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ELCA Journeys: Personal Reflections on the Last Forty Years

Michael C. D. McDaniel

Throughout my ministry, I have sought to inspire a passionate devotion to and teach a clear understanding of the pure word of God, informed in that understanding solely by the Confessions of the Lutheran Church. I have given much time and energy toward building stronger ties between our church and yours.

The topic suggested to me was “ELCA Journeys: Personal Reflections on the Last Forty Years.” Considering the present state of the ELCA, I considered giving my paper a subtitle, taken from Suetonius’ account of the homage given to Caesar by the gladiators: *Ave, Caesar, nos morituri te salutamus*. However, that does not quite fit the case, since the gladiators were, at that point, still very much alive, crying out “we who are about to die salute you.” So, in casting about in my mind for a more proper parallel, I thought of Ebenezer Scrooge and Marley’s Ghost. Perhaps I should view my assignment as similar to that of Marley, who was, as Dickens assures us, “dead as a doornail.” Marley tells Scrooge, “I am here to warn you that you have yet a chance and hope of escaping my fate.”

Certainly, such a caveat is a prominent element in my thinking. Other important elements in my reflections are the great love I have had for the church, the many wonderful moments I have experienced in its fellowship, and thus, my urgent plea for prayer for the members of the ELCA.

I was ordained in 1954 in one of the cradles of Lutheranism in America. The North Carolina Synod is the oldest synod in continuous existence in the Western Hemisphere, since the venerable “ministeriums” of Pennsylvania and New York have been subdivided and no longer exist in their original form. Lutheranism in North Carolina not only goes back to the early 1700s, but it was the North Carolina Synod that first specified the Augsburg Confession as its basis. Loyalty to the Lutheran Confessions has been fiercely defended in North Carolina and, thank God, by many people, it still is.

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Dr. Edward T. Horn, writing in the 1893 volume on *The Distinctive Doctrines and Usages of the General Bodies of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States*, made this interesting observation: "The ministers in the South have meagre salaries and cannot buy many books. As a consequence, they study those they have thoroughly. And there are few parsonages in which will not be found the *Book of Concord* and Schmid's *Dogmatics*, both filled with markers and carefully annotated."¹

My journey as a Lutheran thus began in the bosom of a large extended family, in which, I was given to understand, it was unthinkable not to be a Lutheran. Although I explored other denominations at the state university, such explorations served to strengthen my loyalty to my Lutheran heritage.

Convinced that I had a call from God to the holy ministry, I eagerly entered the seminary at Hamma Divinity School at Wittenberg in Springfield, Ohio. There, I benefitted by a sound course in the Confessions under Professor Willard Dow Allbeck and an exciting course in dogmatics taught by T. A. Kantonen, among other fine experiences.

Prompted by early training, I never spent my time reading anything without first inquiring from those whom I thought would know, "is this sound?" I was very much concerned for purity of doctrine, and I was by no means alone in that passion among my fellow seminarians and, later, fellow pastors.

After a few years of parish experience, I was called to the office of evangelism of the United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA), where my tasks included preparing literature for evangelism and teaching evangelism to groups of pastors in the northeastern United States and eastern Canada. In these years, there was a strong feeling among the leaders of our church that, partly because of the manifest widespread devotion to the Confessions among us, great strides in Lutheran unity lay just ahead.

It was very exciting to attend the national conventions of the ULCA and, later, Lutheran Church in America (LCA), because these were

¹Edward T. Horn, "The United Synod in the South," in *The Distinctive Doctrines and Usages of the General Bodies of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Lutheran Publication Society, 1893), 173-174.

always inspiring and informative events—so much so that we scrimped and saved in order to go, long before there was any possibility of my being elected a delegate. There the best theologians spoke, often on the floor of the convention, the best preachers preached, and the finest music lifted our minds and hearts to God. In those days, there was not a more enthusiastic, wholehearted member of any church anywhere than I was, and I threw myself unreservedly into every aspect of the gospel ministry, working to be a faithful steward of those mysteries committed to my care.

