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Confessional Lutheranism in an Ecumenical World

Carl E. Braaten

One of the benefits of retirement is the time it affords to retrace one's steps, to write one's memoirs, and to speak one's mind without worrying about the consequences. The first essay I wrote and published after finishing my graduate studies in theology at Harvard and Heidelberg Universities in the 1950s was entitled: "The Crisis of Confessionalism."¹ I thought of myself then as a confessional Lutheran theologian, and proud of it. I had studied under Edmund Schlink and Peter Brunner at Heidelberg. Before that I studied with Paul Tillich at Harvard for two years and became his teaching assistant, but I never became a Tillichian. I could never make the categories of German idealism that controlled Tillich's systematics fit into my head. My mind had been steeped too long in the writings of the great neo-orthodox Lutheran theologians, such as Anders Nygren's *Agape and Eros*, Gustaf Aulén's *Christus Victor*, Regin Prenter's *Spiritus Creator*, Hermann Sasse's *This Is My Body*, and Helmut Thielicke's *Theological Ethics*, plus the many monographs written by scholars during the hey-day of the Luther renaissance.² There was no question in my mind but that I would go on to become a teacher of Christian dogmatics in the Lutheran tradition.

When I began my teaching career at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago in the early sixties—I was then thirty-two years old—I worried about the state of confessional Lutheranism in America. At that time many church leaders were calling for greater Lutheran unity in America and the world, leaders such as Frederick Schoitz, Franklin Clark Fry, and Malvin Lundeen, to name only a few. As I examined the scene, I observed that Lutherans were not in agreement on how to answer the simple question:

¹ Carl E. Braaten, "The Crisis of Confessionalism," *Dialog* 1 (1962): 38-48.

² Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953); Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (New York: Macmillan, 1951); Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, trans. John M. Jenson (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1953); Hermann Sasse, *This is My Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1959); Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, ed. William H. Lazareth, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), and *The Ethics of Sex*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1964). The Luther renaissance included Karl Holl, Emanuel Hirsch, Heinrich Bornkamm, and Paul Althaus.

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What is Lutheranism? Even those who believed it necessary to base Lutheran identity on the *Book of Concord* did not agree on how to interpret and apply the Confessions in the present situation. Already at that time Lutheranism in America found itself in a pluralistic situation. That trend has accelerated in the decades since. Using the typological method, I will describe various kinds of Lutheranism or ways of dealing with the Confessions.

I. The Crisis of Confessionalism

First, there was a kind of *repristinating confessionalism*. This position holds that the development of doctrine from Luther, through the Lutheran Confessions and seventeenth-century scholastic orthodoxy, is unilinear and provides a pristine model that all succeeding generations ought to retrieve and implement in their teaching. Second, there was a type of *non-confessional liberalism*. Much of the modern Luther research was motivated by the desire to appeal to Luther's experience of faith over against the lapidary dogmatics of Lutheran scholasticism. *Was Luther Sagt* [what Luther says] became more important than the confessional writings, especially among the followers of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Albrecht Ritschl, and Adolf von Harnack. Third, some theologians had bought into an *anti-confessional biblicism*. Here one sees an appalling ignorance and indifference to the confessional theology of the Lutheran church, a condition that prevailed even in many seminaries. Among midwest Lutheran pietists, influenced by low-church Scandinavian revivalism, the back-to-the-Bible movement gave rise to the Lutheran Bible Institute. In general, it presented itself as an alternative to what the pietists liked to call the "dead orthodoxy" of confessional dogmatics.

There were at least three types of Lutheranism prevalent at the time. For the first type, the touchstone was the *Book of Concord*; for the second, the touchstone was the theology of the early Luther; and, for the third, the touchstone was the Bible. I would be false to history and my own experience, however, without taking into account a fourth type that was in the making, an embryonic movement quite complex and in search of new understanding and new expression. It was easy to say what this fourth approach was not: it was not repristinationist scholasticism, fundamentalist biblicism, culture-accommodating liberalism, or pietistic anti-intellectualism. To give expression to it, Robert Jenson and I founded a theological journal that we named *dialog*, a journal that aimed to Americanize Lutheranism. After thirty years of editing the journal, we abandoned it to found a different journal of theology that we named *Pro Ecclesia — A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology*.

