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Table of Contents

The Metamorphosis of Confessional Lutheranism David P. Scaer.....	203
Confessional Lutheranism in an Ecumenical World Carl E. Braaten.....	219
Confessional Lutheranism in an Ecumenical World: A Missouri Synod Challenge Samuel H. Nafzger.....	233
Crossing Old Line Boundaries: Works of Lutheran Charity Matthew C. Harrison	251
<i>Sola Fide</i>: Luther and Calvin Phillip Cary	265
Luther, Lutheranism, and the Challenges of Islam Adam S. Francisco.....	283
“The Noblest Skill in the Christian Church”: Luther’s Sermons on the Proper Distinction of Law and Gospel Robert Kolb	301
The Argument over Women’s Ordination in Lutheranism as a Paradigmatic Conflict of Dogma Armin Wenz	319

Contemporary Spirituality and the Emerging Church	
John T. Pless	347
Theological Observer	364
The Consecration of the Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Siberia	
The Reception of the <i>Lutheran Service Book</i>	
“The God Squad”: Towards a Common Religion	
Book Reviews	374
Books Received	382
Indices for Volume 71	391

The Metamorphosis of Confessional Lutheranism

David P. Scaer

Metamorphosis means that the external form of a thing changes, but the thing itself, its essence, remains the same. The Greek word from which the English word metamorphosis is derived is used in the transfiguration narrative to describe how Jesus put aside his humility and resumed the glory which was his from the moment of his incarnation: "he was transfigured [μετεμορφώθη] before them" (Matt 17:2).¹ Its cognate in Philippians 2:6-7, μορφή, is translated in the NIV as "nature" and not "form," as it is correctly rendered in the RSV, NRV, and ESV. Jesus put aside the external appearance of God, his divine *Gestalt*, and he took on the appearance of a man so that in every way he looked like an ordinary human being (Phil 2:7, ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων).²

This essay has to do not with Christological but confessional metamorphosis. Perhaps the plural metamorphoses is preferable because historically Lutheranism has taken several forms, some voluntarily and others by compulsion. In the theological milieu, metamorphosis means that ecclesiastical scenery changes. The church never remains in the same setting. In response to changes, the biblical books came into existence and sermons are formed or should be formed. Some sermons hardly differ from those preached at any other time. Historical theology traces past metamorphoses. Theology proper, systematic theology, is the science of responding to current changes. Paul Tillich's "how my mind has changed" might be described as an intellectual metamorphosis, but changing one's mind has to do with a fundamental change, a transubstantiation, not an external one, a metamorphosis. Conversion is a transubstantiation, not a

¹ I am continually amazed that some liturgically informed clergy genuflect at "he was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary" and not "he was made man," the moment in which the metamorphosis from glory to humility took place.

² The NIV, which until recently enjoyed official Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) status by its use in the lectionary, was in line with the Reformed position that Jesus had a divine nature but that the human nature was not given divine characteristics. The traditional Lutheran view is that the man Jesus has a divine form, *morphe*, which he exchanged for a human form, *morphe*, of which the crucifixion is its highest expression. Critical biblical methods have little interest in such old dogmatic questions since they move no closer than the historical Jesus that their methods allow them to discover.

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metamorphosis, because the reality of being a sinner is replaced by the reality of being a saint, or at least the one being placed alongside of the other. Each person's earliest circumstances constitute his or her first orthodoxy, and homegrown orthodoxy is not easily challenged. It is easier to stay put in one's home town and leave the rest of the world undiscovered, but different circumstances require one to reevaluate what he once thought about certain ideas and how he regarded other people. For example, what one thought to be thoroughly Lutheran ideas may turn out to be a lightly-coated Protestantism.

