

State of the Church Report

The Church Faithful And Apostate:

Reflections From Kansas City

by George A. Lindbeck

These reflections¹ on the biennial Churchwide assembly held for eight days in Kansas City, Missouri at the end of August have a twofold aim: first, to ask what difference this gathering makes or will make to the ELCA; and, second, to assess what it indicates about the present state of this church. I shall start with as theologically neutral a summing-up as I can devise (I), comment on the structural (II) and motivating (III) factors at work in the assembly, speak briefly of the future (IV), and conclude with a discussion of the church as faithful and apostate (V).

The summary with which I begin is borrowed in part from Edgar Trexler's editorial in the October issue of *The Lutheran*. In addition to attempting to be neutral, that author has the advantage of being able to compare Kansas City with Chicago in 1989 and Orlando in 1991, which I cannot do. This was my first ELCA churchwide assembly (except for the constituting convention in 1987 which was different in kind). I shall later refer to comparable events I have experienced, but these are more distant in time: LCA conventions in the seventies, the Second Vatican Council in the sixties, and various LWF and WCC meetings.

Description

Compared to Orlando and Chicago, the assembly in Kansas City, according to Trexler, was a bore. Little new ground was broken, and what was expected to happen did happen. It seems unlikely that any of its actions will make much difference. The social statements on environmental questions and on "Race, Ethnicity, and Culture," for example, change little in the church because "care for the earth and opposition to racism are [already] apple pie issues. Any spark in the theological education report was removed by behind-the-scenes compromises. The stewardship strategy largely pulled under one umbrella most of the things already being done.... The ministry study may open up some windows," [such as the ordination of deacons when or if this is warranted by ecumenical developments], but

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for the most part it comes out "at the same place where the merger commission would have if it had chosen to settle the subject." Ecumenism was on the back burner at this assembly, and is not even mentioned in the editorial. What is already in process with reference to Anglicans, Reformed, and Roman Catholics will not be presented for action until 1995 and 1997. In short, this assembly was "more like a rally than a legislative body."

It was, to make explicit what Trexler implies, not only a rally, but a rubber-stamping rally. The leadership was consistently in control. Its set-backs were rare and peripheral, and it won by large majorities on all matters of importance. The assembly's role was to approve what headquarters had decided.

One apparent exception was the New England Synod's memorial asking for the ELCA officially to deplore and repudiate Luther's anti-Judaism. This memorial was approved overwhelmingly in preference to a blander action favored by the ecumenical office, but it was balanced by a statement on Palestinian rights (which, to be sure, also affirmed the right of the Israeli state to exist), and thus was consistent with the assembly's inclusivism (of which more later). There was "Something for Everyone," to quote the headline on the cover of the October *Lutheran*.

Structures

Rubber-stamping, to be sure, is not unique to Kansas City nor to ELCA assemblies. Large bodies composed mostly of strangers with a great mass of complicated business to transact in a strictly limited period of time have no alternative short of chaos but to follow the leaders in the hope that these are reasonably trustworthy and competent. That is what was done by the old LCA and ALC conventions and regularly occurs in other ecclesiastical governance gatherings. The one exception in my experience was the Second Vatican Council, but there the bishops met for months on end (a total of twelve in the four sessions from '62 to '65). They had time to become a deliberative body similar in some respects to a parliament or congress. They and their *periti* developed enough cohesion and expertise to defeat the bureaucracy's (that is, the Vatican Curia's) proposals and prepare and pass counter-proposals. Short of a council of this old-fashioned type, however, there is no way to overturn bureaucratic hegemony. This is a structural problem which exists even when staff members are not in the least interested in increasing their own authority, but only in selflessly serving the church. Knowledge is power, and those who have the time, staff and money to study issues beforehand acquire a quasi-monopoly of it.²

