

FORUM LETTER

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The mystery and miracle of God's grace

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"So then, I was happy in the way that young priests so often are. This is, I think, a special kind of happiness, one perhaps peculiar to the priest, and, moreover, to the priest when he is just beginning, when he's in the very morning of his new life. Which is not to say that happiness must fade as the priest grows old: it can change its quality, it can deepen, ripen, become richer. But *this* kind of happiness will fade, because it belongs to the young: a mixture of innocence and awe, of freshness and wonder, of reverence and excitement, of joy and of a disbelief, almost, that, for example, it is really *you* who, in this church and on this altar and before these people, are now at last to have the great privilege of consecrating the Body and Blood of our Blessed Lord. Here the miracle and mystery of God's grace strikes home so overwhelmingly, with such freshness and clarity, that it stuns your heart and fills your whole being and nothing else matters at all. And these moments, once known, no matter how long ago, can never be really forgotten." —Edwin O'Connor, *The Edge of Sadness* (Little, Brown & Co., 1961)

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Searching for the center



What to do about the crust? That's the perennial lunchtime dilemma for sandwich-eating children who consider the edge of the bread to be like an orange peel that they're inexplicably expected to eat. My older sister once showed me the trick to solving that problem. She made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich; then she turned a drinking glass upside down and pressed the rim into the middle of the sandwich, thus making a circle inside the square of the bread. Finally she twisted a little and took the glass away, and there it was — a perfectly round, crustless PB&J. Ingenious. But for some reason it never caught on in our house.

What to do about the extreme edges of Lutheranism? What if we could have the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America without the liberal revisionism, or the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod without the pseudo-evangelicalism? And if we could have those two things, why couldn't they come together as the center? There have been many calls — and in the wake of the churchwide assembly, likely to be many more — for the moderates in the LCMS and the conservatives in the ELCA to join forces to make a new body. This dream church would bring together the strength of the ELCA without the academia-driven leftist agenda of liberal Protestantism, and the rigorous orthodoxy of the LCMS without the peculiar Waltherian quirks, biblicism and sectarianism. It would be a perfectly centrist, crustless Lutheran body. Ingenious, right?

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The divided center

It sounds perfectly good and reasonable, but would it actually catch on? There is no question that the evangelical catholics in the ELCA and the LCMS (well represented in the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau) sense the need for such an arrangement. They already tend to have more in common with each other than they have with the increasingly dominant left and right of the ELCA and LCMS respectively. And they have a sound theological basis for claiming to be the middle, the evangelical catholic heart and soul of true Lutheranism. So why must the center be divided by denominational lines? Why not unite the center by cutting off the crust from both sides?

Two objections come to mind, one a general principle and the other a facet of this particular case.

Defined sensibilities

The general principle (more of a fact of life or law of nature, really) is that where there are lines, there are hardliners and moderates. No matter where you draw the lines, there will always be some who insist upon abiding by them as the agreed-upon boundaries, and others who see them more as malleable guidelines, clearly not applicable to this or that perfectly valid reason for going just a smidgeon further out. They will then argue about exceptions, discretion, and so forth and so on.

In terms of evangelical catholics, the label defines, it seems to me, more a sensibility than any distinct set of doctrines and practices. And you can't write such attitudes and outlooks into a constitution. You can only delineate doctrines and practices. So if one tried to translate the evangelical catholic sensibility into something concrete, what would that particular set of doctrines and practices be? In general it would include liturgical worship, weekly communion, ecumenical engagement, neither the errancy nor the inerrancy of Scripture, and potentially a three-fold office of ministry with bishops, pastors, and deacons. There could be many more (or less) specifics, but for the sake of discussion let's pretend the new church settled on those things. How would they be perpetuated (or enforced, to use an unpopular word)?

Incipient purism

Suppose a congregation wants to join the

new church but celebrates communion only every other week. If you say they may not join without changing their practice, congratulations; you are now a hardliner, a purist. If they decide not to join, you chased them away with your rigidity. On the other hand, if you say they may join . . . well, explain again, why did we need a new church body? We already have two Lutheran church bodies in which ignoring the agreed upon doctrine and practice is common.

