

# FORUM LETTER

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## Boundaries that are not barriers



How can greater attention to the creed help the church establish boundaries of self-definition that are not barriers? How does the creed help the church set its boundaries where they ought to be? I think it does this first by simply functioning as a clear and communal statement of the community's faith. The creed is clear, it is not ambiguous or complicated. It can be understood and affirmed by children as well as by adults. And it is communal: each Christian understands the propositions of the creed distinctively, to be sure—a necessary and blessed corollary of freedom!—but each affirms this specific set of propositions as the community's faith. Second, the creed challenges every member of the community and places demands on them. The creed expresses what and how the church believes more and better than I do. Therefore it calls me to a level of belief and practice that is now beyond me. I do not belong to a club, but to a people that demands of me commitment and growth. Third, the creed is not a set of abstract convictions, but a rule of faith with a clear and coherent internal logic. It is therefore possible to determine from the creed which behaviors conform to this logic and which do not. It is both an instrument of discernment and a set of interrelated principles for the shaping of a coherent community life. Fourth, the creed invites Christians into reflections on what is truly essential to Christian life. By its very structure, the creed encourages a large vision of the entire story, seen in its entirety, rather than a narrow focus on one point or another. The creed cultivates a consciousness of what Christians have in common rather than a consciousness of what separates them. Fifth, the creed identifies itself as one instrument of Christian identity among others. The creed tells us to seek the truth of God in "all things visible and invisible," and in the incarnate and risen Lord Jesus, and in the Scripture, and in the work of the Holy Spirit, and in the church. The creed opens possibilities for Christians of all sorts to grow together within a framework of their essential and shared commitment. —Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why It Matters* (Doubleday, 2003), 301-302.

## Promises, promises



When I was a lad growing up in the Methodist Church, I first encountered the concept of "creed." The preferred term among the Methodists, at least in that era, was "Affirmation of Faith." My congregation was comparatively "high church" for Methodists, and we fairly often recited the Apostles' Creed in worship (though it was the Methodist emendation

of the Creed, which is to say it omitted the descent into hell; the ELCA has pretty much done the same thing by sending Christ to “the dead,” but that’s another story).

In my confirmation class (see, I told you they were “high church”) we were exposed to the four “affirmations” printed in the *Methodist Hymnal*, namely the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, and then two others. One of them was the “Korean Creed,” a statement approved by the Korean Methodist Church, though the historical evidence suggests it was actually primarily the work of an American Methodist bishop.

### Captive to modernity

Then there was something called “A Modern Affirmation.” This piece was written by Edwin Lewis, a Methodist theology professor, in the 1930s. My pastor, though he was generally fairly orthodox theologically (at least as I recall it), seemed to have a particular affection for this affirmation, and we had to memorize it. I could probably still say it from memory to this day. Not that I’d want to; it is theologically pretty vapid and linguistically clunky (“We believe in the Holy Spirit as the divine presence in our lives, whereby we are kept in perpetual remembrance of the truth of Christ . . .”). The “truth of Christ,” by Dr. Lewis’s lights, didn’t include any of that problematic stuff about “crucified, died and buried,” let alone “rose from dead” or “ascended into heaven.” (In fairness to him, he apparently later recanted his former theological liberalism.)

That’s the trouble with “modern affirmations.” They are just too modern—so much so that they are captive to modernity. The impulse is well-intentioned; the writers generally honestly believe that by being “modern” and leaving behind those hoary phrases of the early centuries of the church, they are simply interpreting the historic faith for a new age. Of course they are doing no such thing, and often their work ends up being about as profoundly theological as “I believe for every drop of rain that falls, a flower grows.”

### How my mind hasn’t changed

When planning worship as a United Methodist pastor, I routinely included either the Apostles’ or the Nicene Creed. I recall one congregation member expressing appreciation for it; “it’s

been a long time since we’ve had the creed in worship,” she said. I began to realize that the classic creeds were an endangered species among the Methodists. This really became apparent when I submitted an opinion piece to a national Methodist newspaper in which I argued for the importance of confessing the historic creeds.

