

FORUM LETTER

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He has not created me for naught



God was all-complete, all-blessed in Himself; but it was His will to create a world for His glory. He is Almighty, and might have done all things Himself, but it has been His will to bring about His purposes by the beings He has created. We are all created to His glory – we are created to do His will. I am created to do something or to be something for which no one else is created; I have a place in God’s counsels, in God’s world, which no one else has; whether I be rich or poor, despised or esteemed by man, God knows me and calls me by my name. God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission – I never may know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. Somehow I am necessary for His purposes, as necessary in my place as an Archangel in his. . . . He has not created me for naught. I shall do good, I shall do His work; I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it, if I do but keep His commandments and serve Him in my calling. Therefore I will trust Him. Whatever, wherever I am, I can never be thrown away. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him; in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him; if I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him. My sickness, or perplexity, or sorrow may be necessary causes of some great end, which is quite beyond us. He does nothing in vain; He may prolong my life, He may shorten it; He knows what He is about. He may take away my friends, He may throw me among strangers, He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide the future from me – still He knows what He is about. O Adonai, O Ruler of Israel, Thou that guidest Joseph like a flock, O Emmanuel, O Sapientia, I give myself to Thee. I trust Thee wholly. Thou art wiser than I – more loving to me than I myself. Deign to fulfil Thy high purposes in me whatever they be – work in and through me. I am born to serve Thee, to be Thine, to be Thy instrument. Let me be Thy blind instrument. I ask not to see – I ask not to know – I ask simply to be used. – John Henry Newman, “Meditations on Christian Doctrine” in *Meditations and Devotions of the Late Cardinal Newman* (London, 1893), 399-402.

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For crying out loud



It’s Social Statement season again in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, this time bringing us a document on Criminal Justice now in the hands of congregations, with the plea that they study and respond. It is without doubt a serious issue, and one in which the church properly has some interest; after all, we claim to be disciples of a guy

who was tried on trumped-up charges and executed in a gruesome and inhumane way.

Unfortunately, what we have been given is pretty much like what we have come to expect: an excessively wordy and poorly written document that won't be of much use to anyone if approved in the current form.

Words, words, words

Let's tackle my criticisms in order. First, the statement is wordy. If you thought *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* was long (and it was), you can add a couple of thousand words to it and see how much longer this one is. Or, if you like to play the percentages, it is about 15% longer than the sexuality statement. That would make it second in length only to the 2007 statement on education.

To put it another way, this proposed document consists of about 15,585 words; the average length of all the previous social statements adopted by the ELCA is about 6,500 words. You start to wonder if the staff people who work on these things are getting paid by the word.

Misappropriating Luther

But of course it takes as many words as it takes, and if the statement were otherwise clear and concise, length wouldn't be such an issue. No such luck. For starters, the statement inexplicably organizes itself around Luther's "marks of the church." It calls them "critical indicators of properly Christian response to the brokenness of today's criminal justice system and to crime itself."

Now I'm a big fan of the marks of the church. Luther's schema is set out primarily in his treatise *On the Councils of the Church*; an earlier form of it appeared in *Concerning Ministry*. The statement cites both treatises, though it doesn't offer volume and page citations from *Luther's Works* (probably a good thing, since then somebody might actually look them up and realize how utterly inappropriate they are in a social statement on criminal justice.)

The document plays fast and loose with Luther here. It begins with a section titled "Confession: mark of the church" and then proceeds to "confess that the church itself and its members have fallen short in responding to crime, its harms and the justice system." Actually, Luther had in mind here not so much the act of confession (much less the kind of

corporate *mea culpa* so characteristic of social statements in general) as the office of the keys – not unrelated to confession, but not at all the same thing. In short, what the statement does is to take Luther's identification of the office of the keys as a mark of the church, and then cobbles together a sort of mind map that gets it where it wants to go: to a confession that we don't do so well at criminal justice.

A half-baked idea

The references to other marks are equally strained and strange. Baptism gets brought in because it "brings forgiveness of sins, even for grave sins. This reminds us that no one lies beyond the final grace of God." You know, "no one" as in "criminals." Get it?

