

# **The Doctrinal Position of ELCA**

By John Brug

## **Overview**

Our topic for this institute is a doctrinal evaluation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We shall consider this topic in five parts corresponding to our five sessions.

- I. The Doctrinal Heritage of ELCA.
- II. The Official Doctrinal Statement of ELCA with a special emphasis on their view of the role of Scripture and the Confessions in the church.
- III. The Dogmatics of ELCA-Theology & The Doctrine of God
- IV. The Dogmatics of ELCA—Christology and Justification
- V. The Popular Doctrine of ELCA.

## **THE DOCTRINAL HERITAGE OF ELCA**

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is a merger of mergers. ELCA has swallowed up nearly all of the previous mergers of American Lutheranism (See Appendix A). The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is the only large Lutheran Church in the United States which remains outside this merger. We in the WELS make up the greatest part of the remaining Lutherans who have shunned the big mergers or who have fled from various mergers on the road to Lutheran unity. Before we examine the present doctrinal state of ELCA, we want to look at the doctrinal heritage which ELCA has received from the synods and churches which preceded it so that we can compare and contrast ELCA's present position with its past. As we do this, we see in 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 ELCA held and defended.

### **The LCA**

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

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 higher criticism 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 Rome and other episcopal churches. The LCA put a greater emphasis on the role of the ministerium and the role of the synod in the governing of the church. The LCA seems to be the greatest contributor to the feminist, gay-rights, liberation theology lobbies which hold 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 at various stages of the merger process were swallowed up in the theological liberalism of the united church.

### **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 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 that confessional. From the time of its 1920 “Washington Declaration” the ULCA was the leader of ecumenicity in American Lutheranism. Its presidents Frederick Knubel 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.”

### **The General Synod**

The General Synod was the descendant of the Pennsylvania Ministerium and other eastern synods. Its goal was practical Lutheran unity, defined organizationally, not theologically. As it was reincarnated in the ULCA, LCA, and ELCA, the General Synod ultimately proved that its real roots were in the rationalism of Quitman, who rewrote the catechism, and in the confessional compromise of Schnucker, 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 Muhlenberg.

One of the few positive contributions of the Americanizing tendencies of the General Synod was its emphasis on Sunday School for all ages, which is still strong in Pennsylvania Lutheranism.

### **The General Council**

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 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.

### **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 Henkels. 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 merger of 1918. The United Synod’s leading role in promoting the common service provides an interesting footnote to the history of Lutheran ecumenism since history repeated itself in the development of common worship books as an ecumenical tool in the Service Book and Hymnal of 1958 and the Lutheran Book of Worship of 1978.

### **The Augustana Synod**

The Augustana Ev. Lutheran Church was the end product of the concern of Swedish mission societies for the Swedes who had come to America. It had a reputation of being more concerned about doctrine, piety, and missions than the ULCA element of the LCA. 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, Ill. already in the early 1930’s. For a while Augustana had a close relationship with the synods that made up the ALC, but Augustana was submerged into the ICA in 1962.

### **The Danes**

The Danes brought an interesting doctrinal heritage into the LCA and ELCA. The “happy Danes” had followed Grundtvig’s view that the Apostles’ Creed was the true expression of the Word of God, which was

only “contained” in Scripture. Through the DELC/AELC the happy Danes entered the ICA in 1962. The “sad” or “holy” Danes influenced by Vilhelm Beck were noted for earnestness and moral vigor. As the UDELC/UELC they, together with a breakaway group from the Grundtvigian wing, entered the ALC in 1960.

### **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.

### **The ALC**

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

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 LCMS and the LCA. The compromises necessary to create the mergers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century generally met with much greater resistance in the synods of the ALC family than in the ICA 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 or its leadership were very enthusiastic. Differences between the ALC and the ICA which posed some problems to the creation of 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 of 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.

## **THE GERMANS**

### **The Old ALC**

The Germans of Ohio, Iowa, and Buffalo 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.

### **The Ohio Synod**

Loy 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 turned toward the Synodical Conference until this relationship was broken by the election controversy. Lenski was the outstanding heir of Ohio's theological tradition in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The Iowa Synod**

Theologically Iowa was always the weakest of the midwestern German synods. The "open questions" and the "historical interpretation" of the Lutheran Confessions promoted by the Fritschel brothers during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Reu's willingness to compromise on inerrancy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century typify the weak theology of Iowa.

### **The Buffalo Synod**

Buffalo is best known for the hierarchical views of its founder Grabau. The Buffalo Synod suffered early defections and never grew. It had fewer than 10,000 members when it entered the old ALC. Leupold was one of the better sons of the Buffalo Synod.

## **THE NORWEGIANS**

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

### **The Norwegian Synod**

The Norwegian Synod, the source of the ELS and the Preus brothers, was a member of the Synodical Conference until it withdrew as a result of the election controversy. 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 anti-Missouri faction in the election dispute, and Hauge's Synod, which had a strong emphasis on personal piety and lay leadership. The ELS developed from the part of the Norwegian Synod that refused to enter the 1917 merger.

The Norwegian Synod 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) 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. That the Norwegian Synod failed to maintain its stance of confessional Lutheranism is one of the sad stories of American Lutheranism.

### **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.

### **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 and 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 Ev 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 in the end 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 ICA and ALC. There was no true unity on the doctrine of Scripture or on 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 such impact on the merger may have been that so many of its adherents were more oriented toward personal experience rather than toward sound doctrinal statements. In the end most of them placed personal ties and group loyalties ahead of doctrine. Many others 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 of those who remain in ELCA contend for biblical truth, a public witness for the doctrine of Scriptural inerrancy has almost been silenced in ELCA.

### **The AELC**

In 1976 the Association of Ev. Lutheran Churches was formed as a result of the Seminex dispute in the LCMS. The AELC brought about 100,000 members into ELCA. Its acceptance of historical criticism, of ecumenical ventures, and of ordained women makes it right at home in 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 ELCA's conflicts concerning synod power and the doctrine of the ministry.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

When the three 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 ministry. 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. The main sources of contention during the last 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 was "Will basic biblical Christianity survive in the majority of American Lutheranism?" As we will see in our upcoming sessions, there is good reason to fear that the answer may be "No."

The ELCA merger was driven by special interest groups promoting sexual and political liberation. The quota system allowed such groups to dominate the planning commission and the first governing boards of ELCA to a degree disproportionate to their strength in the membership of ELCA. The theologians provided little guidance. They had turned away from such unresolved inter-Lutheran questions as lodge membership, millennialism, the Anti-Christ, 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 doctrinal and moral questions.

The result is that there is no trace of evangelical, biblical theology at the official levels of ELCA. Some voices still speak out against the more shocking sexual and political theories coming out of ELCA officialdom and against the most flagrantly unchristian and un-Lutheran doctrinal aberrations, but the voices of Richard John Neuhaus, the Forum Letter and Ad Fontes can be called confessional only in a limited sense. Overall, there is no voice left for biblical Lutheranism at the official level or the seminary level. The only battle left is for the hearts, minds, and souls of individuals at the congregational level.

When we look at 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 our remaining sessions we will see how the decline of American Lutheranism has led to the loss of even the most fundamental doctrines of Christianity. We must fear whether most of American Lutheranism will remain Christian, yet alone Lutheran.

## **THE OFFICIAL CONFESSION**

In this session we shall consider the official doctrinal position of ELCA. Actually ELCA has very little official doctrine. At the present time ELCA's official doctrinal position is limited largely to the doctrinal preface of its constitution. There are a number of reasons for this very limited doctrinal position.

One reason, of course, is that in its very brief history ELCA has not had time or occasion to declare itself on many doctrinal issues. Official statements will undoubtedly multiply as time goes by.

