

**Three Talks at Calvary Lutheran Church
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
June 5-6, 2009**

First Talk

WHAT DOES “BEING LUTHERAN” LOOK LIKE?

Or

What Does It Mean To Be Lutheran Today?

By Carl E. Braaten

What does “being Lutheran” look like? It’s a timely question. If you have read the First and Second Drafts of the proposed ELCA “Social Statement on Human Sexuality,” they make a big deal about being Lutheran. The constant refrain is about how Lutherans believe in this, how Lutherans interpret that, how Lutherans read the Bible, how Lutherans approach ethics, how Lutherans are realistic about the human condition, how Lutherans accept diversity, how Lutherans understand themselves to be simultaneously righteous and sinful, how Lutherans believe in Christian freedom, how Lutherans believe in trust, how Lutherans enjoy good sex, and the beat goes on *ad nauseam*. In reading these documents I asked myself, “Since I have been a Lutheran for 80 years and a Lutheran theologian for over 50 of them, why did I feel that I was a stranger to what I was reading?” What is wrong with me? Am I not Lutheran enough for the ELCA anymore? Have I travelled so far from Lutheranism that I can no longer feel at home in a Lutheran church?

To Be Lutheran: Evangelical, Catholic, Orthodox

Here's what I will confess to you. I do not want to be any old kind of Lutheran. I do not want to be Lutheran at the cost of being Christian, or at the cost of being evangelical, or catholic, or orthodox. So I am going to edit the question in the title of this presentation: "What does it mean to be a confessional Lutheran today?" In one long sentence my answer is that to be a confessional Lutheran today is to be *evangelical*, in radical distinction from being some kind of liberal or mainline protestant, to be *catholic* in the sense of belonging to the body of Christ spread throughout the world on a mission to the nations, without narrowing its meaning down to being "Roman," and to be orthodox with a strong sense of continuity with church tradition founded on the apostles, the church fathers, and the ancient creeds, without any romantic infatuation with Eastern Orthodoxy, its rites and icons. I am saying that I do not want to be a sectarian Lutheran in an ecumenical age. I do not see many signs in the official expressions of the ELCA that it is evangelical, catholic, and orthodox in the senses I have described. In fact, it seems to be ashamed to be associated with confessional Lutheran theology that is evangelical, catholic, and orthodox in the most generous definition of those terms.

When we ask "What does it mean to be confessionally Lutheran today?" of course it means to be faithful to the confessional teachings in the *Book of Concord*. But that only moves the question to another level? What does it mean to be *faithful* and *loyal* to the Lutheran Confessions *today*? The word "today" must be taken seriously. Some would

answer the question by repristinating what some theologian or synod said yesterday or day before yesterday. Franz Pieper has been the theologian of choice in the Lutheran Church -- Missouri Synod. I do not know if that still holds today. My favorite interpreter of the Lutheran Confessions was my teacher in Heidelberg, Edmund Schlink. He was writing for a different day than Franz Pieper. If you want to know what theologians really think, you have to discover what for them is the line of scrimmage and what battles they are fighting.

For my second presentation I was asked to speak on "What Dragons Are We Confronting?" I will re-phrase that to say, "Challenges We Face as Confessional Lutherans."

Those challenges come from the wider culture, but arise also from within the church itself. It is hard to keep the two presentations separate, because when you take your position at the scrimmage line, your moves are calculated to meet the challenges of your opposition. Hence, my sense of being a confessional Lutheran today has not evolved in a bubble, in an abstract setting, not even in an ivory tower. It has been forged in the heat of many controversies. Melanchthon, Luther's right hand man, was an irenic theologian. He wrote *The Augsburg Confession* to bring about peace between the warring factions. On his death bed Melanchthon looked forward with pleasure to be delivered from what he called the "*rabies theologorum*," the fury of theologians. He became sick and tired of all the theological fights that Luther had managed to drag him into. Well, he learned the hard way. If you cannot stand a good theological fight, you shouldn't be a Lutheran. Maybe you should become a Quaker. President Truman is credited for having said, "If you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen."

