

## The Aroma Of An Empty Bottle

by Carl E. Braaten

I attended the 2009 Church Wide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Often voting members and visitors would ask me, "How did we get to this point?" They were referring to the sequence of votes in which a majority voted in favor of resolutions bearing on standards for ordained ministry that no Lutheran Church had ever considered before, let alone approved. How could the ELCA embrace a new doxy, indeed, a heterodoxy, that contravened what the leading theologians and presiding bishops of its predecessor church bodies -- the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America -- had unanimously taught?

I can not imagine that the decisions of the ELCA would have happened under the leadership of Dr. Frederick Schiotz (ELC), Dr. Malvin H. Lundeen (Augustana), or Dr. Franklin Clark Fry (ULC). They would not have happened under the leadership of Dr. David Preus (ALC) or Dr. James R. Crumley (LCA). The ELCA decisions would find no support in the theological writings of Dr. Martin Heineken, Dr. Theodore Tappert, Dr. William Lazareth, or Dr. John Reumann who taught generations of pastors at the Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia, nor in those of Dr. Warren Quanbeck, Dr. E. Clifford Nelson, Dr. Herman Preus, Dr. Kent Knutson, Dr. Roy Harrisville, or Dr. James Burtness, professors at Luther Seminary in St. Paul. These names are a mere sampling. We could list scores more from Wartburg Seminary, Trinity Seminary, and Southern Seminary.

The theologians who founded, edited, and wrote for the leading Lutheran journals, *Lutheran Quarterly*, *Dialog*, and *Lutheran Forum* carried forward the sturdy traditions of Lutheranism. There were differences among them, to be sure, but to my knowledge none of them deviated into the kinds of heresies and heterodoxies now rampant and tolerated in the institutions of the ELCA. Thus the question is understandable, “How did we get from there to here?” Why is confessional Lutheran theology unravelling in the ELCA?

Many will, of course, deny that there are any profound theological problems troubling the ELCA which threaten its unity. Everything seems to be in order. There was no lack of Lutheran slogans and clichés flying around the mikes at the Convention Center in Minneapolis. Bishop Mark Hanson voiced them well, as did most of the speakers. The Lutheran lingo reminded me of the phrase Erik Petersen coined to describe modern German Protestantism in its defection from the doctrinal theology of the Reformation; it’s “the aroma of an empty bottle.” There’s not much left of the original Reformation. The Lutheran “*solas*” can be used as slogans to mean the opposite of what the Lutheran confessors intended. In the current circumstance they are the tell-tale clichés of “gospel reductionism.”

I will leave it to smarter historians than I to explain how it happened that the ELCA could slide so quickly down the slippery slope of liberal Protestantism. Meanwhile, I would hazard two suggestions. First, Lutheranism may contain within its origins the seeds of its own instability. When the first Lutherans lost the magisterial authority of the Roman Catholic Church, it had no sure authority to put in its place. The *solas* sounded good in theory, but it finally comes down to who who has the authority to interpret and apply

them in changing times. In the history of Lutheranism the locus of official authority has been wandering all over the place. In the ELCA final authority lies in the hands of a quota-selected majority of lay members who could, if they chose, decide to merge with the Moonies or Mormons, just as they have decided in favor of altar and pulpit fellowship with Methodists and Moravians. Far-fetched? Not any more than the decisions taken at the 2009 Assembly in Minneapolis. In the church the leaders are supposed to be successors of the apostles and not echoes of majority opinion.

My second suggestion is that the ELCA has succumbed to the same ailment as liberal Protestantism. What is that? Modern Protestantism is an amalgamation of historic Christianity and the principles of the Enlightenment, its rationalism, subjectivism, and anthropocentrism. The underlying assumption is the neo-gnostic belief in the inner-dwelling of God, such that everyone is endowed with the inner light that only needs to be uncovered. The light of truth does not shine through the Scriptures and the Christian tradition as much as through scientific reason and individual experience. This is what happened in Minneapolis: appeals to reason and experience trumped Scripture and tradition, punctuated with pious injunctions of Lutheran slogans and clichés. The majority won. And they said it was the work of the Spirit, forgetting that the Holy Spirit had already spoken volumes through the millennia of Scriptural interpretation, the councils of the church, and its creeds and confessions.

Bishop Mark Hanson repeatedly assured the ELCA Assembly that for Lutherans, our unity is in Christ alone, and not in our “agreements or disagreements.” That is a false use of the “*solus Christus*.” Our Christian unity *does* lie in our agreements. That is what

Nicaea was all about. That is what the Augsburg Confession was all about. Lutherans do not accept the sectarian slogan: no Creeds but Christ! Our unity is in Christ, to be sure, but according to the Scriptures and according to the Creeds and Confessions. Orthodox Christians affirm their unity through the use of liturgies and creeds, and if we share no agreement on these, then in fact we are not one in the same communion.

Frank Senn wrote in his recent book that Lutherans have enough “*solas*” to form a whole choir. It’s time that Lutherans quit using these slogans, born in the heat of controversy, as a fig leaf to cover up their loss of orthodox Christian doctrine.