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# An Evangelical Lutheran Presence: A Retreat for Congregational Elders

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**An Evangelical Lutheran Presence:  
A Retreat for Congregational Elders**

**by**

**Reverend Doctor M. Gilbert Steiner**

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## Introduction

The purpose of *Even unto Death: The Spiritual Armory of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* is to serve as a resource for Lutheran congregations to understand what it means to be Lutheran and why it matters in our spiritual warfare. Similarly, the purpose of this retreat is to assist congregational elders in evaluating the practices and activities of their congregations to determine if they bear faithful witness to the teachings of Scripture. I recommend congregational elders first complete *Even to Death* before engaging in the retreat.

The position of elder must be understood in light of the gospel. Elders will discharge their duties in faithfulness to the gospel. Elders pledge faithfulness to the teachings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, that is, the teachings handed down to us from the Reformation. Evangelical Lutheran congregations represent the gospel in their respective communities. It follows, then, that congregational elders will evaluate the practices and activities of their congregations to determine if they are faithful to Scripture and the proclamation of the gospel.

The Holy Spirit works through God's word to equip members of the congregation for work in the church and so that members of that community will hear the good news of salvation and believe in Christ Jesus as their Lord and Savior. The book of Acts and the Epistles testify to the ongoing responsibility of congregations to search the Scriptures and pray fervently before adopting practices which could impede the proclamation of the gospel and imperil their congregations. While Satan transforms himself into an angel of light and his minions transform themselves into apostles of Christ (2 Cor 11:13), our weapons "are not carnal but mighty in God" (2 Cor 10:4).

From the moment the Holy Spirit gave birth to the church on Pentecost, the devil declared war on the church. The church, until the Lord comes on the last day, will be engaged in

spiritual warfare and wrestle with what it means to be in the world but not of the world.

Likewise, Evangelical Lutheran congregations will wrestle with what it means to proclaim the gospel in their respective communities without surrendering to the devil. Christ has won the victory. Will our congregational practices and activities bear witness to that victory?

In my visitations of congregations, I have concluded that fear drives some congregations to adopt certain practices and activities that obscure the congregation's witness to the gospel. Fear has led congregations adopt practices that send out misleading, inconsistent, or conflicting messages to the community. Fear, left unchecked, ravages congregations one by one. Scripture illustrates the destructive nature of fear with two characters from Scripture: Solomon and Jonah.

Solomon, whom God had blessed with wisdom and wealth, pursued hundreds of wives and concubines and accepted their beliefs. Little by little, the women turned inclusive Solomon's heart from God and he "went after Astoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. Solomon did evil in the sight of the LORD, and did not fully follow the LORD, as did his father David" (1 Kgs 11:5-6).

Jonah, whom God called to proclaim his word to Nineveh, fled to Tarshish. After proclaiming God's word, the people of Nineveh repented and believed in God. God relented from the disaster he had planned for Nineveh. God's mercy on Nineveh displeased Jonah and he became angry. In his anger he prayed that God would take his life. God's response to Jonah indicated that God's mercy was not the exclusive possession of an individual or nation.

Solomon, afraid that he would not be accepted by the world, accepted the world with all of its enticements. Solomon, afraid he would not be accepted by the world—by the women he chased—accepted false gods. Jonah, afraid those outside of the Hebrew nation would repent and receive God's mercy, withdrew. In the case of Solomon, the fear of not being accepted by the

world led him to include the false gods of his wives and concubines. In contrast, Jonah treated God's grace as the exclusive possession of Israel and fled from the responsibility—the call—of proclaiming God's message to the people of Nineveh.

Fear has exerted a similar effect on Evangelical Lutheran congregations. Some Evangelical Lutheran congregations, afraid they will shrivel up and die unless they do something to make themselves appealing to the world, pursue acceptance by the world. Other Evangelical Lutheran congregations, afraid they will shrivel up and die unless they maintain isolation from the world, withdraw from the world. In either case, fear shapes congregational life.