Well, we have not come very far: confessional Lutheran theology in America, now in a new millennium, is still in a state of crisis, or, maybe worse, it may have contracted something like a sickness unto death. The emerging voices in American Lutheranism that collaborated in the founding and editing of *dialog* and that authored many volumes of theology, including two volumes of *Christian Dogmatics*,³ have joined different choirs and are singing different melodies in theology. In the interest of full disclosure, I acknowledge that I am a partisan in the struggle with a definite point of view which, I hope, will become clear in the course of this presentation. To explain what happened in the splitting up of the group around *dialog* and the dogmatics project, I will need to deal with the second aspect of my topic—the modern ecumenical movement. The irony is that the very movement that was created to bring Christians and churches together has had the opposite effect of causing new divisions within the churches.

II. Catholics in Exile

The Second Vatican Council made me into an ecumenical Lutheran theologian. The most memorable year for me was 1965, the same year that the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogues began. It was then that I gave my first ecumenical address. This was my chance to declare where I stood as a Lutheran theologian in the new ecumenical situation, shaped by the Second Vatican Council and the bi-lateral dialogues. To prepare the address I read a few new books. One was by Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Riddle of Roman Catholicism*, in which he devoted a chapter to “the tragic necessity of the Reformation.”⁴ His point was that although the Reformation was necessary, it was also tragic in its consequences. The second was by Hans Küng, *The Council and Reunion*, in which he debunked the traditional Roman Catholic idea of ecumenism as a perennial papal call for Protestants to return to Rome, as though Rome is home.⁵ The third was an essay by George Lindbeck, “A Protestant View of the Ecclesiological Status of the Roman Catholic Church.”⁶ My address was entitled “The Tragedy of the Reformation and the Recovery of Catholicity.” It was published in *Una*

³ Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Christian Dogmatics*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

⁴ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Riddle of Roman Catholicism* (New York: Abingdon, 1959). “The Tragic Necessity of the Reformation” is the title of chapter 4, pages 45-57.

⁵ Hans Küng, *The Council and Reunion*, trans. Cecily Hastings (London: Sheed and Ward, 1961).

⁶ George A. Lindbeck, “A Protestant View of the Ecclesiological Status of the Roman Catholic Church,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 1 (1964): 243-270.

Sancta by its editor, Richard John Neuhaus, under the altered title of "Rome, Reformation, and Reunion."⁷

The basic aim of my 1965 ecumenical proposal was to answer the question of how to affirm Lutheran identity with confessional integrity in an ecumenical age. Well, who are Lutherans anyway, some over sixty million of us? The question cannot be answered in a vacuum, but only in the context of our origin, history, and envisioned future. My answer was then and still is: Lutherans are Catholics in exile. To elaborate further, I argued then and have done so ever since that Lutherans, living in exile, are evangelical without being Protestant in a denominational sense, catholic without being Roman, and orthodox without being Eastern. To make my point, I adapted from Lindbeck's article a parable that harked back to World War II. In June of 1940, Hitler's army invaded and conquered France. Many a loyal and patriotic Frenchman, however, protested against the puppet government of Marshal Pétain installed by Hitler. They left France and rallied around General Charles de Gaulle, and they fought to liberate their beloved fatherland with all the Free French forces in exile.

Now, what if the Free French forgot the reason for their exile, and as expatriots became so accustomed to life outside of France that they forgot about returning and reuniting with the French countrymen they had left behind? What if they began to think and act as though what was meant to be only a temporary arrangement in an emergency situation had actually become for them a permanent home and established settlement? Suppose they ignored the cause of liberation for which they had left France to join the Free French forces of General de Gaulle and instead set up a new government in some other colony, calling it New France, with no intention of ever returning to the land of their birth. If that would have happened, one would call it a tragedy, akin to the tragedy of the Reformation.

The editor of *The Christian Century* wrote a scathing review of my article in an editorial entitled, "Protestant Hara-kiri."⁸ Braaten was calling for Protestants to commit suicide, it said. The editor, Kyle Haselden, was angered by the very idea that Protestants should be asked to "return to Rome." The editor was a Protestant. In terms of my parable, he was thinking of Protestants as emigres, not as exiles. I responded that I was not writing as a Protestant but as a Lutheran, and, thanks to him, he had

⁷ Carl E. Braaten, "Rome, Reformation, and Reunion," *Una Sancta* 23, no. 2 (1966): 3-8.

