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## A Confessional Response to North American Lutheran-Reformed Ecumenism

Mark Mattes

The *Formula of Agreement* between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and three mainline Reformed churches, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ, building on the Leuenberg Agreement in Europe and heralded as an ecumenical breakthrough, raises important questions for confessional Lutherans. This article will primarily examine Lutheran-Reformed relationships in the North American context in light of the earlier work of Leuenberg.<sup>1</sup> There are similarities and differences between Europe and the United States that contribute to the conciliatory stance between these confessional groups. Unlike the sixteenth-century reformers, however, many contemporary Protestant ecumenists are indifferent to the question of salvation, at least when viewed as rescue from the wrath of God. Since salvation from God's judgment upon sin is no longer on our theological radar, the previous disagreements over doctrine have become mere formalities that are easily sidestepped.

Those North American Reformed bodies which view themselves as orthodox, such as the Christian Reformed Church and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, as well as their counterparts among Lutherans, such as the Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Synod, still frame the discussion in terms of the classical disagreements. These church bodies attend largely to christological issues such as the *genus maiestaticum*<sup>2</sup> and Christ's bodily

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<sup>1</sup> The most extensive study of the research involved in the development of the Leuenberg Agreement is found in Elisabeth Schieffer, *Von Schauenburg nach Leuenberg: Entstehung und Bedeutung der Konkordie reformatorischer Kirchen in Europa* (Paderborn: Verlag Bonifatius-Druckerei, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> "We believe, teach, and confess that the assumed human nature in Christ not only has and retains its natural, essential characteristics but also that through the personal union with the deity and, afterward, through the exaltation or glorification, this nature was elevated to the right hand of majesty, power, and might over all things that can be named, not only in this world, but also in the world to come [Eph. 1:20-21]" (SD VIII, 12), Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord*, trans. Charles Arand, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 618. One inference of the *genus maiestaticum* is drawn later in SD VIII, 19: "The union between the divine and human natures in the person of Christ is a much different, higher, indescribable communion. Because of this

presence in the Lord's Supper.<sup>3</sup> Disagreements over these loci remain important because orthodox church bodies, like the reformers, are committed to a christology and soteriology that assume that we are being saved not only from our own misdeeds, but also from God's judgment.

At stake for Lutherans is salvation itself, in keeping with the view that God does not save what he does not assume.<sup>4</sup> But it is this very claim that is put in question by the so-called *extra Calvinisticum*.<sup>5</sup> The Reformed affirm a reserve in the Godhead with respect to the incarnation. If there is such a reserve, however, then how are we saved? No doubt, if all of Christ in both natures comes and assumes all human space and time, then human agency is ruled out. There would be nothing left over with which we could exercise our free will and thus claim the law as our own righteousness.<sup>6</sup>

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union and communion God is a human being and a human being is God. Nevertheless, through this union and communion neither the natures nor their characteristics are mixed together with the other, but each nature retains its own essence and characteristics." Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 619.

<sup>3</sup> Criticism of the Calvinistic view of Christ's presence in the Supper as "spiritual," since his body is supposed to be limited to heaven as a location, can be found in SD VII, 2-128, Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 592-615.

<sup>4</sup> Speaking colloquially, Steven Paulson notes, "Luther completely reversed normal descriptions of 'assumption' found in so-called Logos Christologies, where an incarnate God somehow subsumes humanity and makes it more perfectly 'divine.' Luther's assumption theory is not preoccupied with how humans get up into the divine but how the divine goes so deep into our flesh that he gives his weight to sinful human flesh (our desire to escape into 'spiritual' matters that we think are 'higher' than body). When God sits his corpulent mercy down in this world, no spiritual diet or holy crane will ever get him out again. Sinners 'go up' to being real human beings for the first time because he 'came down' like an enormous divine weight that won't move. Consequently for Luther, salvation is not taking leave of humanity and becoming like God; it is becoming really and fully human as God's own trusting creature in Christ's new kingdom." Steven D. Paulson, *Luther for Armchair Theologians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 144.

<sup>5</sup> The *locus classicus* for the *extra Calvinisticum* is Calvin's *Institutes* II.13.4: "For even if the Word in his immeasurable essence united with the nature of man into one person, we do not imagine that he was confined therein. Here is something marvelous: the Son of God descended from heaven in such a way that, without leaving heaven, he willed to be borne in the virgin's womb, to go about earth, and to hang upon the cross; yet he continuously filled the world even as he had done from the beginning." John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford L. Battles, Library of Christian Classics 20-21 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:481.

<sup>6</sup> Commenting on Luther's critique of Nestorius (with parallels to the Reformed), Paulson notes that "if the preacher says, 'There goes God down the street fetching water,' Nestorius would get all flustered because this wasn't the sort of thing God did—more to the point, it wouldn't leave any water for *humans* to fetch. That is why Luther called Nestorius proud and stubbornly stupid. He [i.e., Nestorius] did not want God

Our free will *coram deo* would be excluded. It is not, of course, as if the Reformed teach free will *coram deo*. But free will always wants to stake a claim wherever it can. A consistent Lutheran christology is thoroughly informed by grace and thus leaves no place for free will. Such a negation of our free will liberates us from its illusions, giving us real freedom from the self-deifying ego and allowing us to be creatures living by faith. But if there is some reserve in the incarnation, as the Reformed maintain, then God is less a threat to our space, being, and self-definition.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to the Reformed objection that Lutherans confuse the two natures of Christ, we must, for the sake of the clarity of the gospel, affirm that the incarnate God is thoroughly enfleshed, that there is no reserve in the second Person of the Trinity as he is incarnate. The entire person of the Son is incarnate in the man Jesus. The resurrected Christ is therefore inexorably attached to a human soul and body, now omnipresent through Christ's exaltation. It is this very body which on the cross bore the sin of the world and expiates God's wrath, and which is given as a testament in the Supper for our forgiveness.<sup>8</sup> Reformed theology is simply incompatible with such a view, so fundamental for Lutheran theology and life.

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sullied by bodily things, and he wanted to save room for humans to do the works of the law. He did not want to preach that 'God died,' nor did he want to preach that 'this man Jesus created the world.'" Paulson, *Luther for Armchair Theologians*, 140-141.

<sup>7</sup> While informed by Reformed theology at several points, the Episcopalian theologian Paul Zahl, through his own deep reflection on grace, has helpfully grasped the pastoral significance of a bound will. "The point for theology is that we are not subjects; we are objects. We do not live; we are lived. To put it another way, our archaeology is our teleology. We are typically operating from drives and aspirations generated by our past. What ought to be free decisions in relation to love and service become un-free decisions anchored in retrospective deficits and grievances. This is the message of tragic literature. . . . Free entities are subjects. Un-free entities are objects. Christ Jesus, the body of God on earth, was free. The world to which he came was un-free. It is un-free still. There is therefore only one Subject in the world today, and he is surrounded by countless beleaguered objects. St. Paul famously wrote, 'Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love' (1 Corinthians 13:13). I would describe an obverse trio this way: original sin, total depravity, and the un-free will abide, these three; and the root of the thing is the un-free will." Paul F.M. Zahl, *Grace in Practice: A Theology of Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 113-114.

