

FORUM LETTER

Volume 36 Number 9

September 2007

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A cure from the serpent



“Those faults that we do not perceive till after they are committed will not be cured by inquietude and vexation with ourselves; on the contrary, this fretfulness is only the impatience of pride at the view of its own downfall. The only use, then, to be made of such errors is to submit quietly to the humiliation they bring, for it is not being humble to resist humiliations. We must condemn our faults, lament them, repent of them, without seeking any palliation or excuse, viewing ourselves as in the presence of God, with all our imperfections upon our heads, and without any feeling of bitterness or discouragement, meekly improving our disgrace. Thus may we draw from the serpent a cure for the venom of the wound. . . . God never makes us feel our weakness but that we may be led to seek strength from Him.”

—François de la Mothe Fénelon, *Letters and Reflections* (ET 1906).

LCMS in Houston—disagreeing to agree



The old saying goes that there are two kinds of people—those who say there are two kinds of people, and those who don't. It applies pretty well to today's Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod coming out of our triennial convention in July, in that our biggest internal disagreement seems to be on the question of whether we have any internal doctrinal disagreements anymore.

The leadership of the synod fully acknowledges we have differing practices and applications of our doctrine in various places, but insists the doctrine is the same everywhere. The opposition says our obviously differing practices in worship and fellowship stem from doctrinal issues that have never been resolved. Oddly, the biggest challenge faced by those at the convention who disagreed with the leadership was in convincing the leadership that they actually disagreed theologically, not merely with the “how” of this or that practice, but with the “what” of the doctrine behind those practices.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. More on this later.

Kieschnick by a nose

The 63rd LCMS Convention, held July 14-20 in Houston, saw President Gerald Kieschnick reelected by a firm but (surprisingly) slim vote of 52% on the first ballot. And with him the delegates affirmed the *Ablaze!* campaign to share the Gospel with one hundred million people by 2017, the 500th anniversary of the start of the Reformation.

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

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.

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SUBSCRIPTION OFFICE: American
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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.

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ISSN 0046-4732

Most of the convention was about as controversial as the proposition that evangelism is good. Anyone who came expecting (or perhaps hoping for) ecclesial fireworks went home pleasantly surprised (or disappointed, as the case may be) by the lack of overt politicking, angry denunciations and parliamentary maneuvering. There was virtually none of that.

Two little tables

There was, of course, one little table manned by very unobtrusive people from a group called JesusFirst handing out free stuff along with sample ballots of preferred candidates from President Kieschnick on down. And next to them, another table featuring a stack of free copies of Christian News, detailing why not to vote for President Kieschnick or any of the JesusFirst names.

But few people bothered with either table. The tone remained civil, the disagreements muted and respectful (mostly), and the decisions generally innocuous. By the end, both sides of the various disagreements were congratulating each other and themselves for the churchmanship displayed by all. And not without reason; in what is perhaps rare for church conventions, nobody went away telling the other side to grow up.

Aura of an infomercial

At times the lack of controversy made the whole convention take on the aura of an infomercial for *Ablaze!*. (The exclamation point and italics are part of the logo, which makes for strange punctuation when one ends a sentence with *Ablaze!*.) We had an *Ablaze!* Update, about 20 "*Ablaze!* Moments" (little one-minute video interviews with people talking about experiences in personal evangelism on the jumbo screen), *Ablaze!* shirts, an *Ablaze!*-oriented President's report, *Ablaze!* references in nearly all the Bible studies and devotions, and even a nod to *Ablaze!* from President Bush in his video address to the convention.

And then the convention was followed by an International *Ablaze!* Summit with leaders of

various LCMS sister churches throughout the world.

For those who haven't heard, *Ablaze!* is the official LCMS evangelism campaign, designed by someone who apparently majored in Pep Squad. Few people have anything against the evangelism goals of it; but many people object to the trappings of Evangelicalism associated with it, so it has taken on a certain political quality. To wear an *Ablaze!* logo is sort of like having a Support Our Troops bumper sticker; it sometimes subtly means more than it says. Some people, like the late former LCMS President Al Barry, prefer to "Tell the Good News About Jesus." Make sure you don't get them confused.

