



The ELCA: Faith and Order

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I shall gratefully serve in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America as it realizes its holy calling to become an authentic expression of evangelical catholic Christianity. What we now have to do is to practice in depth what we officially preach. The ELCA should be a church body that is intentionally committed to realize the powerful potential that resides in its Constitution.

The Confession of Faith firmly professes evangelical catholicity in its confession of the triune God, the lordship of Jesus Christ, and the gospel as the power of God unto salvation. There is also a full affirmation of the Word of God (incarnate, proclaimed, written, inspired), and an unequivocal commitment to the normative authority of the Bible, the Creeds, and the Lutheran Confessions. Indeed, the Unaltered Augsburg Confession is intentionally distinguished from the other confessional writings of the Book of Concord, both as a true witness of the gospel and as a catholic basis for uniting with other like-minded churches.

The chapter on the Nature of the Church explicitly endorses an ecclesiology that is both evangelical (“All power in the Church belongs to our Lord Jesus Christ”) and catholic (“Congregations find their fulfillment in the universal community of the Church....In length, [the ELCA] acknowledges itself to be in the historic continuity of the communion of saints”).

In the Statement of Purpose, this church pledges itself to “call forth, equip, certify, set apart, supervise, and support an ordained ministry of Word and sacrament and such other forms of ministry that will enable this church to fulfill its mission.” Moreover, while retroactively respecting the official status granted church workers in its predecessor bodies, the ELCA will permit no new persons to be ordained except those who will serve in the office of Word and sacrament (10.11.87A).

The Principles of Organization clearly repudiate any sectarian claims of “congregational autonomy.” Interdependent partnership among all expressions of this one church is the consistent norm in polity. It affirms “The congregations, synods, and churchwide organization of this church are interdependent partners sharing responsibility in God’s mission.” Likewise, this church is no mere confederation of self-determining, voluntary societies. “Each congregation and synod in its governing documents shall include the Confession of Faith and Statement of Purpose and such structural components as are required in this constitution.”

The remedial attempts to reform and serve the church catholic beyond predominantly Teutonic and Nordic constituencies really find their basic inspiration and goal in the multicultural vision of Pentecost that patently transcends our traditional Lutheran ethnic homogeneity. Christians

are free to structure the institutional church in ways that most lucidly witness to its unity and continuity throughout the ages, and that most effectively enable the celebration of the means of grace and the service of the universal priesthood of the baptized. On either side of the current debate over goals and quotas, we dare not confuse the sociological inclusivity of the ELCA under the law with the inseparable eschatological catholicity of the *una sancta* under the gospel.

The institutional church, as such, is an “external, secular reality” (Luther) that is properly analyzed in the Large Catechism under the Fourth Commandment of the Second Table of the Law. Hence, all the ELCA predecessor bodies had already employed reasonable quotas for calculating clergy-lay representation in their legislative and administrative bodies. The ELCA simply refined the lay classifications further in order to promote more institutional justice for female Christians and for persons of color and/or persons whose primary language is other than English. We have this heavenly treasure in, with, and under an all-too-human earthen vessel.

In addition, the ELCA is also corporately committed to explore fresh ecclesial ground together. We shall do so in light of both our varied Lutheran historical traditions and the emerging ecumenical convergence of the threefold ministerial office (singular!) of bishop, pastor, and deacon (Faith and Order, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*). Our officially endorsed, churchwide study on the nature of ministry (1988-1994) is clearly among the most promising features of the ELCA in its formative years. It is difficult to overestimate its potential significance for us, both evangelically and ecumenically.

The painful fact is that Lutherans have suffered from a ministerial ambivalence ever since the Reformation. The Augsburg Confession’s article on The Office of the Ministry (V) does not mention ordained ministers, and its relation to the articles on The Church (VII), Order in the Church (XIV), and The Power of Bishops (XXVIII) has been the subject of heated intra-Lutheran debate ever since. Indeed, most other Christians have also not been able to reconcile their own formidable differences on this most vexing of ecumenical issues that still divide the church. None of our Lutheran doctrinal convergences with other churches, however, will result in more visible church unity unless they can be institutionally implemented through the mutual recognition of valid ministers and ministries among us.