The marks of Holy Communion and worship and prayer "impinge on our yearning for justice" because, after all, "Holy Communion is a meal of yearning." The church's worship is all about "yearning," and that "yearning" is central to the "church's commitment to justice." Oh, and it gives an opportunity to advocate for "the enhancement of worship materials to reach out to those affected by crime, incarceration and the entire criminal justice system." I sense a new section of Sundaysandseasons.com in the making.

In short, the whole concept of organizing the statement around the marks of the church is . . . well, let's say just plain silly. It doesn't work. It doesn't do justice (now there's an irony!) to Luther's concept. It doesn't provide a coherent framework for what the statement tries to do.

And one wonders just whose half-baked idea this might have been. There is so much in the Scripture that honestly and directly addresses issues of justice – particularly in the Old Testament, but also in the New. There would be any number of ways to frame a statement on criminal justice in the context of the Bible. Why on earth did the drafters choose to enlist the marks of the church in this cause?

Help wanted: editorial position

Beyond the structural problem, there is the usual social statement phenomenon of just plain sloppy writing. I cited one paragraph taken at random a couple of months back. One could pick comparable paragraphs from almost any page. When trying to speak theologically, the statement uses lan-

guage that is so flowery and fanciful that one can hardly read it without gagging.

Particularly prevalent is the word “cry” and its cognates — you know, as in “cry for justice.” I counted 26 instances in 57 pages. That’s frequent enough that if you try to read the thing through, you notice it. It quickly becomes irritating.

When the statement abandons theology and talks instead about criminal justice, it speaks in clichés and jargon. Thus “Since the 1980s the use of restorative responses to harm, such as victim-offender mediation, family group conferencing and community reparative boards has increased in the U. S. Restorative practices are used with adult and juvenile offenders, both as a diversion strategy and as a supplement to the sanctions of the criminal justice system for more serious offenders.” All well and good, and when I read it over a few times I even started to understand what some of it means.

Beyond rehabilitation

Let me say that to the extent that the statement makes specific recommendations, I generally agree with them. Our criminal justice system is a mess; it is full of racial inequity, it treats juveniles particularly badly, it views incarceration as punitive rather than restorative. A scheme like prison privatization is a really bad idea. Capital punishment should be eliminated. (Though this statement scarcely mentions the death penalty, the ELCA approved a statement on that specific issue in 1991, and apparently it doesn’t need further comment even though a lot has happened in 20 years.) All of that is true, and Christians, as conscientious citizens, ought to be in the forefront of efforts at reform.

But as a statement of the church, this document is a big disappointment. It is, well, beyond rehabilitation and ought to be mercifully put to death.

— by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Guarding the table: responses to Speckhard



Editor’s note: In the May issue, Associate Editor Peter Speckhard wrote about his experience with an ecumenical group on a recent Holy

Land tour, one aspect of which was his decision not to participate in the common communion service celebrated by the others in the group but to offer a separate service for the members of his congregation who were on the tour. Two of our LCMS readers responded, and in the spirit of our name, we are happy to give them their forum, and to allow Pr. Speckhard to respond.

Dear Editor,

My interest was piqued by “Communing where Jesus walked” in the May issue of *Forum Letter*, Pastor Speckhard’s Holy Land travelogue, replete with discussion of a culminating meal. It struck me as ironic because I too had taken a trip to a holy land, just that afternoon, and our focus was also centered on a meal.

Pr. Speckhard’s travelogue focuses on ecumenical anxiety and how to answer the question: “How does one stay pure when visiting the holy land with people of impure faith?” His descriptions of his religious traveling companions, who are portrayed as preoccupied with the environment and

God’s gender (or lack thereof), seem to me to be woven into the story to set up the need for the purity guardianship he later demonstrates. These are more than literary devices; they may also be what the *Catechism* would describe as breaking the 8th Commandment. His point appears to be that the holy meal must be preserved from such impurity.

Sacraments purely administered

Pr. Speckhard contemplates that his purity-keeping may even have been encouraging for those not invited as they came to understand his views better. Since he shares my Synod, my prayer can only be that this would not be true. This rather churlish view of Eucharistic fellowship is not shared by me. I do not embrace it because it is not an orthodox Lutheran view, but a misguided and recent theological construct.

