



What About . . .

The Difference Between the ELCA and the LCMS

August 1997 will be long remembered as an important time in the history of the Lutheran church here in America. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America [ELCA] made a number of very significant decisions during that month. It declared full communion with three Reformed churches: the United Church of Christ, the Reformed Church of America, and the Presbyterian Church—USA. It based this decision on its opinion that there is no longer essential disagreement between the ELCA and these Reformed churches. Furthermore, the ELCA decided that the long-standing differences between Lutheranism and the Roman Catholic Church over the question of how we are saved have been resolved.

These decisions have caused considerable confusion within the ELCA as well as within our own church, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod [LCMS]. It has caused many people to wonder what the differences are between the ELCA and the LCMS, even though our two churches both use the name “Lutheran.”

The LCMS has a tremendous opportunity to make it very clear, both to our own members, as well as to the world at large, what it means to remain committed to the full truth of the Holy Scriptures and the historic confessions of the Lutheran church. This pamphlet is intended to offer a brief overview of the key differences between the ELCA and the LCMS. Hopefully, it will help you understand these differences so that you will be able to discuss them with others.

Our Difference Over the Bible

The LCMS and the ELCA disagree about the nature and authority of the Bible. While both of our churches profess allegiance to the Reformation principle that Scripture alone is the supreme authority for the church's doctrine and life, our two church bodies have significant differences when it comes to putting this principle into practice.

The LCMS believes that the Bible is actually the Word of God, and therefore, is totally truthful, reliable and free from any error. We believe that the Scriptures are the final standard by which we must judge everything that we believe, teach and confess.

The ELCA, on the other hand, avoids making statements that confess the full truthfulness of the Bible. It holds that Scripture is not necessarily always accurate or trustworthy in

all its details and parts. The ELCA tolerates and encourages methods of interpreting the Scripture that presuppose that the Bible contains error and is unclear about various doctrinal matters.

Our difference over the Bible explains other more visible differences. For example, our churches disagree about the ordination of women to the pastoral office, the issue of homosexuality and the question of abortion. The LCMS does not ordain women to the pastoral office, while the ELCA does, in spite of the fact that Holy Scripture clearly teaches otherwise.

The LCMS unequivocally teaches that homosexual behavior is intrinsically sinful because it is contrary to God's Word. In love, we want to help the person caught up in the homosexual life to repent of his sin and receive God's forgiveness. The ELCA has been unable to take a clear Biblical stand against homosexual behavior. It also tolerates groups within its midst that openly advocate the homosexual lifestyle both for clergy and laity.

The LCMS has repeatedly condemned willful abortion as contrary to God's clear commandment not to murder. The ELCA has not been able to speak out clearly against abortion, and, sadly, even pays for willful abortion procedures for members in its health insurance plan.

While there are other examples, these three serve to make the point that our differences over the authority and reliability of God's Word lie at the heart of the other differences between the ELCA and the LCMS.

Our differences over the authority of the Lutheran Confessions

Our two churches also disagree about the authority of the historic Lutheran confessional statements contained in the Book of Concord. The LCMS binds itself to the entire doctrinal content of the 16th-century Lutheran confessional writings. We agree with the confessions of our church not merely *insofar* as they agree with the Bible (a position which would allow individual members to reject certain doctrines), but *because* these confessional statements are in complete harmony with God's inspired and inerrant Word. We therefore accept without reservation all the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God, normative also for the church today.

What about The Difference Between the ELCA and the LCMS?

The ELCA, on the other hand, does not require that its church workers and congregations pledge unqualified acceptance of the full doctrinal content of the Book of Concord. The ELCA views the Lutheran Confessions as historical expressions of the faith held to be true at the time that they were written, but not necessarily as normative standards for teaching and practice today.

Our differences over what is necessary for church fellowship

Given its approach to the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, it comes as no surprise that the ELCA would consider it possible to enter into fellowship with churches that teach things that are clearly contrary to the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions. These sorts of fellowship arrangements are a reflection of the attitude that absolute truth is unable to be known, confessed and asserted. This attitude is contrary to the confessional principle of the Lutheran church that is characterized in the Book of Concord with two very important phrases: “We believe, teach, and confess” and “We reject and condemn.” These phrases reflect the Lutheran church’s firm belief that God’s Word is clear, that it does assert truth that is binding for all times and all peoples, and that we are able with joy to confess and proclaim this truth.

The LCMS believes that the Bible requires full agreement in doctrine before it is possible to join in altar and pulpit fellowship with other churches (Rom. 16:17). On the other hand, the ELCA believes that disagreement in important doctrinal truths does not prohibit altar and pulpit fellowship with other churches.

A good example of this attitude is found in the documents the ELCA used to establish church fellowship with the three Reformed churches. In these documents, it is admitted that “important theological differences ... remain between our two churches in such questions as the understanding of the Lord’s Supper and Christology.” These differences are viewed “not as disagreements that need to be overcome, but as diverse witnesses to the one Gospel that we confess in common.”

What this means is that the ELCA is willing to tolerate the Reformed church’s denial that Jesus Christ is really present in the consecrated bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper. The Reformed believe Jesus is present only “spiritually” but not really present in a miraculous manner in the bread and wine. Lutheranism has never accepted the Reformed Church’s denial of our Lord’s real presence in Holy Communion. The ELCA now claims that the errors of the Reformed church regarding the Lord’s Supper and the doctrine of the person and work of Christ are acceptable options. This has never before been the

position of the Lutheran church, and reveals a decided movement away from historic Lutheranism on the part of the ELCA.

The ELCA’s attitude toward doctrine obscures the vital relationship that exists between the saving Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and all other teachings of Scripture that are centered and rooted in that Gospel—teachings our Lord Himself has given to us to believe and to share with others (Matt. 28:20). The ELCA position regarding church fellowship compromises Scripture’s clear mandate to confess and proclaim “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27)—in all its Gospel-centered truth and purity.

Synod’s opportunity for faithful clarity

All Lutherans have a wonderful opportunity to wrestle with the question of what it means to be a confessional Lutheran church in this day and age. What does it mean to say that we embrace the Holy Scripture as the inerrant and inspired Word of God? What teachings will therefore be rejected? What truths will be raised high as positions that can never be compromised or bargained away for the sake of external church unity? What does it mean to say we agree unconditionally with the Lutheran Confessions as pure expositions of the Word of God? Given this unqualified subscription to the Lutheran Confessions, what issues are non-negotiable and can never be surrendered or given up by Lutherans who wish to remain genuinely confessional Lutherans? What makes for true church union? Is “agreeing-to-disagree” an appropriate attitude for Lutherans when it comes to establishing church fellowship?

The differences between our two churches are a source of great sadness for the LCMS. We take no pleasure in talking about these differences. We wish that our two churches could share a common confession of what it means to be Lutheran. It is important that the members of LCMS congregations have a clear picture of why our two churches are not in fellowship. Knowing the basic differences between our two churches will help us talk with our ELCA friends and family members in a loving and kindly manner.

— Dr. A. L. Barry
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