Bold agreement

But sometimes all the talk of disagreements within a church masks genuine areas of relevant unity, areas in which a church body speaks unambiguously and nearly unanimously as a unified voice to the culture. The temptation, invited by the very nature of conventions and elections and no doubt made worse by the history of the LCMS, is to assume that internal disagreements are the main story. In this case, bold agreement just might go down as the most lasting legacy of this convention.

Normally a church body gets near-unanimous votes when it proclaims the obvious on social issues—poverty is bad, peace is preferable to war, and so forth. Or, the church passes, with contested majorities (say, 60-40 or 70-30), some declaration clearly taking a side on a controversial issue like illegal immigration or welfare reform. But often even those tend to be toothless resolutions to "encourage" some vague non-solution.

In the case of this convention, the LCMS accomplished the rare feat of speaking unambiguously, decisively, and almost unanimously on issues that deeply divide American society and many American churches. Specifically, resolutions concerning abortion and homosexuality show that at least in these areas and social issues

in general, the LCMS is neither divided nor following the lead of the culture but sticking with historic, global Christianity rather than joining the parochial ghetto of the modern American mainline denominations.

Letting their light shine

The abortion issue provided the background for a resolution on embryonic stem cell research (ESCR). This is the issue made famous by actor and Parkinson's disease sufferer Michael J. Fox and one which may have cost Sen. Jim Talent (R-MO) his seat in last year's election. It proved much less controversial in Houston. While the resolution is too long to quote in full, the nub of it is:

WHEREAS, Christians are to let their light shine in this dark world regarding this type of ethical dilemma, and since the LCMS takes a strong and clear pro-life position . . . be it

RESOLVED, that the 2007 LCMS convention makes known its support of adult stem cell research and its opposition to ESCR which involves the taking of a human life.

This resolution is important for three reasons. First, it addresses a highly contentious issue. Further, it takes an unambiguous position. Note that LCMS's pro-life stand is so solid that it is included in the "Whereas" clauses rather than the "Resolveds." Perhaps most significantly, the vote was 97% in favor. There simply is not a relevant pro-choice sector of the LCMS.

That 3%

How to account for even the handful of negative votes? Well, the 3% were probably comprised of four groups: people who reflexively vote "no" on everything, even resolutions to thank God for first article blessings; people who just didn't like the fact that controversial Atlantic District President David Benke chaired the floor

committee that presented the resolution; people who accidentally pushed the wrong button; and perhaps one or two who are secretly pro-choice.

Very few (if any) American church bodies of any size could have achieved that degree of unanimity on that resolution. For a welcome change, the story was not "The LCMS—A House Divided" but "The LCMS—A United Witness to Truth in a Darkening World." Or something like that anyway.

Intrinsically sinful

The other important resolution in this regard concerned homosexuality, specifically the issue of homosexual couples adopting babies, which has been in the news because of the Roman Catholic Church's run-ins with secular authorities on the matter. Again, the resolution is long, but reads in part,

WHEREAS, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and no sin is intrinsically more sinful than another, yet the Bible does clearly teach that sexual relations outside of marriage, including homosexual practice are intrinsically sinful . . .

RESOLVED, that LCMS organizations and LCMS Recognized Service Organizations may not knowingly place adopted or foster children into any intrinsically sinful situations where individuals and families are not living in accordance with the Lord's natural law.

Again, a resolution taking a strong stand on a controversial issue, this time with a binding resolution prohibiting LCMS-affiliated adoption and social work agencies from cooperating in adoptions into homosexual situations. The situation might become complicated by a friendly amendment to include "revealed law" in with "natural law" in the final resolution, which some think might make it impossible for LCMS organizations to consider any non-Christian (or even just non-LCMS) couples as adoptive parents. But even so, the resolution passed with

95% in favor. It seems that on social issues at least, the people of the LCMS believe in the official Roman Catholic position even more univocally than Roman Catholics do.

Kazoo in the orchestra pit

Yet social issues are perhaps the only area where the LCMS is growing closer to the Roman Catholic Communion. Evangelical Catholics are increasingly outnumbered by the Just Plain Old Evangelicals in the LCMS. The *Ablaze!* campaign with all its trappings could easily be adapted for use by Baptists, Assemblies of God, and various independent evangelical megachurches, but would stand out like a kazoo in an orchestra pit in an Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or high-church Anglican or Lutheran setting.

