

FORUM LETTER

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Wonder, imagination, awe, humor



“Once a person grasps, through the eyes of faith, the omnipotence of the Redeemer God, you can ride easy in the theological saddle without falling off the horse. You do not become so prone to the dyslectic: putting God into little doghouses. One is able to draw large camels through the eyes of very small needle heads. You even can gain a sense of wonder, imagination, awe, and humor when you consider gigantic issues. You can smile broadly when you read that God called into existence light before he created the luminaries. (Genesis 1:3 cf., 1:14-18) To people who want to put God in a box, this will seem like nonsense. Nevertheless, faith sees what appears to be a contradiction to our finite minds. It beholds the powerful paradoxical patterns of the Creator-Savior.” — from *The Seduction of Extremes: Swallowing Camels and Straining Gnats* by Peter Kurowski (Pleasant Word, 2007)

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Missouri Synod paradox — churchly and sectarian at the same time

by Robert Benne



“We don’t want any Eucharist sharing with you!” “No! You’re not a confessional Lutheran!”

Such were the pleasantries shouted my way after I gave my lecture to the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod 2007 Symposia Series at Concordia Seminary in Fort Wayne January 18. What an exhilarating experience, to be vehemently denounced for the first time in forty years by someone from the Right! In those years I’ve been excoriated by many, many folks from the Left, sometimes in public (the redoubtable Ed Knudsen called for my excommunication), but much more often in private. Mostly and most simply the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America chooses to ignore its dissidents rather than argue with them. (This year I have appeared at both the LCMS Concordia seminaries but haven’t lectured at a single ELCA seminary for at least twenty years, though I incessantly write about Lutheran themes and issues.)

But let’s get the whole story. I was graciously invited to the symposium by Prof. David Scaer, who gave me my topic: *A Confessional Lutheran Voice in the Contemporary Scene*. The symposium, I should mention, is one of the largest annual symposia devoted to theological discussion; it routinely attracts five

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hundred or more attendees to the old gym at the seminary's lovely Fort Wayne campus. Fellow outsiders invited were Carl Braaten and Darryl Hart, a prolific Reformed author.

Difficult engagement

I interpreted my assignment as a request to reflect on how Lutherans from the two American churches engage the public world through their intellectuals, pastors, and laypersons. I admitted that such engagement was difficult for any religious tradition because of the hysterical worry on the part of secularists about religious people and arguments appearing in public. I also opined that all religious groups were having a hard time communicating their traditions because of a high degree of pluralism and individualism in our country. Without such communication, there would not be a well-formed, critical mass of intellectuals, pastors, and laypersons to address the public sphere.

Then I launched into a critique of the ELCA and the Missouri Synod. I gave my usual schtick about the ELCA — its headlong drift into liberal Protestantism led by our intrepid presiding bishop. Our founding documents are fine but the ELCA's real working theology dictates a non-negotiable commitment to quotas, access to abortion, demasculinization of all images and language about God, "full inclusion" of gays and lesbians, an obsession with "diversity," left wing political posturing, and centralization of governance. Those are at the center for the ELCA elite with the classic functions of the church on the periphery. In such a situation the public world will not be addressed by those holding confessional Lutheran convictions; it will be engaged by those motivated by the liberationist ethics of liberal Protestantism.

A change in tone

The audience really liked what I had to say about the ELCA. It was when I got to the Missouri Synod that the tone changed. I argued that Missouri once produced several generations of intellectuals, pastors, and laypersons who indeed engaged the public world in a magnificent way. But I also mentioned that most of them fled to the ELCA or other religious traditions and there have not been many raised up to succeed them.