⁸ Editorial, "Protestant Hara-kiri," *The Christian Century* 83 (June 22, 1966): 794-795.

helped to make clear the difference.⁹ Lutherans are not Protestant emigres who care nothing about reconciling with those they left behind. That may work for the sons and daughters of Calvin, Zwingli, and Müntzer, but not for those of Luther and Melancthon. No, Lutherans are catholics in exile, if they remain true to their confessional origins. Lutherans today should realize that they belong neither with conservative Evangelicalism, on the one hand, nor with liberal Protestantism, on the other.

The editor of *The Christian Century* had missed the point of my address. The exiles cannot return, I said, until there is a change of government back in the fatherland. Their struggle is to overcome a false government—an authoritarian regime—in control of their homeland and not to create a new Christianity. Ever since the Reformation, the symbol “Rome” has stood for false government. The catholics in exile are not prepared to acknowledge Rome as their final authority or the inflated status it claims for itself.

III. The Papacy as Ecumenical Problem

We are living in strange times. Some of my Lutheran colleagues have jumped ship and individually, one-by-one, decided that Rome is home. They do not accept the implications of the parable. For them there is no “false government” anymore, if there ever was, and there is no need to continue to call for changes in the way the Roman Church is governed from the top down. After one of my friends joined the Roman Catholic Church, I asked him, “Do you really accept as true the doctrine of papal infallibility?” He replied, “I do not look upon doctrine as you do, as something propositionally true or false.” “Well,” I responded, “how do you understand doctrine, if not true or false?” His answer was, “Doctrines are only the rules of the game.” Admittedly, there is nothing true or false about a rule in playing a game. A rule is purely arbitrary. A field goal in football could just as well be worth five points as three. I do not agree with his response. It is a cop-out, and I believe it is not at all true to the way Rome understands its infallible dogmas. They are not mere rules but binding propositions with cognitive status, to be believed precisely because they are true.

In my view, there is no ecumenical advance or lesson to be learned when Lutherans leave their fellow-exiles to accept prematurely the false government that excommunicated them and drove them into exile in the

⁹ Carl E. Braaten, letter to the editor, *The Christian Century* 83 (August 17, 1966): 1011. This letter was followed by a brief response, and the exchange received further comment in another editorial, “The Braaten Brouhaha,” *The Christian Century* (October 26, 1966): 1296-1297.

first place. The number one issue that stands in the way has little to do with incense, candles, rosaries, saints, and all the rest. It has to do with the late-nineteenth-century dogma of papal infallibility, which the pope promulgated in his own behalf.¹⁰ After reading the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogues on papal authority and infallibility,¹¹ my judgment is that Lutherans need not be confessionally opposed to the papal ministry as such, but only to its false claim to universal jurisdiction, something Eastern Orthodoxy also rejects.

Then, out of the blue came the papal encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (That All May Be One), which claims to have heard the lamentations of the exiles. The Pope expressed confidence that if we would take Christ's call to unity to heart, "every factor of division can be transcended and overcome. . . ."¹² In this statement, John Paul II echoed the words of Pope Paul VI who said in 1967: "We are aware that the pope is undoubtedly the greatest obstacle in the path of the *Ecumene*."¹³ I agree, with this qualification: the papal claim to infallibility and universal authority remains the greatest obstacle, despite growing agreement on other fronts.¹⁴

IV. Two Types of Confessional Lutheranism

Most Lutheran theologians who take their stand on the Lutheran confessional writings could perhaps agree with that position. Perhaps we can also agree that what we need now is a return to confessional teaching to recuperate our sense of Lutheran identity in faithfulness to the gospel and the Scriptures that convey the truth of Christ in the power of the Spirit. But then we come to a fork in the road. Ecumenism—*quo vadis?* Where do

¹⁰ The doctrine of papal infallibility was defined dogmatically in the First Vatican Council of 1870. This was reaffirmed by paragraph 18 of *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, which was promulgated by Pope Paul VI on November 21, 1964.

¹¹ Published as Paul C. Empie and T. Austin Murphy, eds., *Papal Primacy and the Universal Church*, Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue 5 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1974), and Paul C. Empie, T. Austin Murphy, and Joseph A. Burgess, eds., *Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church*, Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue 6 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980).

¹² John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Ut Unum Sint: On Commitment to Ecumenism* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995), no. 1. For an ecumenical discussion of *Ut Unum Sint*, see *Church Unity and the Papal Office: An Ecumenical Dialogue on John Paul II's Encyclical Ut Unum Sint (That All May Be One)*, eds. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001).

¹³ *Acta apostolicae sedis* 59 (1967): 498.

