

A Reaction to the Concordat from the Trenches
Dated March 22, 1999

We write in reaction to the document, “Called to Common Mission”, dated November 1998. The document is based on several false premises, one of which is that the Anglicans represent the “Protestant Reformation in England” and, therefore, are similar in tradition to the Lutherans in Germany. If we understand the difference between Lutheran and Anglican beginnings correctly (apart from defensive party lines), Martin Luther was a theologian who wanted to remove the papacy’s bad doctrines, but not necessarily the pope. On the other hand, Henry VIII was a politician who wanted to remove the pope, but not necessarily many of his doctrines (some of which remain(ed) bad). In the present negotiations with the Anglicans, this is a critical distinction that must not be shunted aside. For historical accuracy, we would argue that the Protestant Reformation in England was initiated, not by the Anglican church, but rather by those who sought to purify the Anglican church of its Romanist doctrine and practice and to establish in its stead Reformed doctrine and practice. Those who sought these reforms were of course labeled Puritans. We would submit to you and to the draft committee that it was actually the Puritans who introduced Luther’s (and Calvin’s) Reformed theology into English religious life.

Having stated this for the sake of historical accuracy and perspective, we must address the overall tenor of the document. One would expect that the document should be addressing the broad parameters of the gospel and of the church’s service to her Lord and how those might be enhanced by the union of the two denominations in question. Yet, to our disappointment, the document concerns itself instead primarily with the narrow, Episcopalian issue of the installation of bishops. In this regard, the document seems to want us Lutherans to accept the notion that it is a small thing to permit the laying on of hands during the installation of a bishop in order to gain the advantage of a great church union. We would submit to you, however, that this is no small thing and point to what we consider to be a first-century parallel. You’ll recall how the ancient Romans could not understand why the early Christians refused to sacrifice to the emperor to preserve an admitted good: societal unity. “What are a few drops of oil or a few kernels of grain offered to the gods (you can cross your fingers behind your back) to maintain the unity of the Empire? Why would you face lions to avoid such a small thing?” The early Christians, of course, knew the answer to that and refused to make their offerings because they knew it masked a real issue regarding God’s grace.

In this spirit, we believe that the installation of bishops is no small thing because it too masks the real issue. Under the surface lies the real question of how and by what route grace flows from our Lord Jesus Christ to the faithing Christian. We submit that this was clearly the central question for Luther. Does our Lord’s saving grace flow from God through the church to the believer (as the Roman church and, apparently, the Anglican church seem to hold) or does grace flow directly to the believer by faith and then to the church (as we believe the Reformers taught)? Is there any doubt that behind Luther’s insistence on “by faith alone” and “by Scripture alone,” there lies the demand of “by grace alone” as well? Is saving grace (is there any other kind?) dispensed to the believer by the church through rituals and ordinances (e.g., the “mass”) or is salvation the free gift of grace given directly to the believer and then shared with the church in community? This is a critical question and one on which, we believe, the invaluable insights of the Reformation hinge.

Our understanding of the Reformation (as humble Lutherans, one of whom has apparently not been properly ordained) is that the Reformers (Luther, Calvin, and others) insisted on the Pauline doctrine that salvation is a grace relationship between God and the believer and is based solely on the believer’s faith (which is a gift of grace itself) in the saving work of Christ on the cross. This grace is not mediated by any earthly person, act, or institution – including the papacy and/or the episcopate. At the point of faith, the believer comes directly before God quite naked (spiritually), as direct and naked as

on the Day of Judgment. Because no one or no thing will intercede for us on that final day except our Lord himself, so no one or no thing mediates the salvific relationship between God and the believer on earth except the believer's faith in Jesus Christ, who was crucified once and for all on our behalf. Those who propose otherwise seem to us to be taking them selves much too seriously and this basic tenet of the good news of the gospel not seriously enough.

If this understanding is correct, that it is from those individuals who are saved by grace alone that the church derives its legitimacy (a basic tenet that we believe Luther insisted on), then there are some consequences for church polity that flow from it. One of these is that bishops (and pastors) are accountable to the flock and not vice versa. The flock, of course, owes respect to its leaders, but not accountability. The Scriptural model of the pastor (and bishop) here, we would submit, is that of the teacher/preacher who stands beneath the congregation lifting the believer to God, not the ruler/mediator who stands above the believer (i.e., between the believer and God) controlling them both (!) by the all-too-human dispensation of the "means of grace." The traditional means of grace are efficacious *per se* and were not understood by the Reformers to be the tools (however benevolently dispensed) of bishop or pope.

