

Would Luther Approve of Lutherans Today?

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When most people think of Lutherans they think of long meetings, coffee, and potlucks. What they do not realize is that Lutherans have a very extensive set of confessions that are based on God's Word. These confessions were written by Luther and other prominent theologians that were part of the Reformation. They are the foundation of the Lutheran church, or at least they should be. The two largest Lutheran synods should not be exempt from faithfulness to their confession and God's whole Word. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America need to reevaluate their doctrine and their practices to more closely follow the Lutheran Confessions and, in turn, the Bible.

The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is the smaller of the two synods and has a fewer confessional failings than the ELCA. The most recent example involves Rev. Dr. David Benke, a district president in the Missouri Synod, who participated in an interfaith prayer service at Yankee Stadium in 2001 shortly after the September 11 tragedy.¹ The service included members of clergy from the Jewish, Roman Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, Sikhs, Greek Orthodox, and a few Protestant faiths.² Benke participated with the approval of the synod president, though his actions were outside of LCMS doctrine and contrary to Article X in the Formula of Concord.³ Article X states:

Nor are such rites matters of indifference when these ceremonies are intended to create the illusion (or are demanded or agreed to with that intention) that these two opposing religions have been brought into agreement... We believe, teach, and confess that at a time of confession, as when enemies of the Word of God desire to suppress the pure doctrine of the holy Gospel, the entire community of God...and especially the ministers

¹ Charles Henrickson, "A Prayer for America," in *Contemporary Issues in Fellowship: Confessional Principles and Application* ed. John A. Maxfield (St. Louis: The Luther Academy, 2004), 49.

² Henrickson, "A Prayer for America," in *Contemporary*...56.

³ Henrickson, "A Prayer for America," in *Contemporary*...61.

of the Word as the leaders of the community of God, are obligated to confess openly...the true doctrine and all that pertain to it, according to the Word of God.⁴

Benke absolutely did not follow the Biblical confession in the Formula of Concord on this matter. He gave the impression that the Missouri Synod was in agreement with all of these other church bodies and he did not confess openly the true doctrine according to the Word of God. He also did so as a leader in the synod, when obligated to do otherwise. During his prayer, he refers to all those in attendance as his “brothers and sisters,”⁵ he is leading those not in Christian fellowship with himself or his church body in an act of worship: prayer.

According to John Brug in *Church Fellowship*, “Prayer is always an act of worship.”⁶ Therefore, when praying with someone else, one needs to take into account the biblical principles of fellowship. Since all prayer is an act of worship, there is definite need for the correct observances of fellowship. “True prayer, prayer which pleases God, is a fruit of faith.”⁷ Joint prayer with others needs to follow the same doctrine as and be treated similarly to any other acts of fellowship in worship. Therefore, Christians are commanded to pray with those who share a common confession and life of faith and are to avoid praying with those “errorists” who “adhere to false doctrine”⁸. Christians also are to avoid any means that would give the appearance of approving of error; praying with someone out of fellowship is definitely included. The Apostle Paul says in II Corinthians 6:14, 17, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? ...‘Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord.’” God directly

⁴ “Formula of Concord,” in *The Book of Concord*. trans. & ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 612.

⁵ Henrickson, “A Prayer for America,” in *Contemporary*...58.

⁶ John Brug, *Church Fellowship: Working Together for the Truth*. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996), 114.

⁷ Seth Erlandsson, *Church Fellowship: What Does the Bible Say?* (trans. S.W. Becker; Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1979), 38.

⁸ Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 115.

commanded us not to have fellowship with those not of the same faith and Rev. Dr. Benke is not exempt from this command.

The president of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, Dr. Gerald Kieschnick, who is still the current president, approved of Rev. Benke’s behavior: “...Benke contacted me twice about the event prior to his participation. I did and do support the pastoral decision he made to participate. His action...is clearly in line with a document entitled ‘The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship...’”⁹ Kieschnick does not support his viewpoint with Scripture or even the Lutheran confessions, he uses a document that was published only a year earlier. So in order to remain a confessional Lutheran body, the Missouri Synod needs to evaluate its doctrine—especially in the area of fellowship—and practices according the Lutheran Confessions and the Bible.

