



Slick Magic

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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around the globe” (11).

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

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

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

• “...the meaning of Scripture for

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the end, diversity is trump.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WHAT LUTHER SAYS

Church

“The church is the daughter who is born from the Word; she is not the mother of the Word” (LW 2:101, Lectures on Genesis, 1536).

“For the church was born by the Word of promise through faith, and by this same Word is nourished and preserved. That is to say, it is the promises of God that make the church, and not the church that makes the promise of God. For **the Word of God is incomparably superior to the church**, and in this Word the church, being a creature, has nothing to decree, ordain, or make, but only to be decreed, ordained, and made. For who begets his own parent? Who first brings forth his own maker?” (LW 36:107, The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, 1520).

“Peter, the prince of the apostles, lived and taught contrary to the Word of God. Therefore he was in error. And because he was at fault, Paul ‘opposed him to the face’ (Gal 2:11), attacking him because he was not in conformity with the truth of the gospel. Here you see that Peter, the most holy apostle, erred. Thus **I will not listen to the church or the fathers or the apostles unless they bring and teach the pure Word of God**” (LW 26:67, Commentary on Galatians, 1531).

“In our time, whenever the pope does not have the authority of the Scriptures on his side, he always uses this same single argument against us: **The church, the church!**’ ...With might and main he insists that the church can never be destroyed or overthrown. **This argument persuades many people.** With these and similar arguments these false apostles impressed the Galatians, so that

Paul lost his authority among them and his doctrine came under suspicion” (LW 26:15, Commentary on Galatians, 1531).

Scripture

“Take Christ out of the Scriptures, and what will you find left in them?” (LW 33:26, The Bondage of the Will, 1525).

“Scripture is not to be understood as against, but for Christ, hence **it either refers to him, or is not to be reckoned true Scripture....** For if opponents have pleaded Scripture against Christ, let us plead Christ against Scripture” (LW 34:112, Theses Concerning Faith and Law, 1535).

“For it is the duty of a genuine apostle to proclaim Christ’s passion, death, and office, and to lay the foundation of faith in the same. . . . All genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach and magnify Christ. Moreover, the true touchstone, by which all books are judged, is whether they glorify Christ or not, since all Scripture presents Christ. . . **What does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even if Peter and Paul should teach it.** On the other hand, what proclaims Christ is apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod should do it” (LW 35:396, Prefaces to the New Testament, 1546).

Doctrine

“For doctrine is like a mathematical point. Therefore it cannot be divided; that is, **it cannot stand either subtraction or addition**” (LW 27:37, Commentary on Galatians, 1535).

“If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely **that little point** that the world and the devil are

at the moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages is where the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefield moreover is merely flight and disgrace **if he flinches at that point**” (WA Briefwechsel 3:81 ff).

“All depends on the doctrine. Where doctrine is right, then everything is right: faith, work, love, suffering, good and evil days, eating, drinking, hunger, thirst, sleeping and waking, walking, and standing still, etc. **Where the doctrine is not right, then it is in vain, all is lost, and everything is completely condemned**” (LW 43:281, To the Saxon Princes, 1545).

Experience

“One thing is sure: We cannot pin our hope on **anything that we are, think, say, or do**” (Smalcald Articles III:III:36; Tappert 309).

“Let us thank God, therefore, that we have been delivered from this monster of uncertainty and that now we can believe for a certainty that the Holy Spirit is crying and issuing that sigh too deep for words in our hearts. And this is our foundation: The gospel commands us to look, not at our own good deeds or perfection but God himself as he promises, and at Christ himself, the Mediator. . . . And this is the reason why our theology is certain: **It snatches us away from ourselves** and places us outside ourselves, so that **we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person, or works** but depend on that which is **outside ourselves**, that is, on the promise and truth of God which cannot deceive” (LW 26:387, Commentary on Galatians, 1531).

GOOD HYMN – BAD HYMN

“The Battle Belongs To The Lord”

Words and Music by Jamie Owens-Collins
1985 Fairhill Music

In heavenly armor we'll enter the land,
The battle belongs to the Lord.
No weapon that's fashioned against us will stand,
The battle belongs to the Lord.

Refrain:

And we sing glory, honor, power, and strength to the Lord,
We sing glory, honor, power, and strength to the Lord.

When the power of darkness comes in like a flood,
The battle belongs to the Lord.
He'll raise up a standard, the power of His blood,
The battle belongs to the Lord.