I. Biblical Metamorphoses

In recent times, changes in confessional Lutheranism have been more kaleidoscopic, perhaps more for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) than for the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS). Basic changes in the LCMS version took shape in the first decades of the twentieth century, when it began assimilating conservative Protestant thought into its core belief. Another metamorphosis came after World War II with the intrusion of neo-orthodoxy which externally resembled the LCMS theology. Both the LCMS and the predecessor bodies of the ELCA were confronted with hermeneutic methods which cast doubts on the historical character of events in the biblical narratives. This was at the heart of the disruption of the St. Louis seminary in 1974, but contemporary biblical methods found a place in the LCMS without compromising the older faith. Challenged was the axiom that the older faith depended on the historical-grammatical method, which affirmed the Bible's historical character, but the method itself was incapable of going behind the sacred texts through the oral tradition to the events themselves. Form criticism as offered by Rudolph Bultmann and Martin Dibelius did go behind the biblical texts to events, though what they discovered was meager. For all its failings, form criticism recognized that before the Scriptures were written there was a world out of which and through which the Scriptures came into existence. The Scriptures are embodied tradition. Since salvation had taken place in the events and not in the texts which reported them, the events had a foundational importance upon which the tradition and later the texts depended.

Following form criticism came redaction and narrative criticisms. Like the historical-grammatical method, these methods dealt with the biblical texts and not with the oral tradition behind the texts. Form criticism and the historical-grammatical approach agreed that something stood behind the text, even though the former found very little of it and the latter found it by way of its doctrine of inspiration by first traveling with the Holy

Spirit into heaven and then back to earth. Though requiring belief in biblical history, the approach was fideistic. Current LCMS scholars have used the newer criticisms, always with the understanding that a real history exists behind the biblical texts but not always addressing a necessary connection between the event and the text. So the historical content reported in the biblical text remains an unexamined assumption. Richard Bauckham and Larry W. Hurtado trace the oral tradition back from the texts of the first century to the earliest witnesses.³ Like other criticisms, it does not cross Lessing's ditch to the event itself, but we may have to accept that this ditch will never be crossed and we will have to content ourselves with those biblical criticisms which provide the best vantage points from which the events of salvation can be viewed.⁴ Use of biblical criticisms by LCMS biblical scholars constitutes a real metamorphosis, but such use is normed by LCMS traditional core beliefs.

Through the controversies of the historical content of the Bible, the LCMS espoused a *sola scriptura* theology and lived off its own traditions. Its theological discussions inevitably devolve into determining what the founding father intended in *Church and Ministry* and *Law and Gospel*.⁵ A

³ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2006), and Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in the Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2003). In particular, see Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 1–33.

⁴ Gottfried Lessing, an eighteenth century philosopher, set down the terms for critical biblical studies by putting the events themselves beyond the range of scholarly investigation: "The contingent truths of history can never become the proof of the necessary truths of reason." This referred to "the inability of historical 'facts' to guarantee the truth of kerygma and faith (e.g., Barth, Bultmann)." This is Lessing's "ugly ditch." Behind this was "the ancient Platonic distinction between *uncertain opinions* based on untrustworthy sense impressions of shifting external phenomena and *certain knowledge* of eternal truths known by reason alone." David Laird Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem: The Canon, the Text, the Composition, and the Interpretation of the Gospels* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 173. One is left only with uncertain impressions of things without grasping the reality of the things. Dungan notes that this is only an unproven axiom and is destructive of any relationship between God, man, and the creation. Since an axiom is impregnable to refutation, to participate in scholarly discussion biblical scholars committed to the incarnation and biblical inspiration may have to operate within the terms of Lessing's ugly ditch and content themselves in getting next to the event without asserting its factuality. Should Lessing's principle be applied across the board to all past events, nothing from the past could be known with certainty. This is contrary virtually to all human experience.

⁵ C. F. W. Walther, *Church and Ministry: Witnesses of the Evangelical Lutheran Church on the Question of the Church and the Ministry*, trans. J. T. Mueller (St. Louis: Concordia

reference to the *Brief Statement* may still in certain situations trump every argument.⁶ Referencing convention resolutions and theological commission reports charts LCMS theology. Ironically, doing theology by self-citation may have contributed to the LCMS having a theology closer to the Scriptures and the Confessions than other Lutheran churches who were more attuned to newer biblical methods. More than anything else, LCMS tradition was the one reason which allowed for the LCMS to survive its own Armageddon in the 1970s when it was faced with biblical methods which undermined biblical history. In spite of the prominence of *sola scriptura* as the reigning principle in doing theology, by relying on its own tradition the LCMS operates according to a catholic principle, as idiosyncratic as that may be.⁷ After the trends of the 1970s, LCMS scholars followed the lead of Evangelical scholars by participating in critical biblical conversations.⁸ No longer was the historical-grammatical method enthroned as the Rosetta Stone for unlocking the Bible's meaning. Passages could not simply be collected to provide support for an existing dogmatic system. Concordia Theological Seminary students no longer take one course in biblical hermeneutics, but they take courses that cover the four Gospels, the Pauline Epistles, the Pentateuch, the Major Prophets, and the Psalms. The biblical documents are confronted in their own particularities.⁹ One shoe does not fit all.