A suitable analogy here is one that grows out of the issue we are raising. It has to do with this "flow of grace" as it has played out in the political realm. Despite the attempts to reflect their respective theologies in Germany after Luther's death and in Calvin's Geneva, the English Puritans probably gave the most careful consideration and fullest expression of the implications of the flow of grace for church polity. Accordingly, they largely abandoned the Roman Catholic/Anglican model of church polity for a more direct form of church governance. This, in turn, as it worked itself out, had a major influence on the structure of our American political system. In general terms, European political systems are based on the premise that political power passed from God to the king, who then (often reluctantly) shared some of it with the people. Political power thus followed a medieval theological understanding of the flow of grace. In this country, in contrast, the Constitution proclaims that political power is passed from God to the people, who then share some of it with the state. Is there any wonder why American Lutherans were quite ready to suggest that George Washington be given the title of President rather than King?

Which leads to a much more critical question: Why in the world would the ELCA (the Episcopal Lutheran Church in America?) want to turn its back on its genuine Reformed theological roots, which are one of the historical hallmarks and distinctions of its witness? Apart from the rather panicky reaction of many of the mainline Protestant churches to combine in order to offset their declining membership and influence – forgetting, perhaps, the tenet of Reformation theology that influence must be earned, not commanded – and apart from the all-too-natural temptation to believe that bigger is better and that teaming two dead horses together will increase their speed – forgetting too, perhaps, that the church's Scriptural model is one of struggling servanthood, not one of prestige and power – apart from these, there seems to be a fundamental error in theology here regarding the nature of ecumenism.

Our Lord shepherds the sheep on a thousand hills. He even said that he has sheep we disciples know nothing about. It would follow, then, that the key characteristic of our Lord's flock is that they all hear his voice and come to him, especially at the Last Day. Clearly, our Lord does not say that all his sheep will be the same shape or color or graze on the same hill until that day. One of the distinct strengths of denominationalism, with its many and varied forms of expression and practice, is that, at the Last Day or on any day for that matter, no one will be able to use the excuse that he or she could not find a fellowship that was compatible or meaningful. Denominationalism also diminishes the oppression of misused authority in ever-bigger institutions, ecclesiastical authority that stifles the growth of faith and freedom as surely as political repression stifles economic and societal growth. Can such abuse of authority be more evident than in the pope's felt need to warn Mexicans to beware of the

evangelizations of Pentecostal Protestants? We are surprised he did not include the evangelizations of Lutherans as well, especially after his ecumenically insensitive intent to restore indulgences, of all things! The Episcopal issues here may not be papal, but the mentality is not far removed.

In addition to these substantive issues, we are also very concerned by the unsuccessful attempts in the document to cover up real differences between the two traditions by using vague statements and questionable definitions. The document says, for example, that Lutherans and the Episcopal Church “use very similar orders of service,” as if our respective orders of worship mattered in any meaningful way, apart from what our people are used to. It also says that the terms “priest” and “pastor” are merely interchangeable titles for the same position, ignoring the distinction strongly held by many that a priest mediates between God and man by offering sacrifice while a pastor merely (sic) leads the flock toward God. This distinction quickly leads to a more critical and more telling one. The “sacrifice” offered by a priest is the host offered during the Eucharist. But the document quickly brushes over this issue, no doubt because the Episcopal doctrine of transubstantiation that lies behind the sacrifice was firmly rejected by Luther and the Reformers. Holding instead to a consubstantial presence around the host and the wine, Luther rejected the notion that a priest could recreate in any way Christ’s sacrifice, which he clearly perceived in Scripture as a once-and-for-all event. Thus Luther rightly rejected the pernicious position of any authority that claims for itself the power to recreate Christ’s death, which is the ultimate means of grace given to the church through faithing believers, not through hierarchical office holders.

We have other concerns, but we feel that those cited above point to sufficient reason for us to recommend strongly that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America reject the proposed revision of the Concordat of Agreement as well as the concordat itself. This does not mean rejecting the unique and distinctive forms of worship, ministry, or ecclesiastical structure of any other of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Rather, our intent is to have the ELCA focus on the *raison d’être* of the church. As we have said to each other frequently, borrowing language from the workplace, the church is in the business of sales, not management. Let the churches get on with the desperate business of sales, and spend less time debating about what the company car should look like. We are convinced that most who are outside the church will not care one whit whether the Lutheran and Episcopal churches unite or remain separate. Rather, those who are moved to respond to Christ our Lord will do so, not by the authority of the church, but by the humble and consistent witness of individual believers, saved by grace, living under the constant guidance of the Holy Spirit supported in faith communities by their fellow believers. By no means is a bishop definitive of or necessary for such witness.

Both we Lutherans and the Episcopalians have unique perspectives and distinct styles that are only to be celebrated, not casually covered over because of some misconstrued desire to be uniform as well as one in Christ, which oneness we already enjoy. Our distinct and distinctive witnesses will appeal to potential believers much more so than another monolithic bureaucratic structure, of which the world has too many. The Episcopalian intransigence over the episcopate is no cause at all for us Lutherans to betray our own roots, which we strongly believe are more “historical” in terms of the continuity of the gospel than the mere laying on of hands generation after generation. Please do not cast aside or gloss over that which is distinctive in our respective traditions in the misguided belief that the form of the body(ies) is more important than their work of service and witness to Christ our Lord.

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