The power of bureaucrats, to be sure, is not unlimited. Sometimes they mistake an assembly's mood, but even then it is exceedingly difficult to organize effective opposition from the floor. While this problem is general, it needs to be noted that it is greater in the ELCA than elsewhere. The representational (i.e., "quota") system ensures that there is little carry-over in membership from one assembly to another. The participants lack relevant experience and are also to an exceptional degree unacquainted with each other. This intensifies the problem of elections at the national level. The difficulty is compounded by the wildly inflated number of churchwide officers chosen by the assembly, ninety-one in all, a group much larger than in other

comparable gatherings, and quite unmanageable technically if it were not for the marvels of the electronic age. Elections become a sham under these circumstances. They are equivalent to coin flipping for the electors, and of appointment from the perspective of the nominating bodies. Nominations from the floor are complicated and rarely successful. One of the two candidates officially nominated for each position, both usually unknown to the assembly despite the brief biographies distributed with their names, almost always wins. Some of those for whom I voted, I later discovered, would have been at the bottom of my list if I had known more about them. Further, apart from the official leaders, there were no figures at Kansas City widely enough known to serve

as nonofficial rallying points. Even delegates from former LCA congregations, not to mention ALC ones, did not know, for example, who William Lazareth or James Crumley are. The current officials are the ones with name recognition, and even if not themselves crowd swayers, they decide who will wear prophets' mantles in the assembly's eye.

Moreover, elected participants were officially told both orally and in print not to organize or think of themselves as delegates or representatives of regions or interest groups (a precept tacitly understood not to apply to advocates of social, multicultural and women's concerns, and also ignored, though less openly, by smaller groups opposed to officialdom on such issues as theological education and quotas). Even synodical caucuses were viewed unenthusiastically by some bishops. Elected participants, it was emphasized, are simply members of the ELCA at large chosen to vote their own consciences and opinions at the national assembly. As Secretary Almen explains on p. 5 of *Reports and Records*, I/1, they are to regard themselves as "voting members" rather than "delegates" in order to avoid "politicization."

The actual effect, some people at Kansas City thought, was to turn the assembly into a week-long series of Gallup polls in which the voting members were supposed to serve as a cross-section of the ELCA. The comparison fails, however, because the quota system statistically skews the cross-section, and the pollsters whose crucial role is to decide on the questions to ask are not independent investigators but part of the establishment. Some observers were reminded of the sixties when participatory rather than representative democracy was emphasized, and non-party management became popular in disregard of its tendency to slide into one-party rule.

These anxieties may be misplaced, but they are understandable. The bias in favor of novelty which presided at the birth of

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the ELCA has affinities to the ideological utopianisms which are now collapsing around the world. As a Presbyterian observer of the merger process has put it to me, the ELCA had the misfortune to be formed a few years too early or a few years too late. Before or after the eighties it would have maintained memory and continuity better than it now does. More of the heritage, so some non-Lutherans believe, was to be found in the Lutheran predecessor bodies than among Methodists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians, but now these other denominations have the advantage of retaining more traditional polities. These do not guarantee faithfulness, but they can be helpful in efforts to prevent further erosion. While different from each other, they all developed gradually over a

period of time rather than being invented *de novo* by a planning commission, and they have existed long enough to prove their adaptability in changing circumstances in contrast to the experimental ELCA structures. The odds are that they will better survive future stresses. Among other things, their assemblies, whatever their faults, have a greater structural capacity to function as legislative bodies rather than rubber-stamping rallies (even though, it must be added, they are also quite capable of lapsing into the latter role).

The weakness of church assemblies over against their leadership is in some respects similar to that of shareholders' meetings in face of big corporation management, but in the case of the ELCA, there is a radical difference: management also is weakened. This may in part be because of the well-known tendency of no-party or one-party systems to minimize potentially divisive arguments and thus not know what is going on in the constituency, but there is also another reason. Participatory democracy as institutionalized in this church turns national headquarters into a collection of pressure groups struggling with each other for shrinking resources. Even previously central matters such as theological education or global mission become factional concerns on the same level as others. The inevitable personal difficulties involved in setting priorities and coordinating activities are complicated by structural ones. So far there have been enough capable leaders and staff to keep the dysfunctional machinery going, but whether sufficiently competent and dedicated replacements can be found and appointed in the future remains to be seen.

The voting members were largely unaware of these problems. Only a few knew, for example, of the difficulties involved in the first draft of the sexuality statement, and were thus unprepared for the furor created by its post-assembly release at

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the end of October. For those with experience of the care for ordinary parishioners with which sensitive matters (e.g., the dialogues with Rome) were generally handled in the predecessor bodies, this lack of coordination leading to ignorance of the *sensus fidelium* is perhaps the ELCA's most troubling structural defect.

