

# FORUM LETTER

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Editor: Pr. Richard O. Johnson <roj@nccn.net>

Associate Editor: Pr. Peter Speckhard <pspeckhard@hotmail.com>

Member: Associated Church Press.

EDITORIAL OFFICE: P. O. Box 235, Grass Valley, CA 95945. <roj@nccn.net>

SUBSCRIPTION OFFICE: American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, P. O. Box 327, Delhi, NY 13753-0327 <dkralpb@aol.com> Telephone 607-746-7511. Postage paid at Delhi, NY and additional mailing offices.

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## Heretics sick with envy



[The] cognitive side of Christian faith has largely become the property of those in the academic guild (if not by outright claim, at least by practical default), contributing to a parting of the ways. . . . Those who wish to explore the cognitive demands of faith may do so, even to the extent of viewing it as philosophy, and those who wish to explore its psychological meaning may do so, even to the extent of viewing Christian faith as tool of self-discovery. And this amicable parting accords well with the values that this culture now considers primary, such as the importance of allowing for diversity, of allowing for multiple ways of thinking about and expressing the full range of modern experience, of granting equal weight to each opinion and according equal validity to each search for personal authenticity. . . . [But] the sort of Christian faith that is conceived in the womb of the self is quite different from the historic Christian faith. It is a smaller thing, shrunken in its ability to understand the world and to stand up in it. The self is a canvas too narrow, too cramped, to contain the largeness of Christian truth. . . . All that remains is the self. . . . What remains is, in fact, a paltry thing. But what is being destroyed is not paltry and insignificant at all. Simply put, the psychologizing of faith is destroying the Christian mind. It is destroying Christian habits of thought because it is destroying the capacity to think about life in a Christian fashion. It is as if the topsoil were being washed away, leaving the land barren and incapable of being cultivated. It can no longer sustain the bountiful harvest of being able to discern between good and evil, to think about all of life in terms of God and his purposes, to construct a way of being that accords with his Word, and to contest the norms of cultural plausibility. All of this is lost. And when people are no longer compelled by God's truth, they can be compelled by anything, the more so if it has the sheen of excitement or the lure of the novel or the illicit about it. The heretics of old, one suspects, would be sick with envy if they knew of the easy pickings that can now be had in the Church. —David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* ((William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 182-183.

## Whither parochial schools?



*The Graduate*, a movie that came out about the time I was born, included the famous piece of advice, "Plastics!" That was the future. Get on board in that industry and one's career would only go up. Nobody ever said in the late 60s or early 70s, "Lutheranism!" with the same assurance and vigor. Unlike plastics, the industry of American Lutheranism has

been in slow decline my entire life.

But in the last decade or so, that gradual, seemingly inexorable decline has turned into a free fall. Attendance at many congregations is falling even more rapidly than official membership, and buildings and institutions designed for a much larger group of people are having to repurpose themselves or go defunct. This phenomenon affects publishing houses, seminaries, universities, and all the support organizations and institutions of the church to an even greater degree. For them to change what they do is to change why they exist in the first place, and often there seem to be only two options: close the doors or operate with a different *raison d'être* than the one that brought you into being in the first place.

### Feeling the pinch

The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod feels this pinch perhaps more keenly than some church bodies because we are institution heavy. Operators of the second largest private school system in the United States (behind the Roman Catholic Church), we still, as of 2013/14 (the last school year for which statistics are available at LCMS.org) operate 880 elementary schools and 90 high schools, all of which must find a way to survive not only a shrinking church but a declining culture of commitment to parochial education within that shrinking church.

The raw statistics might paint an unrealistically positive picture. Official reporting often lags behind reality, and, as I noted upstream, it seems the decline has recently turned into a freefall. Just in my own area several schools that only a dozen years ago were operating at close to capacity have either closed their doors or are weighing whether or not to do so in the near future. Both nearby LCMS high schools have closed in the last three years. Two LCMS elementary schools have done likewise, and some of the remaining schools have a tenuous (at best) relationship to the congregations under whose auspices they run. Sadly, even as I write this (on January 12<sup>th</sup>), I'm interrupted by the email announcement that yet another one of our local Lutheran schools has announced that this, its 150<sup>th</sup> year of teaching the faith to the next generation, will also be its last.