This was because, I argued, Missouri is caught in a debilitating set of sectarian currents. Its headquarters elite think that it is the only true church in Christendom and therefore will not cooperate with others, let alone share in the Eucharist. Engagement with others will contaminate Missourians so they stay to themselves and miss out on the essential oxygen that flows from other parts of the Christian world. Worse, the guiding documents of the church — the *Brief Statement of 1932* and the *Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles of 1973* — are so bound by fundamentalist assumptions that any theological and biblical creativity is easily squelched by anyone on the Right asking if the writer believes in the literal six-day creation and/or the historicity of Jonah. Opposition to evolution in any form is an article of faith in those documents. These are formulae for eternal conflict and constriction. In such a climate public engagement is unlikely because it takes a certain amount of freedom and creativity to do so, qualities in scarce supply in Missouri.

After I called for an ELCA more centered on its confessional heritage and a Missouri with a freer and more pacific spirit, I asked for questions. The questions demonstrated that Missouri — or at least a portion of Missouri seated in the gym — did not want to be free or pacific.

A seated half

One pastor asked me what I meant by fundamentalist themes in the founding documents. I told the audience that commitment to a literal six-day creation was a Missouri Synod accretion on the Lutheran tradition, and served as a false gate to get into the Lutheran confessional tradition. And I, for one, found it was too much to reject all forms of evolution. I added that such unwarranted hurdles would cost them many young people and theologians. I then said: "I doubt if everyone in this room believes in the six-day creation!" Whereupon at least half the room jumped from their chairs and shouted: "I do, I do." But I publicly observed that half didn't stand up.

Then someone asked me about Eucharistic sharing and I allowed that I thought I was confessional enough to share the Eucharist with the gathered group. Whereupon a small number

shouted: “No! You’re not confessional!” “We don’t want to share with you!”

That was boorish enough to bring scores of apologies to me from the many who may have been somewhat sympathetic with what I said.

Whoring with Babylon

Pastors told me that a portion of the attendees at Fort Wayne consists of recently minted pastors who have come late to the ministry or have come from other traditions, and they are super orthodox. They want to fight against all “errors.” They are triumphant about the 1970s and believe they are the one true church and will assert dubious teachings just to let everyone know they are separate and faithful. I heard much talk about how they need to resist evolution and historical criticism of any sort. And many are virulently anti-Catholic. After Carl Braaten endorsed small steps to more agreement and sharing with Rome, one pastor publicly asked why we should want to make any steps toward the Whore of Babylon.

Now to complicate matters. At the same time that I experienced strong — sometimes nasty — resistance from what I consider to be sectarians, I found the seminary’s administration, faculty, and students to be far more churchly and vibrant than those of any ELCA seminary I can think of.

How many ELCA seminaries could or would hold straight theological conferences attended by 500 pastors? Most of the attendees were also polite, gracious, and thoughtful. The whole place was free of the kind of political correctness that stifles liberal institutions. You could call God “he” without a sizeable portion of the community breaking into the vapors. Feminization of the church is not their problem.

The student body is sizeable and growing, made up predominantly of young men with some second-career men and young women studying for various positions in the church. They seemed enthusiastic about ordained ministry as well as

other churchly callings. They loved to talk theology. They are overwhelmingly Lutheran in outlook and ethos; the student body is not augmented by candidates training for ministry in other churches, as is the case in most ELCA seminaries. Consistent with Fort Wayne being the “high church” seminary of the Missouri Synod, the worship of the community was magnificent. The music was heavenly. This was all enhanced by the presence of 500 pastors who sang wonderfully. It doesn’t get any better than that.

But, yet, there is the narrow gate — consisting of non-Lutheran accretions — that blocks the way for Missouri either to do creative theology or translate the faith ever-fresh to new generations. The narrow gate makes everyone a bit skittish inside the house of faith, especially since there are lots of wolves and coyotes in there. It prevents lots of faithful people from joining it but, because it swings outward, it certainly allows people to leave.

Nevertheless, perhaps Missouri may prevail and flourish.

What would you wager on: that Missouri will flourish in spite of its confining commitments or that the ELCA will be re-centered on its Lutheran confessional heritage?

