

FORUM LETTER

VOLUME 35 NUMBER 10

OCTOBER 2006

Suppressing the dissident orthodox



“A third contribution that the Lutheran Church can make to American Protestantism is the concept of evangelical discipline. We are witnessing one of the great crises of Protestant theology,

the collapse of conservatism. Historical research has yielded a formula for imperialism, which can be exemplified from the days of Ashurbanipal in his conquest of Elam down to the British occupations of India and the Japanese absorption of Manchouduo [sic]. The only variable factor is the time element.

Church history reveals a similar formula for the penetration of unbelief, repeated again in modern Protestantism with disheartening uniformity: First the demand for toleration, then the demand for equal rights, finally the use of the ecclesiastical machinery for the disfranchisement and suppression of the dissident orthodox minority.” — *by Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “The Contribution of the Lutheran Church to American Protestantism,” Augustana Quarterly, 16:10 (October 1937)*

Inside this issue:

Light years
apart 3

By paths as
yet untrodden 5

A Valparaiso
safety zone 6

Omnium
gatherum 8

The American Lutheran
Publicity Bureau is on the
web
www.alpb.org

“Early” and “catholicism” are not dirty words

by James A. Bergquist



Reginald H. Fuller, the now-departed British biblical scholar and bishop, wrote a penetrating analysis of the Pastoral and General Epistles that bears heeding today. In his 1966 *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament* he wrote of “‘early catholicism’ as the church’s *normative* response to the apostolic age.” [Emphasis added.]

Unchecked spontaneity

In our day, when both the idea and substance of “orthodoxy” is widely held in disdain within big chunks of our mainline churches, Fuller provides a perspective worth repeating. Too many today continue to regard early catholicism as a fallen form of Christianity. Especially, the post-apostolic period remains widely viewed as a disastrous leap into dead orthodoxy, ethical legalism, and institutional triumphalism.

The supposed unchecked spontaneity of an earlier apostolic era is thereby approvingly but mistakenly contrasted with sterile orthodoxy. Unchecked spontaneity becomes a corrective and a standard for today. Fuller’s view of early catholicism as a normative response to the post-apostolic situa-

FORUM LETTER is published monthly by the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau (www.alpb.org) with LUTHERAN FORUM, a quarterly journal, in a combined subscription for \$26.45 (U.S.) a year, \$47.95 (U.S.) for two years, in the United States and Canada. Retirees and students, \$21.00 a year. Add \$7.50 per year for overseas delivery. Write to the Subscription Office for special rates for groups. Single copy, \$2.50.

Editor: Pr. Russell E. Saltzman
<rhlcpastor@sbcglobal.net>

Associate Editor: Pr. Richard O. Johnson
<roj@nccn.net>

Member: Associated Church Press.

EDITORIAL OFFICE: 10801 Ruskin Way,
Kansas City, MO 64134-2931.

SUBSCRIPTION OFFICE: American
Lutheran Publicity Bureau, PO Box 327,
Delhi, NY 13753-0327 <dkralpb@aol.com>. Periodicals postage paid at Delhi,
NY and additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send changes of address
to PO Box 327, Delhi, NY 13753-0327.

Copyright © 2006 by the American
Lutheran Publicity Bureau.
ISSN 0046-4732

tion provides a healthy alternative to the free-wheeling post-modernism of our times.

The essence of what Fuller had to say in his *Critical Introduction* may be roughly summarized as follows.

Theological authority

The young churches faced a critical question as they headed into the late first and early second centuries. The question ought to be our own as well. It is this: How does the church continue its apostolic life and witness in a time when the original living witnesses are no longer present in post-apostolic ages?

Theologically, it is the central question of authority in the church. To answer that question, post-apostolic Christianity developed four institutional structures.

First, an apostolic canon (or standard) of scripture.

Second, an apostolic creed.

Third, an apostolic ministry (which developed into that of bishop, presbyter and deacon).

And, finally, fourth, an apostolic liturgy.

The germ of these four institutional structures may be found within earlier books of the New Testament as well as its later books, each receiving more complete development in the second through fourth centuries.

