•Are There Theological Differences

Between The Lutheran Church‑Missouri Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on the Sacrament of Holy Communion?

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When the Topeka‑Lawrence, Kansas circuit program committee asked me in 1998 to present a paper on the *theological* differences between The Lutheran Church‑Missouri Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America regarding the Sacrament of Holy Communion (*excluding* communion fellowship and open/closed communion issues; those matters were covered by others), my initial reaction was: That's an odd topic. There *aren't* any such differences, are there? For, although we admittedly have disagreements in many areas, don't we at least still agree on the basic doctrine of the Sacrament *per se*? However, a little research revealed that is in fact not the case.

In order to be fair, I decided to focus not on what others say about the ELCA, and its position in this matter (i.e., Christian News, What's Going On Among the Lutherans, etc.), but rather to examine what the ELCA *itself says*, in its own publications, official statements, and writings of its clergy.

I. Undermining the Foundation

The primary locus for a discussion of the doctrinal position of the ELCA is the *magnum opus* Christian Dogmatics. This work, by various contributors and edited by two of the ELCA's leading theologians, is "a standard text in Lutheran seminaries,"1 the primary text used for dogmatic instruction in the ELCA. For nearly 15 years this text's role in the formation of ELCA pastors' doctrinal understanding has been akin to that in the LC‑MS of our own similarly‑titled Christian Dogmatics, by Francis Pieper. Furthermore, because it was published just as the ELCA was being formed, blending divergent viewpoints on some issues, as well as nearly a dozen seminaries and their respective faculties, traditions and curricula, it may have had an even greater formative influence.

The section on the Sacraments in Christian Dogmatics2 was written by one of the editors himself, a leading theologian of the ELCA, Robert W. Jenson. It is a condensation of an earlier, book‑length treatment by Jenson that established him as the ELCA's leading voice on the Sacraments. The startling and disturbing reality we encounter in these pages is just how seriously the historical‑critical method has undermined the faith in such a fundamental area for the life of the Church as the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. As explained in a discussion of what is to be considered a "sacrament":

. . . it was until recently supposed that where "sacrament" is used . . . the mandator must be Christ, that it is, it must be his direct authority . . . Since the emergence of historical‑critical biblical exegesis, it has been impossible to maintain this traditional criterion. Given the state of the texts, we cannot be certain that Jesus mandated any continuing rites for his followers. However the particular scholarly questions are regarded, dominical institution cannot be used dogmatically as it used to be, even for baptism and the Supper . . .

**We have therefore avoided the notion of dominical institution in the preceding discussion, substituting that of canonical institution.4**

That last sentence is the crucial key to understanding the entire locus on the Sacraments in Christian Dogmatics: *canonical* as opposed to *dominical*5 institution. Whereas Lutherans have always stressed Christ's institution of the Sacraments, Christian Dogmatics will only say that Holy Baptism and Holy Communion are "canonically commanded."6 This phrase, which is repeatedly employed, appears at first to be innocuous. However, it quickly becomes apparent that what is meant by this phrase is that whether or not Jesus actually spoke the words of institution is a moot question. The tradition of the Church has placed these words into the mouth of Jesus, and it is for *that* reason that these words are to be received as authoritative:

However the institution narratives may have come into being, and whatever relation to the events of Jesus' Last Supper they may have, it is as rubrics and interpretation of the church’s Supper that we have them. *Within* the narrative structure of the accounts, it is decisive for the meaning of the sayings that they appear in the mouth of Jesus.7

It is not the command of Christ that is authoritative, but the command of the Church. We heed these words and celebrate these Sacraments not because Christ actually so commanded, but because the Church contrived to place these words into the mouth of Christ and included them in the canon: *canonically commanded.*

This represents the relatively new school of Biblical criticism known as "canonical criticism",8 which was introduced and popularized by James Sanders and Brevard Childs, particularly in influential books published by the ELCA's Fortress Press. Canonical criticism has enjoyed wide currency in the ELCA. Unlike traditional methods of historical criticism, the stress in canonical criticism is not on dissecting a text's origins but simply receiving the text it as it now stands, with "a concern for the theological significance of the Biblical texts, and a concern for the function of the Biblical texts within the community of faith which preserved and treasured them."9

The problem with canonical criticism is that it places the source of the text's authority not in the Lord who inspired it, but in the Church which included it in the canon. Canonical criticism maintains that the canonical Scriptures are authoritative because they are included in the canon. The Church has always said the exact opposite: The canonical Scriptures are included in the canon because they are authoritative.