When congregations, in the name of appealing to the world, adopt the language of the world, they are compelled to adopt practices that will make them appear attractive and appealing to the world. When congregations, in the name of maintaining isolation from the world, withdraw from the world, they adopt practices that avoid contact with people of the world. In either case, fear shapes how congregations understand God's word, the gospel, the creeds and confessions, worship, instruction in the faith, and the administration of the sacraments. Consequently, they alter how they profess their faith, how they worship, how they instruct their members, and how they administer the sacraments. In either case, congregations compromise the gospel.

The doors of congregations adapting to the world may indeed be open, but if God's word is absent, souls in desperate need of the gospel walk away empty. Congregations that withdraw from the world, thinking they will be secure from the world, greet souls in desperate need of the gospel with a door bolted shut.

The fears of Solomon and Jonah have resurfaced among Evangelical Lutheran congregations through certain words. Examine the following words: “inclusive, accommodating,

empowering, tolerant, flexible, and liberal.” These words sound very open and inviting; particularly when they are juxtaposed with their respective opposites: “exclusive, repressing, rejecting, intolerant, inflexible, and conservative.”

The words “inclusive, accommodating, empowering, tolerant, flexible, and liberal” are not inherently bad, but the vocabulary of this world twists the actual meaning of these words, giving them highly charged political overtones to create havoc in the body of Christ. The preceding words, imported from the lexicon of the world, generate polarity and drive wedges between believers. These words have no meaning apart from their polar opposites. The language of the world divides people into mutually exclusive classes:

<b>Solomon</b>	<b>Jonah</b>
Inclusive Accommodating Empowerment Tolerant Flexible Liberal Open-minded	Exclusive Unaccommodating Denying Intolerant Inflexible Conservative Closed-minded

Apart from the issue under consideration, these words have no definite meaning. With these words, the world shapes and influences people to adopt a certain practice or position in congregational life. After all, if you do not want to appear intolerant, you will align yourself with the position that ostensibly champions the cause of tolerance. Yet, when these words are examined through the light of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, they are exposed as equivocal, divisive, and deceptive. Your congregation, through its practices, declares what it believes to the community. The operative question is not, “Are we inclusive enough or exclusive

enough?” but rather, “Does our congregation present an uncompromising witness of the gospel in our community?”

Words are powerful; they shape and influence how we think and what we do. Listen carefully to the words you use in your congregation. How have those words altered life in your congregation? Is it possible that your congregation might be going the way of Solomon or Jonah?

The practices sponsored by your congregation are inseparable from several things: your congregation’s understanding of the authority of God’s word, your congregation’s understanding of the gospel, your congregation’s understanding of the creeds and Lutheran Confessions, the manner and form of worship, the manner in which your congregation instructs its members and prospective members, and the manner in which your pastor administers the sacraments. Of course, there are other functions and duties discharged by your congregation. For example, how does your congregation perform weddings and funerals? How does your congregation select teaching materials for Sunday school and adult instruction? How does your congregation select and train its elders and other congregational officers (Church Council, Altar Guild, and Sunday school teachers)? How does your congregation call a pastor? Who performs the duties and functions of the pastoral office?

The practices in your congregation bear witness to your congregation’s understanding of gospel. Has your congregation relied solely on Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions to determine its practices and discharge its duties? My visitations of Evangelical Lutheran congregations suggest that some congregations have succumbed to fear and have jettisoned our Evangelical Lutheran heritage in favor of the words that shape and influence this world. You might respond: “Evangelical Lutheran congregations will disappear unless they embrace the



language of the world.” Such a response clearly indicates that fear is the driving force behind congregations accepting the language of the world—a fear rooted in Solomon’s acceptance of the world or a fear rooted in Jonah’s withdrawal from the world.

To facilitate a meaningful discussion among elders regarding congregational practices, I have framed each section of this handbook with a declarative title: A Scriptural Presence, An Evangelical Presence, A Creedal and Confessional Presence, A Liturgical Presence, A Catechetical Presence, and A Sacramental Presence. Each of the sections will demonstrate that the distinguishing characteristics of the Evangelical Lutheran Church represent gifts of God for us to go forward in faith rather than fear.