The canon of scripture

The canon came to include both the Old Testament and selected Christian writings. The canonical New Testament books, in all of their diversity of historical traditions, together center on the core *kerygma* (meaning, the heart of the Christian message) both by and about the proclamation of Jesus Christ.

The idea of a canon of scripture is already present in Luke 24:44 — “Everything written about me (Jesus) in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled.”

Thus, there was an early three-fold canonical Old Testament (the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms) that the emerging Christian tradition employed when interpreting Jesus Christ.

The presence of an early New Testament canon as a bulwark against falsehood already is clearly implied in the catholic epistle of 2 Peter (3:15-16), made evident in the specific reference to the Pauline letters.

Apostolic creeds

The creeds and earlier confessional hymns of the New Testament epistles also claimed the apostolic substance of that kerygmatic core.

Early creeds include 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, Philippians 2:5-11, somewhat later 2 Timothy 2:8-13, and not least the earlier creed of 1 Timothy 3:15-16.

In other words, the substance of the second and third century creeds already is fundamentally present in both the apostolic and post-apostolic New Testament writings.

These early confessions and hymns come to flower in post-apostolic Christianity, the faith of both ages standing in essential continuity with the other.

Apostolic ministry

Apostolic ministry was intended to insure that the task of public faithfulness in word and deed would be regular and normative throughout the church.

Although the idea that the bishop had direct physical apostolic sanction that could be traced from an original apostle is unhistorical, the idea nonetheless holds a profound theological truth. After the apostles were gone the content of their apostolic witness could only be preserved by those prepared to hang on to the core apostolic *kerygma* as they had received it.

The three Pastoral Epistles speak of a four-fold chain of witnesses: Jesus; apostles; the ministry comprised of elders, deacons, and bishops; and those that follow them. While the developing and increasingly institutionalized apostolic ministry had many functions, the most important task certainly was and is to guard and interpret the apostolic tradition, and to do it for a church in mission.

Liturgical witness

The early liturgies preserved the apostolic substance of faith in the baptismal and Eucharistic liturgies, the former especially in 1 Peter and the latter in Hebrews.

Three challenges

These four second-century apostolic structures arose in response to three main challenges to the young church. The first were various heresies — Gnosticism and other emerging syncretisms from the surrounding culture.

(Fuller, by the way, named Christian variants by a term many avoid today, “heresies.” Unlike much of biblical studies today, Fuller regarded the Gnostic milieu as a threat and not as benign legitimate forms of creative diversity. He called things by their true names.)

The second challenge came from within the Christian community itself, the pastoral need to nurture the growing church. Evangelism remained close to the center, of course. But converts and believers, then as now, needed grounding in faith and behavior.

The third challenge was to withstand sporadic but real persecutions visited upon the churches in both the Eastern and Western parts of the Roman empire.

Taken together the four post-apostolic responses to the post-apostolic period made it possible for Christianity to be faithful to its apostolic origins and at the same time to speak to changing situations within an expanding and culturally diverse missionary church. Post-apostolic Christianity set out to expose false teaching, to generate loyalty to the apostolic

kerygma, and to establish a high ethical standard for Christian living.

Reality and substance

Reginald Fuller, like most of us, readily recognized some of the limitations of early catholicism — the loss of the realized eschatological dimension, faith as more propositional truth than trust, and the over-institutionalization of the *charismata* (gifts of the Holy Spirit).

And yet he could write:

Without the institutional forms of early catholicism, [the] apostolic elements [in the Christian faith] would have evaporated in the speculative mythology, the dualistic asceticism and libertinism, and the false enthusiasm of Gnosticism.

Fuller indeed gives us strong stuff. Early catholicism is more connected to the reality and substance of the Christian faith than is the too-prevalent mushy post-modernism — and so much else — that passes for Christian proclamation today.

James A. Bergquist <jalbergq@paulbunyan.net> has been a missionary in India, was the academic dean at Trinity Lutheran Seminary and following that, became director of Outreach for the American Lutheran Church. Upon formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, he became the ELCA's first outreach director. He is presently teaching theology in Hong Kong and was just invited to teach a Biblical studies course at Guangzhou (formerly Canton) University in China.

