Ecumenical Vision and Evangelical Imagination*
LEE E. SNOOK
Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

The center of our conversation is the proposed document entitled “Ecumenism: The Vision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.” Can we really call this document the “vision”? A vision should be able to capture the interest, the support, the imagination of the whole people of God, the ordinary folk who are one with us in the church. For starters, I count myself among the ordinary folk who will certainly find this so-called vision to be appallingly boring, to be distressingly churchy, and to be so full of language suitable only for legal documents that they will be excluded from the conversation. It is clear that very intelligent and knowledgeable people have written this document, and it is generously sprinkled with biblical texts and historical references. The average person who does not have a legal mind and has no taste for the jargon of lawyers will, in fact, be utterly excluded from the conversation about the unity of the very church they love. Now surely that is not the intention of those who have worked so carefully on this document, but that would be the predictable result. We would not have a vision, but only one version of ecumenism, which would be interesting to no one except the privileged ones whose ecclesiastical legalese excludes me from the conversation.

I. TOWARD A MORE INCLUSIVE VISION

The first thing that might help us would be to put the whole conversation on a more imaginative level—not a lower level, but a broader level; not a simpler level, but a more accessible level where there can be genuine conversation about what it means to be one in Christ.

When I realized that I was being excluded, I found my study of this document drawing me into an uncomfortable exercise in self-examination. This vision, I discovered, is not broad enough to include all those teachers and pastors whose

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proclamation of the gospel and sharing of the sacraments have nurtured me in faith for sixty years. Those six decades began in Pennsylvania and ended in Africa. I was first nurtured in the pietist and ecumenical tradition of Samuel Simon Schmucker who, when no one else even bothered, defended the Lutheran confessions against the dominance of Protestant rationalism in the eastern United States; Schmucker for too long has been ridiculed by latter day confessionalists who simply ignored the challenge of Enlightenment rationalism. I am a son of Schmucker, even if I have moved far from his theology. I even have an equally ridiculous
sounding name. So I have a promise to keep, not to Schmucker’s theology perhaps but to his abiding concern that the Lutheran churches in America be American and that they be ecumenical. At the core, that means we cannot indulge ourselves in contempt for and avoidance of the emerging pluralism on this continent.

My second promise is to our African sisters and brothers in Christ, especially those whom we came to know and love in Zimbabwe. My promise to them is that the church in Africa be allowed to be African, that it be liberated from all the trappings of Constantinian Christianity with its ecclesiastical imitations of the imperial courts of medieval Rome. We Europeans and Americans have for too long been stifling the spirit-filled Christian movements of Africa with the suffocating structures of Rome, of Canterbury, of Uppsala, of Strasbourg and Geneva. If some of our nostalgic versions of unity continue to be exported to Africa, we will virtually guarantee that the established churches in Africa will be as near death as the mainline Lutheran, Catholic, and Calvinist churches in many sectors in America.

If you have been in Africa you will know that the Spirit of God dances all across the sub-Saharan continent; the Spirit waits only for the message of the gospel to be sung in the languages of Africa and to the cadence of the African drum.

African Christians do not need our structures, but we need church structures which will allow us to hear the gospel and to catch the Spirit rising in Africa, in China, in Eastern Europe and south of the Rio Grande, and among our brothers and sisters in store front churches in south Chicago and pentecostal churches across the dusty plains of South Dakota. Without a structure able to detect the gospel charged full by the Spirit rising in America, the ELCA will wither and die, and the gospel will find other means by which to do its work in our pluralistic culture.

We Lutherans are no longer barely literate immigrants. We are proud of our erudition in Scripture, proud of our mastery of true doctrine, proud of our properly trained historical consciousness and our philosophical sophistication. We can hold our own with the brightest and the best of them and we will never relax our often contentious quest for intellectual excellence and our zeal for the right interpretation of our tradition. But now that we have silenced the fundamentalists among us, made Schmucker’s pietism and ecumenism laughable, poked fun at Baptists, belittled Hauge, condemned the Papists, apologized for our liturgical enthusiasts on the one hand and our odd-ball social activists or spiritual directors on the other hand—now that we have made all those points at someone else’s expense, showing everyone just how muscular and smart we are, where are we going to live?

We have moved up in the world and we have left behind us our simple immigrant, peasant, and working class churches. What really have we gained by all our ecclesiastical erudition and academic excellence if we no longer have a home where we can forget our differences and lose ourselves in singing the Lord’s song in this new and puzzling land? What house can we now live in, having moved up in the world, ignorant about or embarrassed by our origins. Where are we going to live now?