Or could there be a third way — a realignment of those in Missouri tired of conflict and confinement with those in the ELCA weary of liberal Protestant drift? An attractive thought, but only that. There is no historical sign of it happening. Many of us will simply have to live at the local — and perhaps regional — level and pray for a miracle.

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A sincere word of thanks to our readers and the supporters of the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau for their generous Christmas contributions. The ALPB, since 1914, has strived to serve confessional Lutheranism in America. That commitment is no less firm today than it was 93 years ago. We are simultaneously gratified and humbled by your support.

From Rwanda to Darfur to Iowa

by Russell J.A. Melby



“Most days, I wish I would not have survived the genocide in Rwanda.” I listened to these horrendous words and knew she spoke as one who had been raped by an evil man during the 1994 one hundred days of terror in Rwanda, when 800,000 people were butchered.

Ten years after her hell-on-earth experience, this Rwanda colleague serves as a staff member of Rwanda’s YWCA. Her supervisor told me that she is one of the most effective persons with whom she is privileged to work.

I learned something of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda while visiting there with two Church World Service colleagues and several donors in January of 2005. We traveled in Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya to learn, observe, and evaluate how our East Africa partners are serving infants and vulnerable children whose parents have died of AIDS, and, in the case of Rwanda, the 1994 genocide. One school teacher attempted an explanation of the genocide by stating: “It was as if all the devils in hell came to Rwanda and committed unspeakable acts of terror.”

Not long after returning from East Africa in February of 2005, I was invited by my friends, Rabbi David Kaufman (a Reform Rabbi serving Temple B’nai Jeshuran) and Dr. Mark Finkelstein (Jewish Federation of Greater Des Moines, IA) to join an interfaith group in addressing the then two-year old genocide in Darfur, Sudan. The interfaith group consisted of Des Moines area Jews and Christians, and recently-arrived Christians and Muslims from Sudan, including Muslims from Darfur. Our goal then and now is to encourage members of the Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities within Iowa to become educated for and advocate on behalf of those who survive in Darfur villages and towns and within refugee camps situated in Chad and the Sudan.

Indiscriminate killings

On July 24, 2004, the United States Congress declared that genocide was taking place in Darfur, an area in Sudan about the size of France.

During the same month, the Save Darfur Coalition was started, largely as a result of the efforts of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC. Elie Wiesel stated at the time, in reference to the Darfurians: “How can I hope to move people from indifference if I remain indifferent to the plight of others? I can not stand idly by or all my endeavors will be unworthy.”

The facts are that groups of “devils on horseback,” referred to as *Janjaweed*, supported by the government of Sudan, have been burning villages, indiscriminately killing women, children, and men, raping girls and women, destroying water supplies, and engaging in a systematic genocide against human beings.

The government of Sudan is Field Marshall General Omar al-Bashir, who took power in a 1989 coup. Most of the people being systematically attacked are black Darfurian Africans, tribal farmers for the most part. At times, the al-Bashir government has openly aided the *Janjaweed* by providing air support, attacking villages with Antonov bombers.

Darfur’s development has been mostly ignored since Sudan’s independence in 1956. The tensions are economic as well as religious and ethnic in origin, centered between the mostly black African Darfurians and the Arab Sudanese. Small conflicts have gone on throughout much of Sudan’s history. Serious fighting broke out in Darfur in February 2003 between the black African rebels forming part of the Sudan Liberation Army and the government of the Sudan.

A cease fire was declared in September 2003 but by early December that year the *Janjaweed* broke the cease fire by again attacking villagers. At the end of that year, the U.N. estimated that up to one million refugees were in critical need of humanitarian assistance. Refugee camps were located along the Sudan and Chad border. Some new camps were set up farther into Chad in an attempt to keep the *Janjaweed* from attacking the refugees. The violence against civilians in Darfur continued. The limited number of African Union peace-keeping troops were unable to stop the

killing and raping, and the village burnings.

