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The things we need to hear



The temptation to forget the few spiritual essentials and to go wandering off after unimportant things is very strong, especially to Christians of a certain curious type of mind. Such persons find the great majors of the faith of our fathers altogether too tame for them. . . . They are especially skillful at propounding notions which have never been a part of the Christian heritage of truth. Their enthusiasm mounts with the uncertainty of their position and their dogmatism grows firmer in proportion to the mystery which surrounds their subject. Dr. Samuel Johnson, the famous English sage, once said that one of the surest evidences of intellectual immaturity is the desire to startle people. Yet there are Christians who have been fed upon the odd, the strange and the curious so long and so exclusively that they have become wholly unfitted spiritually to receive or to appreciate sound doctrine. They live to be startled by something new or thrilled by something wonderful. They will believe anything so long as it is just a little away from the time-honored beliefs of sober Christian men. A serious discourse calling for repentance, humbleness of mind and holiness of life is impatiently dismissed as old-fashioned, dull and lacking in "audience appeal." Yet these things are just the ones that rank highest on the list of things we need to hear, and by them we shall all be judged in that great day of Christ. A church fed on excitement is no New Testament church at all. The desire for surface stimulation is a sure mark of the fallen nature, the very thing Christ died to deliver us from. A curious crowd of baptized worldlings waiting each Sunday for the quasi-religious needle to give them a lift bears no relation whatsoever to a true assembly of Christian believers. And that its members protest their undying faith in the Bible does not change things any. "Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven." — A. W. Tozer, *The Next Chapter After the Last* (WingSpread Publishers, 1987), 14.

Remonstrating with Hinlicky

by Robert Benne



[Editor's note: Paul Hinlicky's article "After Schism" in the Summer 2015 issue of Lutheran Forum has generated quite a bit of discussion. In that article, Hinlicky explained why he stays in the ELCA, how he views the present situation, and why he thinks neither NALC nor LCMS are options for him. We've asked three persons, one each from NALC, ELCA and LCMS, to respond.]

I found a good deal to agree with in the reflections on "After Schism" by my friend and colleague, Paul Hinlicky. My memories are still fresh of both of us standing outside the first ELCA Assembly in 1989 in Chicago, smoking ciga-

rettes and fuming about what was happening therein, as well as of his dramatic gesture at one of the Called to Faithfulness Conferences at St. Olaf College in the early 90s (he disgustingly threw a torn copy of *The Lutheran* from the pulpit in Boe Chapel). So we share a long history of resistance to the trends operating in the ELCA from its conception in the Committee for a New Lutheran Church. However, from 2009 onward we have taken different paths. As he makes clear in his article, he continues his tortured existence in the ELCA and in the new incarnation of Lutheran CORE (Lutheran Coalition for Renewal). I chose to shift my commitment and soon my membership to the North American Lutheran Church. I spiritually left the ELCA when it made its fateful decisions in 2009. Strangely, I found that defeat liberating; I no longer had to fight *against* something forever and ever, but rather could reorient my energies *for* something, first toward CORE in its earlier version and then toward the NALC, which it birthed.

I have served in several capacities in the NALC since its founding. For six years after those 2009 decisions, we have continued to belong to an orthodox ELCA congregation, the same one to which Paul belongs, so I fully agree with him that there are genuine Lutheran Christians as well as orthodox Lutheran parishes remaining in the ELCA. But I see little hope that the slow movement of the ELCA toward liberal Protestantism will abate. Indeed, the path away from orthodoxy was dramatized by the election of a male bishop “married” to another man. So, after making a decision some years ago to cast my lot with the NALC, my wife and I will bring our local parish membership in line with that decision by joining St. John Lutheran in Roanoke, VA, when that parish joins the NALC in September.

LWF: What really happened

As a member of the Commission on Theology and Doctrine of the NALC, I want to remonstrate a bit with Paul about several of his comments about the NALC. The first one concerns his chastising the NALC leadership for its “playing fast and loose with the truth in the process leading up to its now ‘pending’ application for membership in the Lutheran World Federation.” As he notes, one of the two reasons for wanting to join the LWF – against consider-

able resistance from many NALC parishes – was to respond positively to requests by African churches to help them stand for orthodoxy in the LWF. The other was to enter into global ecumenical conversations through the LWF.