“We have lost . . . the understanding,” I wrote in 1976, “of creeds as the witness of the church that transcends our modern parochialism. The function of a creed in worship is to identify the congregation with the one holy catholic and apostolic church, whose existence is at once in this moment and in eternity. . . . This is a communion we ought not lightly discard in pursuit of some fleeting ‘relevance.’” I cited the worship service at a recent Methodist annual conference meeting where the liturgist had solemnly intoned, “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is the one true church, apostolic and universal, whose holy faith let us now reverently declare.” This was followed by a unison recital of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Methodist “Social Creed” —hardly the holy faith of the apostolic and universal church!

When my piece was published, I endured no end of ribbing by my colleagues, and there were several letters to the editor deriding my obviously outmoded opinions. You would have thought I was advocating the reinstatement of the Latin mass.

### Baptized into what faith?

Now that I think about it, that whole episode might have been one of the marking points on my journey toward becoming a Lutheran. I thought that Lutherans would be more or less immune from creedal aversion or revision.

Alas, not so. A reader has forwarded to me the baptismal liturgy of an ELCA church in Southern California, which amended the questions asked of the sponsors (and the congregation itself). It runs like this:

*P: Do you believe in God the Father?*

*C: We all believe in the true God who made and rules the earth and heaven, the Father who, in love, has given us the rights of children. He feeds us in body and spirit, and all we need is provided by his hand. He cares for us day and night, watching to be sure that no harm comes to us.*

*P: Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?*

C: *We all believe in Jesus, the Christ, the word made flesh, the child of God and the child of Mary, our Lord and our brother. He suffered death on the cross so that we might live the new and everlasting life to which he was raised on the third day.*

P: *Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?*

C: *We all believe in the Holy Spirit, the comforter, who created the church and keeps in unity all those who are called to faith, drawing them ever closer to the heart of God through the forgiveness of sins. Amen.*

### Muddled and misconceived

I suppose in some ways this is a better formulation than that “Modern Affirmation” that lingers in my memory; at least here there is some reference to the death and resurrection of Christ. But that’s about the best that can be said for it. Its affirmation of the Trinity is weak; its Christology is muddled; its ecclesiology is astonishingly misconceived, despite the attempt to echo the *Small Catechism*.

“Where the heck did it come from?” I wondered. I googled a phrase or two, but got no hits; one must assume that this was the creation of some individual (maybe the pastor) in that particular congregation. It is astonishing that such a thing could be inserted in a baptismal liturgy, of all places. My correspondent reported that the baptism was of his grandchild, and he himself performed the actual washing “in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” so we can assume it was a “valid” sacrament. But one would have to wonder whether this baptismal liturgy as a whole articulates “the faith of the church, the faith in which we baptize.”

Well actually, no, one doesn’t have to wonder. It doesn’t articulate the faith of the church.

### They’re everywhere

My correspondent went on to say that his son, who lives in Oregon, had also reported an aberrant “creed” being used in worship at his ELCA congregation. He sent a copy of the liturgy, where the following appears in the place the creed would normally be confessed:

*I believe in God, who has created all life and continues to create new life in me. I believe in Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. By his life, death, and resurrection he has saved and redeemed the whole world so that we can know the true depth of human possibility and ex-*

*perience the true joy of abundant life, both now and forever. I believe the Holy Spirit is present now and always, calling me to faith, giving me gifts, and empowering me for the life of service which is my calling. Through that Spirit, God has called and gathered his Church to be the body of Christ, celebrating God’s presence, standing with the poor and oppressed, working for peace and justice, loving and serving all people. Amen.*

### One version

I did get a hit when I googled this one. It was an article by a lawyer back in 1999 who cited it as “one version of a Lutheran confession of faith.” It apparently appeared originally in a book published by Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Burnsville, MN—a book so obscure that a WorldCat search shows only one library that has a copy.

But apparently there are other copies floating around out there in the possession of pastors who think this “creed” is kind of groovy, giving it a half-life much longer than it deserves. In a recent *FL* article, I objected to liturgies that regularly omit the creed; I’ll have to revise my views somewhat here and say that omission would actually be preferable to inclusion of an “affirmation” as problematic as this one.