This development in pastoral oversight of “guarded Communion” reframes the discussion from whom, and in what circumstances, one may welcome to the Lord’s Table, to a quite different and very simple question of how do we keep everyone out except for our group of (presumed) pure communicants. It is a departure from even my stringent

training at the Fort (Concordia Theological Seminary – Ft. Wayne). Gone is self-examination or the counsel one may seek from the ordained. Why reflect or even speak with a pastor when answering one question will determine the matter? “Are you a member of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod?” or, more comfortably stated, “of my Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod congregation?”

If “Yes,” then you may freely receive. If “No,” then you are unwelcome.

It of course does not matter in this case. The invited are hiding in the garden distributing in secret, reminding me much of our ancient parents who also hid in the garden so long ago (Gen. 3.8). Although the majority of LCMS communicants attend a church where no such purity doctrine exists, clearly Pr. Speckhard’s writing represents his adoption of this view. I would imagine he is not alone. I suspect there were, when the *May Forum Letter* was published, several “high-fives” and hand slaps echoing in the pastoral studies or Winkels of those who share Pr. Speckhard’s views.

To make matters worse, in this odd understanding of the Sacrament there hides an even odder vision of the Word, particularly as it relates as a means of grace. In his travelogue, Pr. Speckhard seems to pay little attention to the very Word of God. Reported offenses (by Pr. Speckhard) to the Gospel are dismissed with a literary eye roll and critique in *Forum Letter*, while only the Sacrament must be protected. There seems to be little regard to the open and vulnerable ears of his flock. Clearly this means of grace is lesser. Even worse, for Speckhard, there seems to be no need for the Word, at least personally.

A closed heart

Apparently his proclamation was pure and pleasing while the sharing from the other members of the body of Christ was degraded. This starting point of a closed heart is at variance with our belief in the need for the Word and our understanding of the power of the Word. One thinks of the thief on the cross that mocked Jesus’ Word while the other was open to Him (Luke 23.39-40).

In defending Pr. Speckhard’s views, I would guess that some might point to 1 Corinthians 11.17-34, although those who study such texts exegetically note that this text speaks nothing of such an issue.

The people caricatured by Pr. Speckhard would almost certainly recognize the body of Christ in the Eucharist. Furthermore, if there is any pious hierarchy or pompous action that might reflect the sin against which St. Paul rails, it would be Speckhard’s group who ate while others went hungry (1 Corinthians 11.21).

This brings me to my own trip to a holy land. It was just 3.5 miles from my home. The place where I figuratively took off my shoes is called Sacred Heart Church in the city of Mt. Vernon, NY. In an aging kitchen provided through the graceful action of our separated sisters and brothers in the Roman Catholic tradition is a kitchen operated for the needs of hungry men, women and families. They would not eat (or at least nothing nutritional) if there was no meal provided. My fellow baptized stood with me and carried out trays laden with good things to set before these individuals for whom Christ died. Our goal was to feed not to exclude. They did not need to prove purity to eat but rather ate with hands and faces that many might call “thoroughly unclean” in our disinfected society.

This holy land is holy not because Jesus walked there but because Jesus lives there in the hearts of his baptized as prophet, priest and king. His power compels us to find “Jesus” (or rather the stranger Jesus identifies as Himself) and to feed Him and cloth Him and visit Him (Matthew 25.31-46).

No open table

This is carried out in our Eucharistic table fellowship as well. No one would call ours an open table. When we break the bread and drink the cup that becomes for us the body and blood of Christ in, with and under the bread and wine, we do instruct those who are hungry for what God offers. There are those who decide they do not want it. There may even be a member who is trapped by the evil one and must be awakened by the slap of speaking the truth in love (Eph. 4.15). This discipline may mean that the gifts may not be shared until the sin is confessed (Matthew 18.17).

However, we have no fear that anyone will pollute the Sacrament. Only when we eat while others stay hungry can this sin ever be realized. At our kitchen in Mt. Vernon, we invite people to eat, for we know they need to eat. They would starve other-

wise. This hospitality echoes our Eucharistic hospitality. Ours is a close communion, close and intimate, because what we share is powerful and sacred. It is not, however, closed and there is no fear that the Divine One could ever be polluted. He comes with power to heal and bring life.