I suspect this press release could express the good intentions, frustrations, and heartbreak of

many an LCMS lay leader. After announcing the closing, the *Northwest Indiana Times* reports, "At its peak, [the chairman of the congregation] said the school had more than 200 students. It's had 150 within the last decade. There are currently about 50 students enrolled in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. Many of those students are no longer church members but residents of the surrounding community." The chairman went on to note that it was simply no longer financially feasible to keep the school open.

### From thriving to dying

The obstacles to continuing to run a school are numerous. Standards have risen; you can't pack fifty kids of four different grade levels into one big room with a teacher and call it school anymore. Paying for even basic health care for teachers has become increasingly cost-prohibitive. Homeschooling among some of the most education-minded Christian parents has become very popular at the expense of the parochial schools they otherwise would likely have supported. Those are foreseeable trends. But what is less predictable and potentially more devastating is the suddenness with which a school can go from thriving to dying.

To the Lutherans who founded the LCMS, starting their own schools seemed like a natural function of being the church in a place where the state would not be the church for you. Educating their young was something the state churches in Germany weren't doing to their liking, so when the opportunity arose they took the state out of the schools. It never would have occurred to them to take the church out of the schools. Education was how the church perpetuated itself. In the absence of a state church, running an elementary school was as natural a function of the congregation as singing hymns.

That attitude no longer prevails. None of the other non-Catholic denominations operate vast school systems, so it is tough to argue that a church can't do without one. And many Lutherans with Lutheran schools available to them opt for public education. One can easily see why; it is already paid for via tax dollars. Sending your children to Lutheran schools is paying for the education twice. I recently spoke with an LCMS layman who has five children in Lutheran schools; he told me that before he even

begins to count the cost of college, he will have spent over a quarter million dollars on Lutheran elementary and high school tuition – and that’s in addition to his annual property taxes that help fund the local public schools.

### Church/school disconnect

But if running schools isn’t a natural function of the church being the church, then what exactly is the purpose? Regardless of the intent at their founding, institutions tend to exist to perpetuate themselves. So when the idea that Christian schools were simply how the church perpetuated itself fell by the wayside, new reasons for running schools had to be found. In urban areas with problematic public schools, the idea became that running a school was a service to the community. This led to the phenomenon noted in the press report above about the school closing – a complete disconnect between the people using the school and the church operating the school. In suburban areas, outreach became the mantra. Schools brought new families into the church. But that begs the question of how much bang for your evangelism buck you’re getting if you’re spending a million dollars in order to get a few new families each year.

My suspicion is that the death knell of Lutheran schools operating according to their original purpose was the introduction of tuition, which happened in most places in the 1980s. The moment you charge a fee, you preclude the idea that this is just a natural part of being the church. A church that has a hard time meeting budget never proposes charging people a fee to come to church. If you charge them to attend your school, you’re saying the school is a separate mission from the church. You turn education into a commercial service you offer your mem-

bers and community. Tuition also renders problematic all the other reasons given for operating schools. You can’t charge people for your outreach to them. You can’t charge the poor for your charitable efforts toward them. You can only argue that tuition is necessary to keep your institution alive long after you’ve forgotten why it is important that your institution remain alive other than that you need to have a paycheck. It may just be that tuition keeps the institution alive at the expense of the purpose of its life.

### Will this be your grandchildren’s school?

As for me and my house, we think it crucial that the LCMS school system remain viable, and that it operate under its original charter of simply being the natural way the church perpetuates itself. My children are the sixth generation in my family of LCMS parochial school graduates, and it is important to me that my grandchildren be the seventh if and when that day comes. But the threat of the sudden decline and closing of the schools is real. Inventing new purposes for operating schools may or may not work to keep them open, but I’m not interested in a parochial school that exists for some reason other than to be the way the church perpetuates itself. I think of my own congregation’s school as a mission outpost to the future. When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith that He gave through Lutheran education?

[I will be exploring all these ideas in further detail in the coming year as part of my D.Min. project through Concordia Theological Seminary. This article merely represents the initial thinking through of the problem, and I welcome feedback from readers.]