<sup>8</sup> "For if God is to make a testament, as he promises, then he must die; and if he is to die, then he must be a man. And so that little word 'testament' is a short summary of all God's wonders and grace, fulfilled in Christ." Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-1986), 35:84.

### I. The Agenda of North American Protestant Ecumenism.

Mainline Lutherans and Reformed, it seems, can agree so quickly about their historic differences because they are no longer governed by a belief that we need salvation from God's wrath. The agenda behind many Lutheran and Reformed ecumenists is well expressed in *An Invitation to Action*, the summary of the 1981–1983 North American dialogues:

Humankind seems bent upon bringing the end of the world upon itself and all creatures of God by nuclear holocaust. Our churches are already enlisted in a common mission: participation in God's preservation of the world, God's struggle for justice and peace, and evangelization.<sup>9</sup>

What ties these ecumenical partners together, at least in North America, is the fact that

each of our churches independently has addressed issues common to our local communities, our nation, and the world, such as: nuclear armament, peace, justice for the poor of our country and the world, prison reform, sex, marriage, and the family, economic justice, the yokes of race and class, ecology, and the advocacy of all persons denied their right to achieve their potential.<sup>10</sup>

Hence, the classical differences are not nearly as important as other issues, such as saving the world from humanity itself or becoming all we can possibly be. In my judgment, mainline Protestants should be challenged on this very point. The church has no more important outreach than that of proclamation, not primarily of the law but of the promise, which alone saves from sin, death, the devil, and the wrath of God.

This is not said in order to undermine the achievements of the Arnoldshain Theses (1957), which affirm that Christ's body and blood are imparted in the consecrated bread and wine, or the various agreements which led to Leuenberg.<sup>11</sup> But it is to note that the overall direction of

<sup>9</sup> James E. Andrews and Joseph A. Burgess, eds., *An Invitation to Action: The Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue Series III 1981–1983* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 2.

<sup>10</sup> *An Invitation to Action*, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Marc Lienhard notes that Leuenberg's view of the Lord's Supper goes beyond Zwingli's, since the Lord's Supper is not merely commemorative but actually conveys Christ's presence either through the Spirit or through bodily presence, but differs from Calvin in that double predestination is denied. See "The Leuenberg Agreement: Origins and Aims," in William G. Rusch and Daniel F. Martensen, eds., *The Leuenberg Agreement and Lutheran-Reformed Relationships: Evaluations by North American and European Theologians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1989), 29. Conservative reactions to Leuenberg were published in "Leuenberg Concord: Three Responses. Confessional

Lutheran-Reformed ecumenical discussions has been to see the disagreements of the reformers as anachronistic. We "cultured despisers" have moved beyond these issues. But on what basis have we moved beyond them? It would seem that we agree with Schleiermacher:

There are in our Augsburg Confession certain imperfections, and because of them I did not really want us to accept and endorse it anew word for word, so to speak, as our own confession. Among these imperfections is the fact that one finds in it still far too much talk about the wrath of God.<sup>12</sup>

Instead of whistling away God's wrath via academic fiat, we need to distinguish God as he comes in his promise from God outside his promise. As Steven Paulson comments:

For Luther, distinguishing God in and outside the proclaimed word is what theology is for. This theology is the business of the church. This is the only theology that lives under a living God, and does not

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Lutherans React to Leuenberg Concord," *Springfielder* 36 (December 1972): 185-199. There, Hans-Lutz Poetsch noted that Jacob Preus "called attention to the dangerous lack of distinction between the Law and the Gospel which would call into question any proposed concept of the church" (186). And, similarly to my claim in this essay, Gerhard Rost criticized Leuenberg for "a soft-pedaling of the Holy Trinity and of Christ's nature as true Son of God; a suppression of God's wrath, with the attendant danger of covering up the mystery of God's love; a suppression of the apocalyptic return of Christ and in connection with that a reinterpretation of the Kingdom of God into a development of peace and justice within this world" (191, emphasis added). He went on to say that "all recognized that this Concord is not a document making for true unity between the Lutheran and the Reformed churches, but it is the artificial product of current liberal theology. It actually expresses infinitely less than the genuine ecumenical unity that is already present now in the Christian churches" (191). Finally, Eugene F. Klug noted, "Surely there must be an awareness that much of European theology at this time, Lutheran and Reformed, moves with an aversion to the blood atonement and vicarious satisfaction for sins, that Christ bears, satisfies, placates the avenging wrath of God against sin and sinners" (195). Likewise Lowell C. Green, four years later in his article "What Was the True Issue at Marburg in 1529? A Glance at Erasmus, Zwingli, and Luther, as well as Today's Ecumenical Problems," *Springfielder* 40 (April 1976): 106, outlining the roots of the *extra Calvinisticum* in Neo-Platonic philosophy, as mediated for Zwingli via Erasmus, asked, "Have today's Reformed theologians declared their readiness to surrender the maxim of their forefathers that the finite cannot be grasped by the infinite (*finitum infiniti non capax*)? Until such a concession is made, 'agreement' on the sacrament is meaningless, since the sacramental teaching of the Reformed fathers was but the application of their philosophy and their Christology. Whenever clarity on this point is lacking, not only the doctrine of the sacrament is in jeopardy, but also the doctrine of Christ and human salvation. On this matter there can be no yielding."

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, quoted in Steven Paulson, "The Wrath of God," *Dialog* 33 (1994): 246.

speculate about God according to human designs or desires. It is what makes humanity aware that God always comes to hearers as a person: as the Father who speaks, the Son who is spoken, and the Holy Spirit who hears by creating new beings through the church's message.<sup>13</sup>

Across the vast spectrum of confessional traditions, no two groups seem to be as close as Lutherans and the Reformed. For this very reason, Lutheran identity has been forged through argumentation with the Reformed as much as with Roman Catholicism. Historically, the debate has been heated precisely because of our similarities. If only differences prevailed between these two confessional traditions, there would be little to discuss. Efforts to find doctrinal agreement between the two traditions, however, can only be sustained for the sake of the proclamation of the gospel promise and for no other reason—even one as noble or good as progressive social agendas. The criterion for any ecumenical rapprochement can only be the adequacy of the confessional tradition accurately to proclaim the gospel promise in both word and sacrament.

## II. The ELCA as "Ecumenical Catalyst"

Retired Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, H. George Anderson, has spoken of the ELCA as an "ecumenical catalyst," specifically noting that ecumenical proposals with mainline Reformed denominations in the United States "ask that we recognize in print what we probably all believe in our hearts—that we are not the only church body with the truth."<sup>14</sup> In so designating the ecumenical role of the ELCA, Anderson was only hearkening back to the ELCA Constitution,

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<sup>13</sup> Paulson, "The Wrath of God," 250. Paulson identifies the problem of mainline Protestantism's issue with God's wrath in this way: "If there is a God who operates outside his own law *ex lex*, Ritschl argued, there is no basis for certainty or a standard of justice. God must not operate outside the revelation of his will in law or in Christ if faith is to make any sense. Therefore, Luther's tendency to talk about God (and especially God's wrath) outside God's own word, and even outside Christ, must be exorcized" (247). Paulson argues that this contention also actually distances Luther from Nominalism: "We can conclude that Luther's distinction between God preached and not preached is not meant to 'protect' God's freedom, as a Nominalist might attempt, but is rather the protection of the preaching office entrusted to the church. God's wrath is not an attribute that needs protection, but is the necessary presupposition of the church's work on earth" (250–251). In this light, our interest in ecumenism waxes to the degree our interest in evangelism wanes.

