

FORUM LETTER

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Save me from becoming tired of hearing

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6 my pastor I pray: grant him to speak Thy word with joy, fearlessly
8 against every error, false doctrine, and abuse; that he may declare and
make plain to us the mysteries of the gospel, and remove from our hearts all
delusions. Keep him steadfast in the true doctrine and Christian life, that he may
be unto us a leader unto everlasting life. Guard his body against sickness, that to
our great benefit, he may for a long time go before us and preach Thy divine
word without fear or hesitation, without hypocrisy, not of favor, hatred,
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won for Thy kingdom. Open my heart and ears that I may listen to Thy word
with desire and love, with reverent mind, and hearty attention; to walk in
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from becoming tired of hearing and from slothfulness of soul; and instill in my
mind a great hunger and earnest desire for the inestimable riches of Thy grace,
which is tendered to us in the sermon. Grant me grace to know and esteem my
pastor as a servant and steward of the divine mysteries, that I receive Thy word
from his lips without offence, unto the bettering of my life, the abhorrence of
sin; and not let correction pass me by unheeded, nor, that I offend, or despise
him by whom the correction cometh. Preserve us all in the true faith and a
Christian life, that we may daily grow and increase therein, remaining steadfast
unto our end, and be eternally saved; through Thy beloved Son, Jesus Christ.
Amen. — Wilhelm Löhe, *Seed-Grains of Prayer: A Manual for Evangelical Chris-
tians*, trans. H. A. Weller (Wartburg Publishing House, 1914), 548.

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Same-sex marriage and the ELCA



It is increasingly apparent that those who hope to uphold the traditional Christian understanding of marriage as a cultural norm have lost the debate. The Supreme Court is likely, it seems to me, to strike down same-sex marriage bans across the board this year, and if not this year, then soon enough. Urban newspapers are already filled with fawning wedding announcements of same-sex couples. As Ross Douthat put it in a perceptive *New York Times* column several weeks back, "All that's left is the timing of the final victory — and for the defeated to find out what settlement the victors will impose."

Ah yes, the settlement. This is where traditionalists in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are now feeling some concern. The 2009 Church-

wide Assembly thought it would be a good idea to allow for the proverbial big tent, and so the statement *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* recognized that “at this time this church lacks consensus on this matter.” It went on to identify four different positions toward same-gender sexual relationships held by ELCA Lutherans – each held conscientiously and with conviction.

On my rural street, there is a sign which reads “Golf carts use road.” I always chuckle when I pass it, wondering if it intends to be descriptive or prescriptive. The ELCA statement had no such ambiguity; it was describing what it viewed as the range of opinions in the denomination about same-sex relationships, and it wasn’t (so it claimed) trying to say that one or another of them was “correct.”

A review: four convictions

In case you haven’t read the statement lately, the four are: (1) a belief that “same-gender sexual behavior is sinful” and that “the neighbor and the community are best served by calling people in same-gender sexual relationships to repentance for that behavior and to a celibate lifestyle”; (2) a conviction that “even lifelong, monogamous, homosexual relationships reflect a broken world” and that “the neighbor or community are [not] best served by publicly recognizing such relationships as traditional marriage”; (3) a position that the Bible doesn’t speak about our contemporary understanding of sexuality and so “the neighbor and community are best served when same-gender relationships are honored and held to high standards and public accountability” without equating those relationships with marriage, but with the possibility of blessing such relationships with prayer; and (4) an affirmation that “neighbor and community are best served when same-gender relationships are lived out with lifelong and monogamous commitments that are held to the same rigorous standards, sexual ethics, and status as heterosexual marriage.”

Do you not find it remarkable that as recently as five years ago, even the most “progressive” viewpoint identified in this document fell somewhat short of advocating actual legal marriage for same-gender couples? That is a vivid illustration of just how far things have come – spurred on, of course, not by any theological reflection but simply by the sweep of societal events.