As for the minority who were concerned about structural problems, attention was focused on the quota system. While this was not an item on the original agenda, it could not be ignored: eleven synods presented memorials proposing changes of various sorts. The leadership dealt with the issue by getting the assembly to mandate the Executive Council to receive opinions from various bodies (including bishops, seminaries and the women's and the multi-cultural commissions) and to formulate possible recommendations for 1995. Perhaps Trexler is right in saying that this opening of the representational question to debate may be a wild card with unpredictable consequences, but I came to think at Kansas City that abolishing quotas at this late date may make little real difference. Quotas no doubt accelerated the trends already present in the predecessor bodies towards becoming "just another mainline American denomination," but now that the ELCA has achieved that status, their elimination will not by itself reverse present trends.

The chief motive of the lay people I talked to (and it was on the laity I focused) seemed to be the desire, first, to keep the kids in church, second, attract outsiders and, third, help society and humanity at large. The last concern was important but driven by the first two motives.

The majority at Kansas City approved those trends, and there is no reason to suppose that a non-quotaized assembly would reverse their judgment. This becomes apparent when one considers the motives for approval. What I learned, or thought I learned, about these motivating factors is crucial to understanding what may become of this church, and it is to this that I shall now turn.

Motives

It was at first puzzling to me why the majority seemed enthusiastic or at least content to be part of a ratifying rally rather than delegates to a deliberative body, but not for long. Very few had experience of other ways of conducting ecclesiastical affairs at the national level, and even if they had, it was obvious in this setting that rubber-stamping (accompanied by enough discus-

sion to assure the voting members that the leaders' homework had at least been extensive) was the only way of getting through the week's business. Further, looked at as a rally, it was well organized, effectively led, electronically marvelous, and contained inspiring elements for every conceivable taste. It is a heady experience to gather with a thousand personally congenial fellow Lutheran voting members, not to mention staff and visitors, sent by five million other Lutherans from all over the country to pray, play and consult about this church. One begins cheering for the home team. The ELCA ceases to be a remote abstraction invented by eggheads less than a decade ago and becomes the community to which one belongs, and to and for which one feels responsible. Even critics were emotionally coopted; and anyone who believes that communal loyalty is essential to human well being will not say that this was entirely bad.

The danger, on the other hand, is that the gap between the assembly and the rest of the church is increased. The voting members seemed to identify with the national leadership, not the local congregations from which they came. One middle-aged Midwestern businessman with whom I talked seemed conservative on everything except church affairs. In regard to these, he was in favor of any measures which would shake up the traditionalists in his own parish, and was delighted that the leadership and assembly were on his side. The brand of Lutheranism they were promoting would sell better to outsiders, he thought, than the stick-in-the-mud varieties the traditionalists favored. A younger businessman from another part of the country, active in his congregation and synod, was unreservedly enthusiastic about headquarters (known to him, it is true, only at Kansas City) but not about the rest of the church. I have cited affluent white laymen, not because they were more impatient than other conservative churchgoers, but because one expects them to be less so. They best illustrate the alienation from ordinary parishioners seemingly felt by the assembly majority.

What are the reasons, not only for the majority's enthusiasm, but for its progressivism? The chief motive of the lay people I talked to (and it was on the laity I focused) seemed to be the desire, first, to keep the kids in church, second, attract outsiders and, third, help society and humanity at large. The last concern was important but driven by the first two motives. All sorts of socially significant causes were supported. In addition to the statements on care of creation and on racism, synodical memorials were passed supporting the Brady gun-control bill, ecumenical efforts to end the Yugoslav conflict, the nascent agreements between the Palestinians and Israelis, action on behalf of women and children in poverty, and opposition to harrassment because of sexual orientation. Nothing likely to provoke controversy came to the floor. No one, for example, was bold enough to anticipate President Clinton's November speech in Memphis by proposing action (twenty years after Senator Moynihan made the issue publicly prominent) on family disintegration. To be sure, whether the resolutions were bland or biting may make little difference. Most people I talked to doubted their influence and agreed that working through non-ELCA or non-church channels might often be more cost effective. Yet they thought it important that the church go on record in favor of these good causes in order to make clear that the ELCA is not part of the conservative right. I got the impression, rightly or wrongly, that the chief concern was to burnish the church's public image rather than directly to combat society's ills. The contrast between this attitude and the social