Throughout 2004 and 2005 one cease fire after another was broken. More Darfurians were murdered and forced to flee their homes for the relative safety of refugee camps. U.N. resolutions were adopted and U.S. legislation was passed condemning the genocide. The U.S. and the U.N. threatened sanctions against the government of Sudan. The United States government sent several hundred million dollars in humanitarian assistance for those Darfurians living in refugee camps in Chad or as “internally displaced persons” within Sudan.

In May of 2006 another peace treaty was signed between the Sudanese government and the largest rebel group in the Darfur.

The ELCA, Lutheran World Federation, Church World Service, American Jewish World Service, Doctors Without Borders, and many other U.S. and international church and humanitarian groups attempt to minister to those Darfurians and other Sudanese most affected by the conflict. Lutherans, along with others like Church World Service, are providing medicines, blankets, food, tents, schools, and hope for at least some of the refugees. Many church-based groups, including Lutheran congregations, are channeling their resources through a consortium known as the Action by Churches Together.

I am persuaded that the ones who are experiencing genocide in Darfur should not be ignored by those of us who have been claimed by a gracious God. Responding to the victims of genocide has become, ever since my encounter with the women at the YWCA in Rwanda, a burden I can not put off to the side. It isn't something to be postponed like the unread books on my shelves. People created in God's image are being brutalized, raped, murdered, and they cry out for our action.

A straight appeal

This is a straight appeal to you. Please join efforts to end the genocide in Darfur. We can make our voices heard through prayer, through our adult and youth forums at church, through addressing the genocide in our sermons and by contacting our U.S. representatives, senators, President Bush, and others in our government, and

urge an end to the genocide. Persistence in our prayers and persistence in our contacts with our members of Congress as to how we feel about the genocide can become a part of our daily and weekly routines, until the genocide has ended.

Advocacy resources

When will we have done enough? When the genocide is over. When peace is restored. When people can leave the stench of over-crowded refugee camps where food rations are often inadequate. We can and should be among those who advocate on behalf of the least of these children of God who live in sometimes daily terror of being raped or killed.

There are many education and advocacy resources available. The most up to date information on Darfur can be obtained by going to www.savedarfur.org. Lutherans will also want to reference Lutheran World Relief (www.lwr.org/emergencies/04/Sudan/index.asp). Church World Service — the humanitarian arm of 35 Christian denominations, as well as my employer — is also involved in delivering supplies to refugees and others in Darfur and Chad (www.churchworldservice.org).

Who will?

According to estimates published in *Science* (September 2006) no fewer than 200,000 deaths have resulted from the conflict. The number is higher by now.

In his essay “The Unbeliever and Christians” (found in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, 1960), Albert Camus addressed a Christian audience:

Perhaps we cannot prevent this world from being a place where children are tortured, but we can reduce the number of tortured children. If you don't help us do this, who will?

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The Lutheran Symbols on stewardship

by Philip J. Secker



Most stewardship programs emphasize that believers are to be good “stewards” or “managers.” In his essay “Sacrament, Sacrifice and Stewardship,” however, Arthur Carl Piepkorn pointed out that the only Scripture passage that employs the word for “steward” in this way is 1 Peter 4:10 (he admits that “something of this stress is implied in Our Lord’s application of the parable of the unjust steward”). In most canned stewardship programs, the focus is on stewardship of “time, treasures and talents.” In 1 Peter 4:10 it is on being good stewards of “God’s varied grace.”

Piepkorn often stated, though not explicitly in this article, that stewardship, like fasting and prayer, are parts of what the Symbols call “the external discipline” (cf. Matt. 6:1-6). That means that we cannot wait for the Holy Spirit to move us to practice them, but must discipline ourselves to do so. (The use of pledges is an example of one way to do this.)