Publishing House, 1987), and *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel: Thirty-Nine Evening Lectures*, trans. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1929).

⁶ The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1932).

⁷ Frank C. Senn observes the following: "Even the LCMS is not as lock-step in its biblical interpretation of the Bible as we might suppose. Otherwise, that synod wouldn't be engaged in intense internal debates over such issues as closed versus close communion or prayers with others in the public arena." "One Book, One Church, No Longer," *Lutheran Forum* 40, no. 3 (2006): 11.

⁸ See for example Bethany R. Nummeia, "The Impact of Postmodernism on Missouri Synod Biblical Interpretation," *Lutheran Forum* 40, no. 4 (2006): 53–56. Evangelical scholars have led the way in this area. See Grant R. Osborne, "Historical Criticism and the Evangelical," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42 (1999): 193–210.

⁹ The following statement by Frederick D. Bruner was favorably cited at the December 2006 LCMS Consultation on Man and Woman in St. Louis: "Nothing makes the gospel according to Paul more necessary than the Gospel according to Matthew. For if Matthew's Jesus is telling the truth, then we badly need a Savior and his forgiveness that reaches down beneath our will, underneath our sinful acts, and covers our sinful nature, our subterranean drives, our original sins, our depths." *Matthew: A Commentary*, vol. 1, *The Christbook, Matthew 1–12*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 222.

Each hermeneutical method has the potential of uncovering something not previously recognized in the biblical texts. A method productive for one biblical book, however, may not be so for another. Hidden in any method is a bias, which like any axiom is assumed and not proven. Form criticism could affirm as historical only that which had no parallel in the ancient world. Earlier liberalism took the reverse view. Only that with parallels in the extra-biblical history was true. Narrative criticism assumes that the evangelists were writing stories. Canon criticism addresses what the church believed when it collected the sacred books. Each biblical criticism defines the boundaries of its research and so avoids what it considers prior unacceptable approaches.

If one dare speak of a Lutheran hermeneutic, it is to be formed by the determinative Reformation issues of justification and the sacraments that made Lutherans distinct from the Roman Catholics and the Reformed. The doctrines of justification and the sacraments are both dependent on the incarnation. Sacraments are an extension of the incarnation into the life of the congregation. Without a real incarnation, the sacraments are without substance. A Lutheran hermeneutic must be incarnational so that the word that creates faith has a foundation in the event in which salvation took place, but recent methods like the historical-grammatical method show a hesitancy to take the leap from the text to the event. As already stated, the *sedes doctrinae* approach resolves the historical problem by using the doctrine of inspiration to support the biblical history. By using the Spirit to establish biblical history, however, faith is given a role for which it was not intended. Also problematic is that the older method determines which passages are clearer in comparison with others to support its theological system. This puts it at odds with its other tenets such as the perspicuity of the Scriptures and their plenary inspiration. In choosing the clear passages, the interpreter or theologian is no longer under but above the Scriptures. Biblical criticisms can be effective when they work within a church environment affirming what is already believed. This is as true for narrative and canon criticism as it is for the historical-grammatical method. Working outside of a churchly environment, biblical studies produce different and often amusing results. Bible passages are placed beneath murals in the rotunda of the Pennsylvania State House depicting episodes from the life of William Penn, that state's founding colonial father.

The secularization of the Enlightenment detached the biblical texts from church tradition, and this approach may be considered the majority view among university scholars. Scholars "moved by faith concerns are [held to

be] irrelevant to the scholarly enterprise."¹⁰ By eliminating faith based communities from the hermeneutical task, *sola scriptura* is given full reign. In the face of this understanding of *sola scriptura*, one should recognize that the theological task is not only directed by the biblical texts but by the catholic principle, which in providing the historical dimensions to the theological task looks at what the church has believed and practiced. Church beliefs and practices are rooted in the beliefs and practices found in the teachings and actions of Jesus and the apostles. The evangelical principle is the reliance of the theological task on the Bible and the catholic principle is following the church example. One looks at what Christians were doing. Since the Scriptures arose from within and were formed and preserved in the life of the church, the evangelical and catholic principles constitute one principle in such a way that one informs and critiques the other. Allowing the Scriptures to stand as a solitary authority, which is what *sola scriptura* means, would allow a non-believer the same right of interpretation as a believer.