– by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

## Five things I’d like to say to members of megachurches

(but would never have the courage to say in person)

by Evan McClanahan



So I’m having a conversation the other day with a lovely young couple, exactly the kind of couple I would want to visit and join my congregation. To my surprise, I learn that they are active members of a local congregation.

Not to my surprise, it is a megachurch. Their congregation was of the trendy, post-modern variety that could boast of a membership roll in the thousands. This was a conversation I’ve had many times before with the same result, only with a variety of

megachurches being offered as their own.

Now, because I don't want to turn them off or cause unnecessary offense, I refrain from saying what I really think about their church. I might be coming from a place of sour grapes, or perhaps I'm being judgmental – either of which should cause me to shut my mouth. And even if I'm not and I'm actually correct in my judgments, I might seem like a less-than-attractive pastor to serve as their future spiritual shepherd. So I generally applaud their churchgoing tendencies and try to find common spiritual ground. I want to be there, after all, to catch them when they inevitably fall out of love with their megachurch. (Which never seems to happen.)

So because I don't say what I'm thinking then, I'll share some thoughts here. And since we all like lists, here are my thoughts in a nice little list package. Here are the five things I'd like to say to members of megachurches – but would never have the courage to say in person.

### 1. You are just a number

None of us wants to be a number. Storm-troopers are just numbers. We are people. But I can tell you that it is a rare megachurch pastor that truly knows you and values you, warts and all. At a certain point – and surely 1,000 members is a tipping point – people are just anonymous faces that fill chairs and write checks. So if you belong to a megachurch, you simply are a number to your pastor.

You have to be for that model to work! The only people who will ever offer you pastoral care or “do life” with you are those in your small group. Which is exactly why your pastor is always badgering you to join one. Because to him, you and all your problems are someone else's problem. You are just a number to him, a “giving unit,” a statistic in his year-end report. Again, you have to be. For what pastor can actually get to know all the members of his megachurch? No person has that kind of energy and that kind of time.

### 2. You are needed elsewhere

If you are filling the pews of a megachurch, you are one of the very few Americans who is actually in a pew, er, theatre seat, on a Sunday morning. And you are needed at any of the hundreds of smaller congregations who have seen people leave

in favor of the big box church. They need you to fill their ranks and support their ministries. If the megachurch has financial problems, it has taken them on and can live with the consequences of embracing the most expensive church model imaginable. If you are allowed to see its budget, just see how much they spend on marketing and then ask if they really have financial problems, and then ask if you should feel obligated to solve them.

Meanwhile, the small church without all the programs, marketing, and flash, is in need of all that you can contribute, money or not. The megachurch will be fine if you leave. In fact, no one outside of your small group will even notice. The small church will be greatly strengthened and blessed, because there, you really are needed.

### 3. Your pastor isn't your pastor

Surely you know this by now, right? How can he be? You probably cannot access him, even in an emergency. He is surrounded by associate pastors who are never allowed to preach, many of whom have probably not even attended seminary. He may spend time shaking hands with members after the service, but have you ever been in his home? Probably the only people he relates to in any significant way are his staff, and only a handful of them at that.

He won't attend your Christmas parties and he won't recognize you in the supermarket. He won't preach at your wedding or funeral and he may not even baptize your children, except at a service *en masse*. While he has somehow scavenged the title “Pastor” for himself, he in no way acts as the kind of personal, spiritual shepherd the Bible so clearly describes in 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. In other words, your pastor is not your pastor.

### 4. You want the cool factor or anonymity more than a fallible community

Now I know this sounds really judgmental, but if you are part of a megachurch, it is probably because you either want to bathe in its “cool factor” or you crave the anonymity it offers. The kind of messy, imperfect and personal community you will find at a relatively small church will not give you a safe hiding place. But you can definitely hide in a sanctuary, um, arena, with 10,000 other people. And you can also claim to be part of a successful church

that is on the go. That is certainly more impressive than working hard to keep a historic but small congregation alive.

Ask yourself and be honest: are you at your megachurch so you can imbibe the coolness of it all or so you can hide? If so, the odds are pretty good that you won't be there for long. At some point, the appeals for your cash will get old and you'll realize you don't know many people there. And you'll probably just give up on church altogether. Because the thought of being known well in a small congregation is a thought you've already ruled out.