Here are several excerpts from the article, which was originally delivered as an essay at the 1960 LCMS Michigan District convention:

Sacrament and sacrifice

“The thesis of this [essay] is four-fold: 1) Whenever God through the Church imparts His grace to human beings in the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, He empowers in and expects from each recipient of His grace a response in the form of sacrifice, understood in the broad sense of ‘an action (*ceremonia*) or work which we give to God to do Him honor’ (Apology of the Augsburg Confession XXIV, 18). 2) This sacramental gift of God and our sacrificial response stand in the relation of cause and effect, even though there need be no interval between the two. 3) This rhythm of sacrament and sacrifice finds expression in the historic rites in which the Church — and specifically the Churches of the Augsburg Confession — administers these Sacraments. 4) This double movement of sacrament and sacrifice deserves serious attention in our stewardship training efforts.

“There is a widespread impression among Lutherans that ‘sacrament’ and ‘sacrifice’ are mutually exclusive concepts, that if a rite or an action is a ‘sacrament’ it cannot be a ‘sacrifice’ and vice versa.

“In Lutheran theology this is not necessarily the case. At this point let me illustrate with a single example. The preaching of the Gospel in a sermon is by common consent a ‘sacramental’ action, the effective offer and communication of the divine forgiveness to men by one of God’s responsible ambassadors. Yet in Lutheran theology sermons are called sacrifices. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession (IV 190) declares in so many words: ‘The sermons . . . of St. Paul the Apostle, of St. Athanasius, of St. Augustine and of others who like them taught the Churches are . . . authentic sacrifices that God accepted.’”

Liberal and meaningful use

“Thus a large part of the task of stewardship is the interpretation to ourselves and to one another of the meaning of the Sacraments and the encouragement of ourselves and one another to make more extensive, more liberal and more meaningful use of them.”

Living stewardship sacramentally

“[The task of stewardship] involves, in brief, adapting our stewardship appeals to the sacramental realities of Holy Baptism and the Holy Communion and the sacrificial realities of the life to which they summon us and for which they enable us. It involves making the practice of stewardship the practical living out of that which our participation in Holy Baptism and in the Holy Communion already and irrevocably implies.”

Philip J. Secker is director of The Arthur Carl Piepkorn Center for Evangelical Catholicity (www.Piepkorn.info) and a previous contributor to Forum Letter. The full essay “Sacrament, Sacrifice and Stewardship” may be found in The Church: Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn, now in its second edition available from ALPB Books (www.alpb.org).

Omnium gatherum



Christological psalms ● More than a couple of readers have taken umbrage — yes, that is the word — at the associate editor’s comment in reference to Psalm 1, namely, that “nobody believes the psalmist was talking about some specific male being” (“Challenging Translations,” December 2006 *FL*). In a christological interpretation of the Psalms, these readers insist, of course, the psalmist was talking about the specific and male human being, Jesus of Nazareth.

Well — and we have this on the highest authority — the associate editor thinks that’s perhaps a little picky. He points out that the whole thrust of the essay was to warn that translations which make seemingly innocuous changes from singular to plural language in order to avoid male nouns or pronouns may, in fact, have theological problems precisely because they inhibit such a christological interpretation of an Old Testament text.

What he meant to suggest is that one can read the Psalms christologically without insisting that the Psalmist actually wrote with a consciously christological intent. Thus the Psalmist might have thought he was writing about a generic someone who “walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,” while the Holy Spirit had someone else in mind entirely. Having said that, the associate editor is willing to admit that maybe in Psalm 1 the use of the generic plural language is just as problematic, as he argued it to be in Psalm 24.

Incidentally, if the christological interpretation of the Psalms is a new concept to you, you owe it to yourself to read Patrick Henry Reardon’s magnificent volume *Christ in the Psalms* (Conciliar Press, 2000). It contains a brief essay on how each of the 150 Psalms points to Christ. It’s a fascinating book, both for devotional and for study purposes.

Making nice with Anabaptists ● The church council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America last November expressed “its deep and abiding sorrow and regret for the persecution and suffering visited upon the Anabaptists during the religious disputes of the past.” The expression of

regret evidently arose because of the ELCA’s growing relationships with Mennonites and others coming from the Anabaptist tradition. So, the ELCA council took the simple expedient of saying past persecution was wrong and that the *Formula of Concord’s* condemnations of Anabaptists in general “do not apply in any form to today’s Mennonite Church USA” in particular.

