification and Other ELCA Mergers. May 2000. WLS essay file.

Trexler, Edgar R., *Anatomy of a Merger: People, Dynamics, and Decisions that Shaped the ELCA*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1991.

The ELCA home page and home pages of ELCA congregations.

## APPENDIX 1: QUICK FACTS ABOUT THE ELCA

1995

### **Members:**

Baptized Members: 5,178,255, down 6,830 from previous year

Communing and Contributing Members: 2,501,669

Members of Color or Whose Primary Language is Other Than English: 121,227 (2.3%). Included are African-Americans, 50,635; Hispanics, 32,295; Asians and Pacific Islanders, 22,467; American Indian and Alaska Native People, 7,134; other, 8,696

Average Worship Attendance Each Week: 1,579,871 (30.5 percent).

Congregations: 10,862

Synods: 65 in nine geographic regions

### **Leaders:**

Clergy: 17,681 (2,296 female; 427 people of color)

Associates in Ministry: 1,204 (948 female, 256 male; 11 people of color)

Missionaries: 310 adult missionaries and over 100 volunteers in over 50 countries

2010

### **Fact 1: The ELCA has many members, spread across the country.**

- **Baptized Members:** 4,272,688
- **Congregations:** 10,008
- **Synods:** 65 in nine geographic regions

**Fact 2: The ELCA is a diverse church body, becoming more so every day.** This church is committed to growing in diversity and strengthening its global, ecumenical and interfaith relationships around the world. (Despite a concerted effort 97% of the membership of the ELCA is white).

### **Fact 3: ELCA congregations are led by gifted men and women who have been called by God to serve their community.**

- In 2010, 21% of clergy on the ELCA roster are women. In seminaries, the numbers of women and men preparing for ministry are about equal.
- Approximately 86% of ordained women and 83% of ordained men are actively serving in congregations.