### 5. You may be a real, historical heretic

Of course, everything I've assumed so far is that megachurches offer a bad model for ministry, but perhaps are okay on theology. We should all know by now that is probably not the case. Many megachurches are infected with soul-destroying heresies and bad/false teaching. The Prosperity Gospel comes to mind. So does a reliance on spiritual gifts over the scriptures. Then there's the rampant narcissism that tells the hearers the Bible is all about them. (Once in a while Jesus will get an honorable mention.) Clear, expository teaching on the fundamentals of Christianity – the Trinity, the two natures of Christ, justification by faith through grace – are rarely taught at your average megachurch. It's all

about you, you, and more you. So there is a chance that if you attend a megachurch, you might be a real heretic, the kind that councils met about and excluded from the Church many centuries ago. Don't think that because the words "Christian" and "church" are attached to your megachurch you are necessarily covered in orthodoxy.

So if I had any courage at all, I'd say something like that. But since I try to get along with just about everyone, I say, "Cool," and ask if the coffee bar is really as good as everyone says. If you do attend a megachurch, though, I hope you'll consider the thoughts above. For while they may be filled with a little sarcasm, my concerns are real. Not all churches have to be the same, to be sure. But they should at least try to resemble something found in the first century of the church. And megachurches, sadly, do not.

*Evan McClanahan, STS, is pastor of First Evangelical Lutheran Church in Houston, TX (a congregation of the NALC). In addition to the usual things a pastor does, he is a regular blogger (this article is adapted from his "The Sin Boldly Blog") and hosts a weekly live broadcast (available also as a podcast) on a local radio station in Houston; both can be accessed at the church's website, [www.felchouston.org](http://www.felchouston.org).*

## Offend me. Please.



My wife teaches twenty kindergartners in the morning, but in the afternoon she is responsible for 30-minute music sessions (mostly singing) with all the school's students through third grade. Planning for that is a big job; I often remember the years when I did music for VBS, and had to figure out songs for pre-school through sixth grade. There aren't many songs that work for that wide a span. I marvel that my wife can do this every week.

She tries to pick music that is age-appropriate, of course, but also thematically appropriate – songs that relate to the particular season, or to various holidays. This presents challenges. As you might expect, when it's time to sing Christmas songs, the range of what is acceptable in a public

school is pretty narrow. Nothing about Jesus, the reason for the season. Usually by Christmas vacation (no, wait, they call it "winter break" now) my wife is pretty fed up with Frosty the Snowman and Must Be Santa. At Easter, she doesn't even try.

### Cultural abandonment

As school was ready to reconvene in January, she asked me to help her figure out some songs that might lead into Martin Luther King's birthday. My immediate thought was "Battle Hymn of the Republic." "Nope," she said. "'The coming of the Lord.' Can't do that." I knew she was right, of course, yet I was astonished. Once in a while you hear that sung in church, but it is mostly thought of as a "patriotic song" – you know, like "God Bless

America" (oh, wait, probably can't do that one either). But you can't sing it in public school, because somebody might be offended.

"But," I asked, "couldn't you do it if you used it as a teaching illustration, referred to the Civil War, talked about "let us die [or live] to make men free?" Nope. Too much religious imagery. Too many "glory, hallelujahs." People would be offended. Of course that particular song has the capacity to offend people in church, too—it offends those of the anti-war bent, and those who can't abide singing about "the Lord" or "making men free." Plenty of offense to go around.

### Life is offensive

So maybe the solution is to ban the words entirely. It's a sprightly tune, you know, but let's keep it orchestral. And since these kids growing up today will have never heard the words, or been asked to understand their context, it won't matter much. When they grow up, they wouldn't be able to sing along anyway; maybe they could pick up the "Glory, hallelujah," but they wouldn't really know what it meant.

Well, what else could we sing that would help the kids understand who Martin Luther King was and why he is significant in American history? Keeping with the Civil War theme, I briefly flirted with the idea of "Dixie," which is devoid of religious language. My wife rolled her eyes. "That raises all kinds of other issues," she explained. Oh. I get it.

How about some of the African American spirituals? To name them is to understand that won't work, either. Hard to find one that doesn't have God in it. So there's another important part of our cultural heritage that these children are growing up not knowing. About the only genuine MLK-related song that could possibly be sung without offense (though in this conservative county, someone would take offense) would be "We Shall Overcome." "Did it last year," she said. "It doesn't work with young kids. Too sedate; no fun if you don't already have the emotional connection with it."