Another reason for the very limited doctrinal platform is that many in ELCA do not want to have their doctrinal stance too narrowly defined. Very little doctrinal discussion preceded the formation of 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 view 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 prerequisite for merger was a common confession of faith in the Triune God and in Christ as Lord and a constitutional allegiance to the authority of Scripture and to the Lutheran Confessions. Such a paper confession is pretty much what the planning commission produced and what ELCA ratified in its *Confession of Faith*.

### **The Trinity**

This church confesses the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. COF 2.1

We and many members of ELCA are very happy to see this statement as the foundation of 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, this paper confession of the basic principles of the ecumenical creeds and the Lutheran confessions is intended to give the unwary the impression that ELCA is a church which remains faithful to the doctrinal traditions of the church. It is claimed that such a confession makes ELCA (in one sense) a conservative church. Agreement on this basic core gives the church freedom to differ on other matters. (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 basic doctrinal affirmations can be taken seriously. When the commission was drawing up the 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. George Anderson of Decorah, Iowa and Fred Neuser of Columbus, Ohio 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 notion to delete the reference to the persons of the Trinity failed by only three votes, 30-33 (ALC Press Release, Feb. 27, 1984). And that, as Paul Harvey says, is the other side of the story.

The popular explanation of this article of the confession published in *The Lutheran* included the following observations by dogmatician Timothy Lull:

The doctrine of the Trinity is not well-understood or well-loved. The ELCA confession, however, begins like the historical confessions-by boldly naming God. Some contend, however, that the Trinity is not a scriptural doctrine. In one sense they are right. The doctrine of the Trinity is a claim about God's inner-life. This is what makes proposals to name the Triune God, as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer unpersuasive. Clearly we should struggle to work past the literal understanding of masculine names for God. And "Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer" can be a refreshing change from endless repetition of "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." If new terms are found that are in continuity with Christian tradition they will have to be relational, not functional. (*The Lutheran* Sept. 28, 1988, p. 11.)

This hardly sounds like a rousing endorsement of the biblical terms. One suspects that ELCA Lutherans have not heard the last of the question of "Father, Son and Spirit." But we really cannot blame Prof. Lull for his tentativeness. It is hard to place much confidence in the credibility of a Trinitarian confession which passed committee by only a three vote margin. We will see further evidence that such skepticism is justified when we examine the Trinitarian theology of the leading dogmaticians of ELCA in our next session.

### **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 intended to soothe the conservatives in the pew, but its language is vague enough to allow a mixed bag of christological and soteriological teaching as we shall see in our fourth session.

### **The Scriptures**

- 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 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 make it clear whether Scripture is actually revelation from God or simply testimony about existential revelation experienced by its writers. Sections b and c imply that our preaching from Scripture and our hearing of preaching from Scripture are on the same level as the inspiration of Scripture. They minimize the importance of the 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 median 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."

With a little effort and a couple of crossed fingers most of what Lull says can be understood correctly, but the intention is clearly "gospel reductionism" and a open doorway to the neo-orthodox view of Scripture. How are the faithful to relate the moral precepts of Scripture to the central message of Scripture? By using them as a guide to gospel-motivated Christian living or by dismissing them as secondary, unessential matters? How is the historical information in Scripture to be related to the central truth? As a fictional framework or as the real events through which God carried out his plan? Both possibilities are left wide open in ELCA.



The vague wishy-washy 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 ELCA's loyalty to Scripture as the inspired Word of God. This may deceive the naive, but anyone who was paying any attention at all to the merger negotiations could see that this formulation was a deliberate watering down of the statement concerning Scripture in the ALC constitution, which had included the term inerrant. There were immediate cries 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 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.

When the LCA and the new ALC appeared on the scene in the early 1960s, 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: The Holy Scriptures are the divinely inspired record of God's redemptive act in Christ, for which the Old Testament prepares the way and which the New Testament proclaims.

It is clear which approach won out in the ELCA statement. The ULCA/LCA approach is the clear victor. However, the victory did not require much of a battle, because it is clear that the ALC confession was a sham from the start. The article goes on to admit:

In spite of the provisions of its constitution—and because of them—the new ALC was threatened by controversy over Scripture. A document incorporated into the Articles of Union for the ALC, the United Testimony on Faith and Life, was a lengthy statement framed by the theologians of the American Lutheran Conference prior to the merger that brought together four of its churches. The United Testimony left the door open to the use of historical criticism. That made it possible for those uneasy with the notion of inerrancy to use the new method and to enter the new church with a good conscience. But this was unsettling to the advocates of inerrancy, who could point to the constitution of the new church for support of their position.

Even before the merger there had been signs of trouble over Scripture. But with the skillful leadership of Fredrik Schiotz, the first president of the new ALC, with retreats that brought district presidents and theologians

together, and with the publication of *The Bible, Book of Faith*, written by ALC theologians, the historical-critical approach was introduced and accepted widely, though not universally, in the ALC in the 1960's.

It is clear that from the beginning the ALC'S confession of inerrancy was merely a ploy to calm the conservatives. Even while the leading theologians were accepting the word "inerrant" in the constitution, they were 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 Schiote to substantiate this claim and concluded, "Let's stop scrapping over the ambiguous, confusing, misleading, unnecessary word 'inerrant.'"

In its second progress report the Commission for a New Lutheran Church justified the omission with the following arguments:

The words inerrant and infallible can be understood in ways that lead to interpretations of the Scriptures that are contrary to the Scriptures and what they teach. These terms imply a precision alien to the minds of the authors of the Scriptures and their own use of the Scriptures. These terms can be used to divert attention from the message of salvation and the instruction in righteousness which are the key themes of the Scriptures. They may encourage artificial harmonizations rather than serious wrestling with the implications of scriptural statements which seems to disagree. They may lead people to think that if there is one proven error in the Bible, however minor, the whole teaching is subject to doubt. Therefore, we recommend that the words inerrant and infallible not be included. (*The Lutheran*. Nov. 16, 1983.)

The only positive thing that can be said about this whole situation is that the former deception and coverup of historical-critical conclusions is being replaced by a frank confession and by an attempt to educate the laity in the nuances of critical methods. A concerted effort is being made to inform the laity and to win them over to the negative critical method. One can only hope that like the Seminex theologians the ELCA theologians have overplayed their hand and that their open propagation of their views will open the eyes of some 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.

The "conservatives" seemed mollified by statements like the conclusion of *The Lutheran's* previously mentioned article on Scripture:

The statement is strong in its insistence on biblical authority. It does not exclude those who say that the Scripture is inerrant. It welcomes them and joins them in paying honor to Scripture. Those who say the Bible is inerrant will bring to the new church an insistence that we listen to Scripture before we interpret it. They steep themselves in the texts of the Bible, embodying a long Lutheran tradition of reverence for the text as it was written. They come prepared to give the obedience of faith to the testimony of the Bible.

But the proposed statement also makes room for historical criticism. Lutherans who have studied the ALC's "Search" or the LCA's "Word and Witness" programs have learned that the authority of Scripture increases for them as they learn more about it and the worlds from which it came. They think that with the help of honest scholarship and intellectual honesty the word can be understood and believed in today's world. They, too, honor the Bible as the source and norm for the faith and life of the church.

The constitution proposed for the ELCA is clear about the authority of Scripture and generous in leaving room for us to find different ways of expressing that authority. Talking about the Bible in different ways helps us stay honest about what it means to be a church under the authority of the word of God written in the Bible.

It makes sense. We are Lutherans. We know that what we say about the Bible is, finally, not as important as what the Bible says to us. (*The Lutheran*, Oct. 15, 1986, p. 13)

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

### **The Confessions**

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 well this fine sounding confession is honored by ELCA theologians will not be impressed by this empty paper pledge. But even the words of the confession contain adequate clues as to its emptiness.