So while Pr. Speckhard's travelogue piqued my interest, I have no desire to walk where he walked. I will not cower in the garden. I will not announce my pride and pre-warn my exclusion. I will not mock those who speak His means of grace but will receive with an open heart, allowing the Holy Spirit to use every member of the body, even the parts quite different from me, to inform me (through the rightful third use of the law).

And I will seek to remember the hungry. I will feed them because He has commanded me to do so. This is what I was ordained to do. This is why the Keys were given to the church and why I occupy the Office on behalf of the congregation. In the start of his travelogue, Pr. Speckhard laments that Guarded Fellowship may be at odds with Jesus' desire for unity especially "at these sacred sites." He is correct. More than that, every site is holy by the presence of Christ. He has given us His means of Grace to feed hungry people. Let's feed them, and invite them to be filled and let's not spend one moment protecting the food, in the Holy Land or any land.

*The Rev. Robert Hartwell
Village Lutheran Church
Bronxville, NY*

Dear Editor,

A high doctrine of the Lord's Supper is important and good, and I thank God for it. However, it is neither good nor necessary to use that doctrine to justify ecumenical aloofness, as Pr. Speckhard does in the May issue of *Forum Letter*.

A military chaplain friend used to say of his communion practice: "We make clear that this is the body and blood of Christ—the heavenly banquet of the Lord—but others are also welcome who may only be coming for a small snack." I think he meant that another person's lack of understanding of the moment could not subtract from the sublime fact that here we have Christ in our midst, with peace enough for all.

A little side table

After a young man from my LCMS congregation married a Roman Catholic woman in another city, a priest friend asked me how it went. I told him that, in accordance with accepted Roman Catholic policy, her priest would not commune any of the Lutherans present, but had suggested beforehand that they should "feel free to set up a little table of their own over in the corner and share some bread and wine." "What a turkey!" said my friend; but I say, "Maybe not"—a *real* turkey, with its call of "*Gabe, Gabe, Gabe,*" would sound a much more gracious invitation to God's gracious meal.

This is the Lord's Supper. What matters most here is not what we say about it, but what our Lord says. His presence attaches to his promise, not to our formulations. And is this not the Lord who wills us to be one, who *begs* his heavenly Father to preserve us as one? "Because there is one bread (Christ!), we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor. 10.17). When we err, let it be on the side of generosity and hospitality lest, in our calculated disapproval of those who (we think) do not get it right, we become the older brother of Luke 15, eating by ourselves in the barn.

*The Rev. David Susan
Madison, WI*

Pastor Speckhard replies:

Many thanks to Pastors Hartwell and Susan for reading my article and taking the time to respond. I appreciate the ongoing conversation here in *Forum Letter*.

It seems clear Pr. Hartwell would have preferred that Catholics, Nazarenes, Lutherans, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and UCC members all commune together on our tour. This illustrates the ongoing problem we have in the LCMS; many of us would call that suggestion "open communion," but some would call it "pastoral discretion." It is more than mere terminology; it reflects two completely different views of the rationale behind closed communion. Pr. Hartwell offers his take on the issue by summarizing the theme of my article with the question, "How does one stay pure when visiting the Holy Land with people of impure faith?" which invokes Old Testament ritual purity laws and portrays those who practice closed communion as the

modern equivalent of the self-righteous priests and Pharisees who objected when Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them.

Public confession

But that comparison is not apt. My decision to have a separate service was in no way motivated by fear of polluting God or the Sacrament or myself by including people of impure faith in communion. Rather, the motivation was simply desire to take seriously the Biblical fact that taking communion together is (among other more important things) an act of public, common confession. So one does it with those with whom one shares a public, common confession.

Ironically, Pr. Hartwell condemns my doctrine and practice on this issue as a recent and unorthodox, un-Lutheran (one might be tempted to say “impure”) innovation. But in Israel, Catholic, Orthodox, Coptic, and Protestant churches crowd the very same historic sites, in some cases even maintaining separate altars under the very same roof, often a roof older than Lutheranism itself. Even the cave where Jesus was born is subdivided, with separate altars for separated communions. The landscape of the Holy Land shows that for better or worse, most Christians have been insisting on communing only with those of the same confession for a very long time.

