

The 9.5 Theses

*The Annunciation of Our Lord,
March 25, 1995*

To the Pastors of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

The enclosed theses with their introduction speak for themselves. But it may be useful to explain briefly the process that fostered their writing. For two years, we, a handful of pastors in New Jersey, met on periodic retreats for prayer, theological study and conversation. Our concern was for confessional and pastoral integrity in our own parishes. Our discipline was the "mutual conversation and consolation" in the gospel that was so dear to Luther.

In our conversations we learned that we shared a deep concern for and discouragement over the fate of the confession of the Faith in the ELCA. Others had already spoken of a crisis in the ELCA—a financial crisis, a structural crisis, a decline in institutional loyalty, etc. But we had become convinced that the crisis was, on the most basic level, a confessional crisis. On many fronts, the clear confession of Jesus Christ and his saving work was compromised.

Now and again this crisis erupts in church-wide controversy. But we believe that most of the damage is being done quietly, on the parish level, where "the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3) is replaced by ideologies not centered in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

After a draft of the theses was written, the conversation widened in an effort to include some pastors, bishops, and theologians across the country—some of whose signatures appear at the end of the document.

We realize the theses speak in the voice of theological contention. As the liturgy of Holy Baptism teaches us, our "yes" to God's promises must be clarified by our "no" to falsehood and illusion. We hope our common prayer for the Church also breathes through this document.

What are the purposes of such a document? We offer it first for your "mutual conversation and consolation." We hope it will serve to overcome the sense of isolation and discouragement felt by many pastors. We intend to raise pointedly the question of faithfulness in the hearts of pastors. Through this distribution and their publication in theological journals, we hope the theses will help to place the confession of the Faith at the center of our common life once again. It is our intent to present the 9.5 Theses to the Conference of Bishops and to the Bishop of the ELCA soon to be elected.

We invite all pastors to join their voices to ours by adding their signatures. Please understand that your signing is a public act in the Church and your signature will appear in the forthcoming presentation of the theses to the Conference of Bishops.

--The original signers of the 9.5 Theses

9.5 Theses Concerning the Confession of the Faith in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Preamble

To the people of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood," and to their pastors: "May grace and peace be yours in abundance" (*1 Peter 1:2*).

The ELCA is in a crisis—a crisis of faith. The critical question is whether this church will prove faithful to the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures and the catholic creeds and evangelical confessions, or fall into apostasy—a fall which could go either to the right or to the left. Many in the ELCA tilt toward the right—the ideologies of enthusiasm, fundamentalism, nationalism, and pietism. Many others lean toward the left—the ideologies of activism, feminism, advocacy. This results in the appearance of a conservative versus liberal struggle, but this appearance is an illusion. The real struggle is for faithful adherence to the Scriptures, creeds and confessions over against their subordination to these social or religious ideologies.

Whenever such ideologies prevail, the Word of God is silenced among us and driven out of the Church, and our people, left to their own devices, are deprived of that true consolation which comes from "the Gospel of God . . . concerning his Son . . . Jesus Christ our Lord" (*Romans 1:1ff*).

Praying for the Church, rejoicing in the Gospel, convicted by the Word of God, we offer the following theses, that our confession of the Faith might address the current crisis directly and honestly. Our pastoral office compels us to speak.

1. The Revelation and Name of the Holy Trinity

"When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf." (John 15:26)

"Throughout the world the holy Church acclaims, praises, worships" no other God than the LORD God of Israel, revealed in and named by Jesus Christ as "the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Te Deum; Matthew 28:19; Augsburg Confession—Article I).

We reject the false teaching that the naming of God as Father is a human construct to be understood on the analogy of human fatherhood; that it designates Israel's God as male; that the Trinitarian Name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is inherently oppressive to human beings in general or women in particular; or that substituting triadic terms is adequate.

The Word of God is silenced among us and driven out of the Church whenever the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit is ignored, minimized, marginalized, suppressed or altered in the Church's preaching and praying, baptizing and confessing.

2. The Bondage of Humanity to Sin

"Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned." (Romans 5:12)

The Church confesses "that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves"
(Lutheran Book of Worship—Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness; Augsburg
Confession—Articles II, XVIII, XIX).

We reject the false teaching that would place ultimate hope in human goodness and self-fulfillment, that would confuse sin with failure or lack of virtue, that would exchange confession of our sin before God for self-analyses of perceived human problems.

The Word of God is silenced among us and driven out of the Church whenever we sinners are not held accountable before the holy and righteous God.

3. The Person and Work of God the Son

"Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great: He was revealed in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory." (1 Timothy 3:16)

The Church confesses and believes in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, "the eternal Son of the Father," crucified and raised for the salvation of the world, "worthy of all worship" (Te Deum; Augsburg Confession—Article III).

We reject the false teaching that would separate the man Jesus from the risen Christ, and diminish his particular identity by "re-imagining" him as female, speaking of him as androgynous, or using him as a "Christ-principle." We also reject the false teaching that Christ is for Christians only, that he is but one savior among many, that faith is salutary apart from the particular work of Christ.

The Word of God is silenced among us and driven out of the Church whenever, under the guise of a false pluralism, we do not boldly proclaim the man Jesus Christ, the Jew from Nazareth, as the unique and universal Savior, the One for the many.

4. The Proclamation of Forgiveness, Life and Salvation

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." (Ephesians 2:8)

The Church "acknowledges one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins," in which God has justified the ungodly and promised salvation from sin and death, from devil and hell, and from God's own law and wrath, "and opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers" (Nicene Creed; Te Deum; Augsburg Confession—Articles III & IV).