Today we find ourselves in a hotbed of controversy. We did not ask for it. In the logic of confessional theology, we begin with what we believe, teach, and confess. As Karl Barth said, the *credimus* comes before the *damnamus*. What we believe precedes what we dis-believe. The Confessions start with what we believe, and then conclude with the relevant condemnations and anathemas. At the core of the Confessions we have the bed-rock convictions that define who we are as believers in Christ and what we are about as members of his Church. The Lutheran Confessions have been attacked by modern pluralists for being so utterly christocentric. So be it. We confess that to be true, but we don't apologize. We believe that it is on account of Christ that we know who God is, the God who creates and sustains the world, and that we know what it means to be human, along with the infinite value of every human life, born and not yet born. We have this knowledge because Jesus Christ is truly God and truly human. It is on account of Christ that we believe the Bible and its authority as the Word of God for us. That is our highest authority, not church tradition, although that comes in second, and not human experience, although that is the medium of everything we know, and not modern science, although God gave us the faculty of reason to use for the common good. But tradition, experience, and reason, all together, are not the highest authority. The Bible is. But you can't get the ELCA to confess that today.

Christ is the alpha and omega. That tells us where we come from and where we are going. We can go to the best universities and learn from the greatest minds and still not discover where we came from or where we are going. I learned that in Sunday School. I attended the Universities of Harvard, Heidelberg, and Oxford, and listened to the smartest people talk, but that is not where I learned the ABC's of the Christ-centered

gospel of our Lutheran Confessions. The ELCA “Social Statement on Human Sexuality” is much too impressed by what the gurus of modern science and sociology are teaching about human nature and human behavior. It regards what the Bible says as “old hat,” out of touch, irrelevant to what we modern sophisticated people know. The sacred texts and creeds that have grounded and guided previous generations are muted and voided by the ideology of historical relativism and pluralism.

Philosophers, artists, and writers have been asking, “Where in the grand scheme of things are we now?” Nietzsche has been proclaimed the greatest prophet of modern times. He announced, “God is dead. And we have killed him.” He meant to say, we have done it in church, by what we have made of Christianity. Our modern cathedrals have become the tombs of God. We have buried the risen Lord in our churches. When you visit the great cathedrals of Europe on Sunday mornings and find them empty, they reek with the musty odor of a mausoleum. We are asked to read the “signs of the times,” and we must if we intend to speak for God as preachers, bishops, and theologians in a way that connects with our day and age. A consensus prevails among authors that we are living in a post-modern age. We have heard a clarion call for a post-modern paradigm in theology. But there is no consensus on what that means. I will give you my proposal.

Do We Need A Post-Modern Paradigm For Theology?

I have written a lot of theology, but I never intended to write theology that is irrelevant to the critical issues of our time. But here is what others are saying. George Lindbeck

called for a “theology for a post-liberal age.” He proved wrong. We have entered a new age of liberal theology. Schleiermacher is back in full force in German Protestant theology. He has replaced Karl Barth. Gordon Kaufman of Harvard identifies the essence of post-modernism as historical relativism, the idea that there is no place for absolutes in history. Feminists latch on to post-patriarchalism as the most fitting term to denote the core of a really new paradigm. John Hick fastens on to religious pluralism, the idea that all religions are equally valid paths to saving truth and grace.

Given the cacophony of voices proposing what it means to do theology in our post-modern age, I have asked, what is a confessional Lutheran theologian like me to make of it all? What should I do? Some years ago my wife and I took a summer tour of some Eastern European cities, including Prague, Budapest, and Istanbul. Istanbul played a big role in ancient church history, when it was known as Constantinople. There we had our picture taken where the Nicene Creed was ratified in 381 A.D., establishing the doctrine of the Triune God as orthodox church teaching. That church is now a museum, after functioning as a mosque for centuries.