I suppose I should also tell you that my correspondent reported that his son’s congregation was going to be having an adult forum to rethink the virgin birth. I can tell you some other things they ought to rethink instead.

### The creed of a confirmand

I know there are pastors who ask their confirmation class members to write their own creed. I’ve always thought that a misguided exercise for students who are preparing to confess *the church’s* creed. It might be a useful assignment, I suppose, if directed carefully and in such a way that it did not encourage students to think that they have the right to affirm any old (or new) thing that strikes their fancy.

It can become really problematic, though, if those personal creeds then get inserted into the liturgy to be read aloud by the congregation. How can you ask a worshiper to confess assertions which may or may not reflect “the faith of the church” but which in any event take him/her utterly by surprise, so there is no opportunity to reflect on whether in

fact it *does* articulate the faith which we confess?

It's the same problem if the "creed" comes, not from a fourteen-year-old confirmand, but from some pastor in California or some congregation in Burnsville.

### It's *our* creed

William Willimon tells a story about a guest lecture at Yale Divinity School being given by an Orthodox priest. An earnest student raised his hand. "Father Theodore, what can one do when one finds it impossible to affirm certain tenets of the Creed? How can I with integrity affirm a creed in which I do not believe?" The priest replied, "It's not *your* creed, young man! It's *our* creed. Keep saying it for heaven's sake! Eventually, it may come to you. For some, it takes longer than for others. How old are you? Twenty-three? . . . There are lots of things you don't know at twenty-three. Eventually, it may come to you." [William Willimon, *Preaching Master Class*:

*Lessons from Will Willimon's Five-Minute Preaching Workshop* (Wipf & Stock, 2010)]

Precisely so. The ecumenical creeds are *our* creeds; they are what define who we are as Christians. Modern "affirmations," recast for the sake of an illusive "relevance," are by definition not *our* creeds, and pastors or liturgists have no business foisting them on a congregation. One reason we "keep saying them" is that they become vehicles for the faith once delivered to the saints to "come to us."

So spare me your "modern affirmations." They do not belong in the liturgy of the church, if in fact they belong anyplace at all. If there are Lutheran pastors who don't get this, one would hope that someone—lay people in their congregation, their bishop, maybe even their confirmation students—might teach them what the creeds are and why we confess them.

--by Richard O. Johnson, editor

## Church and weddings: time for a divorce?

by William A. Hartfelder, Jr.



Not a day goes by without a letter to the editor, newspaper article or other media attention devoted to our current debates over gay marriage, often highlighting especially the role of clergy. A recent wire report blurb in the local press where I reside highlighted an interfaith clergy coalition's filing of the first lawsuit challenging North Carolina's ban on same-sex marriages. Current North Carolina law bars same-sex couples from obtaining marriage licenses and makes it a misdemeanor with a \$200 fine for a pastor to perform a marriage ceremony without the license. The coalition, made up of the United Church of Christ, a rabbi and ministers from Lutheran (although not specified, it's safe to assume ELCA) and Unitarian Universalist churches in the Charlotte area, stated they should not be penalized for "following their faith." (*Columbus Dispatch*, April 28, 2014)

That same week there appeared a letter to the editor written in response to a letter printed earlier in the week. Protesting the first writer's opposition to gay marriage as a right restricted to heterosexuals, the second writer insisted: "What I want as

a gay American male is the right to sign a legal contract sanctioned by the government with another male that will provide us with all rights of marriage currently enjoyed by [the first writer]. Nothing more, nothing less. Religion has nothing to do with it. Custom has nothing to do with it. What the majority of others do has nothing to do with it. My right to what other Americans have has everything to do with it." (*Columbus Dispatch*, May 1, 2014)

### Church and state

The above examples illustrate an all-too-often overlooked contradiction in our contemporary daily debates over gay marriage and the separation of church and state. For all our talk about, and affirmation of, this separation, the truth is that when it comes to marriage, clergy in the United States essentially function as clerks of the state.