Light years apart



“The stars in a constellation or asterism rarely have any astrophysical relationship to each other; they just happen to appear close together in the sky as viewed from Earth and typically lie many light years apart in space.” — *from a Wikipedia article on “Constellation”*

We’ve heard, oh, more times now than

there are stars in the sky: *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* isn’t a hymnal, it’s a “constellation of worship resources.”

It’s one of those phrases that sounds pretty impressive at first hearing, but the more you hear it, the less it seems to mean.

But I’m going to order a personal copy, really I am. I’ve heard you can buy it cheaper from Cokesbury than from Augsburg Fortress, but I’ll

probably still order it from AF. Brand loyalty, you know.

But I worry about whether the *Wikipedia* definition is right. Maybe a “constellation of resources” makes it appear that we Lutherans are close together, when in reality we are light years apart.

Truth be told, I really want to support and use the hymnal of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I think it is an important unifying factor, or should be. But is *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* really going to serve that purpose? We’ll eventually address that question more cogently, no doubt, when there is actually a book to hold in one’s hand for review purposes (and we’ll do the same for the forthcoming Lutheran Church Missouri Synod hymnal, *Lutheran Service Book*). But for now, there are a number of reasons to think *ELW* will not promote unity very effectively.

Actual buyers

First and foremost among them is the pragmatic question of how many congregations are actually going to buy the thing. Some will resist just because of cost — an ignoble reason, perhaps, but a real one. Others have serious theological reservations, or their pastors do. Increasing numbers of others print out their liturgies and hymns in the bulletin each week and seldom use the *LBW*’s or *WOV*’s they have. (Of course every congregation that does this is rigorously scrupulous in observing copyright restrictions.)

It’s really the latter reason that is the tipping point for my congregation. Folks don’t see much point in spending thousands of dollars on books that will mostly sit unopened. I can’t say as I blame them. Perhaps some future pastor will curse me because she or he doesn’t want to print out the liturgy and hymns any more, and the congregation will be saddled with these passé *LBW*’s. But I’ve decided not to worry about that. I’ve got a building project to preoccupy me at the moment.

Different matters

I will say that I’ve looked at the *ELW* liturgical material on the ELCA web site, and I think generally they did an okay job. (The hymns and Psalter, now those are different matters.) There are plenty of decisions that I would have made

differently. I wouldn’t have used the English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC) text for the Apostles’ Creed, thereby relegating hell to a footnote. (One of these days I’m going to sort out just what the heck the ELLC is, and how it differs from all the other acronyms of groups in the business of translating liturgical texts.) Nor would I have offered, albeit in a footnote, the option of dropping the *Filioque* (“and the Son”) clause from the Nicene Creed. Some of the new musical settings don’t do much for me. But at least they left the old ones there, which is a good thing.

On the other hand, I think the proposed marriage service is an improvement over *LBW*. It is simple, graceful (no more clunky and depressing “because of sin, our age-old rebellion, the gladness of marriage can be overcast”) and, in spite of some of the early proposals, does not seem to be tailored to accommodate the eventuality of same-sex marriage.

But it is the little things that grate on one’s nerves.

Underwear requisition

Take the liturgy for Confession and Forgiveness. We can be grateful it’s no longer called the “Brief Order,” which always reminded me of an underwear requisition. And I think there are some theological and historical questions about how useful or appropriate this liturgy is for regular use, though unless and until we Lutherans recover a more robust practice of individual confession and absolution I suppose there are merits to it.

But as I say, it’s the little things. In this new liturgy, worshipers are invited to “confess our sin.” Now that rubs me the wrong way, for two reasons. First, what I really need is to confess my *sins*, with an “s” at both ends. Confessing my “sin” allows me to say, “Yeah, sure, I’m a sinner, like everybody else” without acknowledging the peculiarity and individuality of all those *sins* for which I am personally culpable. What good does it do me to confess that I’m a generic sinner?

And then, by phrasing it that way, “our sin,” it allows the worshiper to dissolve into the mass of sinners. Surely there are “corporate sins,” and surely it can be useful to confess them corporately; but that’s not all she wrote, when it comes to confessing one’s sins.