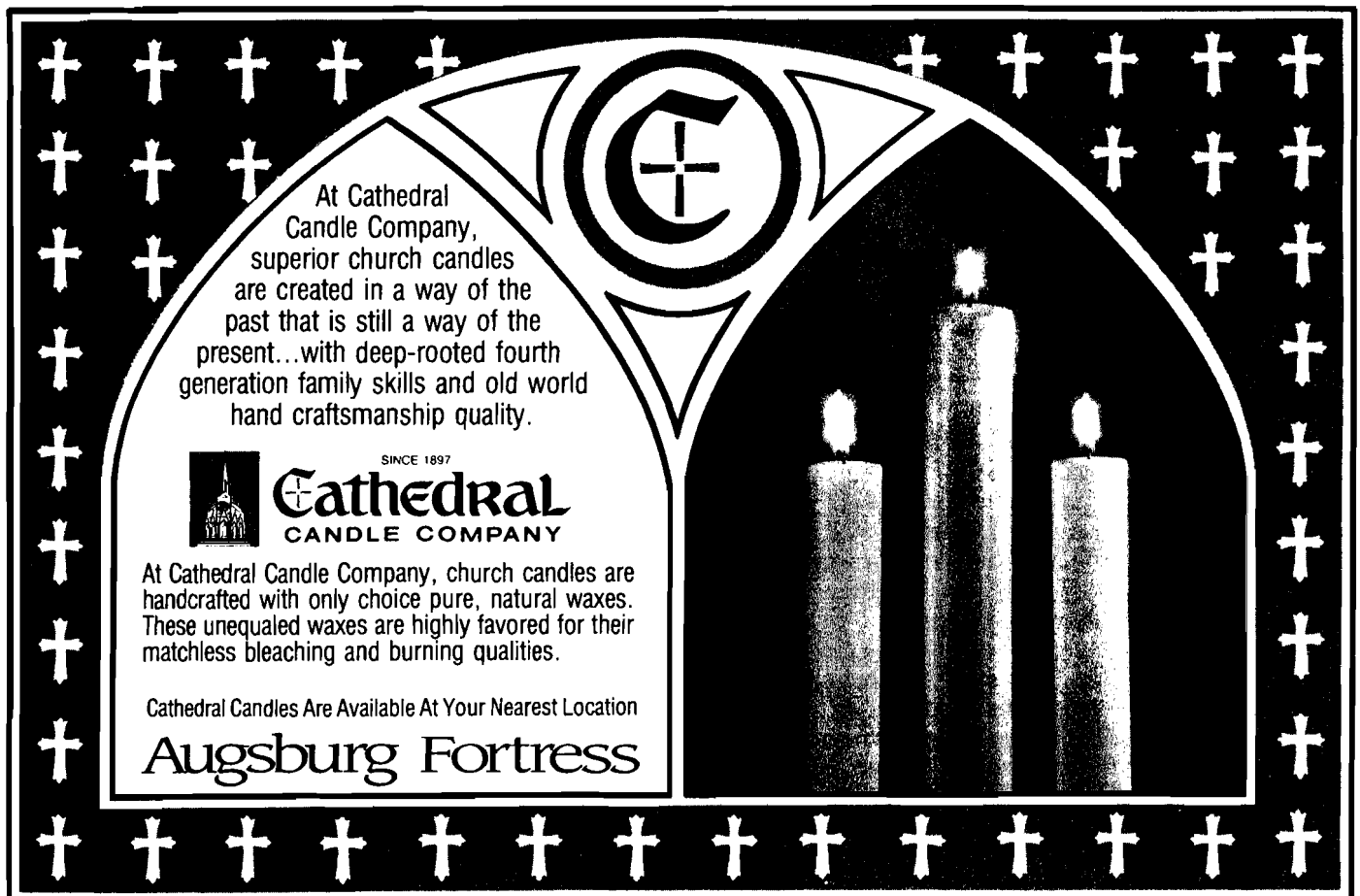
gospel enthusiasms of my student days struck me as immense. Then it was a matter of Christians helping to transform society: we marched on picket lines rather than lobbying for church resolutions. Now interest seems to focus on making the church a place where well-intentioned people feel comfortable.

This same concern to keep their children in the church and attract outsiders accounts, in most of those I had a chance to ask, for the assembly's inclusivism (understanding by this, not simply openness and equality for all no matter what their gender, color, culture or language, but the general principle that the more pluralism and diversity the better in theology, worship, and life styles). To exclude from fellowship for any reason people who do not impose their codes and preferences on you is to deny the Gospel. It is to be rigid, bigoted, legalistic, uncharitable, unLutheran and unChristian. Only a few voting members that I met were consciously and articulately (that is, ideologically) committed to inclusivism thus understood, but it was part of the cultural atmosphere breathed unawares by the majority. If one is not inclusive, so in effect I heard devout Christians saying, one will drive away the children and neighbors for whom Christ died. This might be called affective or pietistic inclusivism in contrast to the ideological variety, and it is easy to sympathize, not least if one is, as I am, of Augustana Synod pietistic background.