One of the requirements for membership of a new body in the LWF is that contiguous churches – in the case of North America, the ELCA and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada – would have to give their approval. That didn’t happen so our application was put on “pending” status, with the accompanying question from the LWF about whether we would practice altar and pulpit fellowship with those churches. We replied that NALC parishes could and would practice such on an *ad hoc* basis. We knew there were orthodox ELCA pastors who could faithfully serve NALC parishes, and we had no doubt that NALC pastors could serve in orthodox ELCA parishes. Meanwhile, however, the ELCA has remained silent on the matter while a number of ELCA bishops have played a mean-spirited game of hardball. ELCA pastors who want to serve NALC parishes – even simply to provide pulpit supply for them – have sometimes been threatened with expulsion from the ELCA. So the truth is that there is far more hostility to pulpit and altar fellowship in the ELCA than in the NALC. The next step, as I understand it, is that the ELCA, ELCIC and NALC are supposed to have joint conversations on a number of issues before anything further can happen.

Lutheran CORE’s changing role

A second item concerning the NALC is Paul’s intimation that NALC cast CORE into outer darkness because it would not “play a stronger role in facilitating exodus from the ELCA” and therefore not help increase the growth of the NALC. The story is more complex than that. Under Pr. Steve Shipman, Director of Lutheran CORE, the organization has bent more and more toward providing a shelter for the ELCA orthodox and acting as a prophetic voice within the ELCA. Little energy has been given to helping churches find their way out of the ELCA into the NALC. Meanwhile, the funds to support CORE were drying up and the NALC had to pick up the bill for some of CORE’s functions, including the Theological Lectures held between its Convocation and the NALC Convocation. Since Lutheran CORE

has morphed back into a reform and renewal movement within the ELCA and has abjured its role in helping congregations leave, there is little reason for the NALC to subsidize the organization. However, CORE members continue to serve in various capacities in the NALC, including Paul Hinlicky himself as a member of its planning committee for the newly-named Braaten and Benne Theological Lectures.

Third, Paul opines that if the NALC has dallied with the Navigators it can certainly relate to orthodox elements in the ELCA, the implication being that the NALC was theologically lax in its dalliance. The truth is that NALC Bishop John Bradosky received sharp criticism for his work with the Navigators from some pastors within the NALC. He assured them he was interested in some of the techniques of evangelism and discipleship practiced by the Navigators rather than its theology. Heaven knows Lutherans need to get better at both. To abate any fears the Commission on Theology and Doctrine asked Dr. Nathan Yoder to draft a paper on discipleship, which he has done in solid Lutheran fashion. It is currently being reviewed by retired Bishop Paull Spring and Professors David Yeago and James Nestingen. Theology is taken seriously in the NALC.

Doing things right

One of the great opportunities in building a new church is that we have the chance to do things right. The first thing we have tried to do right is to make sure Lutheran theology provides the guidance system of the church, not the fashionable ideologies that have so flummoxed the ELCA. That's what happened with the Navigators episode. Further, we are trying to do public witness properly, avoiding the ponderous social statements and promiscuous political advocacy we enjoyed in the ELCA. The same is true with evangelism, both at home and abroad, and with theological education, which is going to be held closely to the life and needs of the church.

Another of the benefits to building a new church is that one can orient energies toward the future and distance oneself from the battles of the past. That's why I don't recognize at all Paul's suggestion that the NALC, along with the LCMS, is "forced perpetually to define themselves over against the heterodoxy of the feared other." He might be right about the LCMS, which is always

fighting among contending "feared others" within the church itself. But as far as I have experienced the NALC, there is little dwelling on the battles of the past with the ELCA. The doctrine of marriage and the requirement that baptism is necessary for participating in the Eucharist are settled teachings.

"Pioneer evangelism" (bringing the Gospel to lands and peoples who have never heard it) is accepted without any debate whatsoever. With the aid and blessing of the Holy Spirit, we want to move on to building a viable church, not obsess about the past.

The ELCA and the Great Tradition

Further, I do not think the NALC proudly thinks "orthodoxy is something we own." We are quite aware that all human formulations are marred by sin and finitude. As Paul asserts, "Orthodoxy is yet an unfinished project" in the sense that what is implicit in the Bible and the Great Tradition can become explicit through the promptings of the Holy Spirit. And new historical challenges have to be grappled with in ways that apply old truths in new ways.