The ecumenical creeds are accepted as "true declarations of faith," but not as the only true teachings or as binding on all in a literal sense. The Augsburg Confession is elevated above the other confessions as the only confession necessary to establish fellowship. It is endorsed as "a true witness to the Gospel." Such an affirmation does not necessarily imply acceptance of all its teachings, only of its gospel message. The other confessions are accepted as "valid interpretations of the faith," but not as doctrinal statements which are binding on all in all their points. It is interesting that the ELCA confession specifically includes the Unaltered Augsburg Confession and the Treatise in its affirmation. This is evidence for the truth of the principle when a person is making a limited subscription to a confession, he can subscribe to any confession, regardless of its contents.

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

It is wholly erroneous to say that these confessions are not our confessions because we would not write them in that way, or because we are not fully convinced of everything they say. ... What does not speak for us today may become the source of guidance and renewal for others in a future hour of the church's life. (*Principles of Theology*, p. 34)

In other words, our subscription to the confessions merely means that we are keeping them around as a testimony to the way in which some Christians at one time interpreted Scripture. Their interpretation may at some future time prove helpful to others even if some parts of it are not helpful to us today. ELCA theologians have publicly proposed repudiating parts of the Confessions. In the Jan. 24, 1986 issue of *The Lutheran Standard* Professor Emeritus Leland Sateran proposed that the condemnations be removed from the content of the Augsburg Confession which is subscribed to by ELCA pastors. He asks, "Hasn't the time come to stop condemning those who do not agree with us? If other Christians disagree, let's recognize their right to do so, without judging or condemning." Sateran's proposal to emasculate the Confessions is at least more honest than the procedure which ELCA has adopted, pretending to adhere to the Confessions, but actually rejecting some of their doctrinal content. To be really honest Sateran should have gone one step further. Those who don't really

accept the Confessions should simply repudiate them and write their own confessions, which will express their real views. Then we will know where they stand. And that after all is what confessions are for.

Even the series of articles in *The Lutheran* which explained to the laity the significance of ELCA's confession made it clear that the subscription to the Confessions 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 fulness of the church's faith. (Dec. 19, 1988, p. 17)

Other articles of the series offer the same cavalier treatment of the other confessions. Lull comments that because the Nicene Creed is longer, it can seem like punishment when it is selected for use, but it is a good creed to use because it contains the widest "we" which Christians have been able to find. The Athanasian Creed has validity as a judgment on careless belief. Even though its language is alien to the spirit of our age, we should see it as a judgment against laxity and should use it occasionally with commentary and preparation. The Augsburg Confession reveals the Catholic side of our heritage and can be a useful tool in dialogue with Rome. Concerning the Treatise Lull comments:

It is sharply critical, equating the papacy with the Antichrist. Sadly, some Lutherans still hold to this identification, even after many reforms within the Roman Catholic Church. (Mar. 22, 1989, p. 16)

One must wonder if Lull has really paid attention to the pope's current teaching and practice concerning papal primacy and if he has thoughtfully reread the unrepudiated decrees of Trent on justification. The Lutheran-Catholic dialogues have changed none of this. The two reasons for our confession's identification of the pope as the Antichrist still stand.

Lull comments that the Formula of Concord tends not to settle doctrinal controversies, but to set boundaries for debate (May 3, 1989, p. 15) It is incomprehensible to me how a dogmatist could make such a statement about the most thorough, 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 ELCA's confession seems to commit the church to traditional doctrine, in fact, it leaves the door wide open to all sorts of doctrinal diversity. In our next sessions we shall look at some of the truckloads of heresy that are being driven through the wide-open doors.

## **THE DOGMATICS OF ELCA**

### **Theology and God**

In our last session we discussed the doctrinal latitude which ELCA's confession of faith allows to its theologians. In the next two sessions we will examine how this freedom is used by the dogmatists that teach at ELCA seminaries. In the last session I claimed that the theologians of ELCA deny the most basic teachings of Christianity. To test this contention we will examine the basic doctrine taught in their 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. 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 which was written by six leading theologians of ELCA in the hopes that it would become the standard dogmatics text in their seminaries. Since the authors are themselves professors at these seminaries, it would seem likely that their goal will be realized. The two-volume text, published in 1984, is generally called *Braaten and Jenson*, after its two editors, who are professors of systematic theology at Chicago and Gettysburg. Its actual title is *Christian Dogmatics*, giving new credence to the old axiom, “You can’t judge a book by looking at the cover.” (Incidentally, if Francis Pieper were alive, he’d be rolling over in his grave at the thought of a text like this being the namesake and “successor” to his *Christian Dogmatics*) If the approach to dogmatics which is typical of this text dominates the seminaries of ELCA, the prospects for the survival of truly Lutheran, biblically-based dogmatics in ELCA are bleak indeed.

### **The Nature and Sources of Theology**

Omens of what is to come appear already in the preface. The authors state quite frankly that an acceptance of doctrinal pluralism is one of their basic presuppositions. They say:

*The fact of theological pluralism is inescapable.*

*I*

We have chosen to make a virtue out of a necessity by way of multiple authorship. ... 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 dogmatics is no longer the systematic presentation of the truths revealed in Scripture. Dogmatics has been reduced to a stimulating exchange of criticisms of the doctrinal traditions of the various churches and to making proposals for reformulating the teachings of the faith in ways which will be acceptable to our era. The task of dogmatics is “the critical interpretation of the doctrines of the church’s faith in light of our knowledge of Christian origins [i.e. historical criticism] and the challenge of the contemporary situation” [i.e. accommodating unbelief]. (1,5) “Dogmatics is done not so much to defend the church as it is, but to criticize it.” (1,7)

### **Scripture**

Although Braaten and Jenson pay lip service to the importance of exegesis as the foundation of dogmatics, it is not surprising that biblical exegesis is almost totally absent from their work. Their presentation consists almost entirely of analysis and criticism of the traditional dogmatics of the churches, followed by the author’s proposal for reshaping the doctrine to make it more appropriate for today. This approach is the natural result of the authors’ rejection of the statements of Scripture as reliable and authoritative sources 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 locus on Scripture, which was written by Braaten.

The introductory thesis for the locus 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. (1,61)

Notice that for Braaten the Scriptures are no longer written revelation from God, but the source of knowledge of revelation about faith. This is quite a step down from the “very words of God.” (Ro 3:2) We certainly agree that the gospel is the heart and the chief purpose of Scripture. All other doctrines serve the gospel. But any specific doctrine must be based on all the passages which speak of that topic, not on some abstract reasoning deduced from a “principle of the gospel.” For example, the terrible reality of hell cannot be denied on the basis of God’s overwhelming love since numerous 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 woman’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 invalidated the traditional view of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. 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 the Barthian doctrine 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.

The following selected quotations give a sample of the viewpoint and tone of this locus.

The heart of Scripture is the promise of the gospel that is brought to expression in the Christ-event. Scripture’s authority is not of a juridical kind: it is not essentially a book of legal doctrines, inerrant reports, or devotional materials. (I, 65)

Scripture’s heart is, of course, the gospel. But it certainly does contain binding laws, inerrant reports, and devotional materials, all of them equally inspired and inerrant.

In none of the Lutheran confessions is there an article explicitly on the authority of Scripture. But in the Reformed confessions there are explicit articles on the “Word of God.” (I, 65)

What is Braaten insinuating by this comparison?