And then there were two

The idea in 2009 was that the ELCA could continue to exist with these four different points of view living together – if not in harmony, at least in mutual respect. Many at the time saw that as an impossible dream, and indeed the significant defections from the ELCA proved it to be so. Probably most congregations and pastors identifying with position one, and many of those identifying with position two, have withdrawn from the ELCA (whether to form the North American Lutheran Church, or to join other Lutheran bodies). That means the new “conservative flank” in the ELCA is a remnant made up of those who would still maintain the second position.

At the same time, the rapid societal changes have made position three increasingly untenable, and have pushed position four further to the “left” (not quite an accurate term, really, but convenient) to the point of simply accepting, as the law increasingly does, that same-sex couples may marry just as opposite-sex couples always have. There is no polling data on this as far as I know, but my guess is that a majority of ELCA pastors would now willingly perform a marriage for a same-sex couple – maybe not in the church, at least not yet, but that will come in short order.

So the new reality in the ELCA is that there are really now two positions: Those who support “marriage equality” and those who don’t, with the former on the way to becoming the large majority.

Well, why not?

This leaves those who hold the other position in an increasingly difficult spot, and this is especially true of pastors. There are at least four pressures.

The first, and in most respects the most difficult, is from congregations themselves. Even the most conservative ELCA congregations have members who are not so conservative on this issue. As same-sex marriage becomes increasingly legally and socially accepted, there will be those in most congregations who will say to their pastors, “Well, why not?” Perhaps this won’t come up until some child of the congregation asks the pastor to officiate at their marriage to their same-sex partner; other congregations, thinking they want to make themselves more “inclusive” as an outreach tool, may adopt a policy allowing for such marriages before they are

ever asked. Either way, a pastor who feels conscientiously unable to perform such a marriage will come under congregational pressure to be more open-minded and reasonable.

A second encouragement to change will be good old-fashioned peer pressure. Pastors are not immune to this kind of influence. Traditionalist pastors already often feel like fish out of water at conference ministerium meetings or synod assemblies. There comes a time when one just says, "Oh, the heck with it—to get along, I need to go along." Pastors subject to this influence often just hope that they won't actually be asked to perform a same-sex marriage before they retire.

Just do it

The third pressure will increasingly come from the ELCA itself. There are already synods where pastors who oppose same-sex marriage are under a *de facto* ban. They are told they need not seek a call in this synod; if they're already members, they need not expect their name to be put forward for another call should they sense that their current call is ended.

If a controversy about same-sex marriage should erupt in a congregation (as when a pastor refuses to perform such a marriage and at least a faction of the congregation thinks he or she should do so), it is hard to imagine most bishops taking the side of the pastor. The attitude will be, "Well, you know, our church allows for this, and there's really no reason that you shouldn't do it if the congregation is OK with it." That's the kinder, gentler approach; other bishops will simply say, "You're being stubborn, and the ELCA doesn't support you. Just do it."

There might here and there be a bishop who would try to maintain the old "bound conscience" fiction, saying to a congregation, "Our church officially respects and honors your pastor's conscience in this, and you must do so, as well." But if the bishop himself or herself were on record as supporting, even tacitly, same-sex marriage, as most of them probably are, such words would ring rather hollow. Most congregations would see the hypocrisy.

Murky issues

The fourth pressure will be that of the government. This is a very complicated question, and

one that is being raised in a number of contexts right now. Two cases currently before the Supreme Court (the most famous plaintiff being Hobby Lobby) will determine whether individuals can "opt out" of providing employees with "health care coverage" for services to which they are conscientiously opposed. It's quite a different presenting problem, to be sure, but the underlying issue is the same, and it is only a matter of time before some ambitious gay couple brings a suit against some congregation or pastor for refusing to perform their marriage.

It seems almost unthinkable that any court could simply demand that the congregation or pastor do so, but there are conceivable ways that state or local governments might bring subtle pressure where the constitutional issues are much more murky.

Unconditional surrender?

So what is the ELCA pastor who wants to uphold the historic and Biblical view of marriage to do? I wish I had a good answer. ELCA clergy will face this issue in a more stressful way than some others. Pastors in churches whose ecclesiastical authorities have not caved to the culture at least know someone has their back. While I'd love to be proven wrong, I just don't see that happening in the ELCA. Rather ELCA pastors who believe they have no authority to perform same-sex marriages will increasingly be marginalized, viewed as eccentric and unloving, waited out—and in some places, openly challenged.