Across from Istanbul we went by boat to Chalcedon, where the council of bishops met in 451 A.D., to affirm the faith of the church in one Lord Jesus Christ, one person in two natures, truly divine and truly human. I experienced an overwhelming sense of continuity of identity with the apostolic faith of those through time who remained loyal to Jesus Christ and his gospel. It seemed incredible that I, a 20th century American Lutheran pastor of Norwegian ancestry, could joyfully claim to share the same faith as those bearded bishops assembled in Constantinople during the fourth and fifth centuries.

Some weeks ago an ELCA pastor emailed me a stinging rebuke of my attacks on the ELCA Social Statement on Human Sexuality. He was once a pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church in Northfield, Minnesota, where I was a member when I attended St. Olaf College. We have had a rather brisk exchange of ideas. He wrote that he is seeking a new reformation, one that will bring the ELCA into the twenty first century and liberate it from its bondage to medieval policies and practices. In his last letter he wrote that the creeds and confessions of the church are all outdated, relevant in their day and age, but don't speak to our situation today. He said, they are just history and not the expression of our Christian faith today. I responded that I regard the creeds and the confessions as the normative expression of faith and doctrine today. I promised in my oath of ordination to teach faithfully in accordance with them. They are not poetry but prose, containing true propositions that refer to God and Christ and many other things. They are included in the Confession of Faith of the ELCA, and look, if you don't believe them, you should turn in your ordination papers and get the "bleep" out of the ministry. That's what heretics were forced to do in the ancient church, but now they manage to climb the ecclesiastical ladder and do their stuff in the bureaucracies of the church.

From my observation only mightily confused theologians are looking for a new paradigm for theology in a post-modern age. As Lutherans we ought to be clear about one thing: our Lutheran Confessions from the *Augsburg Confession* to the *Formula of Concord* don't mean a thing except as a movement within the symphony of the whole catholic faith that unites both the Eastern and Western branches of the *Una Sancta* and that is expressed most classically in the Ecumenical Creeds. In the ancient church all the neophytes would confess the Creed at baptism, naming their new-found God as Father,

Son, and Holy Spirit. That is still the case for us today. We are not looking for a new paradigm in theology. Lutherans are evangelical catholics who stand with all orthodox Christians in accepting the christocentric trinitarian monotheism of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon. That is and has been my proposal for confessional Lutheran theology today.

Types of Lutheranism

I would not be surprised if someone would speak up and ask: "Can't you think of something more relevant to propose for Lutheranism today?" I have to admit that I have a keen sense of holding a minority position and that alternative models of Lutheranism have greater traction in the ELCA today. I will identify three. The first type is advocated by sincere Lutherans who appeal to the *Book of Concord* to distinguish the Lutheran Church from all other denominations. To be true-blue gnesio-Lutherans is to be unlike everyone else. The end-result is to narrow the meaning of being Lutheran down to what makes it different from all other churches. This view tends to be anti-ecumenical; its clearest expression is found in the Lutheran Church -- Missouri Synod. There are dwindling numbers of like-minded well-intentioned Lutherans struggling for survival in Minnesota, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. What's so great about being Lutheran when it means closing yourself off from all the gifts that the Holy Spirit of God has bestowed on other Christian churches? Too sectarian for me!

Lutherans of the second type are motivated by social agendas and find their allies among the peace and justice advocates who are mostly inspired by liberal, left-wing,

liberationist ideologues. These people are also sincere and their heart may be in the right place, but they have lost their appetite for the classical Lutheran categories of theology. They tend to be activists, not thinkers. The theology they produce is very thin.

The third type includes mainly the bureaucratic managers who have a nose for where the money and the power happen to be. They have technical expertise that could be useful in any organizational enterprise, and it doesn't particularly matter which one. The ELCA is currently dominated by these faceless apparatchiks who excel in loyalty to the organization that pays their salaries, but are complete theological idiots.