## A Scriptural Presence

*Even to Death* examined the events in King Josiah's reign and reflected on how the distinguishing characteristics of the Evangelical Lutheran Church are rooted in Scripture and represented in our vows of confirmation and the pastor's vows of ordination.

We can be certain that Satan will direct his attack against the teachings of God's word. St. John described how Satan will do this: "Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us...Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son" (1 Jn 2:18-19, 22).

The lives of Solomon and Jonah illustrate how Satan attacks God's word and those entrusted with preaching that word. Solomon, giving way to acceptance of the world, accepted false teachings and false priests. Invoking inclusiveness, some congregations have accepted false teachings and adopted practices that reinforce false teachings. Invoking empowerment, some congregations have allowed socio-cultural norms to dictate who holds the pastoral office and who performs the duties and functions of the pastoral office.

Jonah withdrew from the world and attempted to withhold God's word from the people of Nineveh. Invoking exclusiveness, he would rather have consigned the people of Nineveh to eternal damnation than proclaim the message of repentance to them. Invoking nationalism, Jonah used his prophetic office to withhold the word of salvation.

The tendencies of Solomon and Jonah remind believers to rely not on their own strength but to trust in the power of God's word. St. John declared, "You are of God, little children, and

have overcome them, because he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 Jn 4:4). On our own, we are incapable of detecting the false teachings. Only the Holy Spirit working through the word can lead us to detect and shun false teachings.

Congregational elders, entrusted with the care of souls and living in the hope of the gospel, will “test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God” (1 Jn 4:1-3).

In God’s word, elders have the standard to test the spirits and determine whether the teaching and preaching in the congregation is faithful to God’s word. Any teaching that denies Christ is not faithful to Scripture. With the word of God as your foundation, consider the questions below:

Discussion Questions:

1. Do the pastor and elders regularly review the teaching materials your congregation uses for Sunday school, Bible class, catechetical instruction and marriage preparation to consider if indeed they are faithful to Scripture? (See Ezr 7:10 and 1 Tim 3:14.)
2. Does it matter who publishes the teaching and worship materials used in your congregation? (See Ps 119:1-8 and 1 Tim 4:1.)
3. What do the following scriptural references suggest about instruction in the word: 2 Tim 3:15 and 4:1, Ti 2:10, Heb 4:12, 1 Jn 2:18?
4. What do the following scriptural references suggest about the pastoral office: Nm 12:1-15, 16:1-40, Mt 4:23, 9:35, Jn 20:19, Rom 10:14, 1 Tim 3:1?

## An Evangelical Presence

It is the good news of God's grace that makes Evangelical Lutheran congregations evangelical. God's holy law condemns sinful man to death and the gospel proclaims forgiveness of sins through Christ's death and resurrection. Just as Satan attacks the teachings of Scripture, the forces of evil will direct their attack against the very heart of the church, the gospel. The simple truth that we are saved by grace, through faith, on account of Christ will be twisted and warped, mutilated and perverted.

Referencing our discussion of Solomon and Jonah, congregations led by fear depart from the truth of the gospel. Some congregations, afraid that they will shrivel up and die, follow Solomon's lead in accommodating themselves to the world of inclusiveness. Other congregations, afraid that they will shrivel up and die, follow Jonah's lead and attempt to withdraw from the world.

Whether a congregation follows Solomon or Jonah, a sense of entitlement obscures the law and the gospel. Congregations, following the lead of Solomon, ignore the distinction between the law and the gospel, thus welcoming into fellowship those who live in open, unrepentant sin. (See St. Paul's statement regarding the wrath of God upon unrighteousness in Rom 1:18.) Congregations, following the lead of Jonah, also ignore the distinction between the law and the gospel, thus reducing fellowship to an external act, by which members think and feel they have no more need of daily contrition and repentance. (See St. John's explanation concerning the confession of sins and fellowship in 1 Jn 1:5—2:11.)

Rather than following Solomon or Jonah, rediscover the treasures of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. One of those treasures is the proper distinction between the law and the gospel. That distinction abolishes any notion of entitlement. Following Luther, Evangelical

Lutheran preachers preach law/gospel sermons to equip believers for spiritual warfare. Through the preaching of the law we are convicted of our sin and condemned to death; through the preaching of the gospel we receive grace, the promise of salvation. In the power of the gospel, we go forward in faith, not fear. We do not accept the world like Solomon or withdraw from the world like Jonah. We proclaim the crucified and resurrected Christ to the world.

