

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY



Volume 63: 3

July 1999

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The Twilight Of Lutheranism

Leonard Klein

There was supposed to be a question mark at the end of the title of this address. I assume that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's proposals to enter full communion with three Reformed churches and with the Episcopal Church raise the question whether the twilight of Lutheranism is upon us. Though we publicly opposed both agreements, the editorial board of *Lutheran Forum* was consistently clear that the former arrangement would definitely portend the twilight of Lutheranism in the ELCA, while the Concordat with the Episcopalians would actually cause some new possibilities to dawn. I will say more about both these questions later.

But now, before going any further, I want to take some time to play with the title — particularly with two words twilight and Lutheranism. The title plainly worries about the sun setting on something called Lutheranism. This is an appropriate concern, but it needs definition.

First, "twilight." Twilight is nice. I remember an old New Yorker cartoon of two aging monks looking at the sunset as one says to the other, "after all these years it still seems like cocktail hour to me." It is a pleasant time of day. Many are not morning people. Everybody gets drowsy after lunch, but there are few who do not love the sunset. The Jews were not wrong to begin the day then. At the completion of the day's work there comes rest, relaxation, and re-creation toward a new day. The church anticipates her feasts at sundown and sings with tired confidence "Joyous light of glory."

If we were talking about twilight in this sense, this could be a very upbeat lecture. If the twilight of Lutheranism marked the completion of the vocation of the Wittenberg reformers and if the basic proposal prevailed that in the church all things should be done with care not to obscure grace nor to imply that the benefits of Christ come to us through our works rather than

The Rev. Leonard Klein is Pastor of Christ Lutheran Church in York, Pennsylvania and Immediate Past Editor of Lutheran Forum.

through faith, that would be occasion for a true Sabbath rest. It would be the end of a hard day and the beginning of a new one. If the twilight of Lutheranism meant an end to the schism of the sixteenth century, at least of that part for which we bear responsibility, Lutheranism would have fulfilled its vocation and earned a good rest in a restored communion with the rest of the Catholic West and its patriarch.

But there is another connotation to the term twilight. This is the connotation implied in the title. With or without a question mark it is far more discouraging. This would be the twilight of a bad day's work, the dissipation and waste of a cause, of labor, of genius. And the ecumenical directions of the ELCA force me to think in terms of that kind of twilight, even before I have defined the second term, Lutheranism.

You see, what Lutheranism is is by no means self-evident. Let me sketch just four common spins and the implications each would put on, for instance, the ELCA-Reformed Formula of Agreement.

One—Protestant. If Lutheranism is just another kind of Protestantism, the oldest to be sure, distinguished by some conservative liturgical habits, interesting ethnic and musical features, and an odd doctrine of the eucharist, then the ELCA's entry into full communion with three Reformed churches would, for instance, be a fulfillment of its destiny. Our call would be to be the Protestant anchor. Such a view is widespread in world Lutheranism and is often the view of us that Protestants hold. You can even find it in the Missouri Synod. If Lutheranism is just one Protestant family among others, indeed the grand daddy of them all, then the more we get together the happier we'll be, so long as no one at the party is in communion with the above-named Patriarch of the West. The ELCA basically lives by this definition.

Two—Waltherian. If, to quote Walther quite precisely, the Evangelical Lutheran Church is the true visible church on earth and unionism, not unity, is all that can be achieved short of full

agreement in the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, then the partial success of the ELCA's ecumenical agenda is simply the end of the ELCA as a meaningful part of that Evangelical Lutheran Church—any success of such an ecumenical agenda would be.

Three—Neo. If Lutheranism is what it is widely understood to be by twentieth century, post-Luther-Renaissance scholars and theologians, a church or movement or school of thought established by Luther's putative rediscovery of the gospel and characterized by the liberation arising from the in breaking of the gospel word into the law-distorted life, then virtually any ecumenical arrangement that does not challenge that way of thinking is acceptable. So one former Seminex professor declared on e-mail that fellowship with the United Church of Christ (UCC) was fine with him, since he was ready and willing to take the clear separation of law from gospel anywhere. More notoriously, the radical Lutheran confessionalists of Luther Seminary in St. Paul mounted a vehement resistance to the Concordat of Agreement with the Episcopalians but raised virtually no objection to the Formula of Agreement with the Reformed. The reason was simple and explicit: the Concordat required adding something to their sole critical Lutheran position, the doctrine of justification. The Reformed, on the other hand, easily met the critical test: they agreed that you don't gotta do nothin' to get into heaven. This position, whether you call it radical Lutheranism, neo-Lutheranism or neo-confessionalism, is extremely similar to the standard Protestant reading of Lutheranism, although it is more thoughtful and more true to genuine Reformation themes. Ecclesiologicaly, however, it is even more minimalist than the standard Protestant view of Lutheranism. It has proved vulnerable, not surprisingly, to various gnosticisms, to antinomianism, and to existentialism. It has difficulty with questions of authority and dogma. It is impossible on questions of moral theology. Increasingly it just fades into general Protestant modernism, although holding on to rather more substance and protesting vigorously that it is different from Liberalism.