<sup>14</sup> See Edgar Trexler, *High Expectations: Understanding the ELCA's Early Years, 1988–2002* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 113.

adopted in 1988 by those Lutheran bodies which merged into the ELCA,<sup>15</sup> whose ecumenical agenda reads:

(4.02) To participate in God's mission, this church shall: . . . f. Manifest the unity given to the people of God by living together in the love of Christ and by joining with other Christians in prayer and action to express and preserve the unity which the Spirit gives.

(4.03) To fulfill these purposes, this church shall: . . . e. Foster Christian unity by participating in ecumenical activities, contributing its witness and work and cooperating with other churches which confess God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>16</sup>

In little over a decade, the ELCA was close to fulfilling these ambitious ecumenical goals. As Edgar Trexler, former editor of *The Lutheran*, the official magazine of the ELCA, noted,

Even though harsh language and organized resistance to ecumenical relationships stretched both the patience and unity of the young

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<sup>15</sup> These were The American Lutheran Church (TALC, 1960), the Lutheran Church in America (LCA, 1962), and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC, 1976). TALC was composed largely of Upper Midwest and West Coast Lutherans, including the American Lutheran Church of German background, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norwegian background, and the United Evangelical Lutheran Church, which had a Danish background indebted to the "Inner Mission." In 1963, another Norwegian-American group, the Lutheran Free Church, joined TALC. The LCA was composed of East Coast Lutherans of German ancestry, many of whom settled in the United States before the Revolution, Swedish Lutherans from the Augustana Synod, and much smaller groups of Finns (the Suomi Synod) and Grundtvigian Danes. The AELC was formed from congregations that left the Missouri Synod in the wake of the Seminex controversy. A summary of the ecumenical ventures of these church bodies can be found in chapters 14-17 of Joseph Burgess, ed., *Lutherans in Ecumenical Dialogue: A Reappraisal* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990). In the late 1960s, TALC theologian Eugene M. Skibbe presented a study of the Arnoldshain Theses affirming its ecumenical role and encouraging its impact in North America entitled *Protestant Agreement on the Lord's Supper* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1968). Commenting on Thesis 8.2 and Thesis 4 of Arnoldshain, Skibbe, departing from the historic practice of closed communion in TALC, advocated for open communion: "The Lord calls to his Supper not just certain people, but all men. This sentence does not say that all people are saved by Christ, as though it did not matter whether a person believed in Christ or not. Nor does it say that all who come to the Lord's Supper come worthily, for some among them might come hypocritically or with evil intentions. But it does say that he calls all—regardless of their past sins, their lack of understanding, or even their wrong theories—that he calls all in his church to his Supper, and that to all who long for God's righteousness he gives the forgiveness of sins" (116).

<sup>16</sup> See William G. Rusch, *A Commentary on "Ecumenism: The Vision of the ELCA"* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), 151-152.



ELCA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America by 1999 completed a series of ecumenical actions that left it poised to enter the 21st century at the forefront of the world's ecumenical scene. No other church had adopted official ties with such a spectrum of Christendom—full communion with the Episcopal Church, with three churches of the Reformed tradition, and with the Moravian Church. As a member of the Lutheran World Federation, the ELCA was a participant in the signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification with the Vatican, a document that brought agreement on the key doctrinal issue that divided the churches and produced the Protestant Reformation. Quite a track record for a new church's first 15 years.<sup>17</sup>

In this same ecumenical trajectory, most recently the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly declared full communion with the United Methodist Church.

With respect to the enactment of *A Formula of Agreement*, which places the ELCA in full communion with the leading mainline Reformed churches in the United States, Trexler notes,

On August 28, 1997, at 10:02 AM, by a vote of 839–193 (81.3 percent) the ELCA Churchwide Assembly adopted the Lutheran–Reformed *A Formula of Agreement*, marking the first time confessional churches took official steps to mend the divisions between them since the 16th century.<sup>18</sup>

Describing the celebration which followed this vote a year later, Trexler writes,

On October 4, 1998, more than a year after the favorable vote on the Formula, some 1,500 worshipers came together in Rockefeller Chapel, Chicago, for a service that Presiding Bishop H. George Anderson called “the celebration of a miracle milestone reached” that is “only the beginning of an unfolding relationship.” Entering the gothic nave from four directions and pausing at a font to acknowledge the brokenness of their separation and their oneness in baptism, leaders of the three Reformed churches and the ELCA symbolized their churches’ “full communion” by forming a single procession. Heads of each church distributed the Eucharist.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Trexler, *High Expectations*, 105.

<sup>18</sup> Trexler, *High Expectations*, 115–116.

<sup>19</sup> Trexler, *High Expectations*, 117.

It should be noted that full communion does not seek the organic union of a transconfessional church, like the United Church of Canada (originally a union of Methodists and Presbyterians) or the historic Union Church in Germany, which has confessionally different congregations within one church. Instead, altars, pulpits, and preachers can be exchanged indifferent to the historic doctrinal differences between these churches.

### III. Disagreement over Ecumenical Direction

The struggle to which Trexler earlier alluded was due not primarily to organized resistance to any ecumenical endeavors in the ELCA on principle, as if a non-ecumenical agenda were an option, but instead to the question toward which ecumenical directions the ELCA should lean. One party, composed primarily of former LCA theologians such as Yale's George Lindbeck, urged that ecumenical endeavors be directed toward Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue "in part from a conviction that Lutherans should operate in continuity with the reformers at Augsburg in 1530. They sought reform within the Catholic Church as Christians who stood in accord with authoritative Catholic sources."<sup>20</sup> For this party the affirmation of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* by the August 1997 Churchwide Assembly of the ELCA with a vote of 958-25 is considered an impressive achievement.<sup>21</sup>

By contrast, other ELCA leaders, many of TALC background, see the Reformation as not only corrective but also constitutive and therefore give priority to dialogue with other Protestants.<sup>22</sup> With respect to the Leuenberg Agreement, one advocate for ecumenical rapprochement with the Reformed, Walter Sundberg of Luther Seminary, challenged Robert Jenson, his opponent on the pro-Roman Catholic side: Where does Leuenberg err? Sundberg contended that a fair evaluation of Leuenberg would reveal nothing that would violate the *satis est* of Augustana VII.<sup>23</sup> It was Jenson's contention, on the other hand, that the North American Lutheran context was not commensurable with the European: European Protestants respond

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<sup>20</sup> Keith F. Nickle and Timothy F. Lull, eds., *A Common Calling: The Witness of Our Reformation Churches in North America Today. The Report of the Lutheran-Reformed Committee for Theological Conversations, 1988-1992* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 32.

<sup>21</sup> Trexler, *High Expectations*, 154.

<sup>22</sup> Trexler, *High Expectations*, 154. TALC had established pulpit and altar fellowship with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Reformed Church of America in 1986.