But there is an "apostolic faith," a Great Tradition, a "mere Christianity" that is settled and non-negotiable. The ELCA has denied at least two key doctrines of that apostolic faith: the Great Commission (it rejected "pioneer evangelism" in 1999), and the Christian doctrine of marriage (it has a male bishop "married" to another man). Its doctrine will have to catch up with its practice. More fundamentally, it submits doctrine to the manipulated decisions of a theologically and biblically uninformed assembly.

While I agree with Paul that God is working a shake-up of the Christian churches and perhaps realigning them in a way in which denominational lines may be re-written or become obsolete, it's a kind of Docetism that suggests that we can bracket church membership out of our lives at this point in history. As some Lutherans have argued, the church is included in the Gospel, and one simply has to take membership in a concrete body seriously. One cannot airily float above them all.

Finally, I do not think Paul Hinlicky has to worry about being "forced to shelter elsewhere." Who in the ELCA would be able to argue with the theologian who just finished a 1000-page systematic theology entitled *Beloved Community – Critical Dog-*

matics after Christendom [Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2015]? Besides, the ELCA has no stomach for any forthright dismissals or heresy trials; it would much rather ignore you.

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A focus too narrow

by Charles Austin



For full disclosure, let it be known that I am an ELCA “loyalist.” I have criticisms, some of them serious, about the church body, but it is thoroughly “my church.” I have served its parishes, I write for its publications and am proud to be on its clergy roster. I am glad that Dr. Paul Hinlicky will remain in the ELCA, although I am sorry that he appears to be so unhappy doing so. He “struggles” to stay and concludes that he is “stuck” in our fellowship. His desire for a continually reformist agenda is almost sure to fail and may make him a marginalized member of our church body and a perhaps a less than full participant in our mission. Or maybe not.

Like many for whom the 2009 decisions about sexuality became the focal point for a grab bag of complaints not only about the ELCA but about Lutheranism and modern Christianity in general, Dr. Hinlicky sees the ELCA through a narrow lens whose focus burns bright and hot, but does not cast a wider, helpful, more illuminating light.

A salvo of insults

Even given leeway for disputatious rhetoric, his references to the ELCA as a “bleeding corpse” and the “social controversy that precipitated the biggest schism in American Lutheran history” are not only overstatements (who wants to stay with a corpse and the schism of the Civil War years was much greater), but fire a salvo of insults over the lay people, pastors and bishops he will continue to have as partners in the Gospel.

Hinlicky’s analysis avoids blowing the oft-sounded horn of Weimar and Nazism, yet he worries that, like the German Christians cooperating with National Socialism, the ELCA may be driven by a need to be “on the right side of history, as if history were God.”

Before I explain where I think Hinlicky’s analysis of the ELCA needs wider focus, I register

my agreement with parts of his assessment of recent history, which has fomented the organization of the North American Lutheran Church and Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ, and further soured our relationship with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

The sad and, in my opinion, unnecessary fragmentation of American Lutheranism will take a couple of generations to heal. It may be an overstatement, but it is largely true to say that the NALC is just the ELCA without partnered gay clergy and the LCMC contains the remnants of those who not only disliked the ELCA merger, but the ALC and LCA mergers of decades ago. I am sorry they have left, but I clearly see why they did so. On the other hand, a thoughtful colleague in ministry suggests (without joy) that the ELCA today is better off without those whose views on sexuality and the decisions of 2009, along with their hostility to other ELCA policies, made congenial fellowship and cooperative mission difficult.

Plenty of life in the “bleeding corpse”

Hinlicky is also right to note that the LCMS, which has denounced us for decades, largely because we ordain women, cannot be a refuge for ELCA dissidents because it is in a “perpetual state of internal schism,” circling wagons of presumed “orthodoxy.” The current regime in Missouri even speaks of breaking up our “cooperation in externals,” such things as social services and aid to refugees. There are moderate voices in the LCMS, but they are fading and in peril when they speak.

One does not have to be an ELCA loyalist to recognize that, though smaller and poorer, it remains an active and clearly sustainable church body. The “bleeding corpse” imagery fades to black in the face of a National Youth Gathering bringing 30,000 young people to Detroit, expanding ecumenical endeavors strengthening our ministries through

cooperation with our full communion partners, and our continued and valued presence as helper to Lutheran churches around the world. It would take decades for any new Lutheran body to establish the presence and, yes, the power that the ELCA wields.