II. Liturgical Metamorphoses

Contemporary liturgical movements, now with a middle age paunch, also classifies as a metamorphosis. New worship forms, initiated with Protestant freedom, were placed alongside of traditional ones. It tested the Aristotelian theorem that the accident of a thing could be separated from the substance of a thing without changing it. For example, brown as a color is an accident of hair, which can be changed to white and the hair remains hair. No one is arguing that Aristotle got it right, but it is helpful in understanding what was intended with liturgical metamorphoses. External worship forms can be changed without affecting core Lutheran beliefs, so the argument goes. Whether this is so or not can be tested by collecting and analyzing field data. Are members of congregations using new worship forms more or less likely to be Lutheran than those who use *The Lutheran Hymnal* from 1941?

Liturgical metamorphoses are not new to Lutherans. After the Reformer died, imperial forces entered Lutheran lands to impose Catholic worship forms, which under different circumstances may not have been so bad. In the nineteenth century, Prussian rulers eliminated characteristic Lutheran forms of worship in favor of Reformed ones with the intent that a liturgical metamorphosis would work its way down into the core belief. Lutherans

¹⁰ Richard B. Hays, "Theological Interpretation of the Bible: Diverging Roads," in *A Report from the Center – Autumn 2006*, ed. Michael Root (Columbia, SC: Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology, 2006), 3.

would then discover that they were not that much different from the Reformed, and two centuries later it seems as if it worked. Contributing to the success of inaugurating a common liturgy in Lutheran and Reformed congregations was the Enlightenment of the previous century, when Lutherans had de-sacramentalized their liturgical forms. So metamorphoses of doctrine and worship can come from either the outside or inside and be imposed by force or undertaken voluntarily.

An example of disjunction of outward form and essence can be taken from LCMS history. For the first century of the Synod's existence, months could pass without the Lord's Supper being offered in its congregations. As recently as half a century ago, only a monthly celebration was common.¹¹ Along with this minimal sacramental practice was the LCMS insistence that the Sacrament was really Christ's body and blood, but the rite itself did not rank up there with the preached word. Preaching was an every-Sunday event, but the Sacrament was not. The Lord's Supper, like Baptism, was a secondary fundamental doctrine. Call it "Protestant Practice, Catholic Substance." The LCMS dialectic between what it said about the Sacrament and its practice was not as blatant as what was found within the common space of the Church of England's Book of Common Prayer with its catholic formula for distribution followed by a Zwinglian sacramental definition in the Thirty-Nine Articles found in the back of the book. For the LCMS, it was Nestorian. Doctrine and practice existed in parallel lines that touched each other four times per year. LCMS sacramental belief was partially fueled by its determination not to be Reformed, but the common LCMS receptionist doctrine of the Lord's Supper came close to the Reformed view. Yes, earthly elements serve as vehicles of Christ's body and blood but only for the shortest time at the moments of its being received into the mouth. Belief that Christ's body and blood were on the altar or in the hands of the clergy person was considered an unacceptable Catholicism. For the Reformed, faith had a role in making the Sacrament what it was. The mouth performed this role for many Lutherans.

A significant metamorphosis towards catholic form came with the introduction of the common service taken from a predecessor synod of the

¹¹ One historian describes the situation in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod as Zwinglian. Mark Braun, "The Black Geneva Piety of the Wisconsin Synod: An Analysis of the Changing View of the Relationship of Doctrine and Liturgy within the WELS," *Concordia Historical Quarterly* 79 (2006): 182-187. According to Braun, the average LCMS communicant received the Sacrament only twice a year. "The Black Geneva Piety," 188.