One thing seems certain: When *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* observed that "at this time this church lacks consensus on this matter," it was leaving the door open—indeed, it was earnestly hoping—for a future time when consensus would be found. That day is rapidly approaching, stimulated by a societal consensus that embraces same-sex marriage as unexceptional and good. I suspect that before too very long the tolerant diversity, the recognition and support of the four positions acknowledged and approved in 2009, will be quietly forgotten if not overtly revoked, and the ELCA will officially celebrate the new social and legal reality. In other words, the settlement, as Ross Douthat put it, will be unconditional surrender.

--by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Same-sex marriage and the LCMS



It is over, to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. Conservatives have unconditionally surrendered, at least on the gay marriage debate and probably on the “culture wars” more generally.

Or perhaps I should say that any who haven’t surrendered will soon become like the fabled Japanese soldiers who fought WWII long after 1945. It’s been prophesied by academia, declared by the judges’ rulings, and ratified by Hollywood, so there is no going back. You will therefore permit me to repeat emphatically, like Dickens speaking of Marley, that it is over. The culture formed around traditional marriage is dead as a doornail.

A new and foreign context

We can complain all day that the victory of the progressives subverted our government by ignoring not only the text of the constitutions of many states but also the outcome of repeated popular votes, but it won’t matter. However it came to be, the fact remains that it was a long fought but ultimately resounding victory for progressives, decay being progress of a sort. And to those for whom everything is reducible to power struggles, victory by bogus judicial fiat counts the same as any other. As athletes say, a win is a win.

Religious leaders who have no king but Caesar will shrug, say their hands are tied and reluctantly just go with the new reality, while those who dare not call a thing what it is will naturally laud these rulings which require everyone to pretend (at least officially) that two men are husband and wife. But American churches in line with historic Christianity on this issue increasingly find themselves in a new and foreign context.

So what will happen in and to the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod as a result of this new context, and what should we do about it now that we’ve (possibly) forgotten how to be strangers in a strange land? Allow me to offer first two predictions and then two prescriptions.

Unity without unity

First prediction: this will not unify the LCMS. I know, I know, I’m going way out on a limb

there. But there is always the idea floating around that becoming an embattled minority will galvanize people who share a cause to put aside other differences. At first it may seem like this will happen in the LCMS; the various camps will rally together around a common identity as torchbearers of traditional marriage. And that may even seem to be happening for a little while, but it won’t last. I truly hope I’m wrong on this (stranger things have happened, I readily admit), but I think Evangelicals will soon go wobbly and this cultural change will, given enough time, simply provide another stage on which the same LCMS play is enacted.

The more conservative and “separatist” strain of the LCMS will see nothing really new because of this issue; as usual, they’ll refuse to change and as a result will become more isolated. They’ve always felt like an embattled minority in American Protestantism anyway, caught between the poles of liberal Protestantism and Evangelicalism, and they still fume about the Council of Trent preventing them from being Catholic.

Meanwhile, the more moderate and culturally mainstream strain of the LCMS will eventually find plausible reasons to cave on this issue. The larger, more contemporary-minded LCMS congregations have never found Evangelicalism so distasteful anyway, and many coastal and urban LCMS congregations feel fairly comfortable with ELCA-style liberal Protestantism; so both of those groups of “moderates” will find a way to embrace the new cultural reality. Oh, it might take a decade or so and they won’t formally and officially cave, they’ll just act with congregational autonomy to gradually get their practice in line with the new cultural expectations, first allowing for some exceptional cases and then allowing the exceptions to become the norm, all while claiming to be completely in line with LCMS doctrine and practice. So the LCMS will eventually become divided on this issue, too, and the division will fall on the same general fault lines as demarcate our other divisions.