¹⁴ See also Carl E. Braaten, *Mother Church: Ecclesiology and Ecumenism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

we go with our confessional Lutheran self-understanding—ecclesialogically speaking? What do we envisage for the ecumenical future of Lutheranism? History will not allow us to stand still.

George Lindbeck has said that Lutherans divide into two camps on how to read Luther and the Confessions. The approach of the one camp he calls “constitutive”; the approach of the other, “corrective.” The constitutive approach sees the Reformation as the beginning of Protestantism, and Martin Luther as the founder of the Lutheran denomination. Alongside, there are other Protestant denominations with roots in the Reformation era, most notably the Reformed and the Anabaptists and their many offspring. Denominational Lutherans liken the *Augsburg Confession* to the Declaration of Independence. Today they call themselves “radical Lutherans.” They believe that the first Lutherans have all the answers we need today. The founding documents of Lutheranism define the difference between Lutherans and all others who claim to be Christian, and there we should stand. It is hard for them to get excited about the ecumenical movement if ours is the only church with the pure teaching of the way of salvation, except possibly to use ecumenical dialogue as an occasion to bear witness to our sense of the truth and to refute the false doctrines taught by others.

The “corrective” approach, in contrast, sees Luther and the Confessions in continuity with the mainstream of the Western Catholic tradition. Its aim is to renew the church in line with the Scriptures, the Ecumenical Creeds, and the Fathers and Doctors of the Great Tradition. The claim of the confessors was that they were true Catholics, in no way teaching anything new or different from classical Christian doctrine. In Article 14, the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* states: “Our consciences are not in danger, because we know that our Confession is true, godly, and Catholic” (Ap XIV, 3; my translation).

The difference between the constitutive and corrective interpretations of the Reformation lies at the base of the controversy concerning the ecumenical decisions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Lutherans who understand themselves as evangelical and Catholic do not read the Augsburg Confession as a “Declaration of Independence.” The founding fathers of our nation who signed the Declaration of Independence had no intention of returning to the old country. They left it for good and did not plan to return when the war is over. They were not exiles but emigres. Evangelical Catholics challenge the Protestant self-understanding of Lutheranism as being one denomination among many. The concept of various denominations is completely foreign to the *Augsburg Confession* and its *Apology*. They were written as public

testimonies to the truth of the gospel on the basis of Holy Scripture and the ancient creeds of the church, to correct erroneous teachings and practices and to preserve the unity of the church that was endangered at the time.

History, however, played a trick on the intentions of the Lutheran confessors. After the Reformation, Lutheranism underwent a series of transformations that betrayed its original purpose to be a gospel-centered reforming movement within the one, holy, catholic church. Consider its roller-coaster ride through four centuries of bouncing from one “ism” to another – scholasticism, pietism, rationalism, romanticism, revivalism, idealism, modernism, historicism, biblicism, and fundamentalism, each one occasioning a new quest for Lutheran identity. Now historical destiny has given to Lutherans a new “ism” – ecumenism – one that ineluctably calls for a response. We certainly do live in an ecumenical age. We may receive it as an opportunity for new self-understanding and as a gift of the Holy Spirit to the churches of today, or we may run from it as from the smell of a skunk. In either case, we will be defined by our response – positively or negatively – to the ecumenical dialogues and by the decisions made or not made by our various Lutheran church bodies.

V. The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

Confessional Lutherans who understand themselves as evangelical, catholic, and orthodox believe that the best hope for the future of Lutheranism lies in the direction of reconciling differences, removing mutual condemnations, and restoring full communion wherever possible, as steps on the way to full visible church unity. So we rejoiced in the signing of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* between the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, therewith consigning to oblivion the mutual condemnations of the sixteenth century.¹⁵ This is the biggest enchilada because it deals with what Lutherans have called “the article by which the church stands or falls.”

According to the *Joint Declaration*, Lutherans and Catholics now confess certain basic truths: first, that all persons depend completely on the saving grace of God for their salvation; second, that God forgives sin by grace and at the same time frees human beings from sin’s enslaving power and imparts the gift of new life in Christ; third, that sinners are justified by faith in the saving action of God in Christ; fourth, that in baptism the Holy

¹⁵ The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000). Hereafter *Joint Declaration*.

Spirit unites one with Christ, justifies, and truly renews the person; fifth, that persons are justified by faith in the gospel apart from works prescribed by the law; sixth, that the faithful can rely on the mercy and promises of God; and, seventh, that good works follow justification and are the fruits of faith.