ELCA into the LCMS hymnal in 1912 and its retention in *The Lutheran Hymnal* in 1941. Yet as long as page five, "The Order of Morning Service without Communion," and not page fifteen remained the norm, the worm had not become a butterfly. The title, "The Order of Morning Service without Communion," was more Protestant than catholic and so it was neither biblical nor catholic. It might be appropriate for a lay-led service, but then the issue of whether a lay person could lead any service was not envisioned. Editorial changes in *Lutheran Worship* and the *Lutheran Service Book* rectified matters. In their lifetimes, Arthur Carl Piepkorn and Berthold von Schenk were controversial figures for advancing catholic-style worship,¹² but what they advocated is now common practice. At one time, college and seminary chapel services were regarded as no different from family devotions consisting of a hymn, sermon, and prayer. Leaders were attired in black academic robes. Congregations worshiped in the same way. From externals it might appear that LCMS congregations had succumbed to the Enlightenment or joined the Prussian Union. Not only are surplice, alb, and stole now the usual garb, but chasubles no longer create the horror that the pope's troops are at the gates. A weekly eucharistic celebration is more the norm than the exception¹³ and has been matched by more sacramentally developed theologies and biblical interpretation. Manuscripts arguing that the evangelists had eucharistic intentions in the Fourth Petition of the Lord's Prayer and in the miraculous feedings are no longer rejected by LCMS doctrinal reviewers,¹⁴ though non-sacramental interpretations are the preferred coin of the realm.¹⁵

Liturgical metamorphoses, placing the catholic principle alongside of the evangelical one, have not developed far enough in the LCMS to compete

¹² Braun, "The Black Geneva Piety," 189-191.

¹³ When nearly all LCMS clergy wore morning coats and black academic robes for the service, Berthold von Schenk was advocating a full eucharistic liturgy. For his own account of reasons for its re-institution, see Berthold von Schenk, *Lively Stone: The Autobiography of Berthold von Schenk*, ed. C. George Fry and Joel R. Kurz (Delhi, New York: American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, 2006), 121-148.

¹⁴ David P. Scaer, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Church's First Statement of the Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 170-183. Within the context of Matthew, the reference to "daily bread" in the Fourth Petition of the Lord's Prayer can only with difficulty be taken as a reference to ordinary food, since concern for this is seen by Jesus as a lack of faith. The LCMS procedure for doctrinal review should itself be reviewed. Though it seems farfetched, the account has been substantiated that an LCMS doctrinal reviewer initially rejected Luther's Flood Prayer from the agenda of the *Lutheran Service Book*.

¹⁵ Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1-11:1*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 331-335.

with Rome in attracting dissident ELCA clergy.¹⁶ LCMS clergy in search of a more definitive catholic principle have made Eastern Orthodox communions and not Rome the port of choice. Since Lutheranism arose within Roman Catholicism, it is hard to explain this attraction to the East. Though the lure of a church with a more catholic program remains strong, the American religious atmosphere is Protestant. Classical Calvinism determined the religious character of the New England colonies, but the prevailing Protestant climate is Wesleyism. Lutherans in this country are more likely to see themselves as Protestant.¹⁷ With Roman Catholics adopting Protestant worship practices and Lutherans heavily invested in liturgical revival, Lutherans may be less uncomfortable with Roman Catholicism than they were a half-century ago. While the ELCA breathes in the classical liberal air of mainline Protestantism,¹⁸ the LCMS leans toward evangelicalism, a movement in which Wesleyism wins over Calvinism. Lutheran presentations of biblical inspiration and faith look suspiciously like the Reformed definition. Missing in Evangelical definitions of inspiration is the christological component which locates Christianity in the history of Jesus. Faith is regarded as of greater importance than the sacraments—an amazing conclusion—since the sacraments are the forms with which the Trinity is clothed.¹⁹ By being placed side by side with the sacraments, which really are tangible things, faith also becomes a thing. In beginning the theological task with God and not Christ, one is closer to Calvin than Luther.²⁰

¹⁶ Leonard R. Klein notes that Lutherans with a strong creedal commitment, like the LCMS, are not as sacramental as the Wittenberg reformers. "Part of the Problem Goes All the Way Down," *Logia* 15, no. 4 (2006): 19. This may reflect the situation in the middle of the last century. Newer pastors are more likely to have a greater liturgical awareness than pastors did a century ago.

¹⁷ The introduction of traditional liturgical forms was seen as catholic. For a discussion of this issue in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) see Braun, "The Black Geneva Piety," 189–191. This attitude was widespread in the LCMS.

¹⁸ Robert Benne, "Lutherans Undefined," *First Things* 157 (2005): 12–15.