Contraception redux

My second prediction is that the long dormant issue of artificial birth control will make a

comeback among conservatives in the LCMS. This has long been a pet topic of mine – how and when (and why) did our teaching on birth control go from one position to the near opposite of that position in one generation? It seems to have simply been a matter of going with the flow of the culture more than actually thinking it through. But the reason it has a chance now to become more than the pet topic of a few people is that when the LCMS explains why we dissent from the culture on gay marriage, we'll (as usual) be accused of singling out homosexuals for special condemnation. After all, we drifted along with other drastic changes to our understanding of the nature and purpose of sex and marriage, so why not this one? It is a good question, and we ought to take it to heart, not by changing our position on gay marriage but by re-examining how we interacted with similar cultural changes in the past.

Birth control is intimately connected to the gay marriage debate because one of the key arguments in favor of gay marriage is that by normalizing birth control (and declaring it an indispensable part of women's health care), our society has already established that procreation is entirely incidental to the true nature of sex and marriage, so the whole man/woman thing is irrelevant. An interesting and perhaps persuasive point. So I expect (and welcome) a thorough discussion of artificial birth control among advocates of traditional marriage, which could have the added benefit of increasing our interaction with Roman Catholic social teaching. It isn't that we'll necessarily come to the same conclusion as Rome, but at least we'll have studied the matter and made a deliberate decision instead of our past practice of just doing whatever Episcopalians do.

The deceitful heart

Now my prescriptions: First, I would like to see the LCMS listen to our worst critics as though they are speaking the truth. True, just because people say you are treating them hatefully doesn't mean you are, but it is also true that just because you say you are treating them lovingly doesn't mean you are, either. Let's not kid ourselves; the heart is deceitful above all things. We ought not claim to understand our own motives so much more clearly than do the people who impute bad motives to us. We have the evidence of our own thoughts that remains hidden from them, but such evidence can de-

ceive us. And they have other evidence hidden from us, evidence which is also not infallible but still to be taken into account. Speaking the truth in love is so much easier when there is a clear proof text to establish the presence of truth and no evidence required or admitted to establish the presence of love, or even to establish a bare minimum of understanding and sympathy. It can just be speaking the truth with a tacked on assertion of love, which takes no effort and requires no harsh introspection and generally fails even to be true.

So something I think would be helpful would be a seminar or convocation, possibly at one of the seminaries, at which formerly LCMS homosexuals honestly describe their experience with LCMS churches. The rules for the audience would simply be no argument or contradiction, no embattled defensiveness – we aren't admitting to the truth of the charges just by listening to them, but we are considering the possibility of the truth of the charges, or if not charges, at least negative experiences. It would just be a genuine, face-to-face explanation from homosexual people who have left the LCMS of their reasons for leaving. There could then be a panel discussion led by seminary professors or President Harrison or district presidents or some other recognizable LCMS leaders, with or without the homosexual former LCMSers present. It wouldn't be a matter of "What should our position be?" but "How shall we go about holding this position effectively in our new context?" I think such an event, if widely attended, could not only help on this issue but also be a step toward a positive change in the general culture of the LCMS.

Double down on schools

My second prescription is that we double down on supporting our Lutheran school system. We're closing schools as fast as we can purchase locks for the doors just at the time when we should be reopening the old ones and starting new ones everywhere. Practically every parish used to run a school way back in the day, but as we came out of our German-speaking ghetto the reasoning behind running our own schools seemed less obvious and the expense of doing so skyrocketed to keep up with the material standards of public education. So what we used to offer for free, we now offer only in select areas to those who can pay tuition.

Most churches that run schools face constant battles between those who think the school is a money pit detracting from other missions and those who think of the school as the primary mission of the congregation. In our new context, I think the latter group once again has the better argument, since once again our entire worldview (this gay marriage debate being but one manifestation) is out of step with the dominant culture around us. A parochial school system can be our mission not only to the next generation but to our communities, and in many cases to our fellow Christians of other denominations who want Christian education for their children but whose congregations lack the experience or know-how to run a much needed Christian school. Christian schools are something the future of Christianity in America requires, and the LCMS is very good at it.

Schools as missionary

Predictably for the LCMS, though, our polity could be the thing holding us back. Because our schools are typically parochial in the strictest sense, meaning run by congregations, they flourish only where congregations are strong and wealthy. And because they are run by congregations, they cannot be effectively consolidated where they aren't flourishing or started where they are most needed. Nobody has the authority.