When I was ordained a Lutheran pastor almost thirty years ago, one of the first things I had to do was apply for a license to officiate at weddings. I filled out the required form and together with a photocopy of my certificate of ordination and the

appropriate fee, dutifully sent it to the office of the Secretary of State. In return I received a suitable-for-framing license to “solemnize” marriages in the State of Ohio.

It is interesting to note that it is the clergy’s signature on the state-issued marriage license – not her or his signature on a document provided by the clergy’s religious body – that legally marries two people in the eyes of the state. Should a couple decide to end their marriage, they do not return to the clergy to have them sign another government issued document to end the marriage legally. On the contrary, they must go the route of legal counsel and the state’s courts. I think we have come to the point in time when we need to give serious consideration to clergy getting a “divorce” from the state!

### The European model

I, for one, would much prefer the model still used in much of Europe where a marriage is first a matter of state law. If a couple desires to have their marriage blessed by the religious body of their choice, they may do so, but that is not what constitutes their legal marriage. For example, when the world watched Prince William and the now Duchess of Cambridge Kate wed on television, they had already been legally married the day before in a civil court. What the world observed was the blessing of their marriage by the Church of England. In contrast, our marriage law and practice has led to an unfortunate blurring of the boundary between church and state.

Over the years I have experienced instances when it was obvious a couple desiring to wed perceived me as if I were a justice of the peace, and they were more concerned with the physical appearance of the church, how many it could seat and its proximity to their wedding reception than they were concerned about the religious content of the rite of marriage practiced by my faith community. But to be fair, who could blame them? After all, in the United States clergy function as clerks of the state for the purpose of performing weddings.

### Rights and rites

Indeed, there are clergy who enjoy the financial benefits that come with serving in such a capacity. I knew of a pastor who claimed he made over \$25,000 annually in retirement “doing weddings” for couples he met as they exited the state office with their newly issued marriage licenses! I can’t help but wonder if this might turn out to be the major stumbling block to clergy getting a “divorce” from the state when it comes to marriage.

It is time for a serious conversation on the difference between “rights” and “rites.” Let the state define people’s legal right to wed, but let religious bodies define and exercise the rite of marriage that reflects their faith, tradition and practice. Until then, all our debates over gay marriage will continue to trip over the line between church and state.

*William A. Hartfelder, Jr., is pastor of Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELCA), in Westerville, OH. This is his first contribution to Forum Letter.*

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## Retreat from weddings? No way!

by Daniel Fienen



Lawsuits brought against providers of wedding services such as wedding photographers and wedding cake bakers have been much in the news lately. The objective of these lawsuits has been to force them to provide their services for same-sex weddings despite their religious objections to them. Some are concerned that sooner or later pastors and churches will be sued or otherwise legally coerced into performing same-sex weddings. A simple solution to such a

push has been suggested: stop performing weddings! Let all our people get married in a civil ceremony; then, if they want the church’s blessing, let them come to the church for that.

There may be good reasons to get out of the wedding business. The opinion of Luther, the example of European churches, and concerns over pastors becoming entangled with the state by acting as an agent of the state have all been mentioned. These reasons may ultimately be seen as sufficient cause to

get out of the wedding business. However, if that move is seen primarily as a way to solve the problem of those who would coerce the church into performing same-sex weddings, I have a couple of concerns.

### The public square

It has long been observed that for a significant number of people, religion is something that should be excluded from society's public space. This concern was expressed back in 1984 in Richard John Neuhaus's *The Naked Public Square*; long before that, in 1951, William F. Buckley had raised a similar issue in his *God and Man at Yale*. Stephen L. Carter in his 1993 book *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* observed that the effort to keep religion from becoming a political tool has resulted in pressure on religious people to act in public as though their faith does not matter to them.

One example could be the contraceptive mandates put into the Affordable Care Act, provisions which would exempt churches (who primarily serve the faithful) from the mandates, but not other faith-based institutions (who deal with the public at large—hospitals and the like). The rationale seems to be that when serving the public at large, the faith concerns of religious institutions should take a back seat to the secular government's mandates and goals. To cede marriage as a concern for the state rather than the church furthers such a retreat from public space.