Historic global norms

That was a key point of my article – what was weird and even potentially offensive to my fellow Americans was the norm in the historic, global center of Christianity. The LCMS folks were odd in the context of our tour bus, but only because the rest of the tour bus was odd in the context of historic Christianity. Mainline American Christianity differs sharply from global, historic Christianity in being not only comfortable with but insistent upon people of differing confessions communing together.

Pr. Hartwell’s image of us hiding in the garden in secret does not square with what happened. Everything was open and explained. I explained our practice beforehand precisely in order not to give unnecessary offense. It was no different than if I had been Orthodox, Catholic or any of the other types of Christians who regularly decide to reserve communion for people of the same confession.

All were welcome – somewhere

Nor was anyone denied communion in this case. Every member of our tour was offered communion that day regardless of their denomination. At issue was whether we would have two services instead of one, not whether some would eat while others went without. Too often those who practice closed communion are depicted as snatching God’s grace away from people who supposedly aren’t pure enough for it, leaving the poor outsiders to go hungry. Again, that reading comes from applying the bogus “purity” template to the discussion. The issue (in non-emergency circumstances) is whether to commune with everyone or only with those of the same confession; to offend against visible unity by communing apart, as they do all over the Holy Land, or against truth of confession by communing together with contrary confessions, as they do all over the American mainline.

Mockery, even gentle mockery, in the context of devotions is a spiritually dangerous thing about which Pr. Hartwell is right to be sensitive. I thought long and hard about the degree to which it was appropriate to be as flippant or (debatable) humorous as I came across in writing about the devotions presented by other group leaders. But I don’t think I substantively misrepresented anyone by trying to have fun with our theological differences.

Easy to be hard?

Pr. Susan assumes that I use a high doctrine of the Lord’s Supper in order to justify ecumenical aloofness, as though there were some obvious incentive for ecumenical aloofness in search of a rationale. The reverse is true. Open communion is the easy thing in search of a rationale. Every decision I made concerning communion on the Holy Land tour made my life more difficult. Just communing with everyone on my bus would have required zero effort on my part and, as an added bonus, allowed me to describe the path of least resistance as the moral high ground. Yet somehow this often gets twisted around such that those who practice closed communion are said to be taking the easy copout, while those who practice open communion are somehow doing something bold and difficult in the name of ecumenism.

Yet who was really being ecumenically aloof? Ecumenism begins by taking other confes-

sions and communions seriously. Not surprisingly, I would have more respect for the “turkey” priest who has the effrontery to take the teachings of his own church seriously than I would for a priest who invites Lutherans like me to commune and winks at the discrepancy between his doctrine and practice. Such a progressive priest fails the first step of ecumenism; he fails to take me seriously as a Lutheran. He shows no more respect for my confession than he does for his own.

Ecumenical aloofness

Surely everyone can recognize divisions as tragic. Nobody delights that there is a brick wall dividing the Cave of the Nativity. But it is ecumenical aloofness to breezily dismiss the reasons for that wall and those who built it, to act as though most Christians through the centuries and across the

globe were making much ado about nothing by insisting upon separate altars for separate confessions, to pretend as though our willingness to commune together somehow shows or creates any genuine unity. Real ecumenical aloofness looks down or askance at the practices of most Christians through history, practices like closed communion, among others. Yet once again, because of our context that is so very alien to global, historic Christianity, everything gets twisted around such that those who take their own and everyone else’s confession of faith seriously and whose practice is right in line with historic Christian practice get called ecumenically aloof, while those who really are aloof, who really do introduce new and alien practices and who really do fail to take seriously what Christians have always taken seriously claim to be ecumenically engaged.