Lutherans who are self-designated as evangelical catholics have one thing in common with these other types of Lutheranism. We hold equally low opinions of each other. And I don't feel so bad about that, because I would worry a lot if they thought that we are all up to the same thing, all united in matters of faith and the gospel, and disagree only on adiaphoral, non-essential matters. I have to confess that during the last twenty years, since the two "Call to Faithfulness Conferences" I coordinated at St. Olaf College, I have been involved in an ecumenical effort to bring theologians from various Christian traditions together to deal with topics of major dogmatic importance. What I learned is that dogma is more important than denomination. I felt at ease and at home among theologians from Orthodox, Catholic, Evangelical, and Pentecostal Churches, more than among theologians at my own seminary or any conference of theologians sponsored by the ELCA. There was a greater sense of church unity and fellowship in Christ, and that is what made me more of an ecumenical Lutheran theologian within the framework of classical Christian orthodoxy of christocentric trinitarian monotheism. In the ELCA I can

no longer assume that among pastors, bishops, and theologians we believe in the same God, the same Christ, and the same salvation. Those are harsh words, but I speak the truth of what I have observed and experienced. This is in sharp contrast to my ecumenical experience among theologians who take seriously the creeds and dogmas of the great catholic and orthodox traditions of the church.

Sociologically the Lutheran Church in North America has become just another liberal Protestant denomination. Some rejoice that we country bumpkins have finally evolved out of our primitive ethnic immigrant status and have joined the great chorus of people who arrived to become major players in the greatest country in the history of the universe. What a joke! That kind of identity is to surrender our birthright as a confessing movement within the church catholic for the sake of the pure preaching of the gospel and the faithful administration of the sacraments. Have you noticed how seldom we hear the adjectives “pure” and “faithful?” We are not stupid. We know that is too much to ask anymore. As Lutherans we have crawled like a snail into the shell of an American Protestant denomination, but are fast losing the evangelical and catholic substance of our traditional faith.

Law and Gospel: The Lutheran Distinctive

I have tried to make the case that Lutheranism should not stand alone as an independent Protestant denomination but to be faithful to its origins it should move within the wider ecumenical orbit of churches that accept the Scriptures and the ancient creeds. I have called its core confession christocentric trinitarian monotheism. Yet, there is

something distinctive in confessional Lutheran theology, something that to my knowledge is not shared by any other Christian tradition. I applaud it. That's why I am a Lutheran and not something else. It concerns law and gospel, specifically making the proper distinction between law and gospel, following the affirmative theses of Article Five of the *Formula of Concord*. The failure to make the proper distinction between law and gospel leads to two fundamental errors: one is legalism and the other is antinomianism. On this issue the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada are in the same boat. They have jumped from the frying pan of legalism into the fire of antinomianism. There are too many examples to count, but I will cite two recent ones. One is the ELCA "Social Statement on Human Sexuality" and the other is the open letter sent to rostered leaders and congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, entitled, "We Believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

Article V of the *Formula of Concord* "Concerning Law and Gospel" states that the law of God gives us instruction regarding what is right and God-pleasing and that it condemns everything that is sin and contrary to God's will. The gospel, in contrast, reveals what a sinner who has been condemned by the law should believe about Christ, to receive the forgiveness of sins and the righteousness acceptable to God. Then it says, the word "gospel" is used in two senses both in the Bible and in the Christian tradition. In the wider sense the gospel refers to the entire teaching of Christ and the apostles. In this sense the word gospel includes both the law that urges repentance and the gospel that offers forgiveness. But the word "gospel" can also be used in a strict sense and as such is placed in contrast to the law. The gospel in this strict sense is a proclamation of

God's unmerited grace and should not be made into a law that humans must obey for their salvation.

Article VI of the *Formula of Concord* deals with the "Third Use of the Law." The question was debated by some Lutheran theologians "whether the law is to be urged upon the reborn Christians or not." One party said yes, the other no. Lutherans from the beginning until now have unanimously affirmed the first two uses of the law: The first use is the civil use enforced by government; the second use is the law that accuses persons of sin. Those who reject the third use of the law are condemned as antinomians or nomoclasts "because they throw the proclamation of the law out of the church." (Article V, *Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration*) The document I cited, "We Believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ" is antinomian through and through. It speaks only of the gospel in the strict sense in the order of salvation. It iterates and reiterates Lutheran teaching about the gospel understood as justification by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone. Friends, that is not what the controversy is about. The document changes the subject. There is no argument in the ELCA or ELCIC concerning Article IV of *The Augsburg Confession*. We all agree that we "receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith." It is true that the gospel is strictly speaking the promise of the forgiveness of sins and justification on account of Christ.