<sup>23</sup> Rusch and Martensen, *The Leuenberg Agreement*, 95. A representative voice of this party is the late James Kittelson. See "Enough is Enough! The Confusion Over the Augsburg Confession and Its *Satis Est*," *Lutheran Quarterly* 12 (1998): 249-270.

to a cultural hegemony of Roman Catholicism, while North American Lutherans respond to a cultural hegemony of a Reformed ethos.<sup>24</sup>

Such disagreements over ecumenical direction invite disputes over matters of polity and worship. The camp in favor of agreement with Rome has tended to favor the adoption of the "historic episcopate," a prerequisite of ELCA agreement with the Episcopal Church USA (ECUSA), and to desire that worship be done as much as possible in continuity with the Roman Catholic mass. The camp in favor of agreement with the Reformed has tended to react negatively to the adoption of the "historic episcopate" and favors worship that has a Protestant shape. In some ELCA circles, opposition to the *Accord* of the ELCA with the ECUSA, which went into effect on January 1, 2001, was so great that even prior to its realization, in March 2000, pastors and laity established the Word Alone Network as a renewal movement, specifically in opposition to the "historic episcopate." In March 2001, the Word Alone Network oversaw the formation of Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC), a new ecclesiastical body for congregations breaking away from the ELCA.<sup>25</sup> The polity of LCMC is decidedly "post-denominational" and congregationalist, unlike the historic polities of most North American Lutherans which had, over time, avoided both episcopal and congregationalist stances, adopting instead a Presbyterian-like form of governance.

Reflecting on such wide-ranging ecumenical rapprochement, which was reached with Roman Catholics and Episcopalians on the one hand and with the Reformed on the other, former ELCA Ecumenical Officer William Rusch claimed that the Augsburg Confession itself allows the ELCA to enter into such extensive negotiations: "Article VII is freeing, for it permits confessional Lutheranism to seek fellowship without insisting on doctrinal or ecclesiastical uniformity, while at the same time striving to achieve common formulation and expression of theological consensus on the gospel."<sup>26</sup>

#### IV. The Role of Leuenberg

The basis for "full communion" between the ELCA and the three mainline Reformed Churches is *A Formula of Agreement*. While familiarity

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<sup>24</sup> Robert Jenson, "The Leuenberg Agreement in the North American Context," in William G. Rusch and Daniel F. Martensen, eds., *The Leuenberg Agreement and Lutheran-Reformed Relationships: Evaluations by North American and European Theologians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1989), 100–101.

<sup>25</sup> Trexler, *High Expectations*, 145.

<sup>26</sup> Rusch, *Commentary on "Ecumenism,"* 32.

with the Leuenberg Agreement is attested to in North American Lutheran-Reformed dialogues and affirmed in *A Formula of Agreement*, that document was never adopted, since dialogue participants sought an indigenous North American approach. *A Formula of Agreement* built upon earlier Lutheran-Reformed dialogues, such as *Marburg Revisited—1962–1966* and especially *A Common Calling: The Witness of Our Reformation Churches in North America Today*.<sup>27</sup> In light of the disagreements over ecumenical directions for the ELCA—whether to verge more toward Rome or more toward Geneva—predecessor church bodies of the ELCA developed different responses to ecumenical ventures with the Reformed. Trexler notes of TALC and the AELC, the latter of which was formed from congregations that left the Missouri Synod in the mid-1970s, that they

virtually adopted full communion with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Reformed Church in America as churches “in which the gospel is proclaimed and the sacraments administered according to the ordinances of Christ,” approving the sharing of pastors and occasional joint services of communion. The LCA, however, was not sure about the Reformed commitment to the real presence of Christ’s body and blood in the sacrament and never adopted Invitation to Action, choosing instead to adopt a less far-reaching statement of friendship and cooperation. When the ELCA was formed, the ALC and AELC relationship with the Reformed churches ended on December 31, 1987.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> For an overview, see Keith Bridston and Samuel Nafziger, “Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue,” in Joseph Burgess, ed., *Lutherans in Ecumenical Dialogue: A Reappraisal* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), 33ff. See also John Reumann’s discussion about the influence of Leuenberg in the North American context in *The Supper of the Lord: The New Testament, Ecumenical Dialogues, and Faith and Order on Eucharist* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 99–100.

<sup>28</sup> Trexler, *High Expectations*, 110. For TALC and AELC, see above, 7n15. The *Study Guide* developed for TALC members to help them examine Lutheran-Reformed ecumenism noted, “In the past Lutheran pulpits and altars were restricted to Lutherans, perhaps for good and sufficient historical reasons. Now practice has changed. This is not because of unionism or theological relativism. To the contrary, this is a sign of theological health. No longer are we a settled people. We wander to and fro, and any attempt to fence the altar is misunderstood as snobbery rather than as a concern for truth and holiness. Only the one who denies the real presence of the risen Christ who forgives sins should be excluded from the altar. Other than this we can safely leave it to the Lord to fence his table. Nor do Lutherans hold strictly any longer to ‘Lutheran pulpits for Lutheran pastors.’ Guest preachers are common. Pulpit exchange is common. But guests are not invited if there is any question about the clarity of the gospel that is going to be preached.” The American Lutheran Church, *Lutheran and Presbyterian-Reformed Agreement 1986: A Study Guide* (Minneapolis: Office of the Presiding Bishop,

1986), 10. The statement here indicates that doctrine follows practice, but is this not a case of the tail wagging the dog? Additionally, why single out the Reformed for pulpit and altar fellowship when *de facto* the Table has become open to all confessional groups? There can be no doubt that the ancient church practiced "closed communion," as Werner Elert has shown in *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, trans. Norman E. Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966). To translate this practice into a more contemporary idiom, the Lord's Supper is not to be seen as a service to the public but as a ministry of the Lord for the assembled congregation. Admittance to the Lord's Table is a privilege, not a right, and should not be construed as a right. No doubt, closure at the Lord's Table comes across as offensive to democratic sensibilities, as well it should. God's kingdom is not a democracy. Commenting on Joachim Jeremias's interpretation of the Supper as akin to and grounded in Jesus' table fellowship with outcasts, John Pless notes, "Jeremias makes the move from Jesus' meals with those deemed outcasts and unrighteous to the Lord's Supper. He sees a continuum between these meals and the sacrament. The contrast between the meals where Jesus sits at table with sinners and the Last Supper is overlooked by Jeremias. In the Last Supper, Jesus gathers only the twelve. It is not an open meal, but a supper with those called to the life of discipleship; they had followed Jesus throughout his public ministry. It is no ordinary meal that Jesus partakes of with his followers, but the last supper where he institutes the sacrament of the New Testament—the meal of his body and blood." John Pless, "Can We Participate Liturgically in the Atonement?" *Logia* 19, no. 2 (Eastertide 2010): 40. What TALC's *Study Guide* did indicate accurately is the fact that we are a mobile society whose members are interlocked with others of many confessional traditions. Given that fact, we may wish to reflect upon the statement on communion practice of The American Association of Lutheran Churches, a small group which broke away from TALC at the time of the formation of the ELCA in 1988. Their position states: "A faithful steward of the mysteries of God sees that each communicant has the tools to examine himself or herself, whether he or she be in the faith (1 Cor 11:28; with 2 Cor 13:5). The faithful steward knows who among his flock has been catechized in the faith, who has transferred their membership from elsewhere, and who is living in open and unrepentant sin. Visitors are handled in the same way as any other communicant; the faithful steward sees that they share the confession of the church within which they wish to commune, knows whether they are engaged in open and unrepentant sin, and ensures they have the tools with which to examine himself or herself. Nevertheless, exigent circumstances exist; we do not bind a man's conscience in such matters. We call this, our practice, 'Responsible Communion.'" This document is available at [http://www.taalc.org/Assets/Communion\\_Practice-TAALC.pdf](http://www.taalc.org/Assets/Communion_Practice-TAALC.pdf). On a different note, I cannot help but wonder if openness to pulpit and altar fellowship with the Reformed in TALC was not due at least in part to the fact that many of the denomination's teaching theologians had received their doctorates from historically Reformed institutions such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Chicago. Likewise, North Americans tend not to like doctrinal differences that separate them from their fellow Americans. I will never forget a pastoral visit in which a retired parishioner, a veteran of WWII, after showing me shrapnel wounds to his leg received at the Battle of the Bulge, said, "Pastor, you can say what you want, but I fought beside Catholics, Jews, and Baptists, and when it comes right down to it, there are no real differences between us." This man represents a sentiment quite common in the United States. Hence, American Christians do not tend