No, I’d like the pastor to invite me to

consider my own individual sins, and bring those to the Mercy Seat. Those are the ones weighing heavily on my conscience on Sunday morning, or they should be.

Nixonian absolutions

Now in the formula for absolution, they got it right. The pastor declares that your sins are forgiven. But that disconnect really highlights the problem. I've confessed my sin (a general thing), and now God has forgiven my sins (those specific things). Hey, that sounds like good news. But on the other hand it's pretty cheap grace, isn't it? Reminds me of President Ford's pardon of Richard Nixon, for whatever he may have done, whether he admitted it or not. No specificity.

As I said, a little thing. But when you say it or hear it over and over, week after week, it adds up. It shapes the way we think about faith, about God, about our human condition, about ourselves as we stand before God. That's why little things are

important.

Authorized resource

And when little things add up to big things, that becomes a reason for congregations to resist buying this "resource."

(Remember, *ELW* isn't really actually an authorized and official book of the church, even though the churchwide assembly gave Augsburg Fortress permission to go ahead and publish it, whatever it might contain, which nobody really knew back when it was authorized. *ELW* is only an "authorized resource.")

So congregations may do their own thing. Some buy, some don't. Many will keep on doing what they've always done, no problem.

And members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, though they appear to lie close together, continue to be light years apart. — *by Richard O. Johnson, associate editor*

By paths as yet untrodden



It took me a bit by surprise, I admit, when my daughter Johanna announced she was going to seminary.

Not that it was a shock, understand; she was a religion (and music) major in college, and had served a year overseas with the ELCA's Young Adults in Global Mission program. Still, perhaps a pastor parent is never quite prepared for a child who says, "I think I'd like to try that, too."

It made it even more remarkable when she made the decision to go to Yale Divinity School, her father's seminary. And so it was with a lot of emotion that I boarded a plane with her a few weeks ago, headed for New Haven, CT.

Now it may seem a little odd for a graduate student's father to accompany her. They thought it was odd that her mother and I drove her to her candidacy committee psych evaluation. ("Look," she said, "I've been back in the country for 24 hours after a year away, and I live 150 miles from here. What's wrong with wanting to spend some time with my parents?")

But she was moving into an unfurnished

apartment and couldn't really take anything with her, so I offered to go and help her get set up. We spent several days driving around to thrift stores, Ikea, Target, and various other places, and finally got her pretty well squared away by the time orientation began and old dad said adieu.

Unnerving campus

Being back on the campus was a little disorienting. I'd been there maybe twice since I graduated, and the last time was at least 15 years ago. When I got home, people said, "Had it changed?" My answer was, yes and no. From the outside everything looked the same — beautiful brick buildings around a graceful quadrangle. But the inside, over the last several years, has been completely gutted and remodeled. All the dormitories are converted to other uses. So I could point to the window that was my dorm room, but darned if I could actually find the window when I went inside the building. Unnerving, to say the least.

The faculty is different, too. Only a couple of holdovers from my day. The giants are gone.

(Doesn't everyone feel that way?) George Lindbeck, Brevard Childs, Hans Frei, David Kelsey, all the professors who contributed to what used to be called the "new Yale theology," all retired or dead. There are some new giants, I suppose, but most of the faculty are more or less unfamiliar names to me.

Some things are the same. We found my class picture, hanging in an out-of-the-way hallway. I pointed out several people whom she knew — her uncle, her brother's godparents. "Boy, he hasn't changed. And she still looks the same." Funny, she didn't say that about my picture.

Genderqueer

She wanted my ideas about what to take, and so I perused the catalogue. Some good stuff there, and not as much fluff as I feared. Finally I said, "Well, I don't think you can go wrong. Just avoid any course whose description includes the word 'genderqueer,' and you'll probably be all right."

And she will be all right. I'm not at all sure she'll come out where I am theologically. After all, I didn't come out of seminary quite where I am theologically now. Of course I see the continuities more than the disjunctions.