For the seventeenth-century orthodox dogmaticians, Scriptures are authoritative because of their divine inspiration and inerrancy. . . . This doctrine became the official teaching of almost all Lutheran and Reformed churches and remains valid to this day, except where the historical critical approach to Scripture has occasioned a new doctrine. (I,66) The result was the divinization of the biblical texts, the ascription of attributes which nearly rival the attributes of the Almighty. The faith and obedience which the New Testament refers to God, Christ, or the Gospel are now transferred to the Scripture as the Word of God. ... The Scriptures are endowed with causative authority, so that in the language of orthodoxy it is said that the Scriptures create faith and obedience. ... This type of language indicates that the distinction between the Holy Spirit, who alone according to classical Christianity possesses such creative, regenerative, and illuminative power, and the Holy Scriptures has virtually collapsed. (I, 67)

The close of this section raises the question: Who is it who has adopted Reformed theology, the holders of inerrancy or Braaten? The section reveals more about Braaten’s failure to grasp the biblical doctrine of the Means of Grace than it does about the real position of our dogmaticians, who never ascribed any authority to Scripture except the authority given to it by God.

Fundamentalist biblicism has not receded in vigor, even though it does not enjoy great prestige in the great theological schools. Masses of laity and clergy wish to possess an uncomplicated answer to the question of

authority. ... In modern Protestant fundamentalism, 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 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. ... The Protestant fundamentalist doctrine represents a reduction of the Word of God to only its written form, (I, 74,75).

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. But he could at least represent the traditional position accurately. “The Protestant fundamentalist doctrine represents a reduction of the Word of God to only its written form.” It’s hard to decide if such gross distortion is a deliberate lie or appalling ignorance.

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”?

The churches that claim the heritage of Luther and the Reformation [ELCA] still affirm the Bible is the Word of God. This is not meant in the fundamentalistic [WELS & LCMS] sense that everything in the Bible stands directly as the Word of God. Nor is it meant in the sense that only some things in the Bible are the Word of God—the red-lettered passages in some versions of the New Testament or the most inspiring verses of anyone’s choosing. The Bible is the Word of God as a whole, in its total import and impact, because it conveys the message of eschatological salvation. (I, 76)

The role of the Bible in constructive theology [a very revealing term] is radically qualified today by historical consciousness. Luther believed that the literal meaning of Scripture is identical with its historical content [rare honesty concerning Luther]; things happened exactly as they were written down. 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)

Braaten and Jenson reduce the Bible to a source book for the imaginative construction 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 prolegomena:

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. ... Biblical theology and dogmatic theology are not reducible to each other. (I, 77)

### **The Confessions**

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

The right wing appeals to the confessional principle to exclude all new developments in modern theology. Committed to a theology of repristination, it lifts up the *Book of Concord*, sometimes coupled with

seventeenth-century scholasticism, as the golden age, the once-and-for-all model of what theology must be. 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)

The confessional principle can be maintained within a creative tension between the pole of continuity, which grounds dogmatics in the catholic substance of faith, and the pole of contemporaneity, which keeps the church open to modern horizons of experience and understanding. The disregard for either principle leads to a polarization of theology between orthodox confessionalism and liberal modernism. 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 authority the confessions claim for themselves is limited. They always speak in the indicative rather than the imperative mood. They introduce their statements with the phrase, "We believe, confess, and teach," declaring not what must be believed in order to have true faith, but what is already believed on the basis of faith in the gospel of Christ. They 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)

The confessions possess hermeneutical significance because they point to the central message of the Scriptures as a whole. They are like a map giving directions on how to find the way through the Scriptures. The absolute confessionalist is like one who studies the map but neglects to make the trip. The anticonfessionalist sets off on the trip with no map for guidance, and quickly gets lost on the way. The confessions are a means to an end, just that but not less than that. (I, 53)

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. We accept the Augsburg Confession as a true witness to the Gospel. We accept the other Lutheran Confessions as further valid interpretations of the faith of the Church." The confessions 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 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 legal code to be enforced on the unwilling. But neither do they think of them as a tentative proposal or optional suggestion to 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 were to serve as a basis for resolving theological disputes.

The confessors of the Reformation would never have accepted a vague "convergence on the gospel" as a basis of fellowship with Rome as the modern traitors to the Reformation heritage recently did. For the confessors the Confessions set forth the doctrinal agreement which was necessary to restore the unity of the church. It would not have been enough for Rome to say, "We accept your suggestion that the gospel is very important." The Confessions were more than a hermeneutical suggestion concerning the main doctrine of Scripture. They were a systematic statement of the truths which the confessors believed were the only scriptural answers to the doctrinal questions which were being disputed during the Reformation era. 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 locus on the trinity was written by Jenson. In the spectrum of 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 I am not sure if Jenson believes in the three persons of the Trinity. I think not. This locus, like much of the text, is written in an opaque jargon, which makes a reading assignment in Braaten and Jenson a particularly heinous form of cruel and unusual punishment. Readers cannot help wishing that Braaten and Jenson had remembered that one of the chief goals of theological writing is to communicate clearly. I leave it to you to figure out Jenson's view of the Trinity.

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. [Run that by me one more time.] 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. [Huh?] 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)

Perhaps, we should call in some learned theologians and philosophers to expound on the beauty and marvelousness of Jenson's "new clothes," but perhaps it would be more appropriate to call in a few little children to yell, "Hey everybody, the king's walking down the street bare naked." It's amazing what people will accept as profound wisdom when they have left Scripture and even common sense behind. Sometimes the laughter of children is needed to awake them to their own gullibility or their own nakedness.

If Jenson's explanation of the Trinity means anything at all, he appears to be claiming that the names "Father, Son and Spirit" are words for describing different modes or aspects of an existential encounter with a transcendent Something-or-Other 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)

The "Father, Son and Spirit" respectively seen to correspond to past, present and future aspects of existential encounter.

We have a temporally three-point identification of the Gospel's God. ... We must point with all three of time's arrows in order to point out this God: to the Father as Given, to the Lord Jesus as the present possibility of God's reality for us, and to the Spirit as the outcome of Jesus' work. The identification is triple—rather than, say, double or quintuple—because time does have three arrows. (I, 101, 102)

The Gospel ... provides no mediator of our ascent to a timeless and therefore distant God. It rather proclaims a God whose own deity is not separable from a figure of our temporal history and who therefore is not and never has been timeless and distant from us. (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)

Jenson goes on to explain his own peculiar contribution to the advance of trinitarian thinking with a diagram of the Trinity which rejects the traditional way of speaking of a first person (begetter and source of procession), a second person (begotten and source of procession) and a third person (proceeding.) Jenson's contribution to the doctrine of the Trinity is to make all trinitarian relationships two-way as far as the imparting of deity. The Father begets, the Son is begotten. The Father and Son breathe, the Spirit is breathed. The Son and Spirit free, the Father is freed. The Son's and Spirit's joint reality as the openness into which the Father is freed is God-constituting. The spirit witnesses, the son is witnessed. The Spirit's witness to the Son is equally God-constituting as the traditional relationships. (I, 156,157) According to Jenson acts of the Son and Spirit in time are a source of the deity of the Father and Son.

Jenson describes God as being event, person, spirit and discourse.

God is an event. . . . An event must happen to some enduring entity. What does not follow and what we have denied is that the enduring entity is therefore ontologically prior to the event. What God happens to is Jesus and the world. God is the event of the world's final transformation by Jesus' love. (I, 167)

The "a person" that God is, is the human person Jesus, the Son. The triune event that God is, is by its triunity a person, this one. We need not, therefore, think of other identities of the Father or the Spirit as with respect to their distinction from one another, individual personal beings in the modern sense. If the Father and Son were singular persons, they would be metaphysical something in the very style of the "Logos asarkos" we have just eliminated. ... We will say, All there is to being God the Father is being addressed as "Father" by the Son, Jesus; all there is to being God the Spirit is being the spirit of this exchange. (I, 171)

Jenson tries to soften or blur the preceding statement in the paragraphs of page 171 which follow this quotation. 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 outrageous statements like the ones quoted above and to surround them with a disorienting 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 and process theology. He effectively denies the clear distinction of the three persons. The most favorable construction one could put on Jenson's work is that he leaves the existence of a personal God in doubt. Certainly, the independence, the eternity, the immutability, and the other immanent attributes of God are lost in a fog of verbiage. 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 an opaque theorizing which is neither clear nor simple. Jenson can be given some good grades in historical erudition, creative philosophizing, and fancy verbalizing, but he must be given a failing grade in the basic task of a dogmatist: clearly setting forth the doctrine of Scripture.