Inclusivist ideology as well as sentiment was, to be sure, also present in Kansas City, though for the most part discreetly. Only in the worship area did it become blatant, so blatant that it could not be kept out of even the October *Lutheran*. "Many expressed distress with the lack of recognizable hymns and liturgies ...[they] said they found fewer than 10 familiar hymns among the 80" in assembly worship books (18). "Worship styles were so eclectic that some ethnic groups did not know their own songs" (66). "Many complained of thinly veiled and distracting political agendas in sermons" (19).

In some cases the agendas were not thinly veiled. One oratorically gifted college student preached to the whole assembly at midday prayer in a fashion which would have pleased strident gays but distressed even members of the Network (the ELCA gay rights advocacy group) with whom I talked. They understandably feared that their cause would be harmed by the student's invocation of the Episcopal Bishop Spong of New Jersey as the great theological luminary of our day and as a definite improvement over St. Paul. The preacher at the Sunday eucharistic service, the liturgical centerpiece of the assembly, was less crude but more sweeping. She started with a moving account of her own awakening to the unChristian character of the caste system in which the ancient Syrian Orthodox Church

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in southern India in which she grew up has become entangled in the course of its nearly two thousand years on the subcontinent, but then used this as a springboard for what was verbally even if not in intention an attack on all forms of orthodoxy. It was bad enough to hear concern for Confessions dismissed as, in effect, bigotedly exclusivist, but the ecumenical insensitivity was for me even more painful. There was no recognition that there are those who remain Syrian Orthodox and return to India (I have known some as students) who are as opposed to the caste system as is this young Pennsylvania Lutheran pastor.

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Yet most of the people I talked to thought the sermon was wonderful. They had been deeply moved, and understandably so, by the autobiographical portions and by the triumphally liberating role of Lutheranism in the preacher's life. One voting member said it was among the ten best sermons in his experience, and was surprised when I suggested the preacher was unnecessarily offensive to those who regard themselves as orthodox or confessional. "Oh, yes," he said, "she did use words like 'shit' and 'crap'" (I do not remember hearing them), "but it is good for the fuddy-duddies to get shaken up." His was a typical expression, as further conversation made clear, of a pervasive desire not to be critical of anything which went under the banner of inclusivism.

One defense of the inclusivist emphasis in the worship program was that it was genuinely all-embracing: it included preachers from the center and the right as well as the left. The brother/sister team of Tim and Pat Lull spoke each day before the whole assembly on Luther's treatment of the creed in the *Small Catechism* in a way which would have been acceptable in the predecessor bodies (as well as to those who disagree with some of the speakers' views as expressed outside the assembly). Two evangelical catholics, Stephen Bouman and William Lazareth, were among those assigned to preach to the 200-300 who normally gathered for the evening eucharists (though Lazareth, unfortunately, was not able to be at Kansas City). One sermon to the full assembly by a black pastor was farther to the right — closer to Billy Graham — than some confessional Lutherans would like, and another, by a white, emphasized

"Jesus only" (on the basis of Paul's Areopagus speech as recorded in Acts) in a way which reminded some of old Lutheran Bible Institute pietism. By including such preachers, Kansas City may well have reached farther to the right (though not anywhere near as far as to the left) than would have happened at LCA conventions I remember. Inclusivism has room for everyone who is willing to cohabit.

The danger, to state the obvious, is that of incoherence, of a confusion of tongues, which deprives a church of recognizable identity and of community-forming potential. This was most dramatically evident when the "Jesus only" sermon I have mentioned was immediately followed (without consultation with the preacher) by perhaps the least Christian hymn Brian Wren ever wrote, "Bring Many Names." Unlike maternal qualities, which the Bible does ascribe to God, some of the divine names celebrated in this hymn have no scriptural precedents (e.g., "old aching God" and "young growing God"). Jesus Christ is not mentioned (not even as a way, much less the way in which Christians know God), and the deity of which the names are predicated is an unknown "joyful darkness." Thus text and sermon were contradicted by what was sung; for while the biblical God is descriptively inexhaustible, his identity is unmistakable. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus, of Mary, Rachel, Leah, Rebecca and Sarah, who rescued Israel from Egypt and raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Whether this was the one and only God worshiped at Kansas City was not clear. Sometimes that God seemed to have many identities or a multiple split personality. Any life based on trust in him would be incoherent to the point of insanity (or else polytheistic which, biblically speaking, would be worse).