II. A CALL FOR EVANGELICAL IMAGINATION

I have a modest proposal. I propose an alternative to the document before us: a new way of thinking about that haunting, urgent ecumenical question-how to design a new way of thinking
about one house of faith. The term ecumenical comes from oikos, as in economics, ecology, ecosystem—as in household, living together, organizing our life together. Now that we have all the ecclesiastical erudition and cleverness and competitiveness necessary—and such achievements are necessary—can we not agree that such are not sufficient? We could read the Bible and history and theology all the day long, and we could pray every day, and still be lacking the one thing which I am making as my proposal. It is what I will call evangelical imagination. We will never be able to think about the kind of house which all Christians have a right to live in if we do not have evangelical imagination. Now that we have destroyed or have become too embarrassed to live any longer in our little houses of origin, we are beginning to feel as if we are standing out in the cold with nothing to shelter us but our erudition—which is something, but not everything. At a time like this we should be listening to all those with such evangelical imagination. Instead, it is almost as if ecclesiastical lawyers are asking us to move back into those structures which once upon a time sheltered the household of faith—in the pre-modern, pre-Enlightenment, pre-Reformation, pre-Renaissance days that used to be.

The document before us invites us to admire whatever structures conserved the apostolic faith from the beginning. Of course, we must be conservative about such matters lest we be faithless and ungrateful. But conservatism about our history is, however necessary, simply not enough. The apostolic testimony also requires an evangelical imagination, a willingness to take risks for the sake of living as one household of faith in the world as it is and not the world as it used to be.

Now what kind of house can we imagine? What kind of house would serve the gospel today as well as the old structures have served the faith in the past? We are calling for an evangelical imagination: How can our imaginations be captured by the evangelical mission of the church? Our focus will be on the world and not on the church, because the gospel has always been for the world and is so today in the late 20th and into the 21st century.

First of all we have to learn to read the Scriptures differently. We do not have different Scriptures—of course!—but we do have a different world. Can we learn to read the Scriptures with an evangelical imagination fit for this world, without forsaking our exegetical and ecclesiastical erudition? Have you noticed? Those Christians whom we call evangelicals have caught up on how to be exegetically erudite, but they are often more imaginative than the rest of us. Not always, but often, and they surely take the Scriptures seriously, so what is to stop us from joining them in the task of ecumenical house-building? So what if some of our sisters and brothers have learned to talk funny—decision theology, sanctification, spirituality, religious experience, and all such?

Can we have an evangelical imagination big enough to construct a new way of living together? Can we learn to think about the Christian household in a more imaginative way?

An evangelical imagination requires only the Scriptures and the world to get it all fired up. If the Scriptures do not excite our imagination, we must be half-dead. And if the world does not provoke our imaginations, then we are totally dead. But if you love the Scriptures, then you cannot hate the world—unless you are ignoring whole portions of the Bible. And when the world, in all its wonder and terror, its beauty and its danger, stabs your imagination into painful
awareness, you cannot rest until the Scriptures grab you again, nag at you, and drive you to God.

There are no Christians anywhere in the world who do not have the Scriptures, if only in their memory. All Christians have the Scriptures and the world or they would not be Christians. And wherever Christians gather to pray, they need nothing more than the Scriptures and the world to have their imaginations captured and set on fire by the epic narrative of God’s love for this world. The dramatic saga of Christians in China during the Cultural Revolution is sufficient proof of that. If we have the Scriptures and the world, what more do we need except an evangelical imagination to construct a house big enough for us to live together, correct one another, and—with all our differences—work together for the sake of the gospel mission?

And if we as Lutherans believe, as I do, that the ultimate rule for interpreting the Scriptures in this world is justification, then let that belief emerge as true in conversation with all others who accept the Scriptures, and let us not insist that our central belief be a condition for us to join others in our common devotion to the Scriptures and to the world.

III. LEARNING FROM THE PARABLES

In the time left to me, I want to give two illustrations of how we might approach Scripture with an evangelical imagination for this world and not for the world as it used to be.