### **Creation**

A review of Braaten and Jenson's doctrine of creation is probably superfluous since it would require someone more patient than Diogenes to find an ELCA theologian with a real doctrine of creation. The locus on creation was provided by Philip Hefner, one of B&J's collaborators. We already know we are in trouble when we read Hefner's title which refers to the Bible's *witness to* creation, rather than to an *account of* creation. Hefner quotes Reumann's claim that there are at least fifteen different creation theologies in the scriptures. The first three chapters of Genesis are given a mythic moralizing interpretation.

If we read Genesis 3 as if it were an eyewitness account written on the very day of the fall, it is misleading, because then it seems that humans were from the very beginning sinful. But when we keep in mind

that the account is put together in the tenth century BC as an explanation of how God works in history, then it becomes not an etiology or even a protology but rather a way of expressing far greater optimism, of saying that evil is not written into the very law of things, but is located discretely in the human will. As such it can be dealt with and guarded against. The writer is saying, “Humans are like this. If you keep this in mind, it is possible to deal with sin and evil constructively (I, 284)

It is bad enough that Hefner denied the historicity of the account, but in his moralizing approach he didn't even get the right moral. In fact, he makes Genesis 3 say the exact opposite of its intended lesson. Our only hope of dealing with sin constructively is found not in the account of the fall, but in the gospel promise which follows.

Hefner commends creationists for their opposition to scientism, but rejects creationism and a literal interpretation of Genesis 1 and 2 on the following grounds. 1) Creationists misuse the biblical literature by giving it a historical and scientific purpose which it did not intend. 2) The creationist position is so simplistic in relating the Bible to scientific discoveries. 3) Creationist strategy does not relate biblical faith to the ongoing activity of scientific research and discovery. There must be two-way traffic between faith and science. (I, 314, 315)

With no real creation and no real fall, it should be no surprise that in the following locus on original sin by Paul Sponheim this doctrine too is shredded by a mythical approach to Genesis 3.

## **CONCLUSION**

At the half-way point of our dreary journey through Braaten and Jenson we find that they leave us with no dependable source of theology, a vague existential encounter for a god, no real knowledge of our creator, and no real knowledge of the seriousness of sin. All the foundations of christology and soteriology have been undermined. In our next session we will find that with no foundations the building itself has collapsed.

## **THE DOGMATICS OF ELCA (cont)**

### **The Doctrine of Christ**

In our last session we considered the doctrinal position of the ELCA concerning the basic principles of theology and the doctrine of God. We used Braaten and Jenson's *Christian Dogmatics* as our primary source. To our dismay we found that even these fundamental doctrines have been undermined in ELCA. Since the doctrine of theology and the doctrine of God provide foundations for all the rest of theology, errors in these doctrines usually infect 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 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 ELCA? Sad to say, in this session we will see that even this indispensable core of Christianity has been obscured and corrupted by the leading theologians of 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 considering the nature and method of Christology.

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.

We have shown that christology by its very nature moves between the poles of the contemporaneity of Christ and the historicity of Jesus. (I, 475)

The historical Jesus, the kerygmatic Christ, and the christological dogma—these three are the stuff of which christology is made. (I, 481)

We see that we already have big problems before we even get to the substance of Braaten's christology. The way in which Braaten goes about establishing his doctrine of Christ can only lead to confusion. Braaten sees three basic sources of christology: what Jesus thought about himself, what the early church thought about him, and what the church throughout the centuries has taught about Jesus. He must use higher 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" a 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.

Braaten begins his presentation by discussing the historical Jesus and his understanding of the Kingdom of God and by summarizing and evaluating the classical christology of the church and the christology of those who opposed it. We will pass over these sections and concentrate on 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 define the divine and human natures in Christ as our theological constructions 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 doctrine of the incarnation was the pillar of orthodox christology from the Council of Chalcedon to the age of the Enlightenment. This pillar has been shattered by the blows of modern criticism. ... 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. (1,527)

Braaten seeks to find a middle ground between the conservative reaction to critical studies, which denies the validity of critical conclusions and defends the traditional faith, and the liberal reaction, which demythologizes the Christian faith and which dispenses with the myth of the incarnation as non-essential to that

faith. Braaten's approach is to interpret the story of the incarnation as a myth which contains symbolical elements which are not to be taken literally, but which has some historical aspects. (I, 528)

The Christ who is invented by Braaten's approach 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 incarnation. For Braaten "incarnation" means that God somehow presents the message of eschatological 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—*basileia*—was shown to be effectually present in his person and ministry. (I, 538)

The classical doctrine of the hypostatic union means that Jesus is the unique event of God's loving self-communication. (I, 538)

The preexistence of Christ is an integral part of the myth of the incarnation. References to the preexistence of Christ ... [are] to be understood soteriologically. They 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 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 possible to hold to the virgin birth as a biological fact and miss its point. It is also possible to make the same point without reference to the virgin birth... 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)

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....The New Testament writers used a rich variety of symbols taken from the world of ancient Jewish and gnostic mythology to interpret the meaning of the cross. 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)

Insofar as we confess Christ's descent to hades as the realm of the dead, we are claiming that his work of salvation is universal and reaches beyond the limits of those who preach and hear the gospel in this life. Nations and generations of people who lived before the coming of Christ and who have never been confronted with the preaching of salvation in his name are not eternally lost. (I, 549)

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)

An incarnation and a virgin birth which are just symbols, a crucifixion which is a means of salvation only when mythically interpreted, and a resurrection whose historical reality consists in the experience of the witnesses—with foundations like these it is no wonder that Braaten looks for salvation apart from the historical deeds of Christ, salvation which can be obtained without knowledge or faith in Christ. If biblical Christianity

still exists in 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 dogmaticians. 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 locus on justification. One would think that to label a book without a locus on justification as a Lutheran dogmatics or even as a Christian dogmatics would be a contradiction in terms. Yet Braaten and Jenson have been bold enough to do this.

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

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. We trust that all the participants in this project of dogmatics are free of it. (1,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 could surrender the biblical teaching of justification in their dialogues with Rome. “Moderate” theologians used to maintain that agreement in the gospel was necessary for mutual recognition of churches. Now even this minimal agreement has been surrendered. “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. This assertion was never a point of disagreement between Lutherans and Rome so agreeing on this is hardly a resolution of differences between Lutherans and Rome. Even the participants in this dialogue gagged at the prospect of labeling their document an “agreement” and settled for the term “convergence.” In a certain sense, the Lutheran participants in the dialogue did not sell out on their principles when they endorsed the dialogue documents. Books like *Christian Dogmatics* reveal that they and their sympathizers had already done that on their own without help from their Catholic counterparts.

In Braaten and Jenson justification by faith receives a brief treatment as a sub-point of Jenson's discussion of “pneumatological soteriology.” Here the doctrine of justification is treated as “a dogmatic proposal” of the Reformation which should be presented in a way that would “avoid reading out of the true church the bulk of Western Christendom, which has not accepted the contention.” (II, 133) The doctrine of justification presented in this section has little clear content, but only a vaguely defined existential function.