¹⁹ Gary Budinger expresses the classical Evangelical belief that faith is more important than Baptism: "I thought the sacraments vs. faith path to salvation was a key difference between 4th-century orthodox Christians and 16th-century evangelicals." Letter to the editor, *Christianity Today* 50, no. 12 (2006): 10. Compare Francis Pieper: "Baptism and the Lord's Supper, important as they are, do not have same importance and necessity as basis of faith as the Word in the form of the Gospel and are therefore called secondary fundamental articles." *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 1:86.

²⁰ N. T. Wright points out that beginning with "God" leaves open the understanding of what is meant by "God." This meant something different to Greeks who worshipped

III. Metamorphoses in the Office of the Ministry

With different historical roots, ELCA metamorphoses are not the same as those of the LCMS. Its liturgical roots are deeper and provided a basis for an alliance with the Episcopal Church in America (ECA). Comprising churches formed in colonial America, the ELCA doctrinal core was formed in Pietism, shaped by the Enlightenment, and turned in a time-reverse towards confessional Lutheranism by Charles Porterfield Krauth. Today the confessional voice is raised by the Society of the Holy Trinity whose membership is predominantly ELCA clergy. They recognize that the ELCA is more and more indistinguishable from mainline Protestantism. This agony has been spelled out in the pages of *Forum Letter* and *First Things* and has recently appeared in *Logia*, and the ink on this issue is not likely to go dry.

ELCA changes arguably have to do more with doctrinal substance and less with appearances, but the metaphorical elephant in the room for the ELCA catholic party is the ordination of women. Women serving as eucharistic leaders constitutes a real metamorphosis. For two millennia, catholic practice—a redundant phrase, since catholic means what is practiced—did not know of this. It is difficult to say whether the change came first in the form or in the substance. Perhaps one is as much the cause and effect of the other. Since socialist northern European governments required women pastors, the change began in the form. Hence this was a metamorphosis with a theological readjustment following. In America the movement requiring equality between the sexes, as for example in the almost successful Equal Rights Amendment, provided this impetus to let women celebrate the Eucharist. This was followed by change in substance, namely, that biblical passages once used to allow only male clergy were judged to be adaptations to ancient cultural norms and hence were no longer binding for church practice. In other words, the Holy Spirit accommodated himself to the times of the biblical writers. This hermeneutical method flourished in eighteenth-century rationalism and has proven to be an all-purpose tool for conservative and liberal theologians to dispose of embarrassing passages.

many gods than to Jews who believed in the God who was the creator and made himself known in Torah. "The Biblical Formation of a Doctrine of Christ," in *Who Do You Say That I Am*, ed. Donald Armstrong (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 50-54. One wonders if, in first speaking of God's sovereignty and immutability, we diminish our doctrines of incarnation and biblical inspiration so that we can only accept them with reservations. The God revealed in the Old Testament has been taken captive by the Greeks.

The equality movement did not stop in giving the ELCA women clergy, but it reappeared by determining the all-powerful ELCA church council according to quotas. Support for all this was wrenched from Galatians 3:28, a passage which really says that God does not use quotas.²¹ With females constituting the majority of ELCA seminary students, the metamorphosis from a chiefly male to a chiefly female clergy will be in place in the next generation, as it is now already in the ECA. Consecrating a homosexual bishop in the ECA has raised to national prominence the question of whether gender and sexual preference is a factor in who can be ordained. It was raised at the last ELCA convention with a solution that satisfied neither proponents nor opponents of allowing homosexual clergy. Before his death, Louis A. Smith, a prominent member of the Society of the Holy Trinity, came around to opposing ordaining women and so the issue is not settled in the minds of some ELCA clergy. Reasons for leaving the ELCA for Rome are varied and complex, but ordaining women is part of the mix. Confessional minded ELCA clergy persons have expressed their concerns and dilemmas in *Forum Letter*, but for its editor the ordination of women is a non-issue. He writes that the ordination of women is “a closed subject, isn’t it? Except for a few unenlightened holdouts—like, you know, Roman Catholics, the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod and the Orthodox—ordaining women is a done deal that’s so done it hardly merits any discussion at all, not among civilized Christians at any rate. You just don’t dare to bring it up, not even in gender-segregated company.”²²