And it wouldn't just be weekly communion. Suppose they have an openly gay pastor. Suppose they do contemporary worship *sans* historic liturgy. Suppose the inerrancy of Scripture is written into their constitution as an article of faith. Suppose they have an all male board of elders that exclusively assists with worship. Suppose they have laymen preside at communion when the pastor is on vacation. Are these things acceptable in the new church? If so, we already have them and do not need a new denomination. If not, only hardliners, a new evangelical catholic crust, if you will, can keep them out.

If you can't live with absolute and rigid rules, but you also can't live with "anything goes," then your only hope is to stock the new church with nothing but like-minded, reasonable people like you. And who needs another microsynod?

The greatest generation

In practical terms, this means that a new centrist church would likely have one really good generation, lasting as long as the original like-minded founders were leading it. They would have a mutual sense of what they meant, what they were reacting against, and where exceptions ought to be allowed. I think a new centrist body would really fly for about fifteen or twenty years. But those founders would have to bequeath to the next generation a church with lines (just like the LCMS and ELCA). And no matter where those lines were, the inevitable second generation hard-liners and moderates would disagree about whether to treat the lines as rigid or squishy, and soon the crust would need to be cut off again.

There would be seminarians who weren't quite 100% on board with the evangelical catholic vision. Are they in or out? If they're in, here we go again with the slide away from the true Lutheran center. If they're out, well, here we go again with

orthodoxy police prying around to enforce absolute, 100% conformity. So unless the goal is an amorphous church body without boundaries of doctrine or practice, the real issue must not be what to do about the hardliners and the liberals who by definition will always be with us. Rather the question is where the lines ought to be drawn. That has to be the first goal of any effort to start a centrist Lutheran church. Make a better sandwich, yes, but learn to swallow it crust and all.

The deal-breaker?

But that brings up the specific problem of this case: what to do about the ordination of women. It is a deal-breaker on both sides. The crust, as it were, runs right through the middle of the sandwich. A new church that ordained women would have to work pretty hard and have some talented hardliners to justify not being in fellowship with the ELCA. Ditto a new church that stuck to the historic practice and the LCMS. There would probably be some attempts at compromise, but it is not possible

to have it both ways on this apart from the “bound conscience” theology of the ELCA’s sexuality task force. That probably isn’t palatable to anyone thinking about a new centrist body. Even if the new church body agreed, say, not to ordain women with the stipulation that this was by human arrangement rather than divine mandate, it would never fly with most of the “centrists” in either the LCMS or the ELCA.

Perhaps a new centrist body could work in ways that I cannot foresee. But I think it more likely that the evangelical catholic movement will always be a sensibility and never a synod. Comedian Steven Wright used to say, “I have a large collection of seashells. I keep it scattered across all the beaches of the world; maybe you’ve seen it.” Perhaps it is the fate of evangelical catholic congregations and pastors never to be collected but to remain scattered amongst whatever synods and denominations are out there, where everybody might stumble onto one. And perhaps that isn’t a bad thing.

—by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

Schmuckerism redux



Our conference pastors’ meeting was to discuss the issue of Lutheran identity, so we were all giving that topic some thought. Perhaps because I was teaching a church history class at the time, what came to my mind was the American Lutheranism controversy of the 1850s. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to me that this historical incident sheds a pretty clear light on what it means to be Lutheran.

For those of you who are some distance from a seminary class on American Lutheran history, a brief reprise of the incident will be helpful. Samuel Simon Schmucker, perhaps the most prominent Lutheran clergyman in the nation at that time, was a big fan of what today we might call “contextualization.” He was concerned with how one “contextualizes” the Lutheran message for an American culture where it can seem a bit alien.

The anti-Lutheran

His solution was to propose an “Americanized” version of Lutheranism—to define the heart of Lutheran life and doctrine in such a way that it

would better connect with the dominant religious sentiment of that time and place. So he floated a document, known as the *Definite Synodical Platform*, which posited five errors in the Augsburg Confession. If American Lutherans could just get over those five errors, he said, then Lutheranism could be attractive and effective in ministering to 19th century Americans. He wrote more extensively about this in his *Elements of Popular Theology* (from which the Schmucker quotations which follow are taken).