Confessional Lutherans have always affirmed that there is no divinely ordained church structure. We dare not compromise that biblical witness. However, what we are now also called to advocate, as responsible evangelical catholics, are those confessionally permissible ways in which the divinely instituted office of ministry can best be structured for maximizing both church mission and church unity in our day.

The ELCA has preserved the apostolic Word and sacraments in its formation. It is also committed to overcoming vexing challenges in church order. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, it is therefore in a much stronger position to speak God’s truth in love to a divided church in a divided world.

The ELCA: Called, Empowered, and Sent

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There is profound gratitude and joy in seeing the birth of the ELCA as one more sign that

“the Gospel” is indeed “the power of God to create and sustain the Church for God’s mission in the world” and that “the Church is a people created by God in Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit” (Constitution of the ELCA, 2.07; 4.01). At the same time, one cannot ignore how seductive such accomplishments can be. For example, the heavy emphasis on “structuring” this new church could easily lead to the delusion that this is our source of power and hope.

Our documents recognize where the power really is, making strong statements on the power of the gospel, the centrality of the Word, and the authority of Scripture. But it is time to move beyond statements and get about the task of centering ourselves in the proclamation of the Word, the study of Scripture, and the celebration of the sacraments so that the Word shapes every facet of our life and mission. Finally the central issue is not how we *define* Scripture but the extent to which we *are addressed* by God’s Word. The faithfulness and effectiveness of this church will be determined more than anything else by the degree to which every congregation and other ministry is so engaged in the study, proclamation, and sharing of God’s Word that every decision, program, policy, and activity is clearly informed and shaped by a biblical, evangelical vision.

The proposed six year study of ministry may not resolve all the theological issues related to a Lutheran understanding of the office of ministry, but it should help us recapture a clearer focus of the teaching function of that office. If synodical bishops take seriously the renewed focus on their task to “preach, teach, and administer the sacraments” (9.31.a.2), they might be able to become better models of evangelical ministry and avoid the bureaucratic trap represented by the list of other tasks associated with that office. The growing partnership emerging between seminaries and the various units of our church and the call for regular theological convocations involving the “teachers of the church” are signs that we want Scripture and theology to inform and shape our decisions, policies, and programs at all levels.

If the six year study of ministry is to serve us, it must also deal with the ministry of the whole people of God. This would take seriously one of the broader implications of defining membership in terms of the baptized. This emphasis could represent one of the most vital cutting edges of our new church if

we take it seriously. We have expended far more effort toward involving laity in the structure of this church than we have in assisting them to fulfill their baptismal calling in daily life. Such efforts fall short of the broader implications of our theology of vocation. In fact they can easily disintegrate into just one more power struggle over who really runs the church, rather than foster a mutual recognition that we are called to be servants together of the gospel—which represents our real power. We seem to be making progress at involving people of color, etc., in our structures; and that is important. But it is also relatively safe, for their percentages are low. The crucial questions before us include: Will we also be willing to share mission resources in equal proportion to the seats they have on our boards and commissions? Will we be willing to become involved in mission with such persons within their life contexts? Will we allow ourselves to be enriched by the faith and cultural traditions these people bring? Will we trust our theology enough to be in dialogue with them so that our theological perspectives are deepened and broadened?

Our new-found unity will also force a re-definition of our ecumenical role. We must

avoid the danger of becoming so preoccupied with what it means to be a “successful mainline denomination” that we lose sight of our traditional self-understanding as a “confessional movement” within the church catholic. We have a rich faith heritage to share, particularly our understanding of the gospel in terms of “justification by grace for Christ’s sake through faith alone” (4.02.a). There is an enormous need for that witness. I would hope that our study of ministry would not be carried out for the purpose of accommodating ourselves to the ecumenical debate on that subject. Rather, it should sharpen our witness within that debate so that we could make an authentically Lutheran contribution which would enrich our brothers and sisters within the church catholic.

The issue of membership in the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches presents us with important decisions early on. It would be tragic if these decisions would so divide us that we would become diverted from the more basic and potentially productive ecumenical challenge of local dialogue and partnership. We are at that stage where the various agreements and proposals can provide dynamic opportunity for local involvement and partnership.

There are many other areas that could be explored. Hopefully these few reflections are faithful to what it means to be truly evangelical—i.e., shaped by the gospel, and bearing witness to that gospel in all that one is and does.