Such divergent tracks were brought into the ELCA and contributed towards ecumenical in-fighting amongst ELCA theologians.

The ecumenical goal with the Reformed, and with the Episcopalians as well, is not what in earlier days was called "pulpit and altar fellowship," but instead "full communion." What is meant by this? As a result of ecumenical cooperation, bilateral and multilateral dialogues, and preliminary Eucharistic sharing and cooperation, ecumenical partner churches enjoy the interchangeability of clergy and venture in joint efforts such as publications, the planting of mission congregations, and the like. "Full communion" does not entail confessional agreement. In this way, it is exactly like the fellowship attained by the Leuenberg Agreement. As Johannes Friedrich, the Presiding Bishop of Bavaria and the new Presiding Bishop of the VELKD, notes, "The Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), according to our founding documents, is a church fellowship based on the model of the Leuenberg Agreement." Specifically, for our purposes, he says,

The Leuenberg Agreement, the foundational document for fellowship among churches of varying confessions, pronounces the way to productive ecumenism via Augsburg Confession 7: The binding confessions of the churches that have joined it are not negated. The Leuenberg Agreement does not presume to be a confession per se, but allows for various confessions to enter into fellowship as they grow in mutual recognition, which follows from a common understanding of the Gospel.<sup>29</sup>

## V. Differences between the European and American Contexts

It is important to acknowledge that there are differences between the background of Leuenberg and that of North America. Of particular note is the church struggle in the 1930s, the reaction of the "confessing" Protestants to the pro-Nazi "German Christians," which was bound to result in cohesion between Lutherans and Reformed against a common enemy. Likewise, Leuenberg itself acknowledges "historically-conditioned thought forms" and spells out the greater affinity between Lutherans and Reformed in Europe:

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to see themselves as belonging to different confessional traditions, but instead to different "denominations," a term taken from currency implying that you receive *the same* amount of change back per each dollar given.

<sup>29</sup> Johannes Friedrich, *The Significance of Lutheranism for Fellowship among Christians*, trans. Kristian T. Baudler, available at <http://www.crossalone.us/2006/HeavyLifting/CCM/SignificanceOfLutheranismForFellowship.pdf>.

In the course of four hundred years of history, the Churches of the Reformation have been led to new and similar ways of thinking and living; by theological wrestling with the questions of modern times, by advances in biblical research, by the movements of church renewal, and by the rediscovery of the ecumenical horizon.<sup>30</sup>

As noted, Robert Jenson argued that not only the *Kirchenkampf* but also joint opposition to Rome, whose cultural legacy is pervasive in Europe, tends to unite Lutherans and the Reformed.

Perhaps the most significant difference between the contexts of European and North American heirs of the classical reformation is that of the spiritual and political edge that Evangelical or "born-again" (decision-theology) Protestantism muscles in North America.<sup>31</sup> Such "born-againism," an heir of revivalism, historically so important to American religious life especially as it moved into the frontier, trumps matters of classical doctrinal disputes in favor of the born-again experience, in which one accepts Jesus as one's personal Savior and Lord, independently of the formalities of rituals and sacraments, and which establishes one on a path of upright living. Of course, such "trumping" of doctrine is only a ruse. Born-again religiosity is permeated by doctrinal stances and assumptions through and through. But a cardinal "doctrine" of Evangelicals is that academic doctrinal debate is of little value. The assessment of truth for such born-againism is deeply pragmatic: Accepting Jesus as your savior "works." Embedded within American Evangelicalism is a deeply anti-intellectual attitude. Arguments over matters of traditional doctrine, such as the validity of infant baptism, or Baptism as regenerative, are passed over by means of a pragmatic criterion of truth—the liveliness of born-again experience and the growth of their suburban churches are what impress. Some mainline congregations, including those from North American Lutheran synods of all stripes, are numerically successful by copying these very tactics of Evangelicals.

North American Lutherans, especially after the waves of German and Scandinavian immigrants to the United States during and after the 1840s, increasingly reacted negatively toward such revivalism. Not only did confessional renewal in Europe at Erlangen and Christiania (Oslo) lend

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<sup>30</sup> Robert Jenson, "The Leuenberg Agreement in the North American Context," 100–101.

<sup>31</sup> I hesitate to use the term "born-again religiosity," since being "born again" or "born from above" are Jesus' own words (John 3:3). The basic problem is that unlike Jesus' teachings in John's Gospel such religiosity assumes the freedom of the will. A campaign promoting the proper understanding of regeneration seems to be in order.

Lutherans a vigorous polemic against revivalism, but homegrown Lutherans such as Charles Porterfield Krauth in Pennsylvania, the original heartland of North American Lutheranism, also sought to reclaim the Reformation heritage as "conservative" and distanced themselves from the Reformed.<sup>32</sup> The doctrine of justification by faith, as well as a wholesome appropriation of the sacraments as external means of grace, was affirmed not only in opposition to Roman Catholicism, but particularly against revivalism. The basis of faith is not grounded in a subjective experience of a new birth, but in the objective promise as mediated through word and sacrament. In opposition to revivalist-minded Lutherans, who sought to alter the wording of the Augsburg Confession and to make it more palatable to revivalistic and sometimes Enlightenment ears,<sup>33</sup> Krauth with his colleagues in the General Council led a charge to appropriate a confessional heritage for North American Lutherans in both theology and worship. The direction of this initiative, which lasted for well over a century, did not lead American Lutheranism closer to Rome or Canterbury, but it surely distanced it from Geneva and Zurich, which had fewer resources to combat revivalism.