No hospice care

Hinlicky notes the declines in budget and membership. But as one involved in the planning for the “new church,” I suggest that the initial budget of \$120 million for the national church was overly optimistic and stemmed from an understandable desire to present “the new church” as bigger than the sum of the predecessor church bodies.

Membership numbers are slippery, but it is clear that the ELCA has “lost” many, who, of course, took their offerings with them. But with a wider focus, we do not lament these as losses to the Church catholic, for those who left us went to other Lutheran churches where they still serve the Lord. Actions of the ELCA did not drive them from the faith.

Hinlicky also overestimates the situation and again insults his partners in the faith in congregations where votes to leave failed. He describes these places as “demoralized shells,” where the “most knowledgeable theologically and/or most committed churchmen and -women” defected. Without discounting the serious pain and strife in those congregations, this is either wishful thinking or an odd suggestion that the “really smart and committed” people left, made as Hinlicky explains why he did not leave. Other “theologically knowledgeable” and committed members may have reasons to stay that are as good as or better than his.

In a congregation, numbers and dollars can shrink to the point where it is no longer sustainable and its situation may be one where growth is nearly impossible, but the ELCA as a denomination is nowhere near being on life support or in hospice care.

ELCA's real problems

Hinlicky does cite or suggest some things that have indeed given the ELCA serious pain and impair its wider mission. The quota system has not only created bureaucratic problems, but has, as Hinlicky notes, fostered mistrust and created ecclesial legalisms that should have no place in a community of faith.

I would add that at its inception, the Confer-

ence of Bishops was marginalized, robbing the ELCA of what might have been a firm, knowledgeable theological hand. And with 65 bishops, some of them from very small synods, it lacks heft. The ELCA's first presiding bishop, Herbert Chilstrom (1988-1995), provided energetic leadership; its second, H. George Anderson (1995-2001), less so. Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson's 12-year leadership, despite his efforts to remain non-partisan, seemed to polarize ELCA dissidents, who latched on to his frequent public comments as signs of a church “run from the top.”

He is right to mention that ELCA leadership failed in dialogue with certain groups of critics, especially those who formulated the “9.5 Theses.” However, such groups often made their own situation problematic by high levels of arrogance and unfriendly rhetoric.

How much disagreement can be tolerated?

Despite his “bleeding corpse” imagery, Hinlicky says “the church of Jesus Christ still exists in the ELCA.” One then might ask what all the fuss is about. It is, of course, about the levels of disagreement which can be tolerated before it is necessary to sever relations with that particular “church of Jesus Christ.” For some, the sexuality decisions of 2009 were the only thing; for others, those decisions were the last thing.

Many will resonate with the case Hinlicky makes for staying. The LCMS is no option; the NALC is small and shaky; the LCMC flirts with a non-Lutheran type of evangelicalism in the training of pastors. Rome is not yet “reformed” enough and Hinlicky will not go “where ordained sisters cannot likewise tread.”

So he stays (or is “stuck”) in the ELCA and I am glad—sort of—that we will have the benefit of his care and scholarship. I like his expressions of hope for the future. I'm not sure I like his desire to nurture doubt about “the sacred cows of the ELCA among those who are not yet open dissenters.” There is a difference between pulling together in the ELCA while expressing honest criticisms and intentionally at the same time raising the level of dissent and possible disunion. Hinlicky says he will “dissent in place until I am forced to shelter elsewhere.” The mere passing reference to “forced” draws blood at a time when some, who by their own

choice fled the ELCA, like to say that bishops and bureaucrats drove them out.

Using a wide lens

Hinlicky is critical of what the ELCA is, but not clear about what he would have it be. In a way, that is good, and he says, in criticism of both the LCMS and the NALC, that “orthodoxy” is not something to be owned as a “settled possession.” It is, he says, “the Holy Spirit’s work in progress through the Word in a history not yet finished.” It is this reference to “progress” that sets him aside from the more unfriendly critics who urge a regression to a time when they believe that certain things about women and sexuality and scripture were indeed “settled possessions.”

Lutherans involved in the merger of 1987 came to the ELCA as moderate to liberal theologically, heavily engaged in social issues, ecumenically energetic and fully involved with the winds of change blowing through the 20th century. Those who say they were surprised at the decisions and directions taken by the ELCA were just not paying attention.