But Schmucker’s proposal, at least according to the conventional telling of the story, was a flop. A very few Lutherans responded with enthusiasm, but the majority were repulsed by his squandering of his heritage. Schmucker’s name became anathema for those who struggled in that era to promote a confessional Lutheranism in America.

Schmucker, history tells us, became the “anti-Lutheran.” The specific proposals he made were firmly repudiated—so firmly that one might even go so far as to say that the doctrines they opposed are in fact key to what it means to be a Lutheran. I would argue that those same doctrines are

among the essential keys to Lutheran identity even today, 150 years later. And I would also maintain that opposition to those doctrines is alive and well, offering a continuing challenge to genuine Lutheranism.

Ceremonies of the mass

Schmucker, for instance, criticized the Augsburg Confession for upholding the “ceremonies of the mass.” Just what he had in mind here is somewhat obscure, but at the very least he was expressing his discomfort with liturgical forms of various kinds. Strongly influenced by antebellum revivalism, Schmucker felt that the liturgy smacked of cold formalism. He was convinced that it couldn’t be an effective means of evangelism in a culture much more interested in religious excitement and emotionalism.

But he was wrong then, and wrong now. Lutheran identity is very much related to Lutheran liturgy. There is, of course, a range of liturgical expressions, and there always has been. But Lutherans are a liturgical people. We treasure the liturgy of the church. It is an essential part of our identity; when it is disrespected, bastardized, or trivialized, we have given up much more than external forms.

This is why much of the church growth movement (and, dare I say it, the Missouri Synod’s *Ablaze!* campaign) falls short of genuine Lutheranism. It is all well and good to speak of “evangelical style and Lutheran substance,” as David Leucke did some years ago, but too often the style consumes the substance and what is left just isn’t Lutheran any more.

Lutheran objectivity

Schmucker attacked the Augsburg Confession’s teaching on baptismal regeneration. What was at stake here was the Lutheran objective view of the sacraments over against the “decision theology” of most of American Protestantism. In the latter view, humans are saved by “making a decision for Christ.” In Schmucker’s day, the inheritance of the two “great awakenings” was a strong tradition of emotional conversion. In opposition to that stood the Lutheran view that salvation is the free gift of God in Christ Jesus, given to us by his grace, and not because of any merit—and not because of any decision—of our own.

And where the Lutheran view of baptismal regeneration places great emphasis on the real significance of the sacrament, the Schmuckerites reduced baptism to a rite which “figuratively represents the process of spiritual purification.” In other words, there’s not much happening here.

The Schmuckerites are still around, of course—indeed, they are rampant in the American religious scene. They are not unknown even among so-called Lutherans today. Even Schmucker did not advocate the admission of the unbaptized to the Eucharist; in fact, he specifically stated that communicants must be “members of the visible church by baptism.” And yet his denigration of baptismal regeneration could logically be said to lead to the growing movement to welcome even the unbaptized to the Lord’s table. After all, if what is required is (again in his words) “a sincere belief in the Lord Jesus Christ,” and if baptism is little more than a figurative representation of this, then how could any “sincere believer,” baptized or not, be refused admission?

Ecumenical collision

Another sticking point for Schmucker was the Augustana’s insistence on the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. It wasn’t so much that he was against that doctrine, though he probably did not hold it himself. He was just against insisting that it is the only way to speak of what is happening in the sacrament of the altar. Lutherans, he insisted, are united in the “happy conviction, that on this, as on all other subjects not clearly determined by the inspired volume, her sons [*sic*] shall be left to follow the dictates of their own conscience.”

In our day, this is where Lutheran identity collides with ecumenical commitments. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has entered into “full communion” with Reformed and Moravian churches, and now (unless something totally unexpected happens at the 2009 Churchwide Assembly) the United Methodist Church. These are groups which have quite a different understanding of the Eucharist and what it means. Schmucker would likely have had no trouble with this dichotomy. Genuine Lutherans find it troubling, to say the least—a clear sign that some Lutherans have been willing to surrender their birthright for a mess of ecumenical pottage.

Universal repudiation

A fourth issue, Schmucker suggested, was the Augsburg Confession's sanguinity about private confession and absolution. He didn't actually write much about this, other than noting that the practice had been "universally repudiated" by Lutherans in America.