One could compare it this way:

* Fundamentalism: I believe Jesus is my Savior because the Scriptures are inspired and they say He is.
* Lutheran: I believe the Scriptures are inspired because Jesus is my Savior and He says they are.
* Canonical Criticism: I believe Jesus is my Savior because the inspired Christian community accepted into the canon the Scriptures which say He is.

So, instead of basing faith upon the authority of an inspired Scripture, as in Fundamentalism, canonical criticism ultimately bases it upon the authority of an inspired Christian community. Lutheranism, on the other hand, *always puts faith in Christ first*. Christ *first* brings us to faith in him, and then he *secondarily* brings us to an understanding and acceptance of the inspiration of Scripture. That is also how the canon was formed in the early Christian community. It is not that the inspired Christian community gave authority to the canonical Scriptures by their inclusion of them in the canon, but rather that the canonical Scriptures asserted in the hearts of the faithful their Lord's authority.

Since "we cannot be certain that Jesus mandated any continuing rites for his followers,"10 the words of institution, for both Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, are to be interpreted as a retrojection into the Scriptures of the Church's later ritual development:

Critical study of the nature of the texts tends to confirm that the texts should be taken first as rubrics for and interpretation of what *we* are to do, not as accounts of what Jesus and the disciples did.11

. . . our concern is primarily not with what these sentences might have meant as utterances of the historical Jesus, but with what they mean as interpretations, canonically authoritative, of the church's rite . . . However the institution narratives may have come into being, and whatever relation to the events of Jesus’ Last Supper they may have, it is as rubrics and interpretation of the church's Supper that we have them.12

In his more extensive treatment, Jenson expounds at length that the Scriptural accounts of the Last Supper are but a retrojection of the Church's later ritual creation.13 Whatever actual historical basis there may have been for the Church’s creation of this ritual, the reports we have of its institution are but a pastiche of the early church, fabricated through conflation of many events:

The origin of the Supper was probably not one event but several. First was Jesus' meal‑fellowship with his closest followers. This fellowship was the visibility of Jesus’ message: It was open to the final fellowship of the kingdom (Luke 12:8) and offensively included "publicans and sinners” (Mark 2:15 par.; Matthew 11:19 par.; Luke 15:1). The fellowship, apparently terminated by the crucifixion, was necessarily reinitiated by the resurrection (Luke 24:15‑35).

Then there was a special event of the fellowship "in the night in which he was betrayed." Little can be said about that night with any certainty. We do not know for sure whether it was a Passover meal, or how much of the institution narrative is an actual report of the events at that meal. What is certain is that the supper was indeed a *last* supper. It was therefore remembered as a farewell supper, as the disciples’ participation in the crucifixion. And when the meal‑fellowship was resumed, this memory interpreted the fellowship . . . One may say that the Supper as known by Paul and Synoptics was created by interpretation of the renewed meal‑fellowship by the theology of the cross.

Third was the series of resurrection appearances that were appearances *at* the meal‑fellowship.14

Because the Scriptural accounts are considered but retrojections of the Church's ritual creation, it is not surprising that the doctrinal understanding of the Lord's Supper in Christian Dogmatics is based largely upon extra‑biblical considerations, such as Jewish table‑fellowship traditions and writings of the early church. In the debate over Scripture and tradition, the conclusion in Christian Dogmatics is that Scripture is tradition, and therefore they are peers in determining the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. In contrast, The Book of Concord says: ". . . Christians are to be directed in the treatment of the Lord's Supper to this and only this one basis and foundation, namely, the words of institution of Christ's testament."15

Without guidance from the rudder of Scripture, Christian Dogmatics is doctrinally adrift, plunging dizzily from Lutheranism, to Roman Catholicism, to Eastern Orthodoxy, to the Reformed ‑‑ practically on the same page. Here is the real pastiche (spoof). Although a detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, the ELCA's doctrine of the Lord's Supper as represented by their standard seminary dogmatic textbook bears only a passing, vestigial resemblance to orthodox Lutheranism as found in Luther himself, the Lutheran Confessions, and Chemnitz and other classic Lutheran theologians.