I am among those with close to five decades in ordained ministry, preceded by two decades of church life as child, teenager, collegian and seminarian. I have great reverence for the congregations of

the Augustana Lutheran Church in which I was baptized, the United Lutheran Church in America which confirmed me and the Lutheran Church in America parish in which I heard the call to ordained ministry. But if an exact replica of those parishes existed today, I would probably not be a member. It is not 1942, 1958 or 1963.

The inevitable procession of time means that everyone who stays with the ELCA or is “stuck” with it – and I guess that, like Hinlicky, I am – will have to sit lightly on favored aspects of our former lives and recognize a greater diversity of opinion and practice than we have ever known before. The sharp focus remains on the Gospel of justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, the essential doctrines of the ecumenical creeds and our Lutheran confessions as historically conditioned extrapolations of Gospel and creed.

Those of us who stay with the ELCA – and are happy about it – will also use a wide lens shining light on a broad and changing mission.

Charles Austin is a retired ELCA pastor who has served parishes in Iowa, New York and New Jersey, is former director of news for the Lutheran Church in America and former English editor for The Lutheran World Federation. He has also been a religion reporter for The New York Times and other secular newspapers.

Looking across a chasm

by Peter Speckhard



As an LCMS pastor, I first want to commend Paul Hinlicky for his struggle and willingness to keep working and fighting in the ELCA despite not having much reasonable hope of prevailing. This is a noble task that many people refuse because it is generally thankless, if not downright scorned by friend and foe alike.

The basic question – why keep doing something that seemingly has no future? – applies to many situations. Should the young family keep attending this dying inner city (or rural) parish, or transfer to the suburban church where the Sunday school is thriving? Should the missionary stay in North America where Christianity appears to be shriveling up, or head to a mission field where

they’re doing baptisms as fast as they can find water? Should the teacher or professor stay at this old bricks and mortar institution operating at less than half capacity, or look for the next new model of doing things? Or, in Hinlicky’s case, should one try to be a voice for confessional orthodoxy in a denomination where orthodoxy is gasping for breath, or find a more hospitable environment?

“Lest the retreat turn into a rout”

Whenever anyone comes to me with a struggle like that, I always bring up a quote from *Lord of the Rings*, one that I’ve used many times. It is about the character Faramir. If you remember, his older brother Boromir was their father’s favorite and known for winning great victories, but his Captain

America approach to everything proved short-sighted and failed. The true and lasting nobility lay hidden in Faramir, whose finest moment came when he defended the rear guard of a fleeing remnant of hopelessly overmatched soldiers “lest the retreat turn into a rout.”

Not that it is always best to stick it out, but I think Tolkien’s phrase captures a too little considered facet of these sorts of deliberations. Where things are on the wane, as in North American Lutheranism, there is still great need for people to man the rear guard lest the retreat turn into a rout. Whatever such unsung heroes do not salvage will be savaged. If there is an ELCA in fifty years, it will owe to people like Hinlicky whatever resemblance it still bears to the church it was created to be.

Misreading Missouri

That having been said, I think Hinlicky’s considerations concerning his other options were less clear-sighted than his insider’s view of the ELCA. The unmistakable sign of someone who has no clear view of the LCMS anymore but instead has a decades old and long congealed dogma about us is that they mention Herman Otten as relevant. It would be as though a politician running for office today started decrying the nefarious influence of the John Birch Society. So when Hinlicky writes, “I won’t have much to say about the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, which is in a perpetual state of internal schism agitated by the Brown Shirt rag of Herman Otten,” I can only respond, “Good call not to say much, since your description is the equivalent of a grainy black-and-white newspaper photo of the LCMS, and, well, we don’t need another source of those.”

True to his word, Hinlicky doesn’t say much (three sentences) about the LCMS, but what he does say is tinged with irony in the context of his article. He dismisses the “more-orthodox-than-thou” crowd in the LCMS in the context of an article justifying his position in Lutheran CORE, which self-identifies as the more-orthodox-than-thou crowd within the ELCA. He laments the perpetual internal schism in the LCMS in an article referencing the Call to Faithfulness conference at St. Olaf College and showing that the ELCA has existed in perpetual internal schism literally since its founding.