Today we know that isn't quite the case (and it likely wasn't then, either; Schmucker's "universe" could be pretty restricted). Though the practice has fallen on tough times, contemporary Lutherans at least give lip service to it. The ELCA's oft-maligned *Vision and Expectations* assumes that pastors, at least, will go to confession with some regularity – though there's not much call to discipline those who don't.

We could perhaps reframe the issue, though, in terms of how seriously one takes sin. Schmucker was a big fan of a general confession of one's "sinfulness and penitence in general," and Lutherans are good at this today. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, for example, asks us consistently to confess our "sin" without mentioning our "sins."

And that's really the issue, it seems to me. Modern Lutherans are increasingly reluctant to be specific about *sins*. We know, of course, that racism, sexism, and lack of care for creation are sinful. We're not so sure about sexual immorality, or if there even is such a thing. We're keen on "sinfulness in general" but not so interested in particular sins, and so we, like Schmucker, don't want to enumerate them. After all, as he would say, even Luther was down on "enumerating" our sins (which, of course, is maybe half true).

The Sabbath as *the* issue of the day

The fifth "error" Schmucker identified in the Augustana was the "denial of the divine obligation of the Christian Sabbath." This is perhaps the most difficult one to get a handle on today. (The difficulty of it for me led ultimately to a doctoral dissertation, but I won't go there now.) Suffice it to say that Schmucker bought into the Puritan concept of the Sabbath, a legalistic approach that was far from the spirit of Lutheranism. He was, in short, confused about law and gospel.

That's still an issue today, of course; indeed, it might be *the* issue in understanding Lutheran identity. Schmucker came down way too hard on the side of law. There are Lutheran fundamentalists

today who have the same problem, albeit on some different issues. They are mostly, but by no means entirely, found in certain corners of the Missouri Synod; as much as they would profess to abhor Schmucker, they tend to follow him in their legalistic approach to Scripture.

But there are others who fall off the horse on the other side, especially in the ELCA. They are those who, rather than seeking rightly to divide law and gospel, think that the law is of little continuing concern or usefulness to Lutheran Christians. It's all about freedom – at least if you are truly enlightened. The tendency, not to put too fine a point on it, is toward antinomianism.

So the lesson to be learned from Schmucker on this point is that genuine Lutheran identity depends on a correct distinction between law and gospel – not an overriding of one or the other, but a balanced if sometimes almost paradoxical approach that sees the need and the purpose of both in the economy of God.

Win a battle, lose a war

Schmucker won a good many of the skirmishes over his "American Lutheranism" in the early days. Historians of the twentieth century, however, generally believed that he lost the war. The reaction to his un-Lutheran theology by a number of prominent theologians, and most particularly by Charles Porterfield Krauth, led ultimately to the formation of the General Council and what might be called a "moderate confessionalism" that saw Lutheran identity as something quite different from other Christian expressions in the United States. Within a few decades, even his own General Synod had essentially repudiated Schmucker's theology, and hitched its wagon to a more confessional star, one exhibiting more Krauth's understanding than Schmucker's.

I suspect that twenty-first century historians will have a different view. Schmucker's proposed abandonment of Lutheran distinctives has come back with a vengeance, and in many different quarters of Lutheranism today. The symptoms of this phenomenon in some cases are very different from those of the mid-19th century (though in other cases they are eerily similar). But if you had to choose a historical lens through which to understand the struggles over Lutheran identity today, the case of

Schmucker and his “American Lutheranism” is not a bad choice, for the parallels are dismayingly appropriate. One wonders when and where we might find the Charles Porterfield Krauth who can help us see

all of this more clearly and lead us into a more genuine Lutheranism.

— by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Telling it like it is



Holden Village, that unique Lutheran-run retreat center on Washington’s Lake Chelan, isn’t exactly the place where one would expect to hear a passionate defense of traditional sexual ethics (or traditional most anything else, as far as that goes). Don’t get me wrong; I think Holden is a cool place, and I’ve enjoyed every day I’ve spent there. But a person of more traditional proclivities must go with the willingness to suspend those proclivities for a time. Frankly, in some respects, it’s less stressful than some of what I’ve encountered, say, at synod assembly or confirmation camp.