II. Fellowship Implications

The ELCA's establishment of full communion with various Reformed bodies,16 and the imminent prospect of the same with the Episcopal Church17 and others,18, 19 has serious implications for their doctrinal position on the Sacrament of Holy Communion, as stated quite succinctly in an article in The Kansas City Star: ". . . Lutherans believe in the objective presence of Christ in the bread and wine of the sacrament, while Reformed Churches have emphasized the presence of Christ in the community . . . "20 The full texts of these agreements and many supporting documents are available on the ELCA’s Internet site at www.elca.org.

The obvious implication is stated by Werner Elert:

By his partaking of the Sacrament in a church a Christian declares that the confession of that church is his confession. Since a man cannot at the same time hold two differing confessions, he cannot communicate in two churches of differing confessions. If anyone does this nevertheless, he denies his own confession or has none at all.21

Less‑reported features of these full communion agreements also have profound implications: Clergy between the various bodies and the ELCA are fully interchangeable,22 with non‑Lutheran clergy who are serving Lutheran congregations exempted from subscription to any of the Lutheran Confessions; congregations of the different bodies may unite;23 ELCA pastoral candidates may prepare for the ministry at a seminary of another body ‑‑ without ever setting foot in a Lutheran seminary classroom! One wonders: What will Reformed pastors who serve ELCA congregations teach regarding the Sacrament? What will be the position of united Lutheran‑Reformed congregations?24,25Just how "Lutheran" on the Sacrament will pastors be who are educated entirely at Reformed seminaries? On this last issue, contrast the attitude of The Book of Concord:

We desire particularly that the young men who are being trained for service in the church and for the holy ministry be faithfully and diligently instructed therein [Scriptures, Creeds and the Augsburg Confession], so that the pure teaching and confession of the faith may be preserved and perpetuated among our posterity . . .26

An ELCA lay member raised these implications in a letter to The Lutheran, the ELCA's monthly magazine:

I was baptized into the ULCA, confirmed in the LCA, and I am now a member of the ELCA. After reading the proposals between the ELCA and Episcopalians, Reformed and Catholics, I fear I'll soon be a member of the UCLA ‑‑ Utterly Confused Lutherans in America. Little by little a new set of letters is becoming more appealing to me: LC‑MS. At least those folks can count on their next pastor being Lutheran!27

The ELCA's answer is given by another of its prominent theologians, Eric W. Gritsch:

When the gospel is proclaimed purely and the sacraments are administered rightly among Christians, unity is achieved. Unity is not uniformity in teaching, government, liturgy or any other human arrangement . . .28

Note that "teaching" is placed on a par with "government, liturgy." Doctrine is declared a mere "human arrangement," an adiaphoron. As Gritsch further expounds:

There has been an enduring debate among Lutherans regarding the meaning of "pure" and "right." Some have linked the meaning of these words with a thought structure or a dogmatic system . . . But the Lutheran Confessions do not view the communication of the gospel as the transmission of a systematic theology or of doctrines . . . the focus is on use or performance rather than on doctrinal understanding.

The points in negotiations for Christian unity is a belief that Christ alone saves from sin and death, and in the performance of sacraments rather than on doctrines about them.29

It is also significant that the ELCA constitution specifies a hierarchy of commitment to the Lutheran Confessions, and it is the Augsburg Confession alone which plays a role in ecumenical discussions: "The Augsburg Confession is accepted as a true witness to the Gospel and a basis for unity, while the other Lutheran Confessions are accepted as valid interpretations of the faith." 30Specifically with regard to Holy Communion, this means that the majestic Article VII of the Formula of Concord, with its quintessential Lutheran formulation concerning "The Holy Supper of Christ," plays no part whatsoever in achieving "full communion"!

III. Infant Communion

In all the frenzy over the Reformed and Episcopal proposals and the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* at recent ELCA church‑wide assemblies, an equally or even more theologically and historically significant departure from Lutheran doctrine was overlooked: *the adoption of infant communion*. "Infants and children may be communed for the first time during the service in which they are baptized . . ."31

This is not just a theoretical possibility, proposed for study. Infant communion is now the official position of the ELCA ‑‑ and was adopted by an overwhelming majority (857 to 44), with little dissension or even discussion.32 And even those congregations which do not implement infant communion are expected to provide it to infants from congregations which do.33