Four—Evangelical Catholic (for lack of a better term.) If Lutheranism is a reforming movement in the church catholic and a church only because it failed in its first go at reforming the Western church, then the image of a twilight becomes rather more complex. A twilight of the sort I first suggested would be good news. That is, a twilight of ecclesiastical Lutheranism for the sake of ecclesial Lutheranism, would be good news.

This last view comes close to my own and would bear, I think, some affinities to the understanding of many Missourians. So the question, which I have taken so long to phrase, would then be whether, in the understanding of Lutheranism with which I work, the ELCA's ecumenical actions of August 1997 represent a twilight and, if so, in what sense. I will quickly answer my own question by repeating the positions I have taken in *Lutheran Forum*, sometimes in concert with the rest of the editorial board.

The adoption of the Formula of Agreement with three Reformed churches is a twilight in the worst sense. In Waltherian terms it is crude unionism. In more evangelical catholic terms, it involved jettisoning Lutheranism's catholic commitment as to the eucharist. The problem is not the UCC's extreme liberalism, congregationalism, and non-confessionalism, as many critics of the Formula tended to think or as many of its advocates worried. The problem is that the theological and liturgical commitments of Reformed Christianity are as little consistent with the catholic continuity of Lutheranism as they ever were. Only under the most rare circumstances can one imagine a eucharistic celebration with Reformed communities that would satisfy the most minimal Lutheran commitments. I believe that the Formula passed primarily because most ELCA pastors are in fact Calvinists on the question of the Lord's Supper—believing basically that it spiritually mediates the benefits of a really absent Christ.

Acceptance of the Joint Declaration on Justification with the Roman Catholics was the right thing to do. We did not imagine at Augsburg that the disagreement with the papal party over Article IV was necessarily church dividing. If they now grant

the same point that we assumed then, when we claimed that our doctrine was consistent with that of “the universal Christian church” and “even of the Roman church (in so far as the latter’s teaching is reflected in the writings of the Fathers),” we can agree to the conclusion of the Joint Declaration that it is not the doctrine of justification any longer that keeps us from full communion. In this the ELCA moved toward that twilight of Lutheranism that would be a fulfillment of its mission. Alas, little else — most notably the arrangement with the Reformed — carries the ELCA in that direction.

Concerning the Episcopal Church, we can, in the truest tradition of broad church Anglicanism, split the difference. Acceptance of episcopal orders and the three-fold office of ministry does not deny any substantive Lutheran commitment. To the contrary, we are confessionally obliged to do so for the sake of the unity of the church. The key confessional text is Article XIV of the Apology: “On this matter we have given frequent testimony in the assembly to our deep desire to maintain the church polity and various ranks of ecclesiastical hierarchy, although they were created by human authority.”

Neither, however, did any Lutheran commitment demand acceptance of the Concordat of Agreement, as some supporters seemed virtually to think. American Episcopalianism was not the hierarchy the confessions had in mind, nor was this necessarily the best way to solve our problems with ministry and order, even though Anglican eucharistic and liturgical practice certainly make communion possible.

Those of you who read *Lutheran Forum* will remember that our opposition had nothing to do with objections to episcopacy. It had to do with the unsettled condition of faith and morals in both bodies. It seemed to us that while full communion should in principle be possible between Lutherans and Episcopalians, full communion between two bodies in such shaky communion within themselves, each so fundamentally troubled in matters of faith and morals, that is, in *twilight*, was a parody of the true unity of the church and therefore an ecumenical misstep.