To further refine such gifts as I had, I enrolled part-time in graduate studies, even while serving as pastor of a 2200-member congregation in Chicago. After a time, I applied for and received a fellowship to study abroad, and we went to Germany where I studied in Hamburg with Helmut Thielicke, Carl Friedrich von Weizacker, and others.

Upon our return from Germany and the completion of my doctoral studies, I sought a teaching position in a Lutheran seminary. However, there were no vacant chairs in systematic theology at that time; so, I accepted the gracious offer of a position at Lenoir-Rhyne College in Hickory, North Carolina.

During those next eleven years, the 400th anniversary of the Book of Concord was celebrated, and the North Carolina Synod asked me to prepare literature and give lectures across the Synod on the Book of Concord. That experience may have prompted people to vote for me to become the bishop at the Synod convention in 1982. At any rate, the synod knew it was electing a professor, and I was glad for that affirmation of the centrality of the word and its teaching.

In the nine years during which I served as bishop, my whole world was turned upside down. These were the years in which the ELCA was being cobbled together by people chosen on the basis of various arbitrary quotas—a principle of organization that I did my best to defeat. It was during these years that some of us realized, with growing disbelief and dismay, what was happening to the church. We had the illusion that we could stop, or at least impede, some of the fearful trends we saw, because the Commission for a New Lutheran Church (CNLC) annually sent a booklet containing new articles for the proposed constitution, with questions for each synod to answer. However, it soon became apparent that clever minds were at work devising these booklets, because the questions were all framed so as to force answers congenial to the CNLC.

One year the North Carolina Synod answered all the Commission's questions, and then by large majorities passed resolutions stating our vigorous objections to various aspects of the proposals. I recall, for example, we were appalled that chapter 2 of the then-proposed constitution, the section on "The Confession of Faith," was a graveyard of once-living words and phrases, lying inert and cold, dry as the autumn leaves. There was no mention of the moisture that could give them life: baptism or the Lord's Supper; and the paragraph on the Bible stated that "God's Spirit speaks to us through the Scriptures to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship *for service in the world.*" A memorial from our synod asking that this hideously reductionist line be removed was simply ignored. The CNLC was apparently incapable of understanding the Rauschenbushian triumph implicit in these words.

This was only one of many ominous signs that quite early warned of fatal flaws in the structure of the ELCA. However, most people — pastors and laity alike — were unable to perceive such signs because no one wants even to entertain the possibility that the church itself is falling victim to relativism and apostasy.

Not surprisingly, for a church whose constitution can point no higher than "service in the world" as its *raison d'être*, within a short time, programs were being pressed upon synods and congregations bearing the sanctimonious humbug of "peace, justice, and the care of the environment." Under this pious Jolly Roger, congregations were urged toward the absurdly presumptuous goal of "meeting the world's needs," by lobbying and advocacy instead of such ministries to word and sacrament as would define the world's real needs. Thus the ELCA emerged as subservient to relevancy in the kingdoms of this world, but indifferent to revelation from the kingdom of heaven.

My first year as bishop, 1982, was the year when the LCA voted to create a new church with the American Lutheran Church (ALC) and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Congregations (AELC). It was also the year in which the sensational ecumenical document, "Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry" was published, and thus ecumenism was very much in the air.² In his sermon at my installation, Bishop Crumley

²*Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, Faith and Order paper, number 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).

declared that the wider the scope of one's ministry, the greater one's responsibility for working toward Christian unity.

I found that a heady notion, and so, just a little more than two years later, it was with great joy that I had the privilege of welcoming the 1985 convention of the Southeastern District of the LCMS when it met in Charlotte. As I was preparing my remarks in the motel room the night before, I became quite excited by the prospect that a closer relationship with our brothers in Missouri could not only enhance our common witness to Christ, but also help the ELCA to turn the tide away from the abyss of liberalism yawning before us.