First of all, in our ecumenical conversations, why do we not make more use of the parables of the kingdom? After all, there are few portions of Scripture that are so well known to ordinary people, more egalitarian, accessible, memorable, all-embracing of life, and common to everyone’s experience than the parables; at the same time there are few scriptural texts which invite us so openly to move beyond exegetical erudition to evangelical imagination. We might even say that Jesus is giving us his permission and his example so that we might be more imaginative about God’s way of living in the world, God’s way of being in the world, God’s way of ruling and ordering the world. It is as though Jesus says to us again and again: “Just imagine: God’s way of ruling the world is like a man with two sons, a householder who planted a vineyard, a woman searching for a lost coin, a ruler who gave a party, a tiny mustard seed. Just imagine!” Jesus invites us again and again to imagine differently God’s way of being in the world. It was the ecclesiastical lawyers who failed to get the point—and when they did they plotted against him, not because they feared God but because they feared the common people.

1. A Tree with Many Branches

What strikes me about proposals for Christian unity is that, no matter how exegetically erudite they may be, they lack evangelical imagination for reading the Scriptures. Typically, such proposals pick out and favor words that speak of unity, God’s unity, the prayer of Jesus for unity, and the like. But try to imagine unity differently, as with the unity of the parabolic mustard seed that explodes into all kinds of branches. How very interesting. One bush, like a tree, can have many branches and still have its unity as it expands into a surprising and exponentially opening variety of branches. Too many proposals for unity simply fail to imagine that the multiplication of branches can be an expression of unity; they almost try to stuff all the branches back into an imaginary earlier stage with only one stem. It might make sense to prune a tree of its unhealthy branches, but could a mustard bush or a spreading oak tree live if all the
branches were reduced to one stem?

Or some proposals for Christian unity read church history as if the Reformation period were a temporary, although of course necessary, repair job to get the hierarchy back into line; such proposals then go on to speak of ecumenism as re-establishing communion which “has suffered many breaks.” Now I speak as a fool, which is to say as an ignorant systematic theologian without a shred of talent for legal thought or ecumenical dialogue, but to see the Reformation as only a temporary break is a failure of imagination; it is a reluctance to see the Reformation for what it was: an explosion which required nothing more to set it off than to let the Scriptures have their way with a monk and then to explode among the ordinary people in the world. Any structure will do as an instrument for such an explosion so long as it allows the gospel to be preached and the sacraments to work their wonderful way. Why should we be so afraid to let the Reformation happen again and again? Let it happen, and then enjoy the fireworks. The Reformation set all sorts of things in motion; if we Christians have trouble with them, we should exercise our imaginations and see them as an opportunity and not just intrusions upon our Germanic need for tidy order. If we read history with evangelical imagination and not ecclesiastical anxiety, perhaps we could again be amazed. Just imagine! The gospel was set free to explode in the 16th century and was a catalyst for the Enlightenment, for secularizing politics, for freeing education from clericalism, for liberating scientific discovery from church inquisitors, altering consciousness, establishing religious freedom and diversity. Just imagine!

Once you can imagine the explosion set off by the gospel in the 16th century, how can you ever go back to thinking of unity as a return or as a repair job? Do you look at a tree and say, look how it is all broken up into all those different and separate branches? Any poet or artist would probably just say: “Wow, how do you suppose God did that? Isn’t it wonderful?” Can you imagine, would you even want to live in, another world than this one with all its risks, its perils, its pluralism, its diversity, and surprising twists and turns? Would you want to live in any other world than this one—a world which the Scriptures have fired our imaginations to see differently, to see as very much alive with the glory of God right down to the tiniest puff of existence? The world is already alive with the Spirit of God, and it waits only for us; it waits only for us to give a name to that power made manifest on the cross of Christ. Should we be afraid in this world? Of course. But is it not exciting? And if God loves this world, why can’t we find a way to live together in this world, a way that includes all the branches?

For God’s sake, can’t we imagine ourselves free to love the world as much as we love the church? Imagine that. For God’s sake! Do not ever trust the world, or the church, as if either one of them were God. But can we not imagine Christian unity that invites us all to love the world for Christ’s sake?

Can you imagine an ecumenical document that does not, as the parables of Jesus certainly do, appeal to a different way of imagining God’s way, God’s rule, God’s being in the world?

2. A House with Many Mansions

The proposed document for conversation makes much use of John’s gospel and the references there to unity, one-ness. All very important and fitting, of course. But let’s consider that the term ecumenical really might have something to do with imagining one house. Does that
not seem right, to imagine our one-ness as a way of living together in one house? John’s gospel gives us one of the most well-known passages about “house”: “In my Father’s house are many rooms, if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?” (14:2).