The doctrine of justification is a hermeneutical instruction to preachers, teachers, and confessors: so speak of Christ and of the life of your community that the justification for that life which your words open is the kind grasped by faith rather than the kind constituted by works. (II, 130)

Conversion is a change in the communication situation within which every person lives; a proper sermon or baptism liturgy or penance liturgy just *is* that change. (II, 134)

Quite frankly, it is hard to imagine how anyone can regard statements like this as an improvement on the simple beauty of Romans and the clarity of the Lutheran Confessions. Jenson's “hermeneutical instruction” is

no substitute for the objective declaration of forgiveness of sins found in Scripture. His “change in the communication situation” is worthless compared to the real change of a person’s whole inner life which is worked by the means of grace.

Things get no better in *Christian Dogmatics*’s main discussion of justification which is contained in Gerhard Forde’s locus entitled “Christian Life.” A detailed analysis of this 75 page locus is impossible because of the time-limits of this presentation, but 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 propositions. Law and gospel are defined in functional terms of existential encounter. Law is defined as “one way in which communication functions when we are alienated, estranged, and bound.” (II, 400) The doctrine of the atonement is stripped of its legal aspects. In his earlier locus 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.

The significance of Jesus’ death is explained by a parable which is intended to develop a noncultic, 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 is all there is, 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 atonement, preaching with no objective justification, preaching with nothing to offer except a vague existential appeal, expressed in opaque jargon and mysterious parables. It is hard to say whether Forde’s explanation of the atonement is farce or tragedy and whether one should laugh or cry when reading it.

The doctrine of justification taught in *Braaten and Jenson* does not provide the content of the church’s proclamation of justification. It only stipulates the kind of talking—about whatever contents—that can properly be proclamation of the church. (II, 422) The biblical message of Christ’s payment for the sins of the whole world and God’s imputation of that payment to the world has been watered down to a ill-defined existential 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 will receive their understanding of justification from a text like this is heartbreaking. Imagine if you can, having such a pastor instruct your children or grand children. Imagine his speaking to the heathen on your behalf. Imagine her comforting you after the death of your wife or visiting you on your death bed.

The gap between the theologians of 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 ELCA and the theologians of WELS is 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 ELCA Lutheran or even Christian.

We can only hope that some pastors and laypeople in ELCA preserve the precious doctrine of justification and the other doctrines of Scripture in spite of the views of their leaders. Next time, in our last session, we will see that the leaders of ELCA are making it increasingly difficult for the people to do so.

## **POPULAR DOCTRINE**

In Session 2 we saw how the official doctrinal position of ELCA leaves the door wide open for theologians to develop and promote all sorts of doctrinal diversity. In the last two sessions we saw how leading theologians of ELCA use this freedom to overthrow even the most basic doctrines of Christianity. We have not had time to examine another major factor in the doctrinal decline of ELCA: the influence of special-interest lobbies whose primary concern is not doctrine, but the promotion of certain political, social, racial or sexual goals. Much political literature with a pronounced left-wing bias is disseminated through ELCA congregations. Concern for doctrine often takes a backseat to church and world politics.

On the organizational level of ELCA there is virtually no testimony remaining for confessional Lutheranism. But are the people in the pew aware of this? Is the theology of their leaders hidden from them as it often is during the earlier stages of the capture of a church by false teachers?

This may have been the case in the past. More than ten years ago, when I served a congregation composed primarily of 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 a bland pabulum about how good God is and what good people we should be. Although this analysis is still holds true to a considerable degree, in recent years there has been a definite effort to bring the laity up-to-date with doctrinal developments in ELCA. For example, even before the merger both the LCA and ALC had formal 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 premerger 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 is proceeding in ELCA we will consider four main sources: the doctrinal leadership provided by the presiding bishop, the catechism and educational materials, preaching, and the publications for the laity.

### **Bishop Chilstrom**

Bishop Chilstrom has presented his doctrinal agenda for ELCA in a pamphlet entitled, “Foundations for the Future.” He declares, “I am convinced that this is a time to go back to our biblical and confessional roots. Unless we do so we will flounder and lose our way.” (p. 2) These are encouraging words. Unfortunately, the specifics which follow offer little encouragement that Chilstrom is capable of providing clear, confessional, biblical leadership to the church.

Chilstrom’s vision for ELCA in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is presented in the form of a catechetical study based on the Apostles’ Creed. Chapter One is a reflection on the 1st Article entitled “Creation and the Word of God.” He states, “The theology of our church must be rooted first and foremost in the theology of God as the One who



has spoken and who has created all things.” (p. 3) Creation is indeed the starting point of Scripture, but we may nevertheless question whether the doctrine of creation can be the primary foundation on which the doctrine of the church is built. Fallen sinners can reach a full, clear knowledge of their Creator only through the gospel, not through reflection on creation. Perhaps this criticism seems like nitpicking, but the concern that Chilstrom’s priorities are confused is justified by his remark in Chapter 2, “God’s grace in Jesus Christ also is part of the foundation on which the church must build.” (p. 12) Christ also is part of the foundation on which we build?? If ELCA is looking for a guide into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it would do better to stick with Paul.

To make matters worse, Chilstrom’s first chapter, despite its title, offers neither a doctrine of creation nor a doctrine of the Word. There is no discussion of the act of creation or of evolution. Chilstrom’s doctrine of creation consists primarily of a catalog of ecological and political problems which Chilstrom ponders while he looks down on the earth as he jets around the world. He concludes:

Most of the basic questions of life come back to our understanding of God as Creator. Every social statement we have developed in any of our predecessor churches is rooted in one way or another in the theology of creation. And every such statement to be formulated by the ELCA must have the same taproot.

It is on this foundation, first that our church must be built. (p. 8)

It is perhaps just as well that Chilstrom does not present his doctrine of the Word here. His position was made clear in an interview published in *The Lutheran* of 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 this 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.

Chilstrom’s second chapter, “Jesus Christ, the Word Made Flesh” is no better. He does maintain, “We need more than ever to accent justification in the life of ELCA and as our contribution to others with whom we are in dialog.” but he adds, “We also need to hear and appreciate the accents of their tradition.” (p.10) He offers no clear statement of the incarnation. He does not mention sin, atonement, or forgiveness. An undefined doctrine of justification is a poor foundation on which to build.

Chilstrom begins his discussion of the Third Article by confessing that as a college professor he was almost totally ignorant about the Holy Spirit. Although this problem has apparently not been entirely remedied, Chilstrom’s discussion of the Third Article contains the few sparks of good theology in this little work.

It is not our ‘decision for Christ’ that lies at the heart of our theology. No, it is God’s prior decision for us. And it is only by the grace of the Holy Spirit that we can have faith to accept God’s prior decision.

Precisely at this point we have a contribution to make to many others expression of the Christian Church. We believe that it is through Word and Sacrament that the Holy Spirit comes to us. (p. 16)

Those are the best words in the document. Chilstrom concludes with a description of the Trinity which approaches modalism and with a peptalk to enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century with a vision somehow based on the foundation he has laid. Overall, I would classify Chilstrom’s vision for ELCA as an example of the “pabulum” I

referred to earlier. It does not explicitly reject the biblical doctrines of creation, inerrancy, or justification. But it is so mushy that it offers practically nothing of substance. The gist of his message is that ELCA is to build something, somehow, on the basic affirmations of the Apostles' Creed. It offers little guidance for putting ELCA on a biblical, confessional path. Writing in *Lutheran Forum* Paul Hinckley pretty well hit the nail on the head when he concluded, "The Bishop is to be commended for his earnest attempt ... to reorient us to our biblical and confessional roots. We would do best to receive his reflections on the Apostles' Creed, however, as a statement of the problem and not yet a solution." (p. 34)

### **The Catechism**

If the people are getting little help from the leadership, can they expect to find refuge in the catechism, the traditional source of doctrine for Lutheran laypeople? To represent the catechisms of ELCA I have chosen to use the *Evangelical Catechism*, published by Augsburg in 1982. It is based on the 1979 catechism of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany, Hannover.