Then the *Joint Declaration* states that "a consensus in basic truths of justification now exists between Lutherans and Catholics."¹⁶ It goes on to declare that the mutual condemnations of the sixteenth century no longer apply to the teachings of the other church. It concludes with this prayer: "We give thanks to the Lord for this decisive step forward on the way to overcoming the division of the church. We ask the Holy Spirit to lead us further toward that visible unity which is Christ's will."¹⁷

This is truly remarkable. I believe that it is a miracle of grace. It is not good enough, however, for the majority of German Protestant professors of theology, probably because most of them since Kant and Schleiermacher have quit believing in miracles. No, that is not the reason. The more likely reason is that agreement on justification gnaws away at the foundations of the century-old concordat that keeps Catholics and Protestants apart. The thought is not original with me that consensus is perceived as a threat to their vested economic interest in preserving separate state-funded theological faculties.

In 1963 Lutheran theologians from around the world met in Helsinki under the auspices of the Lutheran World Federation to produce a consensus statement that would resolve internal disagreements on justification. Notoriously they failed completely. Why? In my book, *Justification*, I tell the story of how the doctrine of justification by faith alone has been a bone of contention between gnesio-Lutherans and their pietistic opponents.¹⁸ Catholic theologians in dialogue with Lutherans since Vatican II have had to ask themselves: Which Lutherans are we talking to—Germans, or Finns, or Americans, those representing orthodoxy, or pietism, or modern existentialism? They observed at least three kinds of Lutheran interpretations on justification. One was the forensic view of justification, according to which God imputes righteousness to sinners without any merit on their part, faith itself being a gift of grace. A second was the modern existentialist view, with its roots in

¹⁶ *Joint Declaration*, no. 40.

¹⁷ *Joint Declaration*, no. 44.

¹⁸ Carl E. Braaten, *Justification: The Article by which the Church Stands or Falls* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

pietism, by which the kerygma brings about a new kind of I-Thou relationship between God and humans. A third view has more recently been injected into the dialogue by the new Finnish interpretation of Luther, which holds that the righteousness of Christ himself is present in faith. This gave the Finns a link to the Eastern Orthodox understanding of justification as *theosis*. The entire intra-Lutheran debate on justification opened up old wounds that Lutherans inflicted on each other in the sixteenth-century controversies on election and free will, a smoldering issue that has never been resolved among Lutherans holding contradictory views.

When I entered Luther Seminary in St. Paul in 1952, the campus was aflame with passionate debate going on between two professors, one a pietist, George Aus, the other orthodox, Herman Preus. George Aus believed that when God offers salvation, persons are free to accept or reject. He liked the picture of Jesus knocking at the door. The person on the inside has his hand on the door knob. It is his choice to open the door or to keep it shut, according to Aus. This decisional theology was popular with most of the students. Herman Preus was on the other side of the debate. He held to Luther's idea of the bondage of the will. When God offers the gift of salvation, he not only foresees who will believe, but he sees to it that they will believe. Faith itself is a free gift of salvation. Can we blame Catholics for needing a hearing aid to grasp what Lutherans really have at stake in the doctrine of justification?

As a student at Luther Seminary, I would venture out on weekends to preach in rural congregations. In southwestern Minnesota, I preached in two congregations, twenty minutes apart, with less than a hundred in attendance at each service. At 9:30 a.m. I would preach at one, and 11:00 a.m. at the other. I asked the church councils why we did not combine the two services and just have one. After all, the service was the same and the sermon was the same. The president of one congregation said that that would be impossible. I asked why. He said, "We just don't agree on Lutheran doctrine." I asked what the difference was all about. He said that it had to do with the election controversy earlier in the century among Norwegian Lutherans, which caused the two congregations to split. One side was in favor of predestination, and the other believed in free will. I said, "Ya, I know about that. And what side was your congregation on?" He said, "I can't remember. It's so long ago."

VI. The Problem of Authority in the Church

The ecumenical train runs on two tracks. One is the institutional track where official dialogues take place between leaders of church bodies and

agreements are negotiated for the sake of reconciliation and communion. The other is the spiritual track where the Spirit of God is at work in the hearts and minds of lay folks across ecclesiastical boundary lines. What if we patch things up ecumenically at the highest institutional levels, while internally our church bodies are being eviscerated by viruses that invade from the surrounding culture of decadence? What if churches officially enter into “full communion” agreements but inside they are being racked by heresies and teetering on the brink of schism? No church body today is spared; we are all more or less in the same boat. The confessional center no longer holds as the denominational machinery spins out of control.