Antinomianism in American Lutheranism

The document “We Believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ” accuses the Confessional Ministerium of the heresy polar opposite to antinomianism, namely legalism, turning the gospel into law. It states that the Confessional Ministerium “insists that ‘the traditional faith and practice of the Church catholic’ on the question of human sexuality and marriage is a matter of the Gospel. It says that to make the church’s historical understanding of human sexuality and marriage a matter of the Gospel is precisely where the Confessional Ministerium errs. For this would mean that faith alone in Christ is no longer sufficient. It would mean that one must also have an unwavering faith in a particular practice of the church. But this is to turn the *unconditional* Gospel of Christ into a *conditional* gospel, which is no Gospel at all.”

I will continue to quote: “Ironically, those who accuse others of abandoning the Gospel have themselves revised and abandoned it by turning it into law. Rather than confessing that faith in the Gospel is sufficient for salvation, the Confessional Ministerium wants to add something extra to it, that is, to make a particular traditional practice of the church a requirement of faith equivalent to faith in the Gospel.” Enough of that. The authors and signers of this document, “We Believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ,” don’t get it. The controversy is not about the gospel as the way of salvation, that is, the meaning of the gospel in the strict sense, in contrast to the law. The controversy is about the gospel in the broader sense, which includes both the law of God and the gospel. No one is arguing that the law is a way of salvation. Those who uphold the third use of the law are not turning it into a way of salvation. The argument is not about the

way of salvation. It is about sexuality. It is not about the doctrine of justification *sola gratia, sola fide, propter Christum*. It is about the ethics of human sexuality. Does the law of God apply to the ethics of sex? Of course it does. Since the authors and signers of the document in question have thrown the law out of the church, it is no wonder that it has nothing to say about the ethics of sex. Are homosexual acts sinful or not; do they fall under the condemnation of the law of God or not? The document doesn't say. It changes the subject. It pretends that the controversy is about how to be saved and not on how to behave as sexual creatures. Even the best behavior in the world will not save. I repeat, we are not talking about salvation, stupid, we are talking about sexuality, the sixth commandment, given by God for the people of God. If our salvation depended on getting a perfect score on sexual matters, we'd all be damned. Even Jimmy Carter confessed that he had lusted after another woman in his heart.

The ELCA Social Statement on Human Sexuality is equally antinomian. Lutherans have said we are justified by faith alone, apart from the works of the law. Good works do not avail for salvation, still they are good. They are God-pleasing. We can't do enough of them. Good works have gotten a bum rap among Lutherans because they have been so busy fighting 16th century synergists and semi-Pelagians. The reason that Lutherans are fumbling the ball on the issue of homosexuality is the same reason that they have always been weak on ethics. When I studied theology at Luther Seminary, there was not a single course on ethics. It's a good thing because it would have been taught all wrong. When Lutherans did start including ethics in the theological curriculum, it's not because they knew what they were doing, but only because they wanted to be like the Protestants who had mostly substituted the teaching of ethics for dogmatics.

When I started my teaching career in a Lutheran seminary I had to teach both dogmatics and ethics. I knew sort of what to do in dogmatics because I had had good teachers of dogmatics and systematics at Harvard and Heidelberg. But I did not know what to do in ethics, so I simply latched on to textbooks of a few Lutheran ethicists in Germany and Sweden, especially Helmut Thielicke, Edmund Schlink, Gustaf Aulén, and Gustaf Wingren. They were all Lutheran ethicists who constructed their ethics on the distinction between creation and redemption, law and gospel, and the two kingdoms of God. That approach inoculated me against the situation ethics of Joseph Fletcher, the theocentric ethics of James Gustafson, and the Latin American liberation ethics.