What does that translation do to your imagining a house? It’s not a very attractive image unless you like dormitories or rooming houses and eating your meals in one hall at one table. The King James Version is more imaginative: “In my Father’s house are many mansions.”

We live in a condominium apartment. A lady from Japan came to visit us; she had learned her English from a British dictionary. “Ah so! You live in a mansion.” Correct. In some parts of the English speaking world, a large apartment complex is called a house, and it is divided into a whole variety of mansions. There is not one person to a room, with all residents obliged to eat together at one table; rather there are many mansions, each with its own decor, its own population, customs, and languages—some might even have a professional staff who dress in period costumes while they wait at table. Some mansions might be quite small, others huge and luxurious. In our Father’s house are many mansions; some may be older than others with long traditions, but the residents of the mansions all live in one house. They do not eat in the same dining room, they do not organize their lives in the same way. But living in the same house means that they have to learn how to live together in one house, even though each mansion is quite different.

An evangelical imagination can see that this house is one, without being a rooming house with only one dining hall or a single room where all conversation is presided over by one Papa. This kind of house, I know very directly, needs some kind of owners’ or tenants’ association which can make decisions and hire and fire the janitor. But residents in our Father’s house should never be asked to move into one mansion or insist that all the mansions should be decorated or organized the same way. Can you imagine how boring and tyrannical and unscriptural that would be? Our Father’s house is not a boarding school for adolescents. But it does need house managers who serve the will of all who live in the one house. Someone has to ease communication, arrange occasions of hospitality, arbitrate disputes, keep the hallways clear of congestion, call meetings for the house. All of these serve the unity of the house; they do not create the unity which is assumed by those who live in it. The residents of anyone mansion cannot run the whole house, but each can contribute to the welfare of all who live in our Father’s one house. Nor should we make fun of the furniture in other mansions or tell anyone how to eat, when to eat, or how to do their work throughout the many places of their witness in the world.

My modest alternative for imagining unity has been inspired, at least in part, by the Augsburg Confession, Article VII: “for the true unity of the church, it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments.”

The unity of our Father’s house does not mean that we all have to move into the same mansion or organize our affairs in the same way. The house is one, yet it is also broken up into many mansions. More are being added all the time; some are being redecorated, and others are being merged into one super-condo. The many are in one house and are all nurtured by one gospel; the same Lord is present in every mansion and all work in the world for the sake of that gospel. The breaking up into many and diverse mansions is no more to be regretted than the beautifully opening branches of a tree. But living in one house does require people with certain
abilities to help the many in the house to engage in mission. One could think of, or imagine, ecumenical officers as servants, like building managers or community organizers who help neighbors or regions or clusters of cities to live and work together peacefully and productively.

To be an ecumenical servant must surely be demanding. It is a servanthood requiring people who know how to draw upon the best sources of knowledge in Scripture, history, doctrine, diverse cultures, and missiology, just for starters. But in a national church such as ours there is a great store of knowledge to be shared and brought to bear on the nature of our unity in Christ. All of us here are eager to participate in that effort. We also are servants who want to join in the work of ecumenicity. But we are at a stage when we also need evangelical imagination so that the evangel, the good news, can be communicated in all the world. We need to think more imaginatively about our Father’s one household of faith.

We should pray for ecumenical, evangelical imagination so that we can see the gospel as a potential for explosions into new unexpected forms of Christian community. The gospel message is not a sealed letter or a family heirloom to be carefully handed over by estate lawyers, but it is like the seeds of a spreading tree which are scattered. Carried by the winds of the Spirit, they take root in unpredictable places and explode into new growth which we hadn’t planned for.

Can we now imagine the household of faith as one house with many new and strange mansions? Can we resist nostalgic dreams of going back to a unity which reflected more the unitary, compulsory ancient pax romana than the exponential pluralism which is Christianity in the world today? The many who live in our Father’s house have too much work to do in the world to be bothered about how to turn the house with many mansions into a rooming house with only one dining hall.

It should be clear that this modest proposal for conversation is not in any way a suggestion for remodeling the interior of our Lutheran mansion. I leave that to Lutheran interior decorators. Rather, it is a suggestion for imagining what it means to live in the house which includes many other mansions of wondrous variety.

My proposal insists only on one thing: we are living in the midst of a new Reformation; the gospel is exploding all over the world. We Lutherans can take very little credit for that, but should we not recognize those Christian communities which have sprung up in our world? Let us begin right now to imagine how all of us reside with them in the one household of God with many mansions.