The true unity of the church is constituted by growth toward greater catholic fullness in doctrine, order, worship, and morals. But the most critical questions in these areas were consistently suppressed by both parties to the negotiations with other Protestants. Glaring issues related to doctrinal discipline, liturgical coherence, aberrations on questions of sexuality and the sanctity of life were never even raised. The dialogues proceeded as if the denominational communities were what existed on the paper of their confessions and history rather than what they actually embody in the present, as if they were paper churches rather than real ones. (Lutheran confessionalism is very vulnerable to this error. If the paperwork agrees, we see grounds for unity. If it does not, we cannot imagine the next step.)

In the kind of ecumenism the ELCA carried out in these cases, all act as if they can pretty much do whatever they want without sundering the unity of the Body of Christ. Then we shake hands and agree that we are each fully the church in spite of our contradictions and aberrations. A Lutheranism that operates by these liberal Protestant assumptions is in twilight, and I have no excuses to make for the ELCA.

I am not arguing that Lutheranism cannot compromise or reevaluate. I am deeply convinced that we need to and that there are matters pertaining to the unity of the church where change is in order. But this cannot be done facing away from Rome and Orthodoxy (or the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod) and toward American mainline Protestantism. So having said what I think is wrong with the path the ELCA has taken, I want to set up a hypothetical situation to suggest what path Lutheranism might take. In doing this I am certain to challenge also the ecumenical and ecclesiological path of the LCMS.

Early on I suggested that a twilight of Lutheranism that involved a completion of its vocation of reform within the Western Catholic tradition would be a sunset that would lead joyfully to the light of a new day. So let us then envision for a while what might have happened if at Augsburg or at

Regensburg eleven years later, when they actually got dangerously close to agreement, the Wittenberg reformers and the papal party had not plunged toward schism. If it is indeed the case that Article IV did not require schism and that the reforms of the second section of the Augsburg Confession were consistent and catholic, what might have happened in the "Lutheran" territories of northern Europe even as they remained in full communion with the pope? I will start by proceeding backwards through the "matters in dispute, in which an account is given of the abuses which have been corrected," as the superscription of the latter portion of the Augsburg Confession has it.

1. If the bishops had "allowed the gospel," the old Catholic sees would have continued to be occupied, and the threefold order would have been maintained. The issue over divine versus human right would have faded, and the more interesting question would have come to the fore: whether anything that is for the good of the church could come from elsewhere than the Holy Spirit. The suspension of the Augsburg Confession by both of our church bodies to permit lay presidency at the eucharist would, for instance, never have happened. The capitulation to ersatz democracy in church government would never have happened.

2. Monasticism would have been reformed and a more modest status assigned to monastic vows, but the wholesale emptying of these worthy and valuable institutions might have been stanchd and the monastic lifestyle and witness endured, to everyone's benefit.

3. Traditions of fasting and abstinence would have continued but without legalism or the mistaken assumption that they "earn grace or make satisfaction for sin." Lutheranism would not have come to be marked by petulant disinterest in such "outward preparations."

4. Confession would have continued in the manner in which it did in fact endure for a couple of centuries in Lutheranism.

5. The mass would have continued to this day with proper dignity, rubrical sense, vestments, ceremonial and the like. No pastor would ever find himself in hot water for proposing the weekly eucharist or following the order of service. Sober theological debate, of the sort Melanchthon offers in the Apology, on the meaning of the sacrifice of the mass would have followed. Some of the cruder medieval views might have been corrected in the broader practice of the church, but Lutheranism would not be marked by radical surgery on the eucharistic prayer and radical disobedience to Christ's command to "give thanks" with the bread and cup. We would have found a way to celebrate the eucharist as the unbloody sacrifice, as the Fathers understood it, and as the Apology approves when speaking of the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom. In any case the glorious development of Lutheran music would have gone ahead.

6. The marriage of priests might well have been accepted, though probably not the marriage of bishops. A regimen like that of Eastern Orthodoxy would have been established, staving off also the current scandal of clergy divorce and remarriage. However the debate on the ordination of women might now stand, it would not have been settled by a miscellany of Lutheran church bodies each in their own way deciding to do it. And it would not yet have happened.

7. Both kinds would have continued to be offered in the Supper. The example of the Bohemians was already in place, to say nothing of the East. Episcopal authority would have kept out the plague of individual glasses.