And he scoffs at the suspension of Matthew

Becker from the clergy roster as more proof of LCMS silliness in the same article in which he lambastes the ELCA and Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary for the “purging” of David Yeago. Defensible or not, such struggles are common to all the Lutheran churches under consideration, not unique to the LCMS. It is as though he curtly dismisses the LCMS for having an “L” and a “C” in it but then goes on to give careful consideration to the NALC, ELCA, and LCMC.

Negotiables and non-negotiables

The real driving tension in Hinlicky’s article as it pertains to the LCMS revolves around the issue of women’s ordination, which is where the LCMS does differ from the ELCA, NALC, and LCMC because of, in Hinlicky’s words, “[the LCMS’s] policy that bars half its baptized adults from the pastoral office.” He thus dismisses the LCMS because the ordination of women is a non-negotiable for him, but he wants to head off any such dogmatism by people for whom the affirmation or condemnation of homosexual relationships is a non-negotiable. He has long been searching for the mythically moderate hermeneutic that clearly justifies the ordination of women but stops short of clearly justifying anything else that might prove divisive. And not having found it, he still thinks, as he did prior to 2009, that the way forward is to “reject denominationalism and think instead of a Christological realignment cutting across all the moribund labels, not just Lutheran. We could then make the schism work as an ecumenical catalyst for something better than the religion business as usual.”

Such a project is doomed if it begins with Hinlicky’s particular set of negotiables and non-negotiables. He finds it problematic when “the right response to fellow Christians who are gay and lesbian is made into a church-dividing *status confessionis* rather than treated as a morally ambiguous ethical issue in a fallen world over which people of good will can and will differ.” So his ecumenical realignment will only include those for whom issues related to homosexuality are fully negotiable. That eliminates a lot of folks from the get go. Yet his ecumenical realignment also can’t involve those who reject the ordination of women, because Hinlicky “cannot in good conscience go where ordained sisters cannot likewise tread.” Women’s ordination is a matter of

conscience for him, a non-negotiable, something that elicits a "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise."

Not many people to work with

So the question becomes "Realignment of whom? Ecumenical with whom?" The insistence on women's ordination limits the initial pool of possibilities to those wearing the most moribund label of all, "Liberal Protestant," and most of them have also made a clear "Here I stand" against any objection to homosexual relationships, leaving a tiny pool of people who are dogmatically opposed to homosexuality but dogmatically committed to women's ordination. Not many people to work with there outside of the NALC, which Hinlicky objects to for other reasons. At any rate, the point is moot because within Liberal Protestantism no ecumenical realignment is necessary because that group has already achieved full fellowship with itself and has no other prospects.

Hinlicky seems to want women's ordination to be an accepted, non-controversial thing (and therefore church-dividing from those who reject it, because, as he says, it is his conscience that forbids him from going anywhere that doesn't recognize the ordination of women) but also to have traditional sexual morality and marriage not to be church-dividing issues either. The ELCA was born into such an environment, but that environment was a moment in time. You can scoff at the LCMS for trying to remain constant despite the flow of the times in its doctrine concerning women's ordination, and you can scoff at the ELCA for trying to lead/keep up with the flow of the times on homosexuality, but you have to pick timeless constancy or getting with

the times. You cannot just have 1988 trapped in amber, which is what the effort to have a package deal of women's ordination, confessional orthodoxy, and sane moral teaching really amounts to. And in a generation or so, the NALC will be faced with the same dilemma; what is the rationale for the doctrinal borders on our practices?

The swan song of orthodoxy in ELCA

Again, Hinlicky is to be commended for leading the swan song of orthodoxy in the ELCA, and his sadness at the state of Lutheranism generally is the deeply Christian response of a deeply Christian soul to a deeply disturbing reality. Sadly, with the exception of his straw man reference to Otten, I cannot claim the LCMS is not as Hinlicky says it is, but only plead that so are the other Lutheran churches. Hinlicky's sadness is itself something we share across denominational lines, and our mutual helplessness to fix it transcends labels. But it isn't the labels themselves, but the doctrines and practices they label that really divide us.

We in the LCMS reject women's ordination, even if it means sadly looking across a chasm at fine Christian folks like Paul Hinlicky and Matthew Becker. My conscience keeps me where Hinlicky's conscience forbids him to go, so we'll never be in the same church unless we both adopt the "bound conscience" theology of the ELCA, and the main thing we both agree on is that such "theology" is actually nonsense.

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