Controversy In The ELCA On Human Sexuality

The Lutherans who produced the ELCA “Social Statement on Human Sexuality” are completely confused. The First Draft of the Task Force stated that a Lutheran theology of marriage and sexuality is based on the gospel, on the doctrine of the incarnation and justification by faith. What a farce. A few of us responded that that is totally false. The institution of marriage is an order of creation. Then the Task Force reversed itself in the Second Draft, accepting the idea that creation comes before redemption, law before gospel, and so forth. Still the Second Draft did not escape the heresy of antinomianism that permeated the First Draft. It still uses the gospel to invalidate the law in the Christian life. The doctrine of the orders of creation and the third use of the law are relegated to a footnote.

The Social Statement has nothing good to say about the law of God. The Psalmist, however, says, "I delight in the law of the Lord." Even when we cannot keep the law perfectly, we delight in it, because it does not only tell us when we are in the wrong but urges us to do good things. The gospel in the strict sense, as justifying grace, cannot usurp the place of the law in moral guidance for Christians. The laws, commandments, and judgments of God are valid for non-Christians and Christians alike. Christians need to hear and heed the law of God in its third use. Watch out for Lutherans who give up on the third use of the law. You will be among antinomians for sure, who believe you can love God and do as you please. The truth is, you are freed by the gospel to do, not what you please, but rather what is pleasing to God. It is the law in its third use that guides us in doing what is pleasing to God.

This is not the time and place to debate the pros and cons of homosexual behavior. Your minds are made up. You don't need me to tell you what to think. But still I want to tell you in a nutshell my own take on the matter. You may not agree with me. First, I do not think that we need the Bible and its revelation to know that homosexual behavior is against the law of nature. We can know the rudiments of the natural law by using our reason, common sense, and conscience. We share that with millions of folks who are not Christians. We have the Bible but what it says is chiefly a republication of the law of nature, which God built into the way he made things since the creation of the world.

When God created the world and human beings, he designed all things to obey certain laws and to act in accordance with their nature. He created ears for hearing. He created eyes for seeing. He created noses for smelling. You don't smell with your eyes and you don't see with your nose. Do I need to go on and be more graphic? What do

you think the sexual organs are made for? If you know the law of nature, you have the answer. Male and female are created in such a way that their sexual organs match. And when they do what comes naturally, they will find it both recreational and procreative. I learned a lot about the natural law when I raised chickens as a kid. They acted according to their nature. I never saw two roosters going at it.

I am a big believer in the natural law. Unfortunately, most Lutheran theologians and ethicists have given up on it. It still holds a strong position in Roman Catholic moral theory. That is why Catholics are so much more clear on the subject of homosexuality than Protestants. Catholics base their teachings on the Bible and the natural law in the Christian tradition. Both Luther and Calvin retained the natural law tradition from medieval scholasticism. If we go only with the Bible, guess what, we will be called bibli-cists, and we will be lectured that there are a lot of things in the Bible that we no longer adhere to, like the ritual and purification laws in the book of Leviticus. And when we appeal to the Christian tradition, we are lectured that we have voluntarily changed our minds on many traditional practices, like on slavery, birth control, women's ordination, and the like. So I think we need a three legged stool, the Bible, the Christian tradition, and the natural law.

Lutherans in the United States and in Canada are being assured by headquarters and their lackeys that we can disagree about matters of sexual practice and still preserve the unity of the church because such matters have nothing to do with the gospel. True, they do not have to do with the gospel in the strict sense, but they do have to do with the gospel in the wider sense, the gospel as a synonym for the whole Word of God, the

law and the prophets, the teachings of Christ and the apostles, which include a great deal about sexual practices, as well as other matters that have to do with the law of God and his commandments. It is simply not true that the foundation of the church and its unity has only to do with the gospel in the narrow sense and not with the law. During the Hitler period Lutheran preachers were in their pulpits proclaiming the gospel of salvation, you can be sure, while Jews were being cremated in the ovens. The Confessing Church did not say, Oh well, what's happening to the Jews is a mere matter of the law; it has nothing to do with the way of salvation in Christ. We will return to this issue in our third lecture when we take up the question of "*status confessionis*."