8. Skipping back one more item, into Article XXI of the Augustana, I would surmise that excesses in the cult of saints would have been curtailed in the Lutheran territories but that a more reasonable and lively use of the cult would have continued. The concession that they indeed pray for us would have been less grudging, and the phrase from the Roman Eucharistic Prayer III asking that we might at last receive our inheritance with all the saints "on whose constant intercession

we rely for help" would not seem so unthinkable. We grant that they pray for us. Unless prayer does no good, should we not rely on their prayers? And unless the saints in glory are confined in a localized Calvinist heaven somewhere, is it not at least imaginable that they are in full prayer fellowship with us and that we might ask their intercessions as freely as we ask for one another's?

This little backward waltz through the Augustana is just a small part of what we might see in Lutheranism, if the twilight had come after successful negotiations with Rome four hundred years ago. You will note that much of it looks a lot like classical Lutheranism and not too much like what we see in our parishes.

But there is more. Let us go to the beginning of the Augsburg Confession, those parts that enable us to say that "nothing is taught in our churches concerning articles of faith that is contrary to the Holy Scriptures or what is common to the Christian church." This has not in fact held true, but if the schism had not followed—or, if many Lutherans had not rather excessively celebrated the schism as a liberation from Catholic faith, order and morals—how might Lutheranism look different in those articles that the confessors could honestly claim were held in common?

Articles I-III. The Ancient Dogmas. Sure, individual theologians would be heretical, but it is unlikely that the development of theological liberalism in Germany could ever have developed as it did, if an international magisterium had continued its sway.

Article IV: The Reformation teaching on justification would have assumed its renewing and reforming role in the church of the Augsburg Confession and in the church in the West—including Rome—but it probably would not have ever been identified as the only important doctrine or as a mere principle of negation (of works, order, ethics, even dogma), that is, as David Yeago puts it, as the "word that lets us off." This, for instance, is how the doctrine of justification was utilized to argue for full communion with Reformed churches whose record on other doctrines is so

conspicuously shaky. It is the foundation of the Bultmannian style existentialism that is still so influential among Lutherans.

Article V (and XIV): Lutheranism would not have ever concocted the notion that the ministry derives from the priesthood of all believers.

Article VI: Hostility to Good Works—whether liturgical or charitable—would never have become a feature of our life. The radical Lutheran position that nothing can be added to justification and the resultant hostility to church order would never have appeared. We would have maintained a lively sense of the connection between justification and sanctification, as did Luther and orthodox Lutheranism.

Articles VII and VIII: Ecclesiology. The doctrine of the church would be important. We would understand that the *totus Christus* includes Christ the head with his body the church. Missouri would not still be struggling to make an emergency ecclesiological solution work. The ELCA would not confuse inclusiveness with catholicity. We would recognize that this article is not about a platonic republic but about the palpable community created on earth by the Holy Spirit.

Article VIII-XIII: The Sacraments. They would not be under continual attack. They would not be misunderstood as useful appendages to the word. They would not be obscured by contemporary or earlier forms of *Schwarmerei*, of which the church growth movement is only the latest, even if one of the most convincingly unfaithful. The unity of word and sacrament in life and liturgy would be self-evident. The elements of the Lord's Supper would be used in such a way as to demonstrate the belief that the eucharistic bread and wine are the body and blood of Christ. Some form of reservation for the sick at least would be preserved among us, as likely would some moderate forms of adoration. A distinction between style and substance would be unthinkable.

Article XV: Church Usages. These would be in much better shape among us. We might see a fuller observance of the calendar including the sanctoral cycle, and as has always been the case at our best, no one would be able to suggest that the mass is not celebrated with more earnestness and devotion among us than among our opponents.

Article XVI: Civil Government. Here we have never faltered, Lutheran support of the government at times reaching the level of scandal. The sober rightness of this stance would have been maintained, while an international connection might have curtailed its excesses.

Article XVII: The Return of Christ to Judgment. Neither chiliasm nor sentimental universalism would afflict us, as the semi-official positions they have sometimes become.

Articles XVIII and XIX: Free Will and the Cause of Sin. These perfectly catholic, Augustinian positions would hold, and the debate about regeneration, cooperation with the Holy Spirit after conversion, how the Spirit works in, with, and under the human will before and after conversion would continue in the church, as it inevitably must. It would keep theologians from playing in the traffic but would no longer divide the church.

