

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)

Comparative Religions Class – Immanuel Lutheran College

Used by permission of Professor David Lau

Lutherans began to come to America as early as 1624. They settled in Delaware, Pennsylvania, and New York at first, later in Georgia and South Carolina and the upper midwest: Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Iowa, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, South Dakota, North Dakota. Some of the Lutheran settlers were confessional Lutherans, but most of them were greatly influenced by pietism and rationalism. One of the early leaders was Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, who organized some of the early Lutherans into a church body.

There have been many different Lutheran church bodies in America through the years: General Synod, Tennessee Synod, Ohio Synod, General Council, Iowa Synod, Norwegian Synod, Augustana Synod, American Lutheran Church. But today the majority of Lutherans are found in one very large church body known as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), which began its existence in 1988. The membership of the ELCA is 5,038,006, with 17,706 clergy. Most of the large Lutheran congregations in Eau Claire are members of the ELCA: First Lutheran, Grace Lutheran, Trinity Lutheran, St. John's Lutheran, Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Immanuel Lutheran, Hope Lutheran, Our Savior's Lutheran. In Canada the largest Lutheran church body is the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC), which has 199,236 members, with 866 clergy. This church body also tolerates all kinds of false teaching and ungodly behavior.

The ELCA claims that it is a Lutheran church and that it honors the Lutheran confessions. But what is actually taught and practiced by these churches is not confessional Lutheranism. Several recent books supply the evidence that the ELCA is a grossly false-teaching church body. The information printed in the following paragraphs is taken mainly from two books: *What's Going On Among the Lutherans?* (1992) and *WELS and Other Lutherans* (1995).

The Inspiration and Inerrancy of Scripture:

The Bible itself teaches that all Scripture has been breathed out by God and is therefore inspired. Since all of Scripture is God's Word, it is clear that all of it is true. There are no errors or contradictions in the Bible. We therefore confess that the Bible **is** God's Word; to say merely that the Bible **contains** God's Word is insufficient.

The dominant position in the ELCA is that there are human errors and contradictions in the Bible. We may call the Bible "inspired" but we may also call the traditions of the church "inspired" or the testimony of Christians today "inspired." When the ELCA was organized, its founders very carefully and deliberately left out any reference to the Bible as the "inerrant" Word of God. None of its seminary teachers or leaders proclaim that the Bible is truth in everything that it says. This, of course, influences everything else that the ELCA does. When a doctrinal controversy arises, the ELCA has no final court of appeal, that is, no inerrant Bible from which to draw its teachings and practices.

An ELCA textbook indicates what is being taught in ELCA schools: "Today it is impossible to assume the historicity of the things recorded. What the biblical authors report is not accepted as a literal transcript of the factual course of events. Therefore,

critical scholars inquire behind the text and attempt to reconstruct the real history that took place."

Creation:

The Bible teaches that God created all things, including man, in six ordinary days. Therefore to say that man evolved from lower forms of life is plainly contrary to Scripture. It is also clear from Scripture that Adam and Eve were real persons, and that their fall into sin took place just as Genesis describes it.

Most ELCA teachers, however, consider the story of creation in Genesis to be a myth. That is, it is a nice story to try to explain how we got here, but, of course, it did not really happen. The ELCA tolerates and even promotes the concept of theistic evolution: that is, that God created things by means of evolution. Adam and Eve are presented as symbols of humanity, not real people. Other stories in the Bible, such as the stories of Noah, Jonah, and Job are also myths intended to teach some moral lesson. Of course, they are not factual.

The Five Books of Moses:

Jesus Himself taught that the first five books of the Bible were written by Moses.

The ELCA, however, is dominated by teachers who believe that the first five books of the Bible were written centuries after Moses died. They follow the so-called historical-critical approach, which claims that the first five books of the Bible and later books as well were derived from various sources commonly identified as J, E, D, and P.

The Words of Jesus:

As disciples of Christ, we of course believe that Jesus actually said all the statements attributed to Him in the New Testament. He Himself said that He would give the Holy Spirit to His apostles to remind them of the things He had said to them, so that we might know them and come to faith in Christ through these words.

Many teachers in the ELCA, however, take the position that most of the statements attributed to Jesus in the Gospels were not actually spoken by Him but were added to the Bible by early Christians in their desire to honor their Lord. Of course, this means in plain English that they were liars. Perhaps you have heard of the "Jesus Seminar." This is a group of scholars who are putting out a book of five Gospels (including a Gospel of Thomas with the usual four) that claim to separate the real teachings of Jesus from the teachings that are found in the Gospels. These scholars have concluded, for example, that the only word of the Lord's Prayer that Jesus actually said was the word "Father." The ELCA also is represented among the scholars of the "Jesus Seminar.

The Virgin Birth of Christ:

The Bible teaches clearly that Jesus was born of the virgin Mary, and that therefore He did not have a biological father on this earth.

The ELCA, however, tolerates the view that Jesus was not born of a virgin, but that later Christians ascribed His birth to a virgin in order to honor His name. The real facts in the story are that Joseph may have been His father, or perhaps a Roman soldier was His

father. The ELCA textbook says about the virgin birth: "It is important not to get bogged down in biology, but to read it as a symbol witnessing the truth of the kerygma."

The Deity of Christ:

The Bible teaches clearly in many places that Jesus is God, even as we confess in the Nicene Creed.