Omnium gatherum



Bridget to nowhere • A reader sent us an advertisement clipped from the religion page of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. It appears to be listed under the heading of “Lutheran,” but the large print says “Celebration of Mass.” That got my attention. Then the next line says, “The Reverend Barbara Zeman, Roman Catholic Priest, Officiating.” There was a photo, presumably of the, uh, officiant. It went on to say that this would take place on a Sunday at 5 p.m., at Trinity Lutheran Church, Lakewood, OH. “Please join us,” it urged. “All are welcome. Social Hour to Follow Mass.” The “sermon,” not unexpectedly, would be “Speaking Truth to Power.” If you missed it, I’m sorry; the ad clearly states that no photography or video recording was to be permitted during Mass. Interpreting this in the kindest way, it appears that Trinity Lutheran was offering space to a group called the “Community of St. Bridget,” which on its website bills itself as “an inclusive, lay directed, worshiping community rooted in Catholic tradition and guided by the Holy Spirit. We welcome you to join us, especially if you feel marginalized by an institutional church.” I hope Trinity charged them something to use the building to compensate for the damage this does to Lutheran/Roman Catholic relations—at

least those that exist in the context of the “institutional church.”

Good choice • Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary is in the process of merging with Lenoir-Rhyne University—an interesting merger which, if done well, can only help both schools (both financially and academically) and serve as a model for other ELCA seminaries. They’ve gotten a good start on “doing it well” by appointing the Rev. Dr. Clayton Schmit as Provost of the School of Theology, a new position that will replace that of the seminary president and provide oversight both to the seminary and to the religion faculty at the university. Schmit is perhaps not widely known across the ELCA; he has been for some years on the faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA, where he teaches preaching. He is a fine teacher, an experienced ELCA pastor, and an excellent choice for this new position. Congratulations to him, and also to the seminary and university.

Doctrinal issue • I have to admit, I was puzzled when I saw the news release about Episcopal Church Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori issuing a pastoral letter on the Doctrine of Discov-

ery. I mean, I knew that Episcopalians had some doctrinal peculiarities, but usually I can at least figure out what they're talking about, even if it seems a tad arcane. But what's the Doctrine of Discovery? Some kind of New Age meditation nonsense (which, of course, wouldn't have surprised me that much)? Nope. Turns out it's the principle in international law having to do with the way colonial powers claimed title to lands which they "discovered" (nearly always to the detriment of the people who actually already possessed the land). As you can imagine, the good bishop is against it. I pretty much am too, though it wouldn't occur to me to see this as an appropriate topic for a pastoral letter.

Green Bible • Someone recently told me they had visited a United Methodist Church when it was "confirmation Sunday" (yes, some Methodists do that), and each confirmand had been presented with a Bible. But no ordinary Bible. They got a copy of the *Green Bible*. Don't know how I missed this one when it was published in 2008. It is, says publisher HarperCollins, "the first ever specialty Bible that takes the issues of sustainability, stewardship of the earth, what many in the religious community call 'creation care' very seriously." You've probably all seen, and maybe even own, "red letter Bibles" that have the words of Jesus in red; this one has verses that the editors believe relate to environmental concerns printed in green. It is, of course, printed on recycled paper, using soy-based ink. The only question I have is how did Augsburg Fortress let HarperCollins beat them to the punch on this one?

Holding the line • Speaking of United Methodists, their 2012 General Conference once again rejected an official proposal to eliminate language in their *Book of Discipline* that says homosexual practice is "incompatible with Christian teaching." And once again, the reason they've not followed other main-line denominations down the sexuality revisionist path is the significant presence in this worldwide General Conference of members from the global South. The delegate presenting the minority report which maintained the language said the church's statement on the issue must be "clear, concise, and faithful to biblical teaching." What a concept. The ELCA statement doesn't even get one out of three.

Give Forum • It's been the practice of the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau to offer a year's subscription to the *Forum* package as a gift to graduating seminarians. A few of them take us up on it each year, but the end of the school year is often hectic, and some students (hard to believe) have never heard of us, so if you know someone graduating this year the chances are they haven't signed up. That makes this the perfect graduation or ordination gift for you to give them; and if they have already signed up for the freebie, your gift will extend their subscription. Right now there's a web special offering two bucks off the subscription price if you order online. Check it out at www.alpb.org. Check out the many other ALPB offerings while you're at it—just about any of them would make a good gift for graduates, or for anyone who is or should be a Lutheran.

—roj

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