Congregations in which the law and gospel remain inviolate go forth in all boldness and confidence. Such congregations, like congregations of the early church, trust in Christ, who called “some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Eph 4:11-12). When the saints were equipped for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, the gospel spread throughout the world. An Ethiopian eunuch was baptized (Acts 8:26). Stephen was martyred (Acts 6-7). Dorcas “was full of good works and charitable deeds” (Acts 9:36). Lydia was known for her hospitality (Acts 16:11). Aquila and Priscilla explained to Apollos “the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:1). When the saints are equipped for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, the church grows. “Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied” (Acts 9:31).

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you see a connection between your congregation's understanding of the law and the gospel and the practices adopted by your congregation? (See Ti 2:1.)
2. What is the danger of following Solomon or Jonah in determining your congregational practices (membership practices, fellowship practices, and church discipline)? (See Ti 1:10.)
3. What happens when a congregation is afraid that it will shrivel up and die? (See 2 Pet 2:18.)
4. What happens when a sense of entitlement enters the life of a congregation? (See 1 Jn 4:1.)

## A Creedal and Confessional Presence

What does it mean for your congregation to provide a creedal and confessional presence in your community? When Scripture, the creeds and the confessions cease to guide the affairs of the church, issues are reconciled on the basis of man's inclination and caprice. Congregations, following Solomon's lead, will disparage the creeds and confessions, claiming they are outmoded and irrelevant. Congregations, following Jonah's lead, recite the creeds and confessions mechanically without comprehending their indissoluble relationship to the gospel. The gospel calls the believer to confess his faith to those wandering from the truth because "he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins" (Jas 5:20).

Those who affixed their names to the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church understood the power of the gospel and God's grace. Evangelical teachings mattered. They understood that their eternal life hinged on the teachings of Scripture confessed in the creeds and confessions. Those who place their confidence in so-called religious liberty granted by earthly law and treaty should review the lessons of history. The Treaties of Passau and Augsburg that granted religious liberty to Protestants in no way settled theological controversies. The master of lies and deceit, the devil, continued to lead many astray by the illusion that religious liberty was to be preferred over theological truth. While the Treaty of Augsburg 1555 granted religious freedom, *Cuius regio, eius religio*, the war of words continued with an incessant attack on the teachings of Scripture.

Not only did the devil employ doctrinal differences to attack the church, but he also employed doctrinal indifference. Doctrinal indifference led many to pursue unity at the expense of the truth of Scripture and the proclamation of the gospel. A seething cauldron of divisiveness

and apathy formed the context for the Formula of Concord. Rather than promoting unity at the expense of the truth of Scripture, those subscribing to the Formula of Concord sought to promote unity through the truth of Scripture, as the introduction to the document attests:

And because directly after the times of the apostles, and even while they were still living, false teachers and heretics arose, and symbols, i. e., brief, succinct [categorical] confessions, were composed against them in the early church, which were regarded as the unanimous, universal Christian faith and confession of the orthodox and true church, namely, the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed, we pledge ourselves to them, and hereby reject all heresies and dogmas which, contrary to them, have been introduced into the church of God.<sup>1</sup>

Since some of the events following the Reformation had political, economic, and societal consequences, some Lutherans have completely lost an understanding and an appreciation for the essence of the Reformation and the confessional writings. The Reformation and the confessions contained in the Book of Concord revolve entirely around the central teaching of Scripture that sinful man is saved by grace alone, through faith alone, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Being creedal and confessional means that we believe, teach, and confess the objective truth of Christ's person and work. The conclusion of the Book of Concord stands as a reminder that holding to the teachings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church matters:

Christian reader, these testimonies of the ancient teachers of the church have been here set forth, not with this meaning that our Christian faith is founded upon the authority of men. For the true saving faith is to be founded upon no church-teachers, old or new, but only and alone upon God's Word, which is comprised in the Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles, as unquestionable witnesses of divine truth. But because fanatical spirits, by the special and uncanny craft of Satan, wish to lead men from the Holy Scriptures—which, thank God! even a common layman can now profitably read—to the writings of the fathers and the ancient church-teachers as into a broad sea, so that he who has not read them cannot therefore precisely know whether they and their writings are as these new teachers quote their words, and thus is left in grievous doubt,—we have been compelled by means of this Catalogue to declare, and to exhibit to the view of all, that this new false doctrine has as little foundation in the ancient pure church-teachers as in the Holy Scriptures, but that it is diametrically opposed to it. Their testimonies they quote

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<sup>1</sup> *Concordia Triglotta*, 777.



in a false meaning, contrary to the will of the fathers, just as they designedly and wantonly pervert the simple, plain, and clear words of Christ's testament and the pure testimonies of the Holy Scriptures. On this account the Book of Concord directs everyone to the Holy Scriptures and the simple Catechism; for he who clings to this simple form with true, simple faith provides best for his soul and conscience, since it is built upon a firm and immovable Rock, Matt. 7 and 17; Gal. 1; Ps. 119.<sup>2</sup>

The creeds and Lutheran Confessions shaped the very core of the Evangelical Lutheran identity. Notwithstanding the prominence of the Book of Concord in The Rite of Ordination (and installation), many Lutherans have not been instructed regarding the confessions and therefore have been deprived of the treasures contained therein. When generation after generation of Lutherans have not been taught what it means to be credal and confessional, they become susceptible to adopting the political and socio-cultural words of the world, imposing those words on congregational life.

The faith professed in the creeds and confessions does not equivocate; it does not prevaricate. The faith professed in the creeds and confessions is the faith revealed in Scripture, upon which the foundation of Christ's church is built. Concord with the creeds and confessions represents the solid scriptural foundation upon which Evangelical Lutherans base fellowship and worship; it governs the administration of the sacraments; it serves as a safeguard for preaching and teaching.

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<sup>2</sup> *Concordia Triglotta*, 1149.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the relationship between Scripture and the creeds and confessions? (See 2 Pet 1:16-2:3.)
2. Discuss the difference between harmony and unity. What is the danger of a congregation pursuing harmony at all costs? (See 1 Jn 5:7.)
3. How does unity exist in a congregation? (See Eph 4.)
4. How do the creeds and confessions promote unity in a congregation? (See 1 Cor 15.)
5. Does it matter whether your congregation is creedal and confessional? (See Jer. 5:30 and 1 Cor 2.)

## A Liturgical Presence

A principle enunciated by Celestine I of the fifth century, *Lex orandi, lex credendi* (the rule of praying [i.e., worshipping] is the rule of believing), captures the importance of worship in confessing the faith of the church.<sup>3</sup> Solomon's worship life clearly indicated whether or not he would remain faithful to God. When Solomon demonstrated his acceptance of his wives' religious beliefs and erected idols for them, he rejected the confession of faith in the one true God. Solomon was sucked into the vortex of polytheism. Jonah's worship life illustrates the character of his faith. Rather than celebrating God's compassion with those who repented and believed in Nineveh, Jonah isolated himself in bitterness.

The manner in which we worship testifies to the substance of our faith. Are we going the way of Solomon or the way of Jonah? According to Peter Brunner, "As the church professes its faith in worship, it is reminded that it, as a wayfaring church, is engaged in combat."<sup>4</sup> Brunner's observation puts us on full alert against the forces of evil, who will direct their attack against worship and thereby disrupt the confession of faith and the proclamation of the gospel.

Brunner offered a poignant description of the origin of worship as well as the distinction between worship before and after man's fall into sin. Brunner explained that prior to man's fall into sin, the Sabbath Day, blessed and consecrated by the Creator, was set apart for the Creator. Man's fall into sin completely destroyed the relationship of love between God and man. The childlike purity of holy devotion to God was replaced with slavery to sin, death and the devil. Without God's direct intervention, the center of man's worship is perverted because sinful man will necessarily place himself at the center. Only God's direct intervention through the all-

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<sup>3</sup>*Lutheran Worship Agenda*, 10.