This catechism does not use Luther's chief parts, but the preface explains that this book is not intended to replace Luther who will always have a place, but to be a contemporary exposition of Christian teaching. (ELCA does have other catechisms which contain Luther's chief parts.) We will sample the *Evangelical Catechism's* teaching on a cross-section of Christian doctrine as an example of the kind of catechetics that might be expected in ELCA.

### **God**

*The Bible's presentations of God do not capture him the way a photograph captures its subject. Instead they communicate experiences people have had with God. (p. 60)*

*The Bible tells us about experiences people have had with God so that we might have similar experiences. Generally speaking, we meet God through other individuals, events, or circumstances; that is through earthly things. (p. 91).*

*Recent studies have shown that there is great diversity among the books of the Bible. ... There are even some details that contradict each other. ... Yet the authority of the Bible does not depend on the total consistency of every detail, but on the God whose word and will are revealed through it. (p.165-167).*

These sections substitute subjective personal experience of God for the objective revelation of God which we have in Scripture. Though the scriptural revelation of God is partial, what it does reveal is correct and adequate for our salvation. Although the anthropomorphic terms which Scripture uses to describe God are not fully adequate to describe the infinite God, they are not mere symbols, but they describe God as he really exists.

### **Sin**

*Human beings were created not for slavery but for freedom. Yet we consistently abandon the relationship God intends for us. ... Theological statements about the bondage of the will do not mean that there is no human freedom. We are free to make decisions and act in everyday affairs. Yet we are in slavery because apart from God, we make decisions to suit our ends, not his.*

*Christ made it possible for us to be free from slavery to ourselves. With the kind of freedom he gives us we can refuse to become dependent on things, power, jobs, or systems. ... We are capable of shaping our lives and the world. (p. 35-37)*

*Original sin means four things: Sin is universal. No clear distinction can be made between individual and corporate sin. Each person is responsible, and yet each person shares in the sin of society as a whole. Sin is unavoidable. Original sin does not mean that newborn babies commit evil acts. It means that the roots of our human self-centeredness are present from birth. Sin brings guilt. Sin produces sins. (From p. 138-143)*

Although the catechism still speaks of original sin, it is very doubtful that this "original sin" is the hereditary guilt and corruption of Scripture and our Confessions. "Roots of self-centeredness present from

birth,” “slavery to ourselves” and “consistently abandoning the relationship God intends for us” are an anemic presentation of the “enmity against God” of Romans 7 and 8.

### ***Redemption and Justification***

*The cross is the focal point of the New Testament. It reveals God as the one who participates with his people in their suffering. (p. 68)*

*It calls Jesus the Son of God because God has appointed him to rule with authority and establish freedom for God’s people. (p. 189)*

*Those who live in a right relationship with God are said to be “justified” in God’s eyes. (p. 204) God does not just see us as righteous, but actually begins a process by which he makes us righteous through faith. (p. 209)*

*God has sometimes been seen as paying a debt to the devil or as requiring the bloody sacrifice of his Son in order to satisfy his wrath. When such language is used it often contradicts other things we know about God from the Scriptures, including his power over evil and his steadfast love and forgiveness. If the church is to make the message of justification known to people today, it must interpret the doctrine in a way that is both faithful to God’s revelation of himself and meaningful in our current context. Society as a whole may be little concerned about sin or God’s will, but people still understand the gospel. All human beings are God’s creatures and all have the same basic needs. No matter how much our culture changes, we will always need the love of God and the fulfillment that comes from being faithful to his will. It may be that we cannot matter-of-factly repeat the phrases used by Paul or Luther. (p. 211)*

This is the gospel? I’ll take my chances with Paul and Luther. Does our world really need this gospel which is no gospel: a savior who is adopted into the deity in order to participate in our suffering and whose death has no clear purpose other than to remind us God loves us. “A nice God loves you, and you should be nice people” is not the gospel of Scripture.

### ***Sanctification***

*The Ten Commandments go far beyond legal regulations. The first three commandments make that quite clear. Therefore it is hard to base laws on them. ... They can only be fulfilled by those who observe them in their spirit as well as in their letter. (p. 72)*

No wonder moral anarchy is setting in. In the following portions of the catechism readers are warned that sexual exploitation of others, divorce and abortion are bad, but this is done in terms that seem to leave loopholes for all of these practices if done unselfishly. (p. 289,290,299,313)

Samples of the catechism’s teaching in a few other areas shows the pervasiveness of false teaching in all areas of doctrine.

### ***Creation***

*The fact that two different stories of creation (Genesis 1 and Genesis 2) were allowed to stand together in the Bible suggests that the question of how God created the world is not a vital question for faith. The Bible does not require us to have a particular theory of creation. Instead, it gives us freedom to investigate the world’s origin, always giving glory to the Creator behind it.*

*None of the biblical creation stories are historical reports. Instead they talk about the relationship between God, human beings, and the world, using the language of symbols and images. (p. 82-83)*

*Adam and Eve, though personified as individuals in the story, are not necessarily individual persons, but representatives of humanity. ... The creation of a woman from the rib of the man, like the creation of man from the earth, is not meant to be taken literally. The narrator is making the point that human beings can enter relationships which have no parallel in the animal world. (p. 88)*

### ***The Soul***

*Although you cannot be separated into different “parts” such as body, soul and spirit, terms like these express the fact that you experience life in different ways. Each way opens a different door to your whole person. (p. 20)*

### ***Spirits***

*When the Bible talks about the radical nature of evil, it refers to “the devil.” In picture language it uses the figure of the devil to represent the fact that evil goes far beyond every human possibility.*

*Christians throughout the ages have sensed God’s sheltering presence around them. One of the ways they have spoken of this presence is with the imagery of angels. (p.148)*

### ***The Church***

*In the ecumenical movement, Christians have learned that unity does not require uniformity, but can be achieved through fellowship in which diversity is possible. ... The unity of the church must allow room for various means of proclamation and worship, for different theologies and methods of organization. (p. 230)*

*The mission of the church includes two closely related tasks: evangelism and service. (p. 254)*

A catechism like this is not going to help ELCA people maintain a sound Lutheran Confession. I examined several other ALC/LCA catechisms and instructional books and found that although some of them are better than the *Evangelical Catechism* in general they have the same doctrinal weaknesses as the Evangelical Catechism. Numerous examples of doctrinal errors and ambiguities could be heaped up from the catechisms listed in the bibliography. I will merely give a sampling of statements from a number of the more popular series.

### ***Affirm, Augsburg’s Confirmation Course***

For the writers of Genesis, the story of creation was not scientific or verifiable. Instead, they wanted to emphasize that history was God’s realm and that God was the central character of their theological history. (OT-TM p. 6)

The Old Testament ... is history, but a very different kind of history than what you have studied in school. The Old Testament writers were not so concerned about telling the actual sequence of historic events. But they were very concerned with giving explanations to people’s questions about God and their relationship to God. ... Genesis 1-11 is not meant to be scientific history. There is no way we can check the events to be sure things happened just as described. Rather these stories were written to give answers to the religious questions people had. (OT p. 2)

During this time [of Nehemiah] a collection of writings called the Law of Moses was heard of. Perhaps these writings were made up of ancient stories, poems, and prophetic statements collected during the exile. (OT p. 28)

“Born of the virgin Mary.” The Creed is saying that Jesus was a real human being sharing our nature, our weaknesses, our sorrows, and even our death. (Creed p.15)

“He descended into hell.” This is a difficult statement to understand. ... One way to understand this part of the Creed is to realize that God’s grace cannot be limited in space or time. Jesus announced God’s grace to those who had died before him. (Creed p.16).