Another “Lutheran” synod that needs to seriously evaluate its doctrine and practices is the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The ELCA has failed confessionally in many areas, especially under the influence of the feminist movement. Some in the ELCA have even gone so far as editing liturgy, prayers, hymns, and Psalms to not use any masculine pronouns. Others have even edited the Lord’s Prayer to fit with feminist ideals.¹⁰ This act goes against the Bible itself. Isaiah 9:6 calls Jesus many masculine names: “For to us a child is born, to us a **son** is given, and the government will be on **his** shoulders. And **he** will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting **Father**, **Prince** of Peace.” Jesus repeatedly refers to God as “Father” in the New Testament. ELCA leaders need to preach against feminism ideals in the church and keep the truth in scripture and liturgy. This is just one of many confessional and scriptural failings with which the ELCA is dealing.

⁹ Henrickson, “A Prayer for America,” in *Contemporary*...51.

¹⁰ Carl E. Braaten, “The ELCA at 20 Years: Flunking the Theological Test,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 47, no. 4 (2008): 376.

Another issue which the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America needs to address is the pluralistic viewpoints of some in their church body. Some in the ELCA believe that there are many valid religions and that they all lead to God. Some of them even believe that Jesus is not the only way to salvation.¹¹ This is a dangerous viewpoint for the faith of those who think this way and also extinguishes the need for missionaries and evangelism. Pluralism has no place in any Lutheran or Christian church body. Over and over again in the Lutheran Confessions it is stated that the only true Christian religion is based on Scripture alone: "...the [unanimously approved] summarized doctrine commonly confessed by the churches of the pure Christian religion is drawn together out of the Word of God."¹² Article IV in the Augsburg Confession says, "...we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffer for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us."¹³ The Lutheran Confessions and the Word of God condemn false religions, so accepting them as a means of salvation or path to God is ridiculous.

Another serious problem in the ELCA, is that of the authority of the Bible. Recently the ELCA has launched a Bible study program called "Book of Faith."¹⁴ This title takes authority away from the Bible being God's true word and calls it only a book of faith. Paul wrote to Timothy, "All Scripture is God-breathed..." (II Tim. 3:16). Jesus said, "The Scripture cannot be broken." A problem that grows out of the decreased respect for God's Word is differing interpretations of that Word. Modern ELCA members find it easy to interpret the Bible

¹¹ Braaten, "The ELCA at 20...", 376.

¹² "Formula of Concord," Tappert, 503.

¹³ "The Augsburg Confession," in *The Book of Concord*. trans. & ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 30.

¹⁴ Braaten, "The ELCA at 20...", 376.

differently than what has been done since the Reformation.¹⁵ They unknowingly reject the doctrines recorded by the fathers of our church in the Book of Concord. The doctrines of our faith that have been the Lutheran interpretations of the Bible for centuries are being ignored for modern age thinking. To make matters worse, leaders in the church are not setting them straight. Bishop Mark Hanson stated that “we do not all read the Bible in the same way and that there are two kinds of hermeneutics at odds with each other in the ELCA.”¹⁶ Bishop Hanson does not argue for one way of Biblical interpretation, nor does he even suggest that there is a correct way. This leads to another problem in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: leadership.

The ELCA utilizes the office of bishops in their synod; even though the WELS does not do this, there is nothing wrong with it. The Augsburg Confession states, “According to divine right, therefore, it is the office of the bishop to preach the Gospel, forgive sins, judge doctrine and condemn doctrine that is contrary to the Gospel.”¹⁷ Dr. Carl Braaten, a prominent Lutheran theologian and member of the ELCA wrote,

I have yet to hear of a bishop in the ELCA condemning any doctrine ‘that is contrary to the Gospel.’ There is a lot of heresy being taught and preached in the churches, but it is not being condemned. Radical theological feminism is not being condemned; the pluralistic theology of religion is not being condemned; the relativizing of biblical authority is not being condemned. The result is, everything goes.¹⁸

ELCA bishops should look at God’s Word and the Lutheran Confessions and evaluate the teachings of their churches. The longer they allow false teachings—feminism, pluralism,

¹⁵ Braaten, “The ELCA at 20...”, 376.