It is strange that the majority of Christendom should be called “unenlightened holdouts.” Among the unenlightened are my seminary classmates Richard John Neuhaus and Robert Wilken, the late Jaroslav Pelikan, Leonard R. Klein, and Phillip Max Johnson, formerly of the Society of the Holy Trinity—not the worst company to keep. Some “unenlightened holdouts” have suffered their share of public rebuke. The Right Reverend Walter Obare Omwanza, presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Kenya, was removed from the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) Council for ordaining candidates for Lutheran ministry in the Church of Sweden. These candidates were willing to be members of the same church in which women clergy served but they

²¹ “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

²² Russell E. Saltzman, “Down under Lutherans,” *Forum Letter* 35, no. 11 (2006): 1. Pastor Saltzman wrote to say that I had not recognized his irony. True enough, but irony is an effective corner of the truth. I sent apologies.

refused to be ordained with them.²³ Ordination of women has become the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*. Ironically, justification, which has the traditional honor of being the doctrine by which the church stands or falls, provided justification for the practice. The argument goes like this: Since we are all forgiven or justified by faith in Christ, distinctions between men and women, including as they apply to the pastoral office, are no longer operative. Strangely the cry of antinomianism has come more from ELCA corners.

Paul uses both evangelical and catholic principles in addressing whether women can serve as preachers—the evangelical principle being the Bible and the catholic principle being practice. He first appeals to Torah, the evangelical principle (1 Cor 14:34, καθὼς καὶ ὁ νόμος λέγει), and—in the light of 1 Timothy 2:13–14—he has in mind Genesis 1–3, Torah in its quintessential form. Paul’s catholic principle is his reference to universal church practice (1 Cor 14:33–34, Ὡς ἐν πάσαις ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις τῶν ἀγίων). Paul does not base his arguments for the Lord’s Supper and the resurrection on his own experiences but on the composite apostolic doctrinal tradition as provided by the Jerusalem church. His citation of “a command of the Lord” (1 Cor 14:37, κυρίου ἐστὶν ἐντολή) comprises both evangelical and catholic principles. He received it. He did not invent it. This is the catholic principle. It is unlikely that “the command of the Lord” refers to a direct, mystical communication from Jesus, but to Jesus’ commissioning of the eleven disciples. They were required to teach all the things that he taught (Matt 28:16–20, διδάσκοντες αὐτοὺς τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετείλαμην). For Paul, both the words and the event in which the words were spoken constitute one divine command limiting the preaching office to men. In choosing men as apostles, Jesus determines who is eligible for the ministerial office. Lutherans are less likely to argue from example, but Roman Catholics and the Orthodox do.²⁴

²³ Walter Obare Omwanza, “Choose Life!,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 69 (2005): 309–326.

²⁴ Frank C. Senn argues that since all sides to a dispute cite the Bible, matters including the ordination of women cannot be resolved by interpretation alone. “Without the Confessions to guide us, biblical interpretation becomes what each church body and each person within each church body thinks is right.” “One Book, One Church, No Longer,” 11. All those who think this way can really come to no other conclusion than the conclusion that women should not be ordained.

IV. Ecclesial Metamorphoses

Future historians will be able to map out the current ELCA travail because those departing the ELCA and those remaining are leaving behind a clear literary trail. Current ELCA clergy are the primary audience of these orations and LCMS clergy the secondary ones.²⁵ In an op-ed piece in *Forum Letter*, "I'll Stay Here, Where I Stand," a slight reworking of Luther's famous "Here I stand," Frank C. Senn gives his reasons for not following Phillip Max Johnson, a personal friend and former co-leader of the Society of the Holy Trinity, into the Roman fold. Senn argues that the form of the Roman Church might not be as catholic as the recent converts think. "And in my congregation, at least, I don't have to fight a cultural battle to raise the level of liturgical music, such as several former Lutheran pastors have experienced in Roman Catholic parishes."²⁶ In other words some, perhaps a majority, of Roman parishes have undergone a metamorphosis so that they look more Protestant than Senn's church service. All this should have gone unnoticed by Richard John Neuhaus, but it did not. In converting to Roman Catholicism, he was by his own admission returning to his Lutheran roots or more precisely to an inchoate c(C)atholicism unrecognized in his youth.²⁷ Neuhaus concedes Senn's point—"The whack at Catholic music is fair enough"²⁸—but at the same time he misses it. Senn is not speaking of musical aesthetics, but of Roman Catholic parishes compromising core beliefs with their worship. The question facing ELCA dissidents is finding the church in which one can best be a Lutheran—or catholic, as some see both terms as having the same referent.²⁹ Alongside of this ecclesial metamorphosis, a literary one has arisen. As problems arose in the LCMS in the 1960s and 70s, *Christianity Today* was the periodical of choice. Today *Pro Ecclesia*, *Lutheran Forum*, and *Forum Letter* are center stage. *Logia*, with its strong confessional bias, has become a rallying point for inter-Lutheran exchange. It is probable that a greater percentage of LCMS clergy read *First Things*, with its Lutheran to Catholic converted editor, than Catholic priests do. Card carrying priests are less likely to take Neuhaus seriously.