The question is whether the matter amounts to a difference of style or substance. The issue of the authority of Scripture no longer plagues the LCMS. But fellowship and worship issues continue to divide us. The “conservative” opposition won’t agree to disagree on these issues because to them that would mean doctrinal compromise. The “moderate” majority won’t agree to disagree because they don’t agree that there are any doctrinal disagreements to agree to disagree about, if that makes any sense.

On the issue of fellowship and close(d) communion, the conservative opposition thinks that an LCMS congregation that basically allows anyone to take communion practices *de facto* open communion, presumably because they believe that open communion is the right thing to practice, which would mean they have a different doctrine than the LCMS. The majority, however, sees it all as a matter of application. In their view, some pastors and congregations are very stringent, some more loose, but all believe in close(d) communion. Not practicing it is just one way of practicing it, so to speak.

Theology gone missing

So it is all a matter of practice, not doctrine. The same concept applies to worship and the relationship of contemporary worship formats to traditional, sacramental Lutheran worship practices. The

conservative opposition says that contemporary worship as normally practiced in many congregations stems from a different doctrine of worship. The majority not only disagrees, but refuses to recognize that the minority disagrees with them theologically and not merely in terms of style preference.

At one point it became almost comical (you can read about it on the online forum). A conservative speaker from the floor proposed an amendment to a resolution on worship asking that we recognize and work on our theological differences concerning worship, but when the recording secretary read the proposal back to the assembly before the vote, the word “theological” was missing.

Whether intentional or not, the omission illustrates the problem. The opposition wants to discuss doctrine, but the majority under President Kieschnick do not see any of the disagreements as theological or doctrinal, but merely practical. As long as the discussion remains in the realm of practice, anything goes. After all, we’re allowed to do things differently as long as we confess the same faith.

And whether we confess the same faith is what the conservative opposition is not sure of and wants to clarify, and what the moderate majority wants to take for granted and move on. No wonder there wasn’t much drama at the convention; it addressed very few of the actual disagreements as such.

Embryonic trust

But both sides did genuinely listen, so there is an embryonic trust or at least mutual respect developing among the various political “sides” of the synod. All have agreed that it was a good convention at least in this respect: no longer did people shout past each other. The sides at least tried to engage.

And this wrap-up doesn’t even really address the big issues that hogged all the discussion time—a resolution to call a special convention in 2009 to consider synodical structure, a resolution

to create a new “ministry specific pastor program” which would ordain pastors via an alternate route under special circumstances, and a declaration of fellowship with the American Association of Lutheran Churches (a group of former American Lutheran Church congregations who chose not to affiliate with the ELCA back in 1987).

But you’ll read more about all those things in

future issues, I’m sure (and again, the conversation at Forum Online goes into them in great detail). As for now, the best summary of the situation is merely this: the LCMS has a better set of problems facing it than just about any other church body I can think of. These days, that’s no small matter.

—by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

Further thoughts on the Vatican statement



In the August issue, Russell Saltzman commented on the Vatican’s recent statement, “Responses to

Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church.” This document has been quite the buzz; I’ve been asked about it by several people, both in my congregation and around town.

As Pr. Saltzman rightly noted, this piece is nothing new. It simply restates what has long been Roman Catholic teaching. In light of that reality, the coverage in much of the secular press has verged on the hysterical—new evidence, they would want us to believe, that the present Pope is trying to drag the Roman Catholic Church back into the dark ages and is thereby repudiating decades of ecumenical conversation.

The magisterium teaches

That’s baloney, of course. Again, the document simply restates and clarifies what Vatican II originally taught. And it’s worth noting that the document is not really framed as an ecumenical overture; this is the Roman magisterium teaching the Roman Church, and to that extent, it’s really nobody else’s business.

Things are never that simple, of course. But what I find most interesting is the response—quick, though uninvited—by various Lutheran leaders.

Take ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson, for example. He had a statement out even more quickly than he responds to congressional legislation. He acknowledged that the document was nothing new, but nevertheless called it “troubling,” “provocative,” and complained that it “has caused

pain.”

It’s unfortunate that Bp. Hanson felt the need for a quick response, for often when we speak too quickly, we aren’t at our best. We can’t help but remember his remark a few years back (see *FL* April 2004) that ELCA Lutherans and Orthodox Christians had reached “agreement on the *Filioque* issue”—an utter misstatement of what ELCA/Orthodox dialogues had in fact done, and one that gave the impression, to put it gently, that the bishop hadn’t quite understood either the significance of the *Filioque* or the conclusions of the dialogue.