To call Jesus “Lord” is to confess Jesus’ uniqueness and authority in our lives. (Creed TM p. 16)

One such theory is that Jesus’ death is the supreme example of God’s love which is intended to produce in us a similar love. Another is that Jesus’ death is the final sacrifice, bringing all forms of animal sacrifice to an end. Some have thought that Jesus atones by means of his teaching more than by his death. Other theories have chosen to emphasize only one aspect of New Testament thought.

In regard to *how* the work of Christ redeems us, we must be content to assert the reality and realize that there are some ambiguities. (Creed TM p. 22-23)

### ***Search, Augsburg’s Adult Bible Study Program***

## Unit 6, John 9-21

The story of Jesus' healing the blind man in John 9 may be understood as 1) a miracle, 2) a story of the early church's struggle to confess Christ, 3) a timeless story of faith, sight and new life, 4) all of these.

There were several editions of John's Gospel. Over the years pieces were added to the Gospel to help Christians understand Jesus.

In the exposition of John 19 there is no objective atonement. Jesus' cross speaks many messages, including victory.

### *Faith for Today, Augsburg, 1975*

We are primarily concerned about God's relationship to us, and not how the world was created. (p. 13)

With Catechisms like this the prospects for sound instruction in ELCA are not good.

### **The Lutheran**

An important source for informing the laity is the church magazine. The answers which people receive to their doctrinal 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 a few questions and answers from the "Since You Asked" column of *The Lutheran*, written by Norma and Burton Everist. The questions and answers which follow are condensed from the original.

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

Answer: 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. (Mar. 30, 1988, p. 46)

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

Answer: 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)

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

Answer: 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, 19<sup>th</sup> century concept of inerrancy leads to many unhelpful misunderstandings and questions like inerrant in what way? Is the Bible inerrant in matters of history? geneology, 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: Some Lutheran churches do not ordain women, using I Timothy 2:11-15 as their primary justification. How can ELCA ordain women in light of this?

Answer: 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. It also teaches us to receive pastoral counsel thoughtfully, and critically, including this column. Pastors and the church are not infallible. (Nov. 23, 1988.)

Not all the advice provided by this column is as bad as that cited above. Some of it is relatively harmless. But certainly members of ELCA looking for solid doctrinal guidance cannot expect to find it in *The Lutheran*.

### **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 analysis is based on a study of 27 sermons (from 9 preachers from 5 congregations; half from one man). It hopefully provides an example of what can be expected from ELCA preaching.

None of the 27 sermons was textual. Usually no 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. “Theobabble double-speak,” the jargon spoken by Braaten and Jenson, was very rare in the sermons I gathered from local churches. (An example of theobabble doublespeak is this quotation from another sermon. “The either/or of the existential situation provides a plethora of alternatives, both specific and non-specific, when one grasps the eschatological aspect of incarnational christology.” Suspected translation: The meaning of Jesus’ resurrection is hard to explain.) 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 in one of the sermons delivered in the Milwaukee area. 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 the headship of man, confusion concerning the means of grace, denial of the biblical doctrine of fellowship, “accepting Jesus as Lord,” and praising doubt as a virtue. Doctrinal “sins of omission” were more frequent. None of the 27 sermons contained an explicit, clear presentation of an objective atonement or objective justification.

Most of the sermons were moralizing. They called for greater sanctification in some specific area of life, but they provided little or no gospel motivation for the change they called for. In ELCA, sermons of the “Go ye into all the world and smile” genre are fairly common, but so are “prophetic messages” which sharply admonish the hearers to change their ways. There are often 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” which talked about the miracles of memory, water, bread, and our lives, but not about the miracle of the incarnation. “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 which 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." Those who don't doubt are identified with the likes of Jim Jones, Rev. Moon, gurus, Stalin, Hitler, the Ayatollah, terrorists, and the Posse Comitatus.

In ELCA preaching there is somewhat of a preoccupation with dealing with doubt.

\* An Ascension Day service which seems to be based on a real ascension, but which undercuts the objective revelation of Scripture. "The Gospel is a rock, the foundation of our faith, but it is not static. It is continually made new by the power of the Holy Spirit... which as Jesus himself said... is as unpredictable as the wind, blowing where it will."

\* Moralizing sermons against a promiscuous life style, against materialism, against prejudice and labeling people, against anger, and against alcohol abuse. A sermon which began with a pretty good presentation on the blessings of the sacraments, but which jumped to the pastor's personal example of tithing as an admonition to the congregation to do likewise.

\* A pro-life sermon based on the sanctity of all life.

\* Jesus at Nain as a model for compassion and doing good.

\* On the 10 Lepers. "Our Duty to Thank God." "Only when you return to thank God does the good news become good news. All God wants us to do is be happy and say thank you."

\* A Michaelmas sermon on Revelation 12 which often mentioned God's victory over "evil," but never mentioned Satan. A sermon on Jesus' temptation by a different pastor affirmed the personality of Satan.

\* On Mt. 15:21-28: "Who are the Dogs?" taking off on the word "dogs" in the story of the Canaanite woman.

"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 xxxxx Church is unique in its relationship to yyyyy 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 that 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 usually 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.

\* Psalm 51 and Luke 15. "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 atonement? Isn't this the very "cheap grace" ELCA claims to fear.

### **Meditations**

I also examined two quarters of *Christ in Our Home*, Augsburg's family devotional booklet. I also noted with interest that two local congregation's offered Missouri's *Portals of Prayer* as a substitute or alternative to their own devotional book. 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 Schweizer, 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 best gospel in 27 sermons and 180 devotions. Several other good statements occurred in the month’s devotions authored by this pastor. However, he could also write that the fulness 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.

\* Prayer in the back cover: O Lord, we cry to you for mercy. Through Jesus’ death and resurrection assure us that our sins have been forgiven and forgotten. Help us to be free to obey you by choice because our guilt is overcome by your love.

\* Faithful prophets are never popular. ... Who today wants to hear the prophets who point out our pollution of the earth, our gluttonous life-styles, our carelessness for the world’s poor, our idolatry of national defense?

\* ”Doubt and belief are two sides of one coin called faith.”

\* Paul, Luther and Martin Luther King as examples of fighting the good fight.

ELCA preaching is not totally devoid 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 atonement. 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 verdict, but based on the fairly large sample of ELCA preaching I saw, I must conclude that ELCA preaching is strongly legalistic. The single most disappointing thing is the lack of objective justification.

### **The Sacraments**

The rite of baptism which I observed was generally sound. The only real reservation I had was “renouncing the forces of evil, the devil and his empty promises.” In light of other ELCA statements I wondered if the words “forces of evil” were intended to allow interpreting “the devil” in a non-personal way. There was a lot of congregational involvement in the baptismal rite (including applause to welcome the new member). In general the ELCA treatment of baptism tends to put more emphasis on being marked as God’s child and on receiving power for a new life than on the forgiveness of sins.

Although ELCA does not have altar and pulpit fellowship with all churches, 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 local congregation has 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 congregation in the area:

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? No wonder intercommunion with the Reformed is near.

In the one celebration of the Lord’s Supper which I observed special loaves of bread and individual glasses were used for the distribution. The loaf and the cup were elevated during the consecration. Communicants came forward and kneeled to receive the elements from the pastors and lay assistants. Non-communicants came forward to receive a blessing.

### Conclusion

The picture of ELCA’s doctrinal position which we have seen in our five sessions is not a happy one. We have seen that the leading theologians have not only abandoned confessional Lutheranism. They attack and undermine even the most basic teachings of Christianity. Although there is lipservice to Scripture and the Confessions, the doctrines which they confess are not maintained in ELCA. In the regular services and instructions 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 remnant in ELCA, and that some will be awakened to come out of her. Let us redouble our efforts to sound a clear call to authentic Lutheranism at a time when its testimony has almost been silenced, even within the Lutheran church.

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