²⁵ Klein, "Part of the Problem Goes All the Way Down," 19-24; Frank C. Senn, "I'll Stay Here, Where I Stand," *Forum Letter* 35, no. 8 (2006): 1-3; and Richard J. Niebanck, "The Inescapable Choice," *Forum Letter* 35, no. 8 (2006): 3-5.

²⁶ Senn, "I'll Stay Here, Where I Stand," 3.

²⁷ Richard John Neuhaus, "How I Became the Catholic I Was," *First Things* 122 (2002): 14-20.

²⁸ Richard John Neuhaus, "While We're At It," *First Things* 168 (2006): 69.

²⁹ See, for example, Carl E. Braaten, *Mother Church: Ecclesiology and Ecumenism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

A different metamorphosis is afoot outside of the United States. While ELCA clergy are taking the bypass around the LCMS into the Roman fold, LWF member churches in Latvia, Lithuania, and Kenya are choosing the LCMS option. Lutheran churches in Madagascar and Indonesia are looking at the LCMS. Not unexpectedly, the LWF is marshaling its financial resources to keep its members in line, and, where its will is defied, it finances competing churches.³⁰ Rome and Constantinople are not options for these European, African, and Asian Lutherans, and so the LCMS is the best show in town or the nearest port. Choose your metaphor. The LCMS is reaping where it has not sown,³¹ not exactly like but somewhat akin to Luther and Melancthon drinking beer as God was bringing about the Reformation. Maybe the interest of other churches in the LCMS is God saying "be all that you can be" or "become what you are" (slogans which I have never figured out). Clouds darken the LCMS's heavens. Decisions to ordain women have only been postponed in the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany and the Lutheran Church of Australia. Should either approve it, it would have met the one LWF criterion for membership and would disrupt the budding confessional consensus in Third World Lutheranism.

Emigration out of the ELCA and LCMS into Rome and the East can be counted pastor by pastor. Measuring the attraction of the influence of Evangelicalism or conservative Protestantism on the LCMS is not so easy, because Lutheran pastors can adopt styles of preaching and worship from Evangelicalism without changing affiliation. For years Billy Graham has been a model for ministers who fancy themselves conservative, but there is no mass migration into the Southern Baptist Convention. Infant baptism plugs up that hole. An inventory of Lutheran church libraries would be a good a barometer of influence from Evangelicalism. Since church boundaries are less of an issue for Evangelicals, change in church affiliation is not problematic.

Some displaced confessional Lutherans find themselves on a pilgrimage. Their looking for a home is a real metamorphosis, but perhaps this is the way it has always been.³² If personal religious belief determined where one serves, several priests in the Archdiocese of Chicago would have become

³⁰ Omwanza, "Choose Life!," 123-124. The LWF contributed \$370,000 to support a church in a newly formed opposition synod.

³¹ "I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor" (John 4:38).

³² See Senn, "I'll Stay Here, Where I Stand," 1-3, and Niebanck, "The Inescapable Choice," 3-5.

Lutherans in Senn's opinion. For Lutherans, according to Francis Pieper, the chief doctrine is that members of the *una sancta* are those who believe that God is gracious to them on account of Christ's salvation.³³ To coin a phrase, they might be called anonymous Lutherans. Some of these are fully aware of the contradiction and suffer the agony. This contradiction between what a church believes and practices and what the church should be, the *una sancta*, comes with the Lutheran turf. The church is never so *sancta* in our own eyes, so, like all other articles of faith, we can only believe it.

³³ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 3:424.