Thoughtful and measured

The bishop, to his credit, insisted that “now is the time for our thoughtful and measured response,” and maybe there will be subsequent responses from him or from the ELCA’s ecumenical officials that come closer to being thoughtful and measured. We hope so. The ELCA’s ecumenical attitudes of late have had a bit of the smiley-face to them, the sort of approach that says “can’t we all just get along” and doesn’t want to grapple with real theological and doctrinal differences. If the Vatican statement serves as a reality check, reminding us that the ecumenical task is considerably more complex and serious than “everybody get together, try to love one another right now,” then it will have been a salutary thing.

More modest response

President Gerald Kieschnick of the LCMS also responded to the Vatican statement—somewhat more modestly, and in a form that seemed more

directed to the LCMS faithful than to the press office. Still, I found his response unfortunate, though for different reasons.

First of all, Dr. Kieschnick opens his letter by quoting, not the Vatican document itself, but an Associated Press story about it. The quote seriously distorted the intent and meaning of the statement, and leaves one wondering whether Dr. Kieschnick actually read anything other than the secular press's spin. He quoted Luther: "Popes and councils can err," and then added a gratuitous, "Apparently that is still true today." That is a sentence that would better have been left unwritten—not because it is untrue, mind you, but because it carries a tone of cynical head-shaking that is unworthy of a church president and not very helpful to anyone.

Ecumenical dialogue is tough sledding, and it is really better left to theologians. That, after all, is why we have them: to think carefully about ecumenical affairs, and to help the rest of us see what the real issue might be. This gets complicated when an ecumenical partner in dialogue says or does some things internally that are difficult for outsiders to comprehend.

But theologians are the ones who can best develop that "thoughtful and measured response." If some comment from Lutheran church presidents or presiding bishops was really deemed necessary, then perhaps a reaffirmation of Augustana VII and a recommitment to continued conversation and prayer would have been enough.

—by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Regime change



Attentive readers will know that, as of this issue, there's a new regime at *Forum Letter*—the result, we hasten to add, not of any coup d'état, but of the planned retirement of Russ Saltzman, announced in the June issue. Russ has been playing with this idea for quite a while, which is understandable after some seventeen years of monthly deadlines. Far as we know, he has no plans to run for office, civil or ecclesiastical (though we understand he came in second in the recent bishop election in his synod). He just was ready to hang it up, and to focus on parish ministry and family life.

You shouldn't anticipate any radical changes to the publication; we follow the rule of thumb "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." Of course there are differences between the former and the current editor. He came to Lutheranism from agnosticism, I came from Methodism (how big *that* difference is, we will not discuss). He's a Republican, I'm a Democrat (though certainly not always a happy one). He's lived in the heartland most of his life, I'm a fourth-generation Californian. We do have significantly different philosophies about punctuation, about which, truth be told, I'm happy I no longer have to dispute.

Tending the whole spectrum

The board of ALPB has been concerned that the *Forum* package has tended to be dominated by ELCA matters. That's defensible to some extent, since the ELCA is obviously the largest segment of American Lutheranism. But ALPB's roots are in Missouri, and its publications have always tried to be very deliberate in tending to the whole spectrum of North American Lutheranism. That continues to be our goal—and we think it an important one, since inter-Lutheran conversation doesn't seem to go on in too many other places these days.

Partly to address that concern, but even more because we think he's articulate and interesting, we have appointed Peter Speckhard as the new associate editor. Pr. Speckhard has written a couple of pieces for us in the past, and he provides our coverage of the LCMS convention in this issue. (If you missed his sprightly on-the-scene commentary at www.alpb.org during the convention, you should be sorry.) He grew up in and around Valparaiso University, where his father was an education professor. Both grandfathers were LCMS pastors, and Peter himself is now pastor of Faith Lutheran Church, Green Bay, Wisconsin. He enjoys life there with his wife (a sometime

Latin teacher, current homemaker/mother) and five children. He's considerably younger than I and yet older, as far as I can tell, than either editor of our companion publication, *Lutheran Forum*. This is only an interesting demographic fact, and not a prediction as to either freshness nor maturity under the new regime. Some time soon we'll ask Peter to introduce himself more fully.