Krauth's directions for North American Lutheranism were furthered by the more recent European immigrants, especially those indebted to the work of Loehe (the Joint Synod of Ohio and the German Iowa Synod) or Walther (the Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Synod), as well as Lutherans from Scandinavian, Slovak, and Finnish backgrounds. In other words, for almost a century, the majority of North American Lutherans distanced themselves theologically from the Reformed, who were viewed as all too similar to and without resources to counteract revivalism. Today, some ELCA members favor ecumenical partnering with the Reformed for the very reason that the Reformation is not only corrective but also constitutive and others oppose it for the opposite reason. But surely ELCA ecumenism should not be based on such teeter-tottering but instead on a fundamental agreement about the gospel. In the overall scheme of things,

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<sup>32</sup> See Charles Porterfield Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963). Commenting on Col 2:9, Krauth notes that "If all the fullness of the Godhead in the second person of the Trinity dwells in Christ bodily, then there is no fullness of that Godhead where it is not so dwelling in Christ; and as the human in Christ cannot limit the divine, which is essentially, and of necessity, omnipresent, the divine in Christ must exalt the human. The Godhead of Christ is everywhere present, and wherever present, dwells in the human personally, and, therefore, of necessity renders it present with itself" (507).

<sup>33</sup> See E. Clifford Nelson, ed., *The Lutherans in North America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 217-227.



it would seem that what makes unity with the Reformed today not only palatable but desirable is that the ecclesiastical agenda has altered over the last several decades. ELCA leaders are far more apt to oppose Evangelicals less on matters of salvation, as would have been done in the past, and more on matters of politics. Such moves reveal the most important agenda for the ELCA. Mainline Protestants have tended to adopt the program of the political left, which favors greater government intervention in the economy but a *laissez fair* approach to matters of sexuality, privacy, and the family. Evangelicals go just the opposite route, favoring the political right and thus approving of a *laissez fair* approach to the economy but greater regulation of sexuality, privacy, and the family. Some of us find ourselves in neither camp, since we favor neither an economy run amok nor families in fragmentation.

### VI. The Basis for A Common Calling

While many mainline Protestant denominations, such as the Episcopal Church USA, the United Church of Christ, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the United Methodist Church, have lost virtually half of their membership over the last forty years—a period in which the population of the United States doubled—Evangelical, charismatic, and increasingly “non-denominational” (albeit Baptist-like) churches have grown, often taking in young families, the parents of which were confirmed in declining mainline Protestant churches. Likewise, beginning after *Roe v. Wade*, born-again religion actively sought to capture the Republican Party and use it for a specific “pro-family” agenda, often working in tandem with the ideals of free market capitalism. The result is that North American Protestants side up on a political divide: Mainliners favor a “peace and justice” agenda and a “mix and match” approach to the family, while Evangelicals favor *laissez faire* capitalism and the traditional family. In this light, the contention of the editors of *A Common Calling* (1988–1992) needs to be put in context:

To some observers it seems that the most important divisions within American religion today are not those that separate one denomination from another, but those that divide members within denominations along a conservative–liberal fissure. The civil rights movement, the protests against the Vietnam War, and the movement for women’s rights have all contributed to the political tensions within American denominations.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *A Common Calling*, 31.

This paragraph, written almost two decades ago, is no longer accurate. The truth of the matter is, more "liberal" perspectives have gotten the upper hand in all mainline Protestant denominations. The divide has for some time moved out of a liberal-conservative debate *within* mainline churches, where "conservatives," insofar as they survive in them, are given little voice, and more *between* mainliners and Evangelicals. Ironically, more conservative pro-life Roman Catholics side with Evangelicals, while more liberal Roman Catholics side with mainliners.

### VII. Sidelining the Classical Differences

Another similarity between Leuenberg and North American Lutheran-Reformed ecumenism is the perception that classical issues such as predestination, the mode of Christ's real presence,<sup>35</sup> the priority among uses of the law, and the ordering of the ministry seem no longer to obtain. Those who try such an approach are seen as anachronistic. As the editors of *A Common Calling* note, "Whatever we may think of it, however, the reality of church life in the twentieth century has become increasingly oblivious to the sixteenth-century controversies between reformed and Lutheran churches."<sup>36</sup> It is not as if they are unaware of the historical differences between Lutherans and Reformed, which they nicely summarize. Lutherans historically have affirmed:

1. The corporeal presence of Christ in the elements of the Lord's Supper based on their firm conviction of an incarnational soteriology.
2. The objectivity of God's saving presence in the consecrated elements of the Lord's Supper.
3. The *manducatio impiorum* or *indignorum*, the eating of Jesus' body and blood by unbelievers or gross sinners who come to the Lord's Supper.
4. The *communicatio idiomatum*, the exchange of divine and human attributes in the one person of Jesus Christ. As the editors note, only a

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<sup>35</sup> Talk of the "mode" of Christ's presence in the Supper is misleading. John Pless notes that "it was from the Formula that [Hermann] Sasse would argue that the difference between the Lutherans and the Reformed on the doctrine of the Lord's Supper is as lively today as it was in the sixteenth century. It is not merely a debate over the *how* of Christ's presence but rather *what* is present. No Christian believes in a *real absence*. That was not the issue at the time of the Reformation, nor is it the issue now. Thus communion announcements that ask that those who come to the altar 'believe in the real presence of Christ in the sacrament' are meaningless. As Albert Collver has demonstrated, the language of the real presence is not yet a confession of Christ's body and blood." See "Can We Participate Liturgically in the Atonement," 41.

<sup>36</sup> *A Common Calling*, 43.

complete exchange of predicable properties seemed to allow for the full incarnational paradox of the presence of the divine and human person of Christ in the Supper. Historically, Lutherans feared a Nestorian division of the one Christ into two, of whom only one, the divine person, is present in the Supper.

5. The ubiquity (omnipresence) of Christ's human and divine natures. Again, Lutherans feared a local circumscription of the risen Lord that would curtail the divine omnipotence

By contrast, the Reformed historically have emphasized:

1. The presence of the Lord at the Lord's Table by means of the Spirit. Calvinists feared the perversion of a spiritual reality into carnal eating and drinking and the assumption of human control over the divine promise.

2. The bread and wine as signs: believers partake of the flesh and blood of Jesus in the Spirit. Historically Calvinists have feared approaching the sacrament as crude sacramental magic.

3. The Holy Spirit as the bridge between sign and thing (*res*). The bridge work of the Holy Spirit is seen in the "lifting up" of the hearts of the faithful (*sursum corda*) and the *epiclesis*. Historically, Calvinists feared an unwarranted reification of the gift in the community of faith and a loss of the trinitarian understanding of gift and giver.