Therefore, in the large convention hall of a Holiday Inn in Charlotte, North Carolina on that April day, I said (after some three pages of preamble),

I want to issue an invitation to the Southeastern District to consider theological dialogues with the North Carolina Synod of the LCA. Before smiling at the thought of such activity at the lowly level of a district or synod, think how Luther snorted to be told that "little Wittenberg" had no business thinking! If not now, when? If not here, where? It is wonderful how God bypassed Rome and even Jerusalem in favor of a cowshed in Bethlehem. Might He not also use a Holiday Inn?

By the grace of God, the Southeastern District overwhelmingly endorsed my proposal, and a few weeks later, so did the North Carolina Synod of the LCA. Very soon, each body had appointed representatives, and with the Rev. Jerald Joersz looking on from the LCMS national offices, we began regular meetings. The first fruit of those meetings was a thrilling "Lutheran Family Gathering," held in Winston-Salem, at which various presentations sought to introduce all of us more fully to our separate traditions. Also, C. F. W. Walther's *Law and Gospel* was adopted as the common study book for all Lutheran pastors in North Carolina, and the Synod Council authorized the purchase of a copy of the book for every pastor, regardless of whether or not he already owned one. This fine relationship flourished for the next six years, until I left office to take up my new work at Lenoir-Rhyne College.

In those halcyon days, it was still possible to hope that mischievous caricatures were responsible for most, if not all, of the apparent differences between our two churches. "What is it that we fear?" I asked.

"You fear that the LCA is lax, free-wheeling, bordering upon heresy, flirting with the reckless enthusiasm of *die Schwärmer*. Certainly, ample justification can be found for such fears, for we have our share of loud and disturbing voices. But we continue to pray that all that is just part of our growing pains." Unfortunately, we would soon find that the pains had nothing to do with growth.

At the beginning of the ELCA, I was able to observe much that happened at close hand. The ELCA is divided into nine regions and sixty-five synods. One synod bishop from each region sits on the ELCA Council that governs the church between national assemblies, and I was the first bishop chosen from the southeastern region. My colleagues then elected me to be chairman of the nine consulting bishops. In that capacity, I found myself in frequent clashes with other members of the Council and the national staff. These encounters added to the extreme frustrations I was already experiencing in attempting to be the same faithful, enthusiastic servant of the ELCA that I had been in the LCA and ULCA. Although I had a great passion for ecumenism at the beginning, I began to perceive that, however glorious unity might be, one dare not cavalierly sacrifice the word of God for chumminess.

In the fall of 1990, with the convention at which my term would end coming up the following spring, Lenoir-Rhyne College asked me to decline to stand for reelection, and return to the college as "theologian in residence." My call would be to teach half-time, and spend the rest of my time creating opportunities for continuing education for pastors and laity in a new "Center for Theology." I agonized over this decision until April of 1991, when I finally concluded that this was a genuine, new call, and not just a welcome opportunity to leave an increasingly untenable position. The proposed "Center" would give me an opportunity to spend my energies in efforts for biblical and confessional renewal. The purpose of the new center runs as follows:

to foster clarity in understanding and passion in proclaiming the Gospel, centered upon the evangelical dogma of justification by grace alone through faith alone, according to the classic, orthodox theology of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, and thus to assist in shaping the future of the Church in faithfulness to the Word of God.

While these years back in academia have been richly rewarding, this last decade has certainly been a distressing time for all who would be faithful to our Lord's command: "If you continue in my Word, you will be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31-32). Most people seem to think that it is possible to search out the truth on the basis of uncommitted reason, and many even parrot the last of Jesus' words—"the truth will make you free"—as license for trying to tear apart every precious heritage we have received. However, it is not possible to know the truth, let alone taste freedom, without first being in bondage to the word of God. "Make me a captive, Lord, and then I shall be free"!