Must reading

In the meantime, we hope you will continue to be loyal readers, even with the place under new management. Rest assured that *Forum Letter* will do its best to continue to be "must reading" among American Lutherans — which is to say, we'll strive to be informative, thoughtful, spicy, charming,

winsome, occasionally sharp, pastoral — but always, we hope, speaking faithfully and out of great love for Christ and his church. As always, we're happy to hear from you about how we're doing on all scores.

If you find enjoyment and satisfaction in *Forum Letter* and *Lutheran Forum*, please introduce us to your friends and colleagues. The quarterly is now, too, under new management, with the appointment of ELCA Pr. Sarah Hinlicky as editor and LCMS Pr. Paul Sauer as associate editor. Both are articulate young voices in American Lutheranism, and when you put them together with Speckhard, I'm feeling like the old gray-head. *Sic transit gloria mundi*.

—by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Omnium gatherum



Concordia Books • Paul McCain over at Concordia Publishing House responded to our offer (July issue) to list CPH's top sellers, since *The Christian Century* didn't include CPH in their survey of the "top five" of various religious publishers. Now that we see the list, we can understand why it might not have been that interesting to *Century* readers. In order of sales, we have: *Lutheran Service Book* (LCMS's new worship book); *The Small Catechism with Explanation* (an old stand-by); *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions* (a new edition of the *Book of Concord*, aimed at a more popular audience than Fortress's Kolb/Wengert edition); *Concordia Self-Study Bible*; and *Lutheran Book of Prayer*. Pretty parochial list, we'd have to say. But then when you see yourself as a publisher of the church, "parochial" is hardly a bad thing to be. Your editor confesses that he actually has three of those five best-sellers on his own book shelf. He doesn't have any of the top five of Fortress Press, they being, shall we say, of less parochial interest.

Two deaths • We're a tad behind here, but we would be remiss if we did not note the deaths recently of two pastors who contributed

significantly to liturgical renewal within American Lutheranism. Pr. Gene Evans was, for many years, pastor of Zion Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Detroit, an LCMS congregation, and was also a guiding light behind the late and lamented liturgical magazine *The Bride of Christ*, published by Lutheran Liturgical Renewal. He died May 19. Pr. S. Anita Stauffer was perhaps better known, at least among a broader range of folks. She was closely involved in the development of the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, and served as editor of the *Occasional Services Book*, and study secretary of the Lutheran World Federation's Department for Theology and Studies. She was also the author of a number of books and articles on matters liturgical. She died June 26. North American Lutheranism was the richer for the lives of these two servants of God; may light perpetual shine upon them.

LCMS Style • The outgoing editor tried to foment some immediate controversy by supposing that the new editor would revert to using a hyphen in the acronym for the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (a usage that was banned during the Saltzman years). David Marshman, former director of news and information for the LCMS, kindly in-

forms us that in the LCMS “style book,” the acronym is never hyphenated. So Saltzman was being neither truculent nor original in omitting it. He also tells us that even “Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod” isn’t technically hyphenated, since that line there in the middle is an em-dash, not a hyphen. But that’s a punctuation subtlety that’s even lost on me, let alone my punctuationally challenged but esteemed predecessor.

ELCA Churchwide Assembly ● Yes, of course we’re going to have plenty to say about it, including an analysis of just what the permission for bishops to ignore the constitution, bylaws, and polices of the ELCA really might mean. But it has to wait until the October issue, see, because the

national church bodies have refused to plan their national conventions in consultation with us about our deadline schedule. But if you are desperate for at least some tentative reports and opinions, you could check out the on-line blogging done from Chicago by your editor at www.alpb.org. And just remember, *The Lutheran’s* coverage probably won’t come until October, either.

The curse of software ● OK, so in this, my first issue as editor, I’ve discovered the really hard part is learning the software. If there are typographically strange things herein, it’s because I decided getting the issue out was more important than getting the appearance perfect. *Mea maxima culpa*.

ALPB Board Dinner

Saturday, October 13th 2007

Immanuel Lutheran Church, 122 East 88th Street, Manhattan, NY
6 PM

Honoring Pr. Russell E. Saltzman, retiring editor of *Forum Letter*

Speaker: Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, editor-in-chief, *First Things*
Response by Russell E. Saltzman

Tickets: \$50

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