Some of those at Kansas City who believe worship is central to Christianity suspected in this liturgical inclusivism a deliberate plot to destroy the ELCA's heritage of faith. The truth is less sinister, but perhaps more serious. Not even the worship committee, so I have been assured by people who know its membership, was ideologically inclusivist: it simply lacked criteria for saying "no." Further, it seems that the ELCA as represented by its national leadership and assembly does not think of worship as central (in this respect, oddly enough, resembling many of the conservatives at Vatican II who thought changes in the mass unimportant). It seeks to avoid heterodoxy in its official pronouncements, but anything goes in the area of liturgy (though at Kansas City, it should be noted, the LBW eucharistic service was violated by additions, such as the native American smudge ceremony at the Sunday celebration, rather than by omissions). The more diversity the better because it might draw more people into the church.

The majority, it needs to be repeated, seem oblivious to the dangers. They are not ideological inclusivists consciously opposed to confessional adherence. Over half the assembly's voting members, according to an electronically conducted poll, were drilled in the *Small Catechism* in preparation for confirmation. They are more thoroughly socialized into Lutheranism than most ELCA members. The tradition is so completely a part of their blood and bone, it would seem, that they cannot imagine it not being transmitted providing one gets people, especially their own children but also non-Lutherans, into the church. The possibility that indiscriminate inclusivity may irreparably erode the heritage does not occur to them. They have no room

for such thoughts because all their attention is focused on attracting the wayward and outsiders.

The Future

Assuming this description of structures and motivating forces is reasonably accurate, it is possible to be brief in speaking of the future. First, current trends in the church towards, for example, identity-destroying inclusivism will continue as long as the same trends are dominant in that part of the national culture of which the ELCA, like other once mainline liberal denominations, is a part. More traditional structures, even the historic episcopacy in the case of the Anglicans, have not enabled these other bodies to resist the fashions of the present. There thus seems even less hope for the polity of the ELCA, belated offspring of the sixties that it is. The unreflective conservatism of the constituency is eroding and will less and less effectively oppose the market-driven orientation which prevailed at Kansas City (i.e., the desire to sell the Gospel by making it attractive to the self-styled "enlightened" sectors of the wider society).

The problem of accommodating to cultural fashions, it should be noted, is not confined to churches thought of as on the left, as the ELCA increasingly is. The same desire exists on the right, as TV evangelists vividly illustrate. Their audience, however, is different, and therefore also their temptations and corruptions. Both sides, so commentators such as Stanley Hauerwas say (and they seem to me basically right in their diagnoses even if not always in their prescriptions), suffer from the dilemma of behaving like Constantinian churches in an increasingly post-Christian situation. They conform to the culture in order to sell the Gospel, but in a situation where Christianity less and less forms the culture. Constantinian marketing strategies always risk eviscerating the faith, but now they do so more radically than before on both right and left.

The confusion is increased by the contemporary polarization in church and culture. Because of my background, I am especially aware of this in the ecumenical sphere. Proposals for closer relations with the Reformed, Anglicans and Roman Catholics, for example, are crafted for the most part by ecumenists whose concern is for reconciled diversity within the particular fellowship of the specific Jewish rabbi who prayed for the unity of his disciples in John 17. Much of their support, however, comes from inclusivists who blur rather than reconcile intra-Christian differences, emphasize what is now often called the "wider" ecumenism of interreligious unity, and often talk as if Jesus Christ were a perhaps replaceable symbol of universal goodwill rather than the one and only Immanuel. With such friends, ecumenism becomes suspect on the right. The left also, however, looks at it askance. Ecumenists are so old-fashioned as to take doctrine seriously, and they believe in treating all churches for whom Scripture and the early creeds are professedly normative as parts of the one body of Christ. This brings them into uncomfortable proximity to traditionalists of the Miniver Cheevy type who also defend creeds and confessions but want to reprimarize the past rather than retrieve its strengths while correcting its weaknesses. That the fullness of the heritage is neither rightist or leftist seems

incomprehensible in our day to both fashionable conservatives and fashionable liberals.