4. That a Lutheran christology of deified human nature is no longer true human nature.

5. The local circumscription of Christ's body in heaven. For Calvinists, the ubiquity of Christ's human nature would jeopardize the reality of the historical incarnation and make the soteriological work of the Spirit redundant.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> In *Marburg Revisited*, Presbyterian theologian Joseph C. McLelland notes the Reformed objection to the Lutheran view of Christ's presence in the Supper: "The Calvinists were not convinced that the Lutherans had not divinized the glorified humanity. For them it was the ascension and descent of the Spirit that provided the proper 'moment' in Christological-Eucharistic discussion. They took them as two sides of the one event; ascension means that the living Christ is not essentially discontinuous with the divine-human One whose presence was circumscribed; Pentecost means that the dynamic of Christ's presence is not a question in the abilities of his new body but in the peculiar power of the Spirit" (50). Hence, in Calvinism, the role of the Holy Spirit is crucial in how Christ is present in the Supper: "It is in this context that the distinctive reformed doctrine of the Holy Spirit is to be understood. The Spirit fulfils his office by bringing us into contact with Christ's substance, which Calvin interprets in terms of a *virtus*, a power judged by its effects in the human realm. Just as much as Luther he

The editors admit that with respect to these debates, "A common language for this witness which could do justice to all the insights, convictions, and concerns of our ancestors in the faith has not yet been found and may not be possible."<sup>38</sup> Similar to the spirit of Leuenberg, the editors note that

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wished to preserve objectivity in the Sacrament, the objective presence of the personal Lord" (48). As helpful as this is, the *non capax* approach to Christology is best expressed by Calvin himself: "There is a commonplace distinction of the schools to which I am not ashamed to refer: although the whole Christ is everywhere, still the whole of that which is in him is not everywhere. And would that the Schoolmen themselves had honestly weighed the force of this statement. For thus would the absurd fiction of Christ's carnal presence have been obviated. Therefore, since the whole Christ is everywhere, our Mediator is ever present with his own people, and in the Supper reveals himself in a special way, yet in such a way that the whole Christ is present, but not in his wholeness. For, as has been said, in his flesh he is contained in heaven until he appears in judgment." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.30. The contrast between this Reformed perspective on Christology and the Lord's Supper and that of a Lutheran like J. Michael Reu is significant. Reu writes, "The first generation of Christians was definitely convinced that the Lord after the resurrection spent a number of days in physically perceptible communion with his own. If such fellowship has been terminated and superseded by a different sort of communion, and if the believers now address their Lord—who is at the right hand of God—as king and high priest, then they thereby affirm that the risen Lord has ascended to heaven some time after his resurrection. In keeping with common scriptural usage 'heaven' is here used in contrast not only with the earth but with the universe, the sense being that Christ has entered into a state of supramundaneity, a state of existence which makes it possible for him to be present everywhere; not only have 'the heavens received him,' Acts 3:21, but he ascended far above the heavens that he might fill all things (Eph. 4:8-10). His resurrection changed his relation to the human nature; his ascension changed his relation to the whole created universe, it marks the transition from a mundane to a transcendent mode of existence." J. Michael Reu, *Lutheran Dogmatics* (Dubuque, IA: Wartburg Seminary Press, 1963), 234. As a follow-up to this christology, Reu concludes his *Two Treatises on the Means of Grace* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1952) with this stance on Holy Communion: "If the possibility of the real presence of Christ's body and blood is questioned, we answer that our exalted Lord is omnipresent also according to his human nature and therefore able to offer His body and His blood where- and whenever He desires to do so. His marvelous power is unlimited. If the dogma of the *unio sacramentalis* is stigmatized as unreasonable or contra-rational, we reply that, measured by this criterion, every mystery of faith would ultimately have to be surrendered. . . . If it is objected that bread and wine, being earthly and transitory substances, could not serve as vehicles for the body and the blood of Christ, we would refer to the incarnation of Christ as the plainest proof that the finite may comprehend the infinite. If we are told that it is unworthy of God that we orally receive His body and blood, we praise Him who in grace has condescended to our level in order to assure us of our salvation" (117-118).

<sup>38</sup> *A Common Calling*, 49.

these theological differences are . . . crucial for the ongoing ecumenical relations between these traditions. We view them not as disagreements that need to be overcome but as diverse witnesses to the one gospel that we confess in common. Rather than being church-dividing, the varying theological emphases among, and even within, these communities provide complementary expressions of the church's faith in the triune God.<sup>39</sup>

As an alternative to this perspective, lively and respectful discussion in which we dared to disagree with our fellow Christians and explain why we think doctrinal matters are important would garner more esteem. Non-Christians are not impressed with a fuzzy "let's get along" spirituality—they can get that at the "New Age" section of the local bookstore or conversation at the local coffee shop.

### VIII. Leuenberg at the Core

*A Formula of Agreement* makes ready use of Leuenberg. With respect to the historic "condemnations," *A Formula of Agreement* quotes Leuenberg: "The condemnations expressed in the confessional documents no longer apply to the contemporary doctrinal position of the assenting churches (LA, IV.32.b)." Likewise, with respect to the Lord's Supper, *A Formula of Agreement* affirms LA, III.1.18:

In the Lord's Supper the risen Jesus Christ imparts himself in his body and blood, given for all, through his word of promise with bread and wine. He thus gives himself unreservedly to all who receive the bread and wine; faith receives the Lord's Supper for salvation, unfaith for judgment.<sup>40</sup>

With respect to the mode of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper, *A Formula of Agreement* likewise looks to Leuenberg:

In the Lord's Supper the risen Jesus Christ imparts himself in his body and blood, given up for all, through his word of promise with bread and wine. He thereby grants us forgiveness of sins and sets us free for a new life of faith. He enables us to experience anew that we are members of his body. He strengthens us for service to all men. (LA, II.2.15)

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<sup>39</sup> *A Common Calling*, 66.

<sup>40</sup> *A Formula of Agreement* also quotes LA, III.1.19: "We cannot separate communion with Jesus Christ in his body and blood from the act of eating and drinking. To be concerned about the manner of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper in abstraction from this act is to run the risk of obscuring the meaning of the Lord's Supper."

When we celebrate the Lord's Supper we proclaim the death of Christ through which God has reconciled the world with himself. We proclaim the presence of the risen Lord in our midst. Rejoicing that the Lord has come to us we await his future coming in glory. (LA, II.2.16)

The specific mode of Christ's presence is not acknowledged. As mentioned earlier, the ELCA has not adopted the Leuenberg Agreement. But perhaps this needs to be qualified. *De jure* the ELCA has not adopted Leuenberg, but *de facto* it has. In essence, the ELCA has used Leuenberg to shore up its agreement with the three mainline Reformed Churches. The glue that binds Lutherans and the Reformed together in America today allows them to sidestep traditional theological matters because they have a common opponent: born-again Americans and the political right, with whom Evangelicals are aligned. They also share a common view of salvation as ultimately social, political, and ecological "peace and justice."