<sup>4</sup>Peter Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 206.

atoning work of Christ and the Holy Spirit working through the word will re-establish God at the center of worship.<sup>5</sup> Brunner, commenting on Luther's understanding of worship, emphasizes the relationship of God's word to worship:

An act of worship that is in conflict with the First Commandment as Luther expounded it is no longer worship but blasphemy. If what happens in those assemblies of Christians is to be a service to God, it must be bound over to judgment under the critical standard by which all our doing and life is judged—God's will as we find it revealed in God's Word...The worship of God depends on what is pleasing to him.<sup>6</sup>

The teachings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church remind us that for worship to be true, God's word must determine worship. While Article VII of the Augsburg Confession stated that it is not necessary that ceremonies, instituted by men, be observed uniformly in all places, Article XXIV of the Augsburg Confession stated that the Reformers made no conspicuous changes to worship services except that hymns in the language of the people were added and that the purpose of all ceremonies was to instruct believers about Christ. Additionally, Epitome Article X of the Formula of Concord emphasized that while ceremonies are neither commanded nor forbidden by God, they support good order and welfare and avoid frivolity and offense.

The manner in which we worship bears witness to our faith. Evangelical Lutheran congregations will be led by Scripture and the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church to ensure their manner of worship glorifies God and edifies the body of Christ. When congregations invoke inclusiveness or exclusiveness as the guiding principles in worship, they reject the one true God, who gave us worship that we might offer praise and thanksgiving to him in the unity of faith.

Discussion Questions:

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<sup>5</sup>Brunner, 49.

<sup>6</sup>Brunner, 23.

1. How does the principle of *Lex orandi, lex credendi* assist the congregation to understand the relationship between their manner of worship and their confession of faith?
2. Does it matter what orders of service and hymns your congregation uses for worship? Explain your answer. (See 1 Cor 14:33, 40 and Mk 2:27-28.)
3. Does it matter who publishes the orders of service and hymns used in your congregation? (See 2 Jn 4-11.)
4. Reflect on the following assertion made in the Introduction to *Hymnal Supplement 98*: “A hymnal is more than hymns, for through liturgy, psalmody, and hymnody, the church is gathered into the very presence of the living Christ. Either with direct quotation or paraphrase, we are given to speak the words and to sing the songs of Scripture itself...Thus it is also a book for instruction in the faith—in a word, catechesis.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>*Hymnal Supplement 98*, Introduction, 4.

## A Catechetical Presence

Is it not ironic that Solomon, proverbial for his wisdom, defied God's wisdom? Solomon "did not keep what the LORD had commanded" (1 Kgs 11: 10). Rather than instructing the people in the one true God, he "did evil in the sight of the LORD, and did not fully follow the LORD, as did his father David" (1 Kgs 11:6). Is it not ironic that Jonah, himself a recipient of God's grace, would rather allow the people of Nineveh to die in their wickedness than instruct them about God's grace? Both Solomon and Jonah abdicated their stewardship of the mysteries of God.

Martin Luther, with his Small and Large Catechisms, presented the teachings of Scripture in a simple manner. Luther's simple manner of teaching, however, should not be construed as simplistic; nor should catechetical instruction be understood as the mechanical diffusion and rote memorization of facts. Describing both the intent and indispensable nature of catechetical instruction for the church, Dr. A. L. Barry asserted that catechetical instruction:

is critical to the church's ongoing life and health...Without good catechesis the church will no longer be able to understand the teachings of the faith, but will only be able to bear witness to vague impressions or the emotional feelings that "being in church" may produce. Without consistently faithful catechesis, the church will slowly forget its history, its teachers, its traditions and its wonderful heritage of faith. Without sound catechesis, each generation of Christians will be led to think that they are the first ever to have come to a living relationship with the Lord, and thus will be cut off from the wisdom of the ages as men and women down through the years have struggled in life and have remained faithful.<sup>8</sup>

Catechetical instruction equips God's people for life in the church. In a congregation where the people of God are thoroughly equipped for every good work, they yearn to hear the gospel, receive the sacraments, and praise God with their voices and gifts. "I was glad when they

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<sup>8</sup>A. L. Barry, *Catechesis in the Lutheran Congregation* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1996), 2.

said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD’ ” (Ps 122:1). “LORD, I have loved the habitation of your house, and the place where your glory dwells” (Ps 26:8). “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and the fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42).