Yet there is hope. Fashionable trends, even those of long duration, sometimes mutate unexpectedly with totally unforeseen consequences, as the *annus mirabilis* of 1989 has recently reminded us. Almost everyone was surprised at the sudden collapse of Marxist totalitarianism, and then astonished all over again by the speed with which its trans-national universalism dissolved in the Balkans and the Soviet Union into vicious tribalisms. Non-Marxist heirs of the Enlightenment with their liberal inclusivist outlook are helpless in the face of these developments. Their position is not an option in the East. The choice in that part of the world during this part of history is between particularisms whether Christian or non-Christian, and if Christian, between ecumenical or anti-ecumenical ones.

Perhaps the same clarity will come to the West. As far as the United States is concerned, increasing numbers of observers, not least from overseas, predict that the erosion of common standards and of the intermediate communities of family, neighborhood and church will, if unchecked, make this society unviable.³ For those who think this way, it is the communal transmission of distinctive heritages rather than their pluralistic dissolution which is attractive. Unapologetically distinctive Christianity rather than accommodated varieties may seem in the future the only kind worth bothering about.

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This reason for hope, however, perhaps applies more to other denominations than to the ELCA. If their polities have greater potential for handing on the faith, as was earlier suggested, they will be less likely to disintegrate in future upheavals. On the other hand, history is cunning, as Hegel would say; or, to speak biblically, God often uses the weak for his purposes. The very fact that ELCA structures can unravel more readily than tougher and better-tested ones may open up the possibility of a quicker and more radical restructuring. Learning from the pre-Constantinian period becomes more and more important as we pass into a post-Constantinian age, and the fluidity of Lutheran polity in the past and the inadequacies of ELCA polity in the present may make this easier. ELCA bishops, for example, now have absolutely no constitutionally mandated corporate role on the national level, but they are being pushed willy-nilly into the power vacuum left by the dysfunctions of mandated

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structures. In contrast to the ninety-one national officers chosen by the assembly at Kansas City, the bishops are not quotaized and are popularly elected. They are the only group within the church whose members know both one another and the grass roots. No other body has their potential both to speak for the rank and file and constitute a deliberative and decision-making assembly comparable to councils and synods in the first centuries. One can imagine the bishops becoming the core of a constitutional convention which would draw on the evangelically catholic resources of Lutheranism in behalf of Reformation churches as a whole. This is only one possible scenario. There are also other ways in which Lutherans might help re-attach American Protestantism to the biblical and patristic roots of historic Christianity. These are fond hopes, to be sure, and not to be relied on, but dreams must also be dreamt if we are to be open to God's future.

Hopes, however, need to be balanced by warnings. Even if outside observers are right in thinking that more of the evangelical and catholic substance of the faith has so far survived in Lutheranism than in most of Protestantism, this substance may now, as our earlier analysis suggests, be hemorrhaging faster in the ELCA than elsewhere. If the withering of the Lutheran heritage progresses too far, communal revival will be impossible when the rains return. The analogy is risky, but it is hard not to think of good Christians in Germany who were blind to the nature of Nazism until it was too late to struggle successfully against it. Similarly, it may well be that the majority at Kansas City will become disenchanted with indiscriminate inclusivism once they realize that it subverts the communal tradition which is part of their personal and social identity, but by then the damage may be irreversible. The ELCA as a national body might cease to be even potentially a bearer of the Reformation witness to the Gospel. The torch would pass to other hands within the symphony of the church catholic. Like Israel's Northern Kingdom, this church can be cut off from God's people.

Faithfulness and Apostasy

What then should those do who want to be unapologetically Lutheran Christians? Is the ELCA faithful enough to call for continued support, or so apostate that they are free, perhaps even obligated, to leave?

There are three possible answers depending on whether one thinks of the relation of faithfulness and apostasy as, first, that

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of mutual exclusion or, second, that of two different perspectives on the same reality or, third, that of a blend which is neither clearly faithful nor clearly apostate.

The first or dichotomous view is perhaps the most common in our polarized age. If faithfulness to the Gospel is to be found here and there (and perhaps even commonly) in the ELCA ministry of Word and Sacrament, then it cannot be apostate, and if it is apostate, then no faithfulness anywhere can be attributed to it. In this mutually exclusive approach, the debate centers on whether this church has yet passed the divide separating faithfulness from apostasy.