She doesn't know, and I don't, if she will

ultimately pursue ordination. In a way, I'm glad she doesn't know that yet. Let her learn some theology, do some reflecting, and then discern what God is calling her to do. If I had it to do over, I think I might be a little slower to jump on the ordination track. Not that I could have gotten away from it, you understand; it is a calling, after all. But I would probably approach it a little differently.

Part of life

Ah, the wonder of watching your children discover their calling! It's got to be one of the most incredible aspects of parenthood — and not just when your child is going to seminary. I feel the same way about my son, who is in journalism graduate school — a career choice that really took me by surprise.

But it's part of life, isn't it? "Ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown." In some sense, watching my children make these discoveries helps me make sense of my own journey. At least it reminds me of the most important thing about that journey: that even when I don't know where I'm going, God's hand is leading me, God's love supporting me. In the end, that's all that matters. — *by Richard O. Johnson, associate editor*

A Valparaiso safety zone

by Peter Speckhard



It gets trickier every year to be a loyal son of both Valparaiso University and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

Recently I visited a member of my congregation, a VU student who lives in a campus dorm billed as an "Intentional Christian Community." Sure, such a thing ought to be superfluous on an intentionally Christian campus, but, let's face it, a lot of things that ought to be aren't, whether at Valpo or anywhere else.

Anyway, a little sign taped in the dorm's front door window proclaimed:

This space is a safe zone in which

members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community as well as their allies are welcome and can be guaranteed acceptance and support.

Wrong support

So, was I welcome there? To be welcome, one had to "support" the GLBT community and be their "ally." As a fellow sinner and Christian and as a parish pastor, I support homosexuals the same way I support everyone else — by sharing God's Word of Law and Gospel and seeking to free them from the tyranny of their sin.

But I suspect that isn't the kind of support

the sign guaranteed. I'd almost wager (though I'd truly love to be wrong on this) that whoever put that sign up wanted — nay, demanded — to live in world where homosexual behavior is not immoral. I do not inhabit such a world.

Even so, am I an “ally” of the GLBT community? As I see it, yes. I am willing to deal pastorally as best I can with anyone, as God enables me. In that sense I'm everyone's ally. But because I believe (along with Scriptures, the LCMS, and the global, historic Church) that homosexual activity is wrong, I probably flunk the sign's ally test. In the mind of whomever put that sign up, I have no doubt that unless I am apologetic or at least slightly embarrassed by the LCMS's conservative position on all things GLBT, I am an enemy of their community.

Sticks and stones

And what did it mean by “safe”? Even given my enemy status, did anyone think I was going to throw rocks at them if they came outside? Spit in their faces? What were they safe from? I'm nice. I play well with others. They're safe from people like me. (We can't be talking about actual violent criminals who might hate the GLBT community. Such people are not known for honoring taped-up signs.) No, I don't think sticks and stones are the issue. They're worried about doctrines, “intolerant” Christian doctrines, doctrines that are guaranteed intolerance within that “intentional Christian community.”

But guaranteed by whom? The resident I visited was never asked about it and didn't even know who had put the sign up. But as a Christian, and as a pastor of the LCMS, just like VU's current and past presidents, was I now an invader here? Did I represent an alien and hostile presence in this intentionally Christian community? I wonder. But I also wonder how many other such “safe zones” might pepper the campus. Is there any place where Jehovah's Witnesses are “safe” from Christmas trees? Where Scientologists are guaranteed to have Tom Cruise taken seriously? Where six-day creationists are safe from the arguments, smirks, and dreaded “judgmentalism” of evolutionists? Do we have any “feminist-free zones”? (If not, I'll bet someone could make a pretty penny selling tickets to one.) Is there any place on campus where a person who whole-heartedly believes what the

LCMS teaches about human sexuality is similarly “safe” from contradiction and can be guaranteed support?

It might be fun, in an adolescent prankish sort of way, to put up little signs for such zones around campus just to see what would happen. They'd probably get taken down, which is just as well. In all likelihood (putting the best construction on it) this “safe zone” sign merely represented that very sort of unfortunate juvenile nonsense — sincere, misguided, and annoying in equal measure.