In a congregation where the people of God are thoroughly equipped for every good work, they live in faith, laboring and praying for others to know the joy of believing in Christ as their Lord and Savior. “There is joy in the presence of angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Lk 15:10). “So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:46-47).

In a congregation where the people of God are thoroughly equipped for every good work, they don the whole armor of God, knowing that Christ has won the victory over sin, death, and the devil; they know that as they fight the good fight of faith, they will receive the crown of righteousness (2 Tim 4:7-8) because the battle belongs to God (2 Chr 20:15). In a congregation where the people of God are thoroughly equipped for every good work, they pledge to receive their pastor and show him that love, honor, and obedience in the Lord which the people of God owe to the shepherd and teacher placed over them by the Lord Jesus Christ, and the promise to support him with their gifts and fervent prayer.<sup>9</sup>

Rather than a graduation or commencement exercise, the rite of confirmation bears testimony that an individual, desiring membership in the Evangelical Lutheran Church, has undergone instruction in the teachings of Scripture using Luther’s Small Catechism. If

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<sup>9</sup>E. E. Foelber “The Office of the Public Ministry,” in Theodore Laetsch, ed., *The Abiding Word*, Volume Two, (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1947), 474-492.

congregations view The Rite of Confirmation as a ceremony conferring unrestricted access to the Lord's Supper, they miss the nature of catechetical instruction. The Rite of Confirmation gives the catechumen an opportunity to offer his vows in the presence of God and the congregation to acknowledge the gifts God gave to him in baptism; he announces his intent to conform his life to God's word, to be faithful in his use of the sacraments, and to continue steadfast in the true Christian faith even unto death.

#### Discussion Questions:

1. How much time should your congregation devote to catechetical instruction? (See Dt 4.)
2. Who provides catechetical instruction in your congregation? What functions do the pastor, the elders and the parents perform in support of catechesis?
3. How might elders assist the pastor and parents in assuming their respective duties associated with catechesis? (See Dt 6.)
4. How might Luther's Large Catechism be included as part of an ongoing catechetical regimen in your congregation?
5. How does catechetical instruction assist members of the congregation to speak the common language of Scripture in doctrine, devotion, and discipline? (See Dt 6:10 and Eph 4.)
6. What is the danger in viewing The Rite of Confirmation as a commencement ceremony?

#### A Sacramental Presence



Congregations that permit entitlement to determine congregational life render themselves impotent. Entitlement attacks all that pertains to the gospel, especially participation in the Lord's Supper. Yet congregations that go the way of Solomon or the way of Jonah permit entitlement to determine participation in the sacrament.

Following the path of Solomon, they administer the Lord's Supper while invoking inclusiveness, accommodation, empowerment, tolerance, flexibility, affirmation and sensitivity. In such congregations, everyone who considers themselves Christians is invited to partake of the Lord's Supper. As in the case of Solomon, whose relationships with his wives and concubines determined his theology, relationships determine the administration of the Lord's Supper. How could this possibly happen? More than likely, some of the members had relatives or friends visiting the church; no one felt comfortable asking these visitors what they believed about the sacrament; no one wanted to inquire regarding their understanding of baptism, their understanding of God and man, or whether they had undergone catechesis, because to do so makes everyone feel awkward. Besides, making people feel included, affirmed, and empowered is what really matters. Therefore, the easiest way around this dilemma, the easiest way to avoid an awkward discussion about the Lord's Supper, is to place an inclusive statement in the bulletin making everyone feel welcome. No one is excluded; no one is denied; everyone is entitled to partake of the sacrament. As a result, both pastor and elders have jettisoned their responsibility.

