



I hate to say I told you so, but . . .

By Tony Stoutenburg

One of the reasons for my opposition to some of the ecumenical agreements that the ELCA has engaged in over the years is that I see a movement underway to undo the Reformation.

It is the stated position of some of those who have encouraged the ELCA into these endeavors that Lutheranism is nothing more than a movement within the church whose goal should be to re-unite with the Roman Catholic church under the authority of the Pope.

This is not acceptable to me. I swore to preach and teach in accordance with the Lutheran Confessions. All Lutheran pastors do, and I believe a clear and plain understanding of the Confessions stands in the way of these "home to Rome" efforts.

So it seems that in order to clear the way, some of the most basic Lutheran principles are quietly being compromised, and an attempt is underway to undermine a Lutheran identity. In this article I offer three examples.

A Bishop Prays . . .

I am pretty sure that every Lutheran knows that we do not pray to saints or ask dead saints to pray for us. One of Luther's basic premises was the priesthood of all believers. Among other things, that means that God hears everyone's prayers. He does not listen to the prayers of a pastor more than he does those of any other believer. And the prayers of good people - saints - are no more or less effective than

the prayers of sinners. (Of course, every believer is both sinner and saint, but that is another subject ...)

Furthermore, there is no instruction in Scripture to pray to saints. Rather, we are told over and over again to pray to God, and we can do that because Jesus, who is God the Son, is our high priest who has opened the way for us to approach God the Father directly through prayer.

Roman Catholics have a very different tradition, in which one is encouraged to pray to certain dead holy people - saints - asking them to pray for us.

Like I said, I am pretty sure every Lutheran knows we do not pray to saints and ask them to pray or intercede for us. Or I was pretty sure.

In March 2002, there was an ordination at St John's Lutheran Church in Northfield, MN. The one to be ordained had written parts of his own ordination service (which is not all that uncommon; I did it too.) But he included a prayer of invocation which read "We ask all the saints to pray for us, beginning with the Mother of our Lord, continuing on through the ages ..."

This flies in the face of the Lutheran Confessional understanding. What ought to be the shocking part about this is that the synod bishop was the presiding over this service (as he must, according to CCM) and he went along and led this prayer! So, a Lutheran synod bishop led a Lutheran congregation in a prayer that violates the Lutheran Confessions.

Later, when a retired pastor and three other people who had walked out of the service wrote a letter of objection, they did receive an apology.

Now, no one has ever mistaken me for a great theologian, but even I know enough to not say this prayer, no matter where it is printed. I find it frankly inconceivable that the bishop who serves on the ELCA Bishop's Committee on Theological and Ethical Concerns failed to notice this confessional lapse.

(There is an article on this matter in the WordAlone Network News which will soon be available online at www.wordalone.org/news/news.htm.)

New Hymnal = Merger?

In another article in the Network News, Professor Walter Huffman of Trinity Seminary, (who is not a member of WordAlone) discusses some of the changes in Lutheran understanding and practice that have slipped in through CCM. There is a longer version of his article on the website at www.wordalone.org/news/news.htm. (Click on Prof. Huffman's article.)

Huffman points out an interesting fact. Joint hymnal projects often precede mergers. Remember the Service Book and Hymnal that came out in 1958? In 1960 and 1962 the ALC and LCA were formed from a variety of bodies.

Then there was the Lutheran Book of Worship, released in 1978 as a joint project. Ten years later, the ELCA was formed by the churches who adopted the LBW.

I have found this to be common in other traditions as well. As near as I can tell, a number of smaller denominations became the United Methodist Church shortly after a new joint hymnal was produced. The same thing seems to have happened with the Presbyterian Church USA.

It is true that there is no formal talk of a merger, and please understand, I am not trying to play Chicken Little here. But one of the architects of the Concordat/CCM has said that the day will soon come when we will wonder why we need two bishops in the same historic episcopate in the same region, and we will simply choose to have one. (If that happens, we will be one church body.) We have already altered our liturgy and practice - as Huffman points out - from traditional Lutheran teachings to conform to the Episcopal tradition so we can be in "full communion".

And now there is talk of a joint hymnal...

What is the place of Scripture?, or The Reformation Undone?

Around Easter, I received an email from Pastor Mark Hanson, the presiding bishop of the ELCA. It is not that I am special; it was sent to all rostered leaders of the ELCA as an Easter message. (The full text is on the internet at www.elca.org/bishop/eastergreeting.html.)

After opening with the promise of Easter, Pastor Hanson goes on to say that "There are four pressing issues before the ELCA. I encourage your active involvement in shaping our responses to each one." He names them as Mission, Leadership, Ecumenical relationships and global partnerships, and Sexuality.

He then says, "As we address each of these issues, I believe it is imperative that we hold in tension tradition (scriptural, confessional, theological and liturgical), context, and strategic thinking."

A major part of the story of the Reformation is that Luther rejected a claim by the Roman church. When Luther questioned how some practices and doctrines, such as purgatory, could be taught when they do not appear in Scripture, the church responded that there are two sources of authority, Scripture and Tradition.

Tradition was collected from the interpretations that various theologians (called church fathers or doctors) had set out in their writings since the early church.

Luther and his followers rejected that notion. One of the first nicknames used to describe what would later be called Lutherans was "the Sola-ists." They were called this after some of their mottos: Sola Fide (by Faith Alone) Sola Gracia (by Grace Alone) and Sola Scriptura (by Scripture Alone.)

This last motto, "by Scripture Alone" was a direct assault on the teaching of the Roman church that tradition is a source of authority equal to Scripture.

There is nothing wrong with human traditions, mind you. We have plenty of them, but each tradition must stand up to two important ground rules. First, tradition must never be taught as the true faith, for the whole content of the true faith, in both Law and Gospel, is contained in Scripture. That is why Scripture alone is enough.

The second rule is that every tradition must itself be tested against Scripture. Luther writes:

Necessity forces us to run to the Bible with the writings of all teachers, and to obtain there a verdict and judgment upon them. Scripture alone is the true lord and master of all writings and doctrine on earth. If that is not granted, what is Scripture good for? The more we reject it, the more we become satisfied with men's books and human teachers. LW Vol 32, p 11.

So, for Lutherans, Scripture is our sole source of authority, against which every tradition must be tested. The constitution of the ELCA even says "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."

"So what?", you ask. Well, look at the presiding bishop' statement again: "As we address each of these issues, I believe it is imperative that we hold in tension tradition (scriptural, confessional, theological and liturgical), context, and strategic thinking."

As I read this, there are now three sources of authority we must hold in tension: "tradition, context and strategic thinking." Where is Scripture? It is not even in a category by itself, it is merely a subset of our traditions, on the same level of importance as our liturgical tradition. In other words, instead of being a master of tradition, Scripture has been reduced to the same level of importance as our worship styles.

While I recognize that there are other Christian denominations, and that no one has an exclusive claim on God's truth, I truly believe that the Lutheran confessional understanding is the correct interpretation of Scripture, and that Scripture is the sole source and norm for our faith and life.

Friends, it is for that reason that I am deeply concerned for the ELCA. Whether by design or oversight, or both, there is a move away from these key doctrines of

the Reformation. If we loose our anchor from Scripture and the Confessions, we will be awash in a sea that will imperil the future of the ELCA and the local church's place in God's mission. It is for that reason that I remain committed to the causes I have been involved with.

(Tony Stoutenburg, proud husband of Pam and proud dad of Tony and Matt, lives in Naselle, Washington. He serves as pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Chinook and Naselle Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chinook and Naselle, Washington. He is a member of the WordAlone Network Board and a member of the LCMC's Northwest District.)