The year 1997 was especially tumultuous. It was in that year that the Philadelphia Convention of the ELCA sold our birthright for a mess of pottage by entering into unbelievably shocking relationships with Calvinistic and Zwinglian organizations. However, a bright, if somewhat faint, new fire was struck that year when the Spirit of God called six pastors together to create a very simple basis on paper for a ministerium that would bolster pastors and support them in faithfulness to the word and the Confessions. In the three years since, chapters of this new society, called "The Society of the Holy Trinity," have been formed from the state of Washington to New England, and many people are working and praying that God will use this effort—and whatever other means the Holy Spirit may choose—to bring about renewal and reformation within Lutheranism.

That fall, 1997, I offered a course on the Book of Concord to any and all who might wish to take it—free. Ninety-seven people (pastors and laity) enrolled for this class, which met for three hours every Monday night, from August to December. There is now considerable pressure on me to offer a similar course again this fall, and, given health and strength, by God's grace I will.

You are surely aware that the ELCA has been taken over by the very people our parents warned us not to play with when we were little. It is only now that the majority of our members are beginning, slowly and reluctantly, to realize that the persons writing our literature and directing our programs are hijackers, and that this church, once so dear, so wonderful, so shining with grace and glory, is way off course. As more and more people awaken to this fact, there are increasing distresses and demands that the leaders faithfully lead.

It is often pointed out that the ELCA and the LCMS are on divergent courses. People in high places in the ELCA have expressed their regret—but done nothing about it. Instead, there has been a rush by the ELCA leadership to consort with various Reformed churches, Moravians, Roman Catholics, and Episcopalians. The prayer of Jesus in John 17 that we might be one “as He and the Father are one” is not a mandate for mindless coziness. However “good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity,” we must not sacrifice God’s truth on an altar of unity.

In these recent unionistic negotiations, two structural flaws and abuses in the ELCA have become painfully evident: 1) the ideological principle of “diversity” or “inclusivity,” which rapidly became a greater force in decision-making than either the law or the gospel; and 2) the operational principle of coercive power—for example, the notorious quota system.

A dramatic result of this tampering with Scripture occurred when the Denver assembly of the ELCA voted to commit our church to an Anglican episcopacy. The assembly consisted of 60 percent laity, chosen because they fulfilled categories. They had neither a proper call to exercise theological leadership, nor any theological training. Yet, this aggregate was given authority to alter the doctrines of the church—and they did so! This is clearly a perversion of the concept of the priesthood of all believers and a mockery of Article XIV of the Augsburg Confession.

Further abuses were incorporated into the structure of the ELCA—a disparagement or even denigration of authority (biblical, confessional, ministerial, and liturgical) appearing in various forms. When the constitution of the ELCA was being written, it was proposed to state in chapter 17 that “the Nominating Committee shall strive to ensure that all persons nominated for any position possess the necessary competence and experience for the position.” The North Carolina Synod urged that this be amended to read, “The Nominating Committee shall nominate *only* such persons for any position who possess the necessary competence and experience.” The amendment was refused, and the ELCA was launched with the tacit affirmation that factional concerns are more important than competence. That is apostasy.

It is not just confessional laxity that troubles most of us. Repentance and contrition are rarely lifted up, and personal discipleship in prayer,

Bible reading, and obedience to the Commandments receive insufficient attention when they are not openly scorned.

The reopening of fundamental moral questions, especially in areas of sexuality, constitutes a direct attack on Christian morality and invalidates the efforts of Christian people faithfully to keep the Commandments of God. That the reopening of such questions has been led by members of the hierarchy and program staff of the church only deepens the offense. The capitulation of church leadership to the relativism of the late twentieth century has scandalized the church.

To put human sexual gratification above the Commandments of God and the clear teaching of Scripture is simply unthinkable; yet, without any ELCA leader to say a clear "no," there is a continuing push for the ordination of homosexuals and the blessing of homosexual liaisons as if they were marriages. Furthermore, as long as the ELCA health insurance program covers abortions, a percentage of each Sunday's offering presented before the altar of the Lord is going to finance murder.