The double-perspectival (or, more simply, bifocal) view leads to a different conclusion. This outlook is an ecclesiological extension of Luther's understanding of believers as

simultaneously justified and sinners. Churches are faithful in virtue of God's faithfulness, not their own righteousness. When judged by God's law they are apostate, but faithful from the eschatological perspective of the Gospel promises.

This bifocal understanding provided the Lutheran Reformers with theological reasons, confessionally formulated at Augsburg, for refusing to sever communion with Rome. They left it to the pope to do the excommunicating. Yet, as Luther reminded the sectarians in his treatise "Concerning Rebaptism"⁴ of 1528, the church under the tyranny of the Renaissance papacy (which as the anti-christ was worse than apostate) remained the church. Within her is found the one, holy, catholic and apostolic communion of saints. Everything we have, Luther says, came from her. She recited the creed, prayed the *Pater Noster*, preserved the riches of the life-giving sacraments and holy Scriptures even if she dreadfully misused them. She was not apostate though ruled by the Scarlet Woman, the Whore of Babylon, and that is why it was apostasy to sever oneself voluntarily from her. No contemporary church, including the Roman communion, is the *Christentum* of Luther's day, but those who have learned from him in these matters will normally strive to remain within that part of the church, including the ELCA, in which God has placed them. On this all confessional Lutherans can agree, but especially those of evangelical-catholic persuasion.

In addition to this bifocal outlook for which every church is both redeemed and judged, both faithful and apostate, we need a third way of thinking which highlights differences. In this third outlook, faithfulness and apostasy, to repeat, are thought of as mixed together in varying proportions. The two may be so balanced, according to what the book of Revelation says about the church in Laodicea, that the blend is neither hot nor cold,

but nauseously lukewarm. The Lord spews the Laodicean church out of his mouth (3:16). Yet this rough treatment, as the following verses make clear, has as its purpose correction rather than rejection. God has not yet abandoned Laodicea, but stands at the door and knocks (3:20). One can scarcely call this church faithful, and yet it is not simply apostate. It continues to be part of the elect people whom God has chosen to be his witnesses and with whom he continues to plead even when they are faithless.

Laodicea, it could be argued, is the closest thing in the Bible to the ELCA in convention assembled at Kansas City. Indiscriminate inclusiveness in which faithfulness and apostasy are heedlessly conjoined even in worship results in insipidity. Punishment is to be expected but, as in the case of Laodicea, for the sake of repentance.

The analogy can be carried farther. The Bible does not summon the faithful to leave Laodicea, nor to retire from the fray into separated conventicles of the like-minded. Rather, it would seem, they are to labor for the welfare of the church in which God has placed them.

The application to the ELCA is clear. If and when the collapse of present structures comes, the rebuilding will be done by networks of those who have been working beforehand to prepare the way. The chief burdens will fall on the generation younger than I, and especially on those most exposed to the pressures of polarization, particularly women and minority members. To all evangelical Catholics I would like to say: be wary of cooption by establishments, but also do not let disgust with the structures make you withdraw from the struggle to work within, influence, and if possible, change them. Do this for the sake of the flocks now wandering in the wilderness, in the name of the Good Shepherd of the sheep, and praying to the One who sent him, for the Spirit's guidance. **LF**

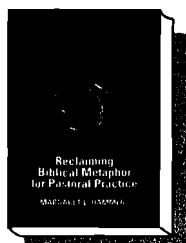
— Endnotes —

1. This is a re-written version of an address given at the 13th Inter-Lutheran Forum Banquet, White Plains, NY, Nov. 7, 1993, sponsored by the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau.
2. Given the fact that it is the bureaucracies which control the funding of studies undertaken by American denominations, it is not surprising that they themselves are rarely studied. Good dissertations on ecclesiastical bureaucratic power were done in the 1950s, but, as far as I know, little since then.
3. See, for example, the collection of articles in *Foreign Affairs*, September/October, 1993.
4. American Edition, vol. 40.

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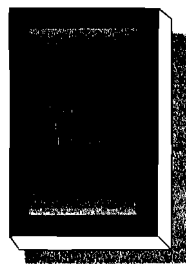
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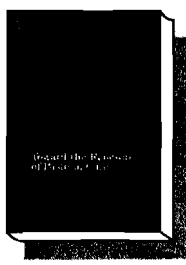
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