### IX. One Basis for the Sidelining

Since it is clear that Lutherans and the Reformed are not in doctrinal agreement, on what basis can fellowship as we see it in Leuenberg or *A Formula of Agreement* be established? No one has responded more elegantly to this question than the late Warren Quanbeck in the first round of US Lutheran-Reformed discussion, *Marburg Revisited*:

When the traditions are set alongside each other and examined in a sympathetic way, it can be seen that one does not necessarily have to choose one doctrinal tradition to the exclusion of all others. To be a loyal Lutheran does not mean that one can see no value in the dogmatic or liturgical tradition of the Eastern Orthodox churches, or that one must condemn the total doctrinal statement of the Roman Catholic or Calvinist traditions. The New Testament witnesses to a rich variety of theological motifs in interpreting the Lord's Supper: memorial, communion, thanksgiving, sacrifice, mystery, anticipation. No tradition in the church has done justice to them all; each tradition has sought to develop one or more of them. What is seen in the study of the scriptures, and noted again in the development of the church's doctrine, becomes real and existential in ecumenical discussion.<sup>41</sup>

In light of this rhetoric, can it be at all surprising that while disagreement over the mode of the Lord's presence in his Supper—bodily (Lutheran) or via elevation by the Spirit (Calvinist)—persists, Lutherans and the Reformed can affirm that they substantially share a common

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<sup>41</sup> *Marburg Revisited*, 51.

faith?<sup>42</sup> With respect to Quanbeck, the question needs to be raised: Does a diversity of metaphors in the New Testament entail a diversity of doctrine? The one doctrine in scripture can express itself through a variety of metaphors. Diversity of doctrine in the New Testament would have to be established on other grounds. To be sure, an appreciation of doctrinal differences among Christians is progress over mindless caricatures and mean-spirited judgments. All in all, however, this tells us precious little about what we should believe, teach, and confess. The issue is further complicated by the fact that Lutherans and Reformed do not see eye to eye with respect to what it means to be a confessional church.<sup>43</sup> Underneath doctrinal disagreements is the real concern of the teaching of the gospel: Is the gospel properly being distinguished from the law such that our "solipsistic self-preoccupation" comes to an end and that we are given a "sure foundation and thus a sure comfort in another – Christ"?<sup>44</sup>

### X. Conclusion

That traditional disagreements between Lutherans and the Reformed are now considered anachronistic, at least by mainliners, is due to the fact that our attitudes about the gospel, specifically about from what the gospel saves us, have changed. The reformers, both Lutheran and Reformed, were so zealous over doctrinal differences because they believed they needed to be precise about the gospel, since after all it is the gospel that saves people from God's wrath. But it would seem that today we no longer really believe in God's wrath. Prior theological disagreements with the Reformed are therefore non-issues. Today we are apt to say of death that it is something natural, not "guilt made visible," as Karl Rahner once put it.<sup>45</sup> Even born-again Christians are likely to tell you to accept Jesus as your

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<sup>42</sup> *Lutheran-Reformed Consultation, Series II, 1972-1974*, 111.

<sup>43</sup> "Since the Reformed traditions have neither agreed on a single common confession nor codified an authorized book of confessions, none of their historical statements of faith have equivalent status to documents gathered together in the Lutherans' Book of Concord. Since Lutherans have effectively elevated the ecumenical creeds and the confessions of the sixteenth century above later statements of faith, they have declined to add new documents to their confessional corpus. Thus they continue to assert the sufficiency of the historical creeds and confessions for the contemporary faith and life of the church. By contrast, the Reformed communities have shown a greater willingness to develop new confessions in response to contemporary problems and issues. By asserting the principle *reformata semper reformanda*, the Reformed churches seek to preserve a dynamic relation between the churches' confessions and the living Christ to whom these confessions witness." *A Common Calling*, 29.

<sup>44</sup> Quote from Notger Slenczka, in Werner Klän, "Aspects of Lutheran Identity: A Confessional Perspective," *Concordia Journal* 32 (2006): 14.

<sup>45</sup> Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1961), 49.

Savior not because you will be saved from wrath but because Jesus will give you a "purpose-driven" life.<sup>46</sup> But our assumptions beg the question: Do we in fact encounter God's wrath daily, and will we—outside of Christ—encounter it eternally? Do we not deal with God's judgment in, with, and under all other judgments, not because judgments of others or even of oneself are true but because they are a result of a fallen world—and that ultimately it is God's judgment that counts? We live, move, and have our being within a world swamped in judgment, but ultimately, behind all such judgments that we make or that are made about us, we live in a fallen world which holds the equivalent of a death sentence over our heads. Do we not need an external word (*verbum externum*) to save us? And do we not need a Savior whose divine nature is not only capable of the finite, but capable of absorbing and even becoming our sin so that we might become his righteousness?

If that is the case, must not we Lutherans affirm precisely what we have confessed in the past? We must confess a robust view of the incarnation, the *infra Lutheranum*, not only because of the *communicatio idiomatum*, but because the Redeemer took on not only human life, but on the cross, sinful human life, indeed was judged the "greatest sinner"<sup>47</sup> (*maximus peccator, peccator peccatorum*) in order to bear away sin and its wages of death, so that we can have eternal life now and forever.

The impulse for ecumenical dialogue is salutary, but not at the expense of budgets that could be geared for evangelism, world mission, or, for that matter, social mercy. In that light, we need to distinguish an ecumenism "from above" from an ecumenism "from below." In ecumenism "from above," churchwide budgets are used to legitimate bureaucratically pre-established harmony between various denominations which are already "birds of a feather" with respect to their social and political agendas. And a major assumption of these denominations, shared with their Evangelical counterparts, is that classical doctrines are relatively unimportant. Make no mistake: Many of the social agendas raised by mainline Protestants urging our support for the poor and the downtrodden merit our attention and action. But the quest for justice as such is not salvific but is instead a matter of social ethics. It entails fidelity to the Golden Rule. Its exercise is highly complicated, since we live in a global economy in which tracing accountability for decisions can be murky but from which no one is scot-free. On the exercise of justice, intelligent people of good will do disagree

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<sup>46</sup> See Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life: What On Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

<sup>47</sup> LW 26:277.



about how to rectify inequality of opportunity and establish basic human rights. Even so, that is no excuse for Christians along with all other citizens to fail to work for basic human rights to freedom and dignity, along with equality of opportunity, as a natural consequence of their vocations within democratic societies.

Contemporary ecumenism involves church bureaucrats initiating or sponsoring high-level committees that put together written agreements embodying some sort of doctrinal agreement—or doctrinal avoidance—so that clergy can be officially exchanged. North American ecumenism has tended to be focused on such upper-level church structures. It should be contrasted with the ecumenism “from below” which has been in place for some time in many parishes. This entails Christian cooperation among varying groups by operating food banks, clothing racks, homeless or domestic abuse shelters, home rehabilitation projects, literacy and educational opportunities for underprivileged children and adults, opportunities to recover from alcohol and drug addictions, and other such venues. These activities extend social mercy to those in need. Likewise, open, genuine, and honest discussion and disagreement among thoughtful and informed Christians of good will can help us better understand ourselves, our mission, and others. Until doctrinal agreement is established between different confessional groups, however, neither “full communion” among differing confessional traditions nor “open communion” at the altar should be our goal. Rather, the first step is to establish doctrinal agreement, and that for the sake of the purity of the gospel which alone saves.

Classical differences between Lutherans and the Reformed are anachronistic only to those already bewitched by Enlightenment “dogmas” of human progress and tolerance.<sup>48</sup> Not everything about these Enlightenment views is wrong. Surely, for example, a democratic approach to governance is preferable to a feudal approach. Nevertheless, such views secularize Reformation teachings, reframing a conscience captive to the word of God as a conscience captive to the autonomous “self.” Hence, Enlightenment doctrines need to be tested in light of law and gospel. In that light, we flee from God as wrath to God as mercy. It is Jesus Christ, who stands by his promise, bears God’s wrath, and gives us his very righteousness, whom we must uncompromisingly confess.

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<sup>48</sup> See Wayne Booth, *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974).