### Legitimate interests

Both the state and the church have legitimate interests in the founding of stable families through marriage. In the current curious hybrid ceremony, the pastor acts not only to represent the state's interest in the matter, but also God's creative power to join the two into one new family. If the church succumbs to intimidation and retreats from being a vital part of this important life transition, and if we allow ourselves to become an optional frill on a secular ceremony or a curious nostalgic throwback to an earlier day, do we not lose? At the least it would take very serious education to convince even our own people that we are more than an unnecessary but quaint decoration, a bump on the way from the "real ceremony" to the serious party. We also could

weaken an important part of our teaching on marriage and family.

Do we really want to encourage the trend that when Christians interact with others not of their faith, they should deny their Christianity, take up a secular mantle and pretend that Christianity doesn't really matter in "real life"? I think not. Such a strategic retreat may eventually prove to be necessary, but it should be adopted reluctantly and not without a fight.

### Besides, it won't work

Another problem with getting out of the wedding business to avoid conflict is that ultimately it will not work. This push to force the religious objectors to provide for same-sex weddings is ideologically driven. Not many in the LGBT community are so anxious to have church weddings that they want to force them where they would not otherwise be welcome. There are plenty of churches (as well as bakers, photographers, florists and caterers) willing and even eager to celebrate same-sex marriages; forcing compliance by those with religious objections is hardly necessary.

Rather it is the ideologues and activists who wish to make a point, coercing those reluctant to approve of same-sex marriages to at least act as though they do. That will be the purpose if it comes to attempts to force churches to perform same-sex weddings. If we retreat from performing weddings to avoid having to perform same-sex weddings, it would be at best a temporary reprieve.

But for those whose intent is to force *all* to accept as normal and good same-sex activity, other means will be found to push the issue. Every retreat by Christians will be seen not only as a victory, but also as a stepping stone to the ultimate goal of forcing any and every institution, ideology, belief system, or association that does not accept same-sex activity to do so or be destroyed.

So where do we make our stand? Let's not be too quick to give in by giving up the church's traditional authority in performing Christian weddings.

*Daniel Fienen is pastor of Grace Lutheran Church (LCMS) in Baldwin, MI. This is his first contribution to Forum Letter.*

## George Muedeking: an appreciation

by Ray F. Kibler III



The Lutheran magazine recently noted the death of Dr. George Muedeking, a significant voice for confessional Lutheranism in America through much of the late 20th century. I didn't think the six-line notice there really did justice to an editor, churchman, and theologian of Muedeking's stature, so I asked Ray Kibler, a long-time friend of Muedeking and a member of the ALPB board, to write a brief remembrance. — roj

Now at rest in the church in heaven, George H. Muedeking served the global Lutheran churches as a faithful pastor, teacher, editor, writer, and pastor again. The Lutheran church in North America in particular has lost one of her most articulate and influential witnesses to the Bible and Confessions—to the Law and the Gospel—over seven of her most tumultuous decades.

### Deep and wide

Lutheranism in him ran deep. George was born in 1915, baptized and confirmed in the [Lutheran] Joint Synod of Ohio and Other States, and ordained into the ministry of the subsequent [1930-1960] American Lutheran Church. He was born and reared in Wisconsin and then educated in the Midwest—at Capital University, Indiana University, and then the seminary of Capital University (merged into today's Trinity Lutheran Seminary). But previous generations knew George best beginning in 1941, when he was called as a home mission developer and then as pastor of congregations in Southern California. He served a congregation in Northern California during the 1950s, completed his Ph.D. at the University of California, and also taught theology at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary during the early 1960s. In 1965, George was appointed editor of *The Lutheran Standard* of The American Lutheran Church [1960-1987] (the *Standard* was a predecessor of the ELCA's *The Lutheran*), and he served in that capacity until his retirement in 1978.