We reject the false teaching that would replace God's eschatological salvation with therapeutic rejuvenation, material well-being, social transformation, the spread of provisional human justice, or other good and desirable effects in what unbelief would label "the real world."

The Word of God is silenced among us and driven out of the Church when the singular and specific promise of the Gospel is traded for the promise of some worldly good or the plans and pleas for human betterment.

5. The Holy Spirit and the Means of Grace

"So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ." (Romans 10:17)

The Church confesses and believes in "the Holy Spirit, Advocate and Guide," who "calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church" through, and only through, God's means of Grace, which is the preaching of the Word—i.e. through Scripture, sermon, Baptism, Absolution, and Communion (Te Deum; Small Catechism—Creed—Article III; Augsburg Confession—Articles V, IX-XIII).

We reject the false teaching that the Holy Spirit is given apart from the preached Word and sacraments, that the Holy Spirit is evidenced by human enthusiasm or activism, that the Holy Spirit is to be equated with the dynamic of social, political and spiritual movements. We reject the false teaching that the Church grows through human ingenuity and energy. We reject the false teaching that God's liturgy is a tool for the advancement of political, cultural or therapeutic programs. We reject the elevation of organizational success, growth in numbers, and political and therapeutic activity to the status of marks of the Church.

The Word of God is silenced among us and driven out of the Church when the true means of grace "the preaching of the Word and the sacraments" no longer defines, structures and centers the ministry and mission of the Christian congregation.

6. The Vocation of the Baptized and Good Works

"For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, to be our way of life." (Ephesians 2:10)

The Church confesses that the faithful are "bound to bring forth fruits—that is, the good works mandated by God" in the Ten Commandments, and done for God's sake alone (Augsburg Confession—Articles VI, XVI, XX).

We reject the false teaching that would elevate advocacy for self-chosen high-visibility causes above the common participation of Christians in the life of the world as husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, employers, workers, artists, teachers, doctors, lawyers, politicians, etc.

The Word of God is silenced among us and driven out of the Church whenever the daily vocation of Christians is denigrated.

7. The Unity of the Church Catholic

"For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." (1 Corinthians 12:13)

The Church "believes in one holy catholic and apostolic Church," "the Body of Christ," which is the congregation of the faithful gathered by the Holy Spirit to hear the preached Word and sacraments (Nicene Creed; Romans 12:5; I Corinthians 12:12ff.; Augsburg Confession—Article VII).

We reject the false teaching of a North American liberal Christianity that would substitute a politically-devised multi-culturalism or inclusivism for the Church's true catholic unity in the preached Word and sacraments. We reject the false teaching of a North American conservative Protestantism that would substitute an invisible, spiritual experience of fellowship for the concrete reality of the preached Word and sacraments.

The Word of God is silenced among us and driven out of the Church whenever the visible unity of the churches is not actively pursued in terms of the true God-given unity of the Church in Word and Sacrament.

8. The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel

"For 'no human being will be justified in his sight' by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law, comes the knowledge of sin." (Romans 3:20)

The Church teaches that both law and gospel must continually be preached in the congregation of the faithful: the law to convict people of sin and to promote God's temporal justice, the gospel to forgive people of sins and to Proclaim God's eternal righteousness (Apology of Augsburg Confession—Article IV).

We reject the false teaching that would identify God's law with achievable human goals rather than as the call to repent from sin and to amend one's life before the holy God. We reject the false teaching that would re-define God's gospel as a freedom which allows individuals to fulfill themselves and to do whatever pleases them.

The Word of God is silenced among us and driven out of the Church whenever it is no longer held that God Almighty who created everything and gave us his law is the one God who redeemed the creation and renews it through his Holy Spirit.

9. The Holy Ministry

"Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries." (1 Corinthians 4:1)

The Church teaches that the holy Ministry is the divinely instituted public office of preaching the Word and sacraments in the congregation of the faithful (Augsburg Confession—Articles V, XIV, XXVIII; cf. Occasional Services—Ordination).

We reject the false teaching that would define the holy Ministry as a "helping profession," and so turn bishops and pastors into psychological counselors or social activists. We reject the false teaching that would fragment the one divinely instituted Ministry into so-called specialized ministries, as if the circumstances of ministry determine its content and practice. We reject the false teaching that ordained ministers are not subject to an exemplary standard in their conduct and relationships, or that they may excuse immoral behavior by an appeal to privacy or gospel freedom.

The Word of God is silenced among us and driven out of the Church whenever the holy Ministry becomes a loosely defined service to people rather than the specific divine call to serve the Word of God, and whenever bishops and pastors are not encouraged to adorn the holy Ministry with holy lives.

9.5.

"We believe that you will come and be our judge. Come, then, Lord, and help your people, bought with the price of your own blood, and bring us with your saints to glory everlasting." (Te Deum)

Almighty God, grant to your Church your Holy Spirit and the wisdom which comes down from heaven, that your Word may not be bound but have free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people, that in steadfast faith we may serve you and in the confession of your name may abide to the end, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Lutheran Book of Worship—Matins & Vespers)

Signed:

*Pastor Ronald B. Bagnall, Trenton, NJ
Pastor Louis A. Smith, Collingswood, NJ
Pastor Phillip Max Johnson, Jersey City, NJ
Pastor Linda Sue Larson, Cresskill, NJ
Pastor John David Larson, Cresskill, NJ
Pastor Richard F. Niebanck, Delhi, NY
Pastor Beth A. Schlegel, Trenton, NJ
Pastor Mark A. Hoffman, Moorestown, NJ*

Note: Over 700 pastors and 300 laity appended their signatures to these theses.