Still, I was a bit taken aback by what I am about to relate. One evening session was devoted to the (at that time) forthcoming ELCA churchwide assembly discussion of the rostering proposals. It was led by David Brauer-Rieke, bishop of the Oregon Synod, who conducted it as a sort of mock assembly session, using (more or less) *Roberts’ Rules*, with some time out to explain a bit of the background and process to those who might not know it.

Refrain and restrain

It didn’t surprise me that the bishop was clearly an advocate for allowing for ordination of GLBT persons in committed relationships (though in a setting where he was playing presiding officer, perhaps he was a little *too* clear). But a few comments along the way left me shaking my head.

For one, he interpreted the 2007 Landahl resolution in a way that clearly distorted what its words actually said. Bp. Paul Landahl, you may recall, moved that the assembly urge bishops and synods “to refrain from or demonstrate restraint in disciplining those congregations and persons who call into the rostered ministry otherwise-qualified candidates who are in a mutual, chaste, and faithful committed same-gender relationship.” In Brauer-Rieke’s interpretation, this means that the assembly “told”

the bishops “not to discipline” such infractions. He seems to think that “restrain” and “refrain” are synonymous; or perhaps he just doesn’t grasp the meaning of “or.” That many bishops seem to have read it that way is certainly true enough, and it does get them entirely off the hook (“the assembly made me do it!”); but to hear a bishop describe the assembly’s action in that distorted way was still disturbing.

Show me the tape

In response to a question about what would happen if the churchwide assembly were to fail to adopt the proposed changes, he said that bishops would pretty much “continue to do what they’ve been doing” about clergy who violate the church’s standards, which is to say, “nothing.” The good bishop apparently has a high bar for dealing with such matters; if any complaint is made about a pastor’s sexual behavior, he quipped, “I demand videotape.” Still, if bishops are going to keep on doing what they’ve been doing no matter what, one wonders why we have bothered to have the churchwide assembly take this up.

Then he spoke about the “bound conscience” language. He made it clear he would expect this to be a temporary expedient, and that eventually a congregation’s unwillingness to call an openly gay pastor would be ignored — that the ELCA would, down the road, no more allow for such “discrimination” than it would allow for discrimination against pastors who are of a different race or who are women. That this is where we are headed does not really surprise me, but it does sort of cut the heart out of the “bound conscience” charade.

By no authority

To the bishop’s credit, he did handle one question quite well. He was asked by a young woman what part governmental anti-discrimination

laws might have in this whole question, and he replied that such laws do not apply to churches in their decisions about rostered leaders. "Does that bother you?" the woman asked, with a bit of an edge in her voice. "Does it bother me?" Brauer-Rieke responded. "No." Good answer.

The whole presentation, however, did make it clear once again that, whatever policies may come out of the churchwide assembly, they are not likely to make much of a difference. Bishops will enforce them or not as they see fit—usually with complaints

that "we bishops don't have any real authority anyway." The ELCA continues down the road of rampant congregationalism, where any congregation can do whatever it pleases without fear of reprimand, and where expectations for clergy (at least in the area of sexual morality) are pretty much ignored as long as their congregation doesn't care.

It is nice, on the other hand, to have a bishop who tells it like it is, even if like it is isn't like it should be.

— by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Omnium gatherum



Scathing review • I don't often have a chance to read *Studia Liturgica*, the fine ecumenical and international journal of liturgical research, but someone recently sent me an article by Philip Pfatteicher from 2007 (37:249-260) entitled "Reforming the Daily Office in Two New Lutheran Books." It is essentially a critical review of how the daily office is handled both in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* and *Lutheran Service Book*. Pfatteicher (a distinguished liturgical scholar who was author or co-author of most of the commentaries and supporting volumes of *Lutheran Book of Worship*) isn't impressed. His comments about *LSB* might be described as constructively critical; with *ELW* his words approach the category of scathing. He despairs over its historical ignorance, its grammatical clumsiness, its agenda-driven purpose, and he makes many excellent points that go beyond complaints about the excision of masculine pronouns. My favorite among his observations: his amazement at the reference in the *ELW Minister's Edition* to the "historic Paschal Blessing" at the end of Morning Prayer. This blessing, he points out (and he would know), was "basically invented by the subcommittee of the Liturgical Text Committee of the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship in 1976." "For *ELW*," he laments, "the passage of a mere thirty years apparently makes a practice historic." If you're still trying to make up your mind about *ELW*, this article would be useful for you to consider.

