



## Slick Magic

### “Diversity” is Trump in the ELCA’s *Opening the Book of Faith*

**Abracadabra.** How did he pull that rabbit out of the hat? Magic often relies on misdirection, that is, getting the audience to look in the wrong place at the right time.

The ELCA’s new initiative, *The Book of Faith*, is a kind of magic that lures readers to look in the wrong place at the right time.

The initiative is the result of a resolution adopted at the 2007 Assembly calling for a five-year churchwide study of Scripture with “Lutheran” eyes.

This initiative has been given a large budget, and most synod assemblies have adopted the program.

The first book in the series, *Opening the Book of Faith. Lutheran Insights for Bible Study*, emphasizes “norms,” “convictions,” “spins,” “principles,” “expectations,” and “insights” from “our Lutheran heritage.”

**On the one hand, look at the good things the study affirms:** “law and gospel,” “the plain meaning of Scripture,” and “Scripture alone.” Lutheran themes and phrases pop up on almost every page. The study affirms the kinds of things that good Lutherans say. Some examples:

- “*Our beliefs* – As the ELCA, the focus of our trust and our formulations of the faith are determined by Scripture” (9).

- “Scripture is the source and norm, not our understandings of Scripture” (10).

- “[The Bible] is the Word of God, and it does convey what God wants to say to us in a way that no other book or collection of books ever could” (27).

- “This message of law and gospel is at the heart of Scripture: faithful interpretation discerns this message; faithful proclamation declares this message” (29).

- “Lutherans say that Scripture is to be interpreted in line with its ‘plain sense’” (37).

- “Lutherans come to all Scripture with certain biblical ideas having pride of place, including justification by faith through grace and a theology of the cross” (61).

ELCA leaders **claim** to hold to the Bible and Lutheran axioms. How could anyone find fault with these leaders?

**On the other hand, something tricky happens.** What happens is a classic case of misdirection. You are directed to look at all the Lutheran lingo, but watch for the sleight of hand. Watch for sentences like these:

- “The Bible is the fixed point given to us. It is the norm.

Our commitment to this authority leads us to **treat any Christian disagreement as a conversation that remains open** ....The Word interprets us, so we stand before it in hope, with our varied understandings” (17).

- “We who are [Luther’s] descendants do not forget the world-changing impact of his solo voice, **but we always assert that the Bible belongs to the whole church -- the church across the centuries and**

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around the globe” (11).

• “Approaches to Scripture can intentionally or carelessly suggest that the reader or some method is in control of the meaning. **This error** may be revealed when an interpreter or group implies that their particular understanding must be correct and **shows disrespect for the faithfulness of others’ efforts at hearing....**the gift of the Bible is given to **the whole church**” (14).

• “... insights are always tested by discernment within the larger Christian community, including **the community that stretches back across the centuries and around the globe**” (15).

• “If we think that the Bible means something, and **there are other people—Christian people who love and worship Jesus—who think that the Bible means something else**, maybe we should talk to each other” (28).

• “...the meaning of Scripture for

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individuals is to be in harmony with **its universal meaning for the community of faith**” (41).

**Holy Smoke and Mirrors.** Are you are catching on? Here’s how the illusion works: What they give with one hand, they take away with the other. It’s classic magic.

**1. “The faithfulness of others’ efforts at hearing.”** The study repeatedly commends “the **plain meaning**” of Bible texts. This claim could be asserted 100 or 1,000 times. The quantity doesn’t matter because what’s decisive in the end is tolerating other interpretations. Therefore:

• You must **not** show “disrespect for the faithfulness of others’ efforts at hearing...” (14).

• “**Any** Christian disagreement [is] a conversation that **remains open**” (17).

An example: You may assert the “plain meaning” of Bible passages about marriage as the union of one man and one woman, but “other people—Christian people who love and worship Jesus— think that the Bible means something else” (28). They think it means the affirmation of loving (same-sex) relationships.

You dare not imply that your understanding is correct because that would “show **disrespect for the faithfulness of others’ efforts at hearing...**” (14).

In the end, diversity is trump.

**2. “The whole church.”** The study says Luther’s voice was important, BUT it was only a solo voice. The ELCA is here to remind you that the Bible belongs to “the whole church—the church across the centuries and around the globe” (11).

Therefore in your congregation you may use God’s name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, BUT there are medieval mystics and modern feminists who do not regard “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”

as God’s name but simply as one metaphor among others. They pick other images from Scripture more suitable to their liking. Diversity is trump.

You may have your view, but they have theirs, and they are “Christian people who love and worship Jesus-[and] who think the Bible means something else” (28).

Above all, you must **not** “show disrespect for the faithfulness of others’ efforts at hearing” (14).

**3. Diversity, thy name is legion.** On one hand, Lutheran insights. On the other, “the whole church,” “the whole church,” “the whole church.”

But where is “the whole church”? “The whole church” is an illusion. There is no consensus within Christendom on any question. The rest of Christendom does not hold to law and gospel. Almost all of Christendom says justification by faith. Only the Reformers said justification by faith *alone*.

Scholars have always disagreed about texts – every text, not just obscure ones, but **plain** ones. This was as true in Luther’s day as in ours. Rather than following Luther, the ELCA makes “diversity” normative: “Any Christian disagreement [is] a conversation that **remains open**” (14).

The ELCA goes the way of “diversity.” Their agenda is to promote a GLBT agenda, particular political causes, feminist God language, etc. – under the guise of listening to “the whole church.”

What a slick trick – watch them use all the Lutheran lingo – page after page – so you don’t really notice the sleight of hand as **these claims are all gutted by asserting “diversity” and “the whole church.”**