Article XX: Faith and Good Works. The charge of forbidding good works really would be false, and the lively discussion about the margin between faith and good works would continue. The goal, however, might be less to get the boundary drawn cleanly and more to get on with the good works. Maybe we have not erred so much in forbidding good works as in forgetting them. Most Roman Catholics, I discover, get the point about justification by faith; they just cannot understand our hang up. Neither do I. We are justified by grace through faith, and we live in ongoing relationship with God in time and space.

Well, you may ask yourself, why has he bothered to describe what with a few disagreements along the way would seem to be a fairly reasonable description of classical Lutheranism? It looks

not unlike the old Piepkornian position, spiced up with a few additional post-dialogue concessions to Rome. But if you pause for a second the point should come into focus. Where can you find Lutheranism like this? Or the version you might draw?

Liturgically, sacramentally, and theologically some of our parishes may be striving and mostly succeeding at putting into play some such vision of Lutheranism. But all are terribly vulnerable. The lack of hierarchy and a clear doctrine of pastoral authority means that any of our efforts could be overthrown by a majority vote of a council or voters' assembly. And the same problem goes up the regional and national level. Your district could choose to go "church growth" in a big way, and you might be more or less stranded in your effort to conduct a recognizably Lutheran ministry of word and sacrament. The Missouri Synod, like the ELCA, is vulnerable to the sociological rule to which denominations fall prey: that is, to be a loose coalition of often disparate interest groups. Your reputation is quite other, but it is no secret that Missouri's monolithic character is a thing of the past. Biblical authority by itself, and surely not as shibboleth, does not make identifiable Lutheranism happen or endure. The Confessions are paid lip service, although not everywhere, but they do not much inform actual practice.

In his review of the ELCA assembly in *First Things*, Richard Neuhaus took note of Richard Koenig's observation in *The Christian Century* that the ELCA was a church that *at all costs* wanted to stay together. That actually was not true of a lot of us there, but it is a fair perception of the church wide reality. Anything can be sacrificed except the sacred unity of the ten-year-old coalition. Evangelical Catholics and other confessionalists in large numbers were prepared to pay the price of the Formula to get the Concordat. You have similar versions of the same thing. But the unity achieved by our denominations is not the unity in diversity of the one, holy catholic and apostolic church. It is the unity effected by coalition politics where there is not deep agreement as to what the church or its faith is.

I would argue, then, that the emergency arrangements of the Lutheran Reformation have self-evidently failed to preserve Lutheranism in a form that most of us could embrace. Twilight is little surprise. The wonder, the marvel of God's grace, is that a fair semblance of Lutheranism has endured as long as it has. The inertial force of the true catholicity has been in many ways astounding, and there are reasonable assessments of the situation that are far more generous than I can give. But the problems are real for anyone who is not satisfied with the status quo in world Lutheranism. Missouri has chosen an interesting option, largely to go its own way in preserving Lutheran identity as it understands it. Still, even the most ardent Missourian, convinced that Missouri has it right and is keeping its Lutheranism intact, must confront the reality that the LCMS and its sister churches are a small part of those who identify themselves as Lutheran. Thus, Missouri's very conviction and success would bear witness to an overall twilight of Lutheranism. Indeed, the LCMS's self understanding has pretty much always been premised on the assumption that the rest of Lutheranism was in fact in twilight. If Missouri is indeed an exception, thereby the rule is proved that Lutheranism is in twilight.

In any event, the marvel is that the day lasted as long as it did, given the provisional nature of Lutheran ecclesiology and office. If that day is not to be wasted and the twilight of Lutheranism is to be positive, only a recovery of catholicity will do the job. This means that we must think and act in ways that will make the ultimate reunion of the West and of the West and East possible. It will mean shaking off some bad habits, reviving the confessional practice of the sixteenth century. For me it would involve, as I suggested above, an openness to certain practices that Lutherans have tended to rule out and, perhaps more drastically, a concession that, as in its first fifteen centuries, the church can live in unity, even as a variety of theological opinions on justification and sanctification, faith and works, law, and gospel inform its life. If the pope will now "allow the gospel" — and surely that is implied in the declaration that the condemnations of the Reformation era no longer apply to us —

then we might be able to start to think about a positive twilight. Four hundred years ago a twilight in which Lutheranism retained, or returned to, full communion with the Catholic West might have been effected with relative ease. Just looking at what has changed since then on our side to make such a reunion harder is to see a twilight of a more discouraging sort. That, I am afraid, is the twilight that more likely will herald our future.