There is something slightly troubling about all this. Well, some of this, at any rate. I actually haven’t favored persecuting Anabaptists for many years now. But I am unaware that Mennonite teaching has changed in any fundamental way. And if it has changed so much that the *Formula’s* reservations no longer have theological applicability, then why apologize when we can gloat (with becoming modesty, of course)? Hooray, we won the argument!

The Mennonite Church USA, however, hasn’t changed its teaching. It remains the case, for instance, that “Baptism is for those who are of the age of accountability and who freely request baptism on the basis of their response to Jesus Christ in faith.” (Source: Mennonite Church USA <www.mcusa-archives.org/library/resolutions/1995/1995-11.html>.)

No, I instead fear the ELCA council effectively amended the Confessions only because we have found that Mennonites are nice. To be fair to the council, though, the declaration does say that baptismal faith and practice are subjects of future conversation. One hopes that means lots of conversation. You may review things for yourself at (www.elca.org/ecumenical/ecumenicaldialogue/mennonite/). You’ll need a PDF file reader.

None of this of course addresses the wisdom of apologizing for the sins of others after they are long dead, but it is certainly easier than apologizing for your own.

Extending toleration ● Noting that Anabaptists were a frequent target of official persecution by the state at the behest of the church, the ELCA council equally repudiated “the use of governmental authorities [by the church] to punish individuals or groups with whom it disagrees theologi-

cally.” Though the declaration is limited to the Mennonite Church USA in the moment, we do think the council has set a precedent for tolerance that may soon be extended to Republicans in the ELCA.

A stand-up cause ● The October 2006 press release — issued through the ELCA’s Washington, DC advocacy office — gushed:

“More than 1,500 members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) were among the 110,332 U.S. citizens and 23.5 million people worldwide who stood up during worship Oct. 15 to fight global poverty. The ‘STAND UP’ event set a national and global record in the *Guinness World Records* for the largest number of people to stand up for a cause. . . . Lutherans across the United States participated in the event organized as part of ‘ONE: The Campaign to Make Poverty History,’ in cooperation with the United Nations’ Millennium Campaign.”

The press release goes on to admit inadvertently that better than half of the stand-ups came from only three congregations. It gets better. At Solor Lutheran Church in Webster, MN, “52 people stood for a moment during worship, 14 of whom participated in a house party later that day” to discuss and act on poverty and hunger.

As a friend noted, the real problem here isn’t that so few stood up, but that the ELCA’s LOGA office (Lutheran Office for Governmental Affairs) actually believes they accomplished something. You really have to work hard to do something so monumentally ineffective as to get a response of only “over 1500 people” in the entire

ELCA.

And so far as records go in a world wide cause, how many people world wide stood up that Sunday to state the Apostles’ Creed in the cause of faith?

Lenten surrender ● We’re well into mid-Lent by the time you read this, well into the Lenten disciplines of fasting, prayer and charity. It’s the first that has always flummoxed me. One year some while back, I determined to give up cigars for Lent. Like somebody said, I enjoy a good cigar but I’ll settle for a bad one when a good one can’t be had. I was all set for the close of the Ash Wednesday liturgy to enter upon my Lenten contemplations smoke-free. Then, in the mail some few days before, there arrived a package from a friend in New York. Opening it, I found several cartons of my favorite brand of cigar. His note said he was giving up cigars for Lent and remembered we both liked the same brand. Obviously, this was a sign to give up something else. Celery?

Which brings to mind the recent novel *Survivor* by Chuck Palahniuk, wherein is found this prayer:

Our most Holy Father,
Take from me the choice You have given.
Assume control of my will and habits.
Wrest from me power over my own behavior.
May it be Your decision how I act.
May it be by Your hands, my every failing.
Then if I still smoke, may I accept that my smoking is Your will.
Amen.

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