In view of these and other matters in which the ELCA bows to the paganizing of the church, we must ask whether this ELCA that we are so benevolently offering to share with other denominations any longer qualifies as bona fide Lutheranism. Indeed, is it a Christian church?

What on earth went wrong? What was the culprit when, so full of hope and joy, we gathered a larger body together in this new church? Was the culprit "quotas"? The denigration of authority? Faithless leaders?

The culprit, of course, is Satan, for still today he is sarcastically asking, as he did in the Garden, "did God say . . . ?" Undermining God's word is his primary line of attack, and succumbing to such temptation our gravest sin. For when we begin to waver in our trust of the word, we forget to worship Him. And there, cold and dead, our hearts stop, and no longer leap up with joy and thanksgiving.

At the heart of every difficulty in the ELCA, at the heart of all the differences between the ELCA and the LCMS, is the question of the authority and reliability of the Word of God. Do we believe the precious words of the Catechism: "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord"? (Why, here is purest Chalcedonian dogma, without a single technical term!) Let us cling to Jesus, and let us continue in His word, for

therein alone will we be His disciples, and therein alone know the truth that sets us free from sin, death, and hell.

Brothers and sisters of Missouri, thank you for your faithfulness to the word. In the January 2001 issue of *The Lutheran Witness*, President Barry wrote, "one of the fantastic blessings God has given to our church body is faithfulness to the Scriptures and Lutheran Confessions." May that always be true of the LCMS, and may it come to be true of all this lost and weary world. The word alone is to be the sole source and norm for what we believe, preach, and confess—the sole standard by which we judge the church and its ministry, a source and standard not to be compromised by some human construct such as "quotas" or the worthless fiction of an "historic episcopate."

In the study of God's word, the Pandora's Box of the higher-critical method (as Professor Lawrence Rast has called it) must be firmly shut and thrown away. Much ink has been spilled over whether or not the problem is the method itself or those who have used it. But, in any case, let us avoid it. For, as the saying goes in the mountains of North Carolina, "if you lie down with dogs, you'll get up with fleas." I have dedicated the remainder of my life to attempting to open the eyes of my brothers and sisters in the ELCA to the liberating, glorious truth of the infallible, inerrant word of God.

It is my prayer that, very soon, faithful Christians in the ELCA and in the LCMS will seek each other out for true communication—not useless talk about misguided notions, but fervent seeking for the will of God. The Society of the Holy Trinity presents such an opportunity, and I urge all of you to give consideration to becoming a member.

To close, I want to share words from two great translators of the Bible, Jerome and Martin Luther. The passage from Jerome appeared as a reading for Thursday of the week of Advent Two in Volume I of *For All The Saints: A Prayer Book for and By the Church*.³ You will recognize the line from Luther as the beginning of one of his greatest hymns.

³Frederick J. Schumacher, compiler and editor, with Dorothy A. Zelenko, *For All The Saints: A Prayer Book for and By the Church, 1: Year 1, Advent to the Day of Pentecost* (Delhi, New York: The American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, 1994), 52.

I beg of you, my dear brother, to live among these books [of Scripture], to meditate upon them, to know nothing else, to seek nothing else. Does not such a life seem to you a foretaste of heaven here on earth? Let not the simplicity of the Scripture or the poorness of its vocabulary offend you; for these are due either to the faults of translators or else to God's deliberate purpose: for in this way Scripture is better fitted for the instruction of an ordinary congregation. . . . I am not so dull or so bold as to profess that I myself know it, or that I can pluck upon the earth the fruit which has its root in heaven, but I confess that I am hungry to do so. . . . "Every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened" (Matthew 7:8). Let us learn upon earth that knowledge which will continue with us in heaven.

- Jerome, *Letter to Saint Paulinus of Nola*

Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Thy word!

- Martin Luther