My wife ended up with a bluesy little song about Martin Luther King that some teacher probably made up to avoid giving offense. Of course sometimes these things are out of your control. Talking about Dr. King with one class to whom she had introduced the song, an earnest little girl raised her

hand. "But what if someone doesn't like black people?" she asked. Now that's offensive. But it's also real life, and dealing with questions like that is why public school teachers get the big bucks. (That was irony, in case you missed it.)

Real life is often offensive. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that in real life, people often take offense. It's endemic these days; giving offense is about the worst thing you can do. I mentioned briefly last month the President of Oklahoma Wesleyan University's response to a student who complained about being offended by a chapel sermon that made him feel bad about himself. ("That feeling of discomfort you have after listening to a sermon is called a conscience," he wrote.) College faculty are pressured to give "trigger warnings" about any assignment that might cause offense to a student, so that the student can choose to opt out. These are the same students who have grown up not having to be exposed to songs that might offend them for religious or other reasons.

### It's everywhere

It isn't just in education, of course. Politicians have to be terribly careful not to offend anyone (with exceptions made for certain presidential candidates, who are allowed to do so as long as it is done strategically). I always kind of felt bad for Joe Biden, whose presidential hopes in 2008 never recovered from his statement about Barak Obama that he was (as quoted by CNN) "the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy." At the time I remember listening to the audio clips and thinking, "But there's a comma after 'African-American.' He was simply listing things about Obama that make him an attractive candidate: "first mainstream African-American" [one thing], "articulate and bright" [another thing], "clean and nice-looking" [a third thing]. Sure, I can see why someone might hear it differently, but then sometimes people are just looking for a reason to be offended. Obama himself later said he was sure Biden didn't intend to offend anyone. But Biden "deeply regretted any offense his remark might have caused." And he kissed the Presidency goodbye. (Obama was himself subsequently given a pass for telling Hillary Clinton that she was "likeable enough," but that's another story.)

Of course this is an issue in the church as

well these days. It's part of what motivates the language police, who want to be terribly sure that nothing is ever said that might conceivably offend anyone (particularly themselves). They want to be sure that the church is a "safe place" where nobody ever has to be offended.

I'm all for pastoral sensitivity, but there's got to be a limit. The gospel is offensive. People were offended at Jesus. Being offended isn't necessarily a bad thing. The word comes from the Latin *offendere*, "to strike against." I don't know about you, but sometimes my thick skull and my sinful heart needs a whack or two before the grace of God can work its way into me.

George MacDonald's wonderful story "The

Gifts of the Child Christ" tells of little Phosy, who lives a life without much light or love. She attends church regularly and has heard the vicar say (countless times) "Whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth." She reflects often on this phrase, and thinks "I wish He would chasten me."

I get that. I love it when my pastor offends me in his preaching. I love it when words in the liturgy offend me. I need to be offended, to be chastened. I don't want my church to be a safe place. If you remove anything that might offend me, I might as well stay home. To paraphrase again from the Oklahoma Wesleyan president, life isn't about me. If I'm offended, I may just need to grow up.

— by Richard O. Johnson, editor

## Omnium gatherum



**I'm melting!** • The other day for some reason I was browsing through some old issues of *Forum Letter* and I came upon an item in 2010 about an ELCA news release headed "ELCA Now Fourth Largest Member Church of the LWF." Despite the implication of the headline, what the story actually said was that the ELCA had *dropped* from the being the second largest in 2008. Then I said that if I were a betting person, I'd bet the ELCA would slip to fifth place within a year or two, maybe even sixth. I'd forgotten all about this, but when I saw it of course I immediately looked up recent LWF stats to see if my prediction was borne out. Sorry to say, yes, it was. The most recent LWF statistics available at the moment are from 2013, so three years after the earlier item. ELCA by then stood at number six. The churches with the largest membership in 2013 were Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (6.35 million), Church of Sweden (6 million), Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (5.83 million), Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (4.43 million), Protestant Christian Batak Church in Indonesia (4.1 million), and then the ELCA (3.95 million). The Church of Norway is coming up fast at 3.83 million. I know, I know . . . the European figures are pretty bogus, what with them being state churches and all. Still, the ELCA continues to drop in rank. Which, of course, merely means we should rejoice at the continued growth of the church in Africa and Asia.