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, there are indeed substantial theological differences between The Lutheran Church‑Missouri Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America regarding the basic doctrine of the Sacrament of Holy Communion. The ELCA has relinquished many significant and fundamental aspects of the historic Lutheran position, seemingly for the sake of superficial success in ecumenical negotiations. This movement away from the historic Lutheran position has become much more radical and intense with the formation of the ELCA as compared to its predecessor bodies, so that those within the LC‑MS who were more familiar with the position of those bodies might not realize the current situation in the ELCA. This divergence will only grow more pronounced as the ELCA is transformed even further by full communion with the Reformed and other bodies. As ELCA Bishop George Anderson bluntly put it, "I can't remember the last time I heard someone talk about Lutheran unity having a future. The question really is, given the present direction of the ELCA and the LC‑MS, is talk of Lutheran unity as pointless as discussing unity in the former Yugoslavia?"34

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Endnotes:

1. Ted Peters, "*God Happens: The Timeliness of the Triune God*,"Christian Century, April 1, 1998, p. 342.

2. . Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, Christian Dogmatics(Philadephia: Fortress Press, 1984), Vol. II, pp. 291‑366.

3. Robert W. Jenson, Visible Words: The Interpretation and Practice of Christian Sacraments (Philadephia: Fortress Press, 1978).

4. Braaten and Jenson, op. cit., Vol.II, p. 294.

5. "Of or pertaining to the Lord (Jesus Christ)." Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "Dominical."

6. Braaten and Jenson, op. cit., Vol. II, pp. 3l5ff passim, 337ff passim.

7. Ibid., p. 347.

8. Richard N. Soulen, Handbook of Biblical Criticism, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), p. 37f.

9. Ibid.

10. Braaten and Jenson, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 294.

11. Jenson, op. cit., p. 81.

12. Braaten and Jenson, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 347.

13. Jenson, op. cit., pp. 62‑77

14. Braaten and Jenson, op. cit., Vol.II, p. 344f.

15. Theodore G. Tappert, et. al., trans. and eds., The Book of Concord, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p.10.

16. ELCA News Service, "*Lutherans Approve 'Full Communion' with Reformed Churches*," August 18, 1997.

17. ELCA News Service, "*ELCA Assembly Approves Full Communion with Episcopal Church*," August 19, 1999.

18. ELCA News Service, "*Lutherans, Orthodox Propose 'Mutual Confession*,"' January 10, 1997.

19. The*Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* is "the first step . . . to full communion" with the Roman Catholic Church. ELCA News Service, "*Lutherans, Roman Catholics Overcome Historic Condemnations*," November 4, 1999.

20. "*Evangelical Lutheran Church Accepts Unity Overture*,"The Kansas City Star, August 19, 1997, p. A‑1.

21. Werner Elert, Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries, trans. Norman E. Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), p. 182.

22. "Clergy in one church body may serve as pastor in a church of another church body." ELCA News Service, "Presbyteries Ratify Full Communion with Lutherans," March 11, 1998; ELCA News Service, "Policies Recommended for ELCA‑Reformed Sharing of Clergy," March 26, 1998.

23. ELCA News Service, "Lutherans Explore 'Ecumenical Shared Congregations,'" October 23, 1997; "New York Lutheran, Presbyterian Congregations Merge," The Lutheran, August, 1998.

24. "Two weeks ago, I attended the installation of a colleague who is now serving a Lutheran/Methodist parish. My bishop asked her if she would 'preach and teach in accordance with The Book of Concord.' The Methodist district superintendent asked her the same question but with regards The Book of Discipline. She said yes to both although I'm not sure that is possible." John Dornheim, electronic message on discussion group Liturgy‑L@neiu.edu, February 24, 1998.

25. "This unusual cross‑denominational merger . . . raises questions: Is the new parish Lutheran? Presbyterian? Neither? Both, the answer seems to be." "New York Lutheran, Presbyterian Congregations Merge," The Lutheran, August, 1998.

26. Tappert, op. cit., p. 12.

27. Priscilla Lamparter Landis [Harleysville, Pennsylvania], The Lutheran, January, 1997, p. 56.

28. Eric W. Gritsch, Fortress Introduction to Lutheranism(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 133.

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31. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament," 1996, sec. 37d.

32. ELCA News Service, "Lutheran Statement on Baptism and Holy Communion Passes Overwhelmingly," August 20, 1997.

33. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, op. cit., sec. 38d.

34. . ELCA News Service, "Anderson: ELCA and Missouri Synod Should Work Together," October23, 1997.