Books, books, books • One of the real bonuses of this job is that people send me, unsolicited, books

that they have written or published—hoping, obviously, for a review or at least a note in *FL* commending their work to our readership (which, while not great in number, is largely comprised of people who actually read books). As a matter of policy, we usually don't do actual reviews of such books, but if we think them of interest, we'll at least give a plug. So consider this a plug, first of all, for Arthur Simon's cleverly titled *The Rising of Bread for the World*, his autobiographical account of the origins of the respected anti-hunger agency Bread for the World. Simon, as you may be aware, is a retired LCMS pastor who has long been involved in efforts to fight hunger. It's an inspiring story, published by Paulist Press. I've also been meaning to tell you about *Deliver Us from Evil: A Manual of Exorcism*, by Philip Gagnon, another Lutheran pastor (ELCIC). The demonic is not much talked about in polite Lutheran circles these days, and few pastors have been called upon for an exorcism. But should you have the need or the desire to think about these things from a balanced and evangelical perspective, Gagnon's book is a good place to start. He explores the history of exorcism in the church, and provides sound pastoral counsel about how to recognize and deal with the demonic. The book is published by Kirk House Publishers (www.kirkhouse.com).

Cheap legal advice • A publication of a different sort also appeared in my mailbox. Daniel R. Suhr has written a fascinating article entitled "On the Freedom of a Congregation: Legal Considerations When Lutherans Look to Change Denominational

Affiliation" (*Texas Review of Law & Politics*, Spring, 2009). He has surveyed the case law on church property disputes, with particular attention to how this might get played out for an ELCA congregation wanting to leave the ELCA. *Forum Letter* doesn't advocate that course of action, but if it is one your congregation is considering, this paper would be important food for thought. Download a copy at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1317073>, or Mr. Suhr has a limited number of paper copies and he'll send you one if you e-mail him at danielsuhr@gmail.com.

Continuing education • I took the opportunity this year to attend the annual conference of the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology, which focused on the "continuing challenge to the churches" of Vatican II. With speakers like George Lindbeck and Michael Root, it was well worth the time and money. I haven't been a regular at the CCET events, but I've been to a couple of them, and I commend them for your consideration as you plan for continuing education. They're better than any ELCA-sponsored event I've ever seen. Get on their mailing list so that you'll get notice about the conference (generally held in June) well in advance. For more information, go to www.e-ccet.org/.

Keynoter • Jay Bakker, son of the discredited televangelist and the former Tammy Faye Bakker, is pastor of Revolution, an "emergent church" congregation in New York City. Bakker was also tapped as a keynoter at the ELCA National Youth Gathering. His theological approach is — well, as he told Larry

King, "more liberal than most." That, of course, depends on what the meaning of "liberal" is, but Bakker is a prominent proponent, for instance, of gay marriage. An ELCA pastor, interested in what his youth might be learning at the Youth Gathering, went to the Revolution web site, followed a link, and ended up on a gay pornographic site. There was a concerned call to Higgins Road, and, perhaps coincidentally, the Revolution web site crashed just a couple of hours later. No doubt this pornographic link was originally the work of some hacker. Still, one has to wonder about the appropriateness — on a number of levels — of asking Bakker to be a presenter at an ELCA youth event. (A colleague who attended the event reports that Bakker did indeed speak, but not particularly impressively, and that his presentation was "short and unremarkable." Sometimes that's the best one can hope for, I guess.)

Signs of the times • In what is a terribly troubling sign of the current economic situation, the Lutheran theological journal *Logia* has e-mailed a pdf file of its Holy Trinity issue to subscribers, with the explanation that "due to cost constraints" they will not be receiving a printed copy, and that, furthermore, this "may hold true for future issues as well." While I often disagree with the theological perspective of *Logia*, it is a thought-provoking publication with some very significant writers (albeit mostly from the very conservative ranks of Lutherans), and seeing this kind of move is disheartening to anyone with an interest in the religious publishing business.

—by Richard O. Johnson, editor

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