**Circulation** • Another statistic we've followed over the years is the circulation of *The Lutheran*. Not much good news on that front. I think the last time we looked at it was 2011, when the paid circulation was 190,811. For 2015, the reported figure is 146,389. That's a decline of about 23% in four years; or, looking longer range, about a 54% decline since 2006, when the circulation was 315,779. It's a tough time for print journalism of all kinds.

**Tough times** • It isn't only print journalism that's fallen on hard times. The Chairman of the Board of Trinity Lutheran College in Everett, WA — formerly Lutheran Bible Institute of Seattle — announced TLC is closing its doors at the end of this academic year.

**A merger by any other name** • The boards of the ELCA seminaries in Gettysburg and Philadelphia have announced that they are going to . . . well, they didn't say "merge." The two presidents, Gettysburg's Michael Cooper-White and Philadelphia's David Lose, explained that "mergers are created out of past realities." They're not into that. Rather they will "create a new school of theology and leadership formation." It will be "one school on two campuses with multiple points of access." There's been talk about the two Pennsylvania schools joining forces for years, but both have distinguished (and rather different) histories that have made progress on such a plan difficult. But now that they're free from those

“past realities,” they can enter into this “new venture of theological education” as they develop “one school on two campuses with multiple points of access.” One could be forgiven for wondering whether the real motivating factor here might be the “present realities” of declining enrollment, escalating costs, and aging facilities. But good luck anyway.

**Christian doctrine** • A couple of years ago, Cascade Books published Robert Lowery Calhoun’s *Scripture, Creed, Theology: Lectures on the History of Christian Doctrine in the First Centuries*. When I started at Yale Divinity School in 1972, Calhoun had already been retired several years, but he was a legend. His lectures had been transcribed and reproduced privately; the library had a copy, and I often turned to it when I needed a comprehensible explanation of early church doctrinal disputes. Some years ago I managed to snag a copy of this privately printed edition, and I still frequently consult it. The newly published version is partly based on those original transcribed lectures, partly on other notes and writings of Calhoun, edited and with an introduction by Calhoun’s colleague, George Lindbeck. I haven’t actually seen the published edition, but I’m willing to recommend it sight unseen. A great resource from a great teacher.

**Ivy League Christians** • Speaking of Yale, one of the magazines that shows up in my mailbox is *Christian Union: The Magazine*. It’s published by Christian Union, the organization, which is an independent Christian ministry that focuses on the so-called “Ivy League” colleges. It is, as you might imagine, of the [non-Lutheran] evangelical stripe, but I always find

it interesting reading. Their Fall 2015 issue contains a special section on “Sex and Spirituality.” The articles are quite thoughtful, but I was particularly struck by an introductory comment by editor Matthew Bennett: “A few years ago,” he writes, “a student, who was not involved in our ministry asked to meet with one of our ministers on campus. They sat down face to face and the first thing out of the student’s mouth was, ‘Is it wrong to sleep with my girlfriend?’ Our minister simply said, ‘Yes.’ After some discussion, the student said, ‘Thanks, I just needed someone to say it.’ All Christians, and especially ministers, need to teach sexual ethics, because so many are depending on it.” That anecdote could be applied to so many areas besides sexual ethics, though it really *should* be applied there. Pastors today seem to be very reticent (and I am the chief of sinners) to answer forthrightly when facing a question of whether something is right or wrong (unless, of course, the subject is peace and justice or global warming). After all, to quote Pope Francis, “Who am I to judge?” There is a difference, though, between “judging” and “being judgmental.” The latter is a bad thing, but pastors actually are called to judge, aren’t they? We are called to judge doctrine, and we are called to judge ethics. That’s what “prophets” do, right? And aren’t we supposed to be “prophetic”? Of course it’s a lot easier to prophesy against politicians and corporations than to speak the prophetic word to the college kid in your office. But then it seems unlikely that kid in the story had grown up in a Lutheran congregation; unless his pastor or confirmation instructor was atypical, it wouldn’t have occurred to him to ask the question.

– roj

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