Lutheranism in George also ran wide. Despite his retirement back to Northern California in 1980, he remained highly active as a lecturer and guest professor in the U.S. and in Australia, while serving as the interim and visitation pastor of sever-

al congregations. More recent generations have known George well from his published books and articles in Christian ethics, pastoral counseling, and other topics, but especially in Lutheran theology. Moreover, innumerable pastors and laity knew George for his over thirty years of glad and untiring labors within such ministries as the Fellowship of Confessional Lutherans, the Lutheran Bible Institute of California, the WordAlone Network, Solid Rock Lutherans, and the Institute of Lutheran Theology, among others.

### Missionary in a time of change

For over seven decades, George was a missionary whose faithful witness was formed in the family dislocations of World War II and the prosperities and disparities in church and society that followed. With a joyous faith based firmly upon the Bible and the Confessions, he was always confident and fair in addressing the many challenges of war (again) and of rampant social discontent through the 1970s. But during over thirty years since, as some North American Lutheran leaders and thinkers fell from those sources and norms and thus from the Lord Himself, George in his continuing writings effectively confronted their positions graciously. Moreover, in his public activities and deep personal friendships he winsomely witnessed to the true Christian faith with charity for all.

George died April 20 at the age of 98. He is survived by two children, six grandchildren, and six great-grandchildren. His beloved wife Harriet predeceased him in 2006. But George is also survived by countless grateful North American Lutherans who continue to find in his life and work inspiration for continued faithful service to Christ and commitment to the Lutheran Confessions.

*Dr. Ray E. Kibler III is an ELCA pastor and church historian who served for many years in intentional interim ministry. He is a member of the board of the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau and remains active in many church, ecumenical and academic groups. He and his wife live in Claremont, CA.*

## Omnium gatherum



**The joys of ministry** • There are some things you just can't make up. The ELCA's Sierra Pacific Synod newsletter recently carried a piece by "Bishop's Associate"--they call it that because "assistant" is so, you know, hierarchical--Nancy Feniuk Nelson rhapsodizing over the privileges and joys of ministry. She mentions the thrill of baptizing babies, children and adults, the joy of serving communion to people just before surgery or after private confession, the privilege of preaching the good news of Jesus Christ. "But none," she continues, "feel quite as joyful or satisfying or sacred as the time when I get to ride with Bp. Mark [Holmerud] in the Pride Parade. . . . I have fun doing it but don't even begin to think that fun means it isn't also sacred and serious. For isn't that God's way? Haven't there always been those times when happy and holy can go together? This is one of them and I thank God and the synod for my opportunity to ride in a convertible representing the grace of God, which always surprises us in the most joyful ways!" Can't say that I'd ever thought to compare riding in the San Francisco Gay Pride Parade to administering the sacraments or preaching the gospel. I got a lot of joy in my 40 years of ministry, but not enough, I guess. Or not the right kind. The same newsletter included an invitation to the congregations of the synod to send delegations to be part of the parade; I haven't heard how many responded.

**From ALPB books** • Another recent addition to the list of books published by the American Lutheran

Publicity Bureau is *On Being the Church in These Precarious Times*. Consisting of papers given at last year's theological conference sponsored by Lutheran CORE and the North American Lutheran Church, this volume--edited by Carl Braaten--contains contributions by some of the brightest theological lights (past, present and future) of American Lutheranism. Among the "senior theologians," in addition to Braaten, are James Nestingen and Frank Senn. David Yeago represents the best of our current established teachers, while Nathan Yoder, Stephen Turnbull and Sarah Hinlicky Wilson (editor of *Lutheran Forum*) are up-and-comers. Some good stuff in this book; you can order it at [alpb.org](http://alpb.org).

**Speaking of the dead** • Not quite out yet as we go to press, but due imminently, is a still newer ALPB book by former *FL* editor Russell Saltzman. Russ has produced a marvelous anthology of funeral sermons and reflections, preached in a wide variety of situations and circumstances. I was never much of a fan of collections of sermons by ordinary parish pastors (if Saltzman can be considered "ordinary"), but this is one I wish had been around when I was in parish ministry, and one I will give as a gift to young pastors I know.

**Save the date** • ALPB is observing its centennial this year, and there's going to be a dinner in New York on October 12, 5 to 9 p.m. Make your travel arrangements now; more information to follow about dinner reservations. -roj

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