Dead-end side-street

So why has this particular sign not been taken down? Valpo has long been a leader in seeing Lutheranism in relation to the larger Church. Thus it has sometimes been embarrassed by the perceived parochialism of its LCMS roots. But one of recent history's little ironies is that the road forward in that truly broad, ecumenical perspective now happens to be the road not out of the LCMS, but out of the little dead-end side-street of liberal Protestantism.

The GLBT sign merely provides a case in point. The LCMS position on human sexuality, in stark contra-distinction to that of the GLBT community, happens to coincide almost exactly with virtually everyone else's in all of Christendom — Catholic, Orthodox, or Evangelical. Only the dying mainline protestant bodies call themselves both Christian and socio-political allies of the GLBT community. Given that fact, the bold proclamation of a safe zone can only be read as an emblem of a new parochialism at VU, an outlook colored by a quirky, militant and rigidly dogmatic brand of Christianity out of step with the larger Church.

Only this time it isn't the LCMS playing that role. So here's to hoping that it gets trickier every year to be a loyal son (if such a thing there be) of both the GLBT community and Valparaiso University.

Peter Speckhard <pspeckhard@hotmail.com> graduated from Valparaiso University in 1992 and currently serves as senior pastor of Faith Lutheran Church in Green Bay, WI. He and his wife Heidi are expecting their fifth child this month. This is his first contribution to Forum Letter.

Omnium gatherum

The LCMS lawsuit ● I don't know anything more than this. No sooner had we gone to press last month with the story of the LCMS lawsuit "intervention" than the case was dropped and dismissed "with prejudice." The plaintiffs — including the four LCMS board members who brought the "intervention" (Edward Balfour, Elizabeth Fluegel, David Hawk and Christian Preus) — have ended all proceedings. Apologies were made broadly to the LCMS and more particularly to President Gerald Kieschnick, and good feelings of mutual joy were expressed by all.

Whatever ● Recently in a *Los Angeles Times* op-ed one Charlotte Allen criticized liberal Christianity generally, and Episcopalians particularly. We would allow that some of her comments were a bit over the top (particularly about the ordination of women), but we do have some sympathy with her speculation on declining church attendance: "When your religion says 'whatever' on doctrinal matters, regards Jesus as just another wise teacher, refuses on principle to evangelize and lets you do pretty much what you want, it's a short step to deciding that one of the things you don't want to do is get up on Sunday morning and go to church." Her criticism provoked no less than a full page paid advertisement in the *Times* a couple of weeks later, signed, by the Episcopal bishop of Los Angeles. He was not happy about how Ms. Allen portrayed his church, and he said so in no uncertain terms. Episcopalians, he insisted, "believe that

the central biblical mandates are clear: to love, welcome, and include all people into an egalitarian Christian fellowship." Whatever.

Coming conference ● *Called to Engage the Postmodern World — The Lutheran Voice in Contemporary America* is the title of a conference at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, November 3-4. Slated speakers include an array of Lutherans, Roman Catholics and Evangelicals. Among them: Robert Benne, Mark A. Noll, Harold O.J. Brown, Fr. Gregory Lockwood, Paul Rorem. Call 314.505.7000 for details. The conference is sponsored by Concordia's Institute on Lay Vocation, directed by Uwe Siemon-Netto.

Stickers off fruit ● The 730-page book is titled *Encyclopedia of United States Stamps and Stamp Collecting*. It might be subtitled *The Secret Life of an ELCA Pastor* because Rodney A. Juell, one of the two editors, is an ELCA pastor. He spends his spare time fiddling with those little pieces of paper. I don't "do" stamps, you know. Stamps have as much appeal to me as collecting the little stickers off fruit in the produce aisle. No, I'm a coin guy myself, very wholesome, and I sometimes write for *Numismatic News*. But — not that I'm going so far as to actually encourage the habit — if you "do" stamps this is *the* book to have. It is really a remarkable work and it won a highly-prized international award in philatelic literature (\$30.00 at Kirkhouse Publishers <www.kirkhouse.com>).

Address Service Requested

Periodicals
Postage Paid

AMERICAN LUTHERAN PUBLICITY BUREAU
LUTHERAN FORUM / FORUM LETTER
POST OFFICE BOX 327
DELHI, NY 13753-0327