Furthermore, if schools are a mission to the future and to the communities around us, the idea of tuition presents a paradigmatic problem. You can't charge people for your mission to them. Nor can you simply print more money to run a Lutheran school. Most LCMS schools have given up on the idea of not charging tuition. The reality is the one-to-one parish to school ratio with no tuition will never work, and parishes trying to go in together on a school is a dicey prospect due to innate territorialism. Lutheran schools in America will have to be-

come missions for every congregation, like overseas missionaries are missions of every congregation. It isn't just the past that is a foreign country; the future is a pagan country to which our Lutheran schools make the best missionaries. And for that to happen, we might need districts to start operating schools in places where congregations can't. That would raise other questions about the nature of the call and relationship between the school and the local church, but that, too, would be a welcome discussion.

I envision Lutheran schools simply serving anyone who wants to learn about the world according to the Truth free of charge, with donations of whatever you can afford welcome. That's sort of how charity hospitals used to be operated; think of a good Lutheran school as an expensive homeless shelter, offering life to those in need. We could afford it if it mattered to us. And maybe it does.

Old, odd – but bold?

Certainly if we give up on our schools we will have little presence in the American future. We're too old and odd but too accustomed to thinking of ourselves as normal to survive much longer without our own school system. I should note as an aside that the old K-8 model of education is not the only one out there and perhaps there are other models incorporating aspects of home-schooling and online education which could make the whole endeavor of Lutheran education more affordable.

Fr. Richard Neuhaus's last book was entitled *American Babylon*. It's a good title. Whatever shape the world takes, whatever context we find ourselves in, the task remains to be a collective witness to the truth, to keep the flame alive, to live in such a way that the people around us must at least take us into account as they form a worldview. The good thing about living in Babylon is that, come what may, you never run out of opportunities for bold witnessing.

--by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

Don't ask a pastor



I've commented before on the ELCA's "Living Lutheran" web site, and especially the feature "Ask a Pastor." Readers send in questions, and some members of a panel of (blessedly) anonymous ELCA pastors respond.

A recent question was this: "Is 'christening' a different word for 'baptism,' or does it mean and/or entail something other than being baptized?" This one was actually asked of a pastor, who then, for reasons that escape me, thought getting the panel's

response would be a good idea. It wasn't.

Dumbing down answers

Now let me preface this by saying that I know sometimes pastors give answers to questions that are sort of "dumbed down" so that the questioner can get the basic point without having to take a seminary course; I've done it myself. And sometimes pastors say more than they really know (I've likely done that, too), though this is more excusable in a casual conversation than it is in a written response for publication.

One of our responders, Monica, started out pretty well. "The use of the word 'christening' depends on religious tradition." That's true enough, though I might have added a linguistic note that it is really an English word and so would be most commonly used in churches (Anglican especially, but perhaps also Methodist and Presbyterian) that clearly have roots in the British Isles, but it would be less common in groups like Lutherans whose roots are elsewhere. Etymologically speaking, that's a fairly accurate answer; the word literally means to "make someone a Christian," which theologically happens in Baptism. The best dictionary definitions of "christening" seem to give, as the first meaning, "baptism." They are, in short, synonyms.

Reducing the Word

But Monica then goes on to say that "a christening is often used as a 'naming' ceremony for infants," but that "christening is not a sacrament" though baptism "also includes naming." (Are you following this?) Oh, and by the way, "We baptize because Jesus says so." And, in what seems to be an amalgam of the *Small Catechism* and Mark 16, "Through water and believing in God's word — Scripture — we are assured of God's redeeming love."

I have to say, I had never heard that what assures us of God's love is believing in Scripture. I thought Lutherans had a rather larger understanding of "the Word." A little fuzzy there, don't you think?

Words mean what I say they mean

Nonetheless, Monica is probably closer to the mark than David, who ignores the linguistic aspects of the question and defines "christening" solely as the "naming ceremony" in order to make some

kind of theological point. "Christening and baptism are indeed different things," he avers. "Christening is something we do. To christen a child is to name that child. . . . Baptism is something God does. In Holy Baptism, God fills the child with the gift of the Spirit, claims the child as a beloved son or daughter of God, and unites the child with Jesus Christ."