It is not the ecumenical policies and decisions of the ELCA that drive me crazy; it is the easy accommodation of cultural trends and fads in our church headquarters, councils, congregations, colleges, and seminaries, so much so that life-long Lutherans no longer feel at home in their own church. Many are asking whether we all do in fact hold the same faith, worship the same God, baptize into the same name, and proclaim the same gospel, surrounded and infiltrated as we are by therapeutic religion, left-wing and right-wing ideologies, new age spirituality, entertainment evangelism, mega-church idolatry, multi-cultural quotas, radical theological feminism, all together crowding out a single-minded devotion to the evangelical and catholic substance of the Scriptures, creeds, commandments, liturgies, symbols, and sacraments of that Great Tradition that has endured down through the centuries and across all cultures.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said: “The concept of heresy has been lost today because there isn’t any teaching authority.”¹⁹ Well, as Lutherans do we not have a clear sense of authority? Of course we do. Do we not subscribe to the authority of the Bible, as well as the Ecumenical Creeds, and the Book of Concord? Of course we do. That is good—very good—but we have no concrete official and public locus of authority whose task is to implement the normative sources of the faith. Where does the buck stop when it comes to matters of interpretation and discipline? Our authorities are all written down on paper; you can find them in the constitution filed away on a library shelf at church headquarters. There it sits. Something is lacking—an instrumental link from paper to people. The early church created the office of bishop precisely to provide such a link, and from that linkage—the story is too long and complex to relate here and now—we got the canon of Scripture, the orthodox creeds, and the catechisms taught to the people. Without the episcopal councils of the ancient church, we would

¹⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3 (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1966), 206.

hardly have any of those lifelines. The irony is that non-Catholic Evangelicals accept the decisions of the ancient councils of the Church but reject the ecclesial offices from which the creeds with their authority emerged.

We have learned from recent history that the mere recovery of the office of bishop is no panacea. The bishops are often part of the problem. So far they cannot even remind the churches they serve that same-sex behavior is sinful and that clergy with same-gender partners must be defrocked. If they cannot at least do that, they should not be trusted with the gospel. They run the risk of losing their pastoral and theological credibility when they sink up to their noses in the sludge of antinomianism and moral relativism.

We face a crisis of teaching authority in the churches today, and Lutherans share in it. Lutherans have stressed orthodox faith; Catholics have stressed episcopal order. I believe that orthodoxy without episcopacy is blind, and episcopacy without orthodoxy is empty. It was my hope that if we put the two together we might have a workable model of authority in the church. That was the experience of the early church and that is a lesson we can learn from church history when Christians have been engaged in a struggle to be faithful to God and the gospel. Why is it not working? There is something wrong. As one Episcopalian said of his church, we are in a "mell of a hess." If I knew how to solve the problem, I would run for office or write a best-seller.

VII. Conclusion

Wherever I go, people pine and opine that something is wrong and not working. I do not believe that the so-called "radical Lutherans" with their anti-ecumenical bias have the right answer. Nor do I believe that the minority of Evangelical Catholics will prevail in American Lutheranism. The vast majority of Lutherans think of themselves as Protestants in just another Protestant denomination, whether it be the one on the right that feels closer to conservative Evangelical Protestantism, or the one on the left that feels closer to liberal mainline Protestantism.

I do believe strongly – and I end with this opinion – that our best hope is to move toward rapprochement with Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox, leading eventually to eucharistic fellowship in a communion of churches. Pope John Paul II stated that "the Church must learn to breathe

again with its two lungs, its Eastern one and its Western one.”²⁰ I fear that if Lutherans breathe only the oxygen they generate for themselves, they will die of halitosis; if they choose to be cut off from the Catholic and Orthodox traditions of doctrine, worship, spirituality, and church life, they will eventually be engulfed by the surrounding neo-pagan culture now taking hold of much of American Protestantism, both on the left and the right, and as a result lose the gospel and the confession that gave them birth. It is with convictions such as these that I together with my wife LaVonne and the Jensons, Robert and Blanche, founded the *Pro Ecclesia* movement sixteen years ago. Only God knows whether it will bear good fruit for the gospel and the church.

²⁰ “Discourse to Members of the Roman Curia, 28th June 1985,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, June 29, 1985. Pope John Paul II frequently used this expression. See also *Ut Unum Sint*, no. 54, and the Apostolic Letter *Redemptoris Mater* (March 25, 1987), no. 34.