Many in the ELCA, however, are willing to concede that the doctrine of Jesus' deity is not taught in the Bible but that it was a doctrine developed by the early Christians in order to honor Jesus. On this point the ELCA textbook says: "The notion of the preexistent Son of God becoming a human being in the womb of a virgin and then returning to his heavenly home is bound up with the mythological picture of the world that clashes with our modern scientific world view." And again the textbook says: "The preexistence of Christ is an integral part of the myth of the incarnation." We have to realize that when ELCA theologians talk about Jesus being God, they do not really mean that Jesus was and is true God from all eternity. They mean only that He is given the name of God in order to honor Him as someone special.

The Atonement:

We believe, as the Bible teaches, that God punished Jesus on the cross in our place. Jesus died for our sins as our Substitute. God forgives us our sins for Christ's sake, that is, because Jesus died in our place. Jesus was our Substitute also in His life, keeping the law of God and being perfectly obedient throughout His life.

Many ELCA theologians, however, teach only that Jesus died for us as a man might die for his friends. They do not want to think that God would be so "unjust" as to punish Jesus for our sins. One ELCA theologian taught in an ELCA textbook: "Jesus came and died because God is merciful, not to make God merciful. We killed him because he forgave sins, not to make forgiveness possible."

The Resurrection:

The tomb was empty on Sunday morning, because Jesus rose physically from the dead and showed Himself alive to His disciples. Our bodies also will rise from the dead on the Last Day.

Some ELCA teachers, however, present Jesus' resurrection as a spiritual resurrection, not as a physical resurrection. Whether the tomb was empty or not is no concern to them. They would maintain that we can believe in Jesus' resurrection even if His body remains in its tomb. One graduate from an ELCA seminary claims that when he graduated from the seminary, he did not believe in Jesus' physical resurrection, nor did most of his classmates, nor did any of his teachers. The Bible, however, teaches us that if we deny Jesus' resurrection from the dead, we are not Christians at all.

The New Morality:

The Bible clearly teaches that fornication is a sin. This includes extramarital and premarital sexual intercourse. Homosexuality is condemned in Scripture, both the lust for it and the act itself. There is forgiveness for the penitent adulterer and the penitent homosexual. The Holy Spirit gives power to the repentant Christian to amend his sinful life and change his ways.

The ELCA, however, tolerates the view that extramarital and premarital sexual relations are not always sinful, and that homosexuality is an alternate lifestyle. Many ELCA leaders are even willing to accept the idea of homosexual pastors, that is, pastors who openly promote homosexuality and practice it in their lives. An ELCA study document says: "No (Bible) passage specifically addresses the question facing the church today: the morality of a just, loving, committed relationship between persons of the same sex."

One ELCA statement declares: "This church recognizes that there can be sound reasons for ending a pregnancy through induced abortion." Among such reasons they lists threats to the physical life of the mother, cases of rape or incest, and the likelihood of fetal abnormalities.

Another ELCA statement says: "We question whether the death penalty can be administered justly. ... We oppose the death penalty."

The Way to Heaven:

The Bible clearly teaches that there is only one way to be saved. Jesus is the Way; no one goes to the Father except through Him. He is the only Savior for all mankind. Those who die without faith in Him are lost eternally.

The ELCA, however, tolerates the increasingly popular view that sincere followers of non-Christian religions may also get to heaven. In fact, universalism is very popular today: namely, the view that eventually all will go to heaven, and that there is no eternal hell.

Other Doctrines and Practices:

The ELCA calls itself Lutheran, but the above paragraphs give evidence that the ELCA is not confessionally Lutheran, by any means. The ELCA practices fellowship with many non-Lutherans. Joint services with Roman Catholic churches are not uncommon. Almost all ELCA churches practice open communion; that is, the Lord's Supper is given to anyone who happens to be present at a service. The practice of infant communion is gaining headway. The practice of woman suffrage is probably universal in the ELCA; the ELCA makes no distinction between men and women in their calling of pastors and teachers.

At its 1997 convention the ELCA adopted a formula of agreement with the following non-Lutheran church bodies: The Presbyterian Church (USA); the Reformed Church in America; the United Church of Christ. This agreement means that all of these church bodies consider themselves in full communion with one another. This agreement ignores or makes light of the historical doctrinal differences between Lutherans and other Protestants. These doctrinal differences have not been resolved on the basis of Scripture. Rather, they have been ignored. But in fact these churches are in basic agreement that the Bible is not the Word of God, and therefore they can be sure of no doctrine, nor do they really have a doctrinal position anymore.

In August of 1999 the ELCA approved full communion with the Episcopalian Church. The agreement makes provision for all ELCA pastors in the future to be ordained by a bishop in the "historic episcopate." This agreement makes necessary something that is certainly not commanded in Scripture as being necessary: namely, ordination by a bishop who has in turn been ordained by someone who can trace his ordination back to the

apostles. At the same time the ELCA likewise approved full communion with the Moravian Church in America.

On October 31, 1999 representatives of the ELCA were on hand in Augsburg, Germany to sign a document together with representatives of the Roman Catholic Church. The document declares that Lutherans and Catholics are basically agreed on the doctrine of justification by faith. This agreement is made possible by the fact that certain words such as “grace” and “justification” are not clearly defined. The Roman Catholic representatives said that there is nothing in the document that differs from the decisions of the Council of Trent. Since the Council of Trent plainly cursed the teaching of justification by faith alone, without the deeds of the law, it is clear that this agreement does not at all resolve any doctrinal differences. Nevertheless, the leaders in the ELCA hail the agreement as a historic resolution of the conflict between Lutherans and the Roman Catholic Church. What it really indicates is that the ELCA and its sister congregations in the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) are no longer confessional Lutheran church bodies. (Confer the last section in these pages, entitled “Associations of Church Bodies.”)