Congregations following the path of Jonah administer the Lord's Supper invoking membership or an outward rite as establishing an open-ended invitation to partake of the Lord's Supper. In such congregations, everyone who has been confirmed is invited to partake of the Lord's Supper. As in the case of Jonah, who wanted to restrict God's word only to the people of Israel, restrictions determine the administration of the Lord's Supper. How could this possibly

happen? More than likely, the congregation wanted a quick and easy method of determining who was eligible to partake of the Lord's Supper. Again, no one felt comfortable asking what individuals believed about the sacrament; no one wanted to inquire regarding their understanding of baptism, their understanding of God and man, or whether they had undergone catechesis, because to do so makes everyone feel awkward. Besides, if they have gone through confirmation instruction, they must know everything they need to know. Therefore, the easiest way around this dilemma, the easiest way to avoid an awkward discussion about the Lord's Supper is to make confirmation the official rite of passage to the Lord's Supper.

Whether your congregation goes the way of Solomon, inviting everyone to the Lord's table, or the way of Jonah, inviting only those who have been confirmed, you engender a sense of entitlement. Who is truly invited and worthy to partake of the Lord's Supper? Summarizing the Apostle Paul in 1 Cor 11:17, the Thorough Declaration of the Formula of Concord states:

For Christians who are of weak faith, diffident, troubled, and heartily terrified because of the greatness and number of their sins, and think that in this their great impurity they are not worthy of this precious treasure and the benefits of Christ, and who feel and lament their weakness of faith, and from their hearts desire that they may serve God with stronger, more joyful faith and pure obedience, they are the truly worthy guests for whom this highly venerable sacrament [and sacred feast] has been especially instituted and appointed; as Christ says, Matt. 11, 28: Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.<sup>10</sup>

The above statement from The Formula of Concord unequivocally declares that Christ instituted this meal. It also asserts that Christ instituted this feast for our salvation. Those who partake of this meal receive Christ's body and blood.

Discussion Questions:

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<sup>10</sup> *Concordia Triglotta*, 997.

1. What is the danger of reducing participation in the Lord's Supper to a question of inclusiveness or exclusiveness? (See 1 Cor 11:27.)
2. What is the danger of a long-standing member of a congregation, who lives in open and unrepentant sin, partaking of the Lord's Supper? (See 1 Tim 2 and 1 Cor 5:9.)
3. What is the danger of a congregation inviting everyone present to partake of the Lord's Supper? (See 2 Cor 11.)

## Fear or Faith?

Out of fear that they will shrivel up and die unless they do something, some congregations have gone the way of Solomon and others have gone the way of Jonah. In either case, entitlement thinking has crept into the church and gained a foothold. Entitlement thinking has shaped practices in congregational life; people think they are entitled to what they consider to be the goods and services of the church.

Entitlement thinking fosters an environment in which people think they deserve a certain status or privilege. Entitlement thinking must be exposed for what it is—a weapon of Satan. Left unchecked, entitlement thinking disrupts the faithful proclamation of the law: sinful man begins to view himself not as a sinner but as someone who is entitled to be affirmed, included, and empowered. Sinful man is entitled to nothing but death. If a sinful man does not repent and believe the gospel, he is entitled to nothing and faces the certain prospect of eternal damnation.

How you and I define what it means to be Evangelical Lutheran does matter. The words we use in our congregations define congregational practices and shape congregational life. We are in the midst of spiritual warfare. Based upon Scripture, Luther observed how Satan was employing different tactics and strategies to destroy the church one believer at a time:

Satan has gathered experience from the very beginning of the world and has been made more cunning by daily practice. If he finds it impossible to overcome us by the greatness of the temptation, he tries to overcome us by persevering until he has wearied us...Such is the supreme wickedness of Satan. In order to overcome it we must fortify our soul with this and other passages of Holy Scripture that, as he does not weary of assaulting us, we may not weary of persevering in prayer and in hope until we gain the victory.<sup>11</sup>

Rather than living in fear, we live in faith. Living in faith means we proclaim the victory of Christ in every facet of congregational life. Let every practice your congregation adopts—

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<sup>11</sup>Plass, 1347:4328.

every decision your congregation makes—proclaim the crucified and resurrected King of kings, and Lord of lords. Let every practice and activity of your congregation boldly and unequivocally represent the teachings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.