¹⁶ Braaten, “The ELCA at 20...”, 376.

¹⁷ “The Augsburg Confession,” Tappert, 84.

¹⁸ Braaten, “The ELCA at 20...”, 377.

decreased authority of the Bible—to culminate, the deeper those teachings’ roots will be in the synod.

The most recent and publicized case of false teaching within the ELCA is that of antinomianism. Antinomianism is the notion that Law is unnecessary and all ethics can be derived from the Gospel.¹⁹ A big example of antinomianism in the ELCA is that of accepting homosexuality and even ordaining men as ministers who are practicing homosexuals. The problem is, ethically judging homosexuality by the standards of the Gospel is impossible. The Gospel was never meant to be a guide for Christian living, just a testament of Christ’s life and sacrifice for believers. When applying the Gospel to homosexuality, one sees “God is love,” and justification by faith. They improperly apply this to human sexuality. Also, the core doctrine of Lutheranism is that of being justified by faith apart from works.²⁰ Some are in the habit of believing that as long as you have faith, anything we do in this world does not matter for our eternal soul. The Augsburg Confession expands on justification by faith and states, “It is also taught among us that such faith should produce good fruits and good works...”²¹ Good works are a natural part of faith, without them faith is not really faith.

The antinomianism teachings in the ELCA lead to only-Gospel teachings and that unity under the Gospel is all that is necessary. Applying the Gospel in place of the Law leads to indifference on issue of the Law, such as homosexuality, abortion, and basic Christian living. Those following antinomianism turn all that is not Gospel into adiaphora.²² Luther was firm in his belief and teaching of the Law; he distinguished three uses of the Law: a curb, mirror, and

¹⁹ Braaten, “The ELCA at 20...”, 377.

²⁰ “The Augsburg Confession,” Tappert, 30.

²¹ “The Augsburg Confession,” Tappert, 31.

²² Braaten, “The ELCA at 20...”, 377.

guide.²³ The curb function lets a sinner know when he sinned. The mirror function accuses the sinner of his sin. The third function of the Law is the one most easily ignored by those in the ELCA.²⁴ The guide function helps the Christian with how he should live his life. The Formula of Concord specifically stresses the need for the law: “We believe, teach, and confess that the preaching of the law is to be diligently applied not only to believer and the impenitent but also to people who are genuinely believing...”²⁵ The guide function is only meant for Christians who have been reborn in Christ.²⁶ Laws are necessary in society just as they are necessary in the church, and through the church, members’ morality.

God’s written law is not the only thing that Lutherans should base their morals on, God created laws of nature and conscience also for guidance. People instinctively know the difference between right and wrong. God gave that conscience to humans by design. He also gave logic and reason and the ability to see how things should work. “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20). Dr. Carl Braaten believes that natural law is almost nonexistent in the current ELCA.²⁷ The influences of modern politically correctness and accept-all morality have definitely impacted the ELCA.

While both the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America do teach many sound confessional and scriptural teachings, they both need to look at what they are actually teaching because some of what they are doing is not Lutheran. The Missouri Synod especially in the areas of fellowship, while the ELCA needs to evaluate itself in

²³ “Formula of Concord,” Tappert, 478-479.

²⁴ Braaten, “The ELCA at 20...”, 378.

²⁵ “Formula of Concord,” Tappert, 480.

²⁶ “Formula of Concord,” Tappert, 479-480.

²⁷ Braaten, “The ELCA at 20...”, 378.

the de-masculinization of God, pluralism, the authority of the Bible, church leadership, antinomianism, and natural law. While it may be easier to just not do anything, this is sin. God hates false teachers and vows to punish them severely. Martin Luther said it best, “Peace if possible, truth at all costs.” Leaders in those synods need to strive to teach Biblical and doctrinal truth above all, even if it is not the easiest way. Lutherans are much more than just long meetings, coffee, and potlucks; they have a tradition of sound theology and confessionalism that is crucial to the church’s foundation.

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