Of course David is right in insisting that baptism is God's action; but it isn't very helpful (nor is it necessary) to distort the sense of the word "christen" in order to make the point. Only in Wonderland do words mean just what we choose them to mean.

Probably not . . .

Linguistically speaking, there really is no difference between the two words, though Monica was right in saying that they are used in different traditions. Theologically speaking, if one were pressed to make a distinction, I don't think it is quite right to make the one David tries to make. A better direction would be found in the hoary *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1907), now available online, which offers this: "In English, the term *christen* is familiarly used for *baptize*. As, however, the former word signifies only the effect of baptism, that is, to make one a Christian, but not the manner and the act, moralists hold that 'I christen' could probably not be substituted validly for 'I baptize' in conferring the sacrament."

You've got to love the ambiguity there. And you've got to long for the days when the theological concern about the baptismal formula had to do with the validity of "christen" rather than the validity of "Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier."

Let it be said, however, that Monica and David have waded into a difficult area. Try googling "What's the difference between baptism and christening?" and you'll get a plethora of bad answers. Most of them are both linguistically and theologically bad, and even worse than those given by Monica and David. That's partly because they are given by people who do not have the pure sacramental understanding of us Lutherans, so they can be forgiven for their faults. But of Lutheran pastors — and especially if the answers are going to be published online by a Lutheran church body — shouldn't we expect better?

— by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Omnium gatherum



Trail mix • Matt Fitzgerald thinks preachers who try to soft-pedal the hard parts of the gospel, and especially when facing the unfamiliar faces in the Easter crowd, are really missing the boat. “Pity the preacher,” he writes, “who tries to soft-pedal Easter! The first time in my adult life that I went to worship on my own volition was on Easter Sunday years ago, when I was in my early twenties. Communion was served by intinction. I walked toward the table suppressing a sudden urge to run headlong toward the elements. I was surprised by my own eagerness, surprised to realize how much I needed Jesus, how badly I had missed his presence. When I reached the preacher I held my hands out expectantly, ready for Christ’s body and his blood. He placed the bread in my hands and said calmly, “Sustenance for your faith journey.” It was as if he were handing me a bag of trail mix before a hike. Jesus went unmentioned and therefore Jesus went unrecognized. My need for him went unmet.” (*Christian Century*, 2 Apr. 2014)

Take the plunge • I admit that I don’t always keep up with contemporary churchly lingo (“tables” instead of “committees”), and when I do keep up with it, I do a lot of eye-rolling. So I was taken by surprise when I read the ELCA press release saying that we have something called the “ELCA Conference of Bishops Immigration Ready Bench.” Not only that, but there are six other ELCA “ready benches.” I did a little googling and found an explanation, apparently written by Bp. Michael Burk (Southeastern Io-

wa Synod), which explains that this is part of “this church’s advocacy work.” A “ready bench” is a gaggle of bishops (that’s not Bp. Burk, that’s me) who are prepared to be “ready” when “called upon to speak and/or advocate in their particular area of concentration.” These “benches” have periodic conference calls and they meet once a year or so in Washington, DC, for briefings on their areas of concentration. Curious guy that I am, I wondered where on earth this odd term came from. The answer seems to be that it comes from competitive swimming. It’s “the area where swimmers are organized into their proper heat and where they await their chance to swim.” Makes sense, I guess. The bishops organize themselves into groups that are prepared to, um, “dive in” when public spokespersons for ELCA positions on immigration, poverty, etc., are needed. They’d like to make a big splash, but one suspects they are usually in over their heads and often all wet. And I don’t even want to contemplate bishops in Speedos.

Prayers of the people • Many folks don’t really like the canned prayers of the people put out in SundaysandSeasons.com, and with good reason. There are a variety of options out there for those who need some help constructing this important part of the liturgy. ALPB wants to do its part, so it has published *Prayers of the People: Petitionary Prayers Guided by the Texts for the Day* by Richard Bansemer (\$11 + postage). Some excellent prayers here, to be used *in toto* or as a starting point. Order from alpb.org. – roj

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