When your enemy presses in hard, do not fear,
The battle belongs to the Lord.
Take courage, my friend, your redemption is near,
The battle belongs to the Lord.

What's right?

This contemporary praise song brings to mind several Biblical texts that proclaim the victory of the cross over evil. First, Romans 8:37-39: “In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” And also Luke 10:18: “And [Jesus] said to them, ‘I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.’”

The song's refrain echoes Revelation 5:12, also echoed in Handel's Messiah: “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” And it is similar to the battle imagery in Luther's “A Mighty Fortress.”

All in all the text and music work together to convey the victorious Christian message that we are saved not by our own doing, but by the strong arm of the Lord.

With all these Biblical themes “The Battle Belongs To the Lord” is a good praise song for today.

“Breathe on Us, Creative Spirit”

Rev. Bruce Benson
St. Olaf College Chaplain

Breathe on us, Creative Spirit, peace beyond all anxious noise
Still our hearts to catch your whisper,
turn our fears to hopes and joys'
Use our lives to serve your purpose, give our hidden skills a voice;
Hallow all our gifts and talents. We are yours; our hearts rejoice.

Poet, painter, music maker: all your work, as tribute bring.
Scholar, actor, graceful dancer: make your skill an offering.
Your uniqueness finds a welcome safe beneath God's holy wing.
Let your gifts now grow and flourish, let your spirit rise and sing.

Word of God, eternal springing, wake and fill our minds we pray;
That your truth may be our guide in all we think, and do, and say,
Let integrity and justice mark the work we do each day.
Stir our hearts that we may ever your command of love obey.

In all times and in all places, praise and glory be expressed
To the God of all creation, ever living, ever blessed.
In our worship and our living keep our eyes on what is best,
‘Til we feast around the table where you welcome every guest.

What's wrong?

The above hymn, sung yearly at graduation, is bad but not because it is offensive. Rather it is bad because it presents a laundered message: God is nice, we're nice, and everybody is saved in the end, as the last line of the hymn proclaims: “Til we feast around the table where you welcome every guest.”

The text is reminiscent of H. Richard Niebuhr's summary of liberal theology: “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”

Perhaps the hymn is bleached out in order not to offend those St. Olaf students and their families who are not Christian.

Perhaps the hymn represents the college's view of what Christian faith is – a spur to do good, an affirmation that all are good, and the assurance that religious differences really don't matter because in the end all will be saved anyway.

What hymns could do a better job of proclaiming the gospel at graduation and sending graduates into the world? Some options:

LBW #553 Now Thank We All Our God
LBW # 551 “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee”
LBW #561 “For the Beauty of the Earth”
LBW #557 “Let All Things Now Living”

QUERIES AND INQUIRES

1. A Lutheran pastor said that the words for communion – “The body of Christ given for you ...the blood of Christ shed for you” – mean that we really eat Jesus’ flesh and drink his blood . What kind of “real” is this?

John 6: 53: “So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.”

Christ is really present in the bread and wine, but the bread and wine remain bread and wine:

“We believe, teach, and confess that with the bread and wine the body and blood of Christ are received not only spiritually, by faith, but also orally – however, not in a Capernaite manner, but because of the sacramental union in a supernatural and heavenly manner.”

(Book of Concord, Epitome, Article VII, Tappert edition p. 483:15; Kolb edition, p. 506:15)

2. Roman Catholic Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, head of the Vatican’s Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, recently said Christians “have many things in common with other believers – for example, that we all believe in one God...” Do we really all believe in one God?

There is no agreement about “God” among the many religions. For Jews Yahweh is not the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For **Muslims** there is no God but Allah. Although Christians say God is three-in-one, Muslims insist that God’s Son is a second God and that therefore Christians are idolaters.

Buddhists are basically atheists. For Buddhists there are ultimately no distinctions between humanity and God, between evil and good.

Hinduism has 330 million gods, and when Hindus say there is one God – Brahman – this is an impersonal force, nothing like the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The leaders of each of these religions are polite and diplomatic when the TV cameras focus on them, but make no mistake, they each exclude the others.

Why does the high-ranking Vatican official say something so misleading as: “We all believe in one God”? It is the dark side of the Vatican game of playing all sides.

(For concise summaries of major religions see www.bbc.co.uk.com/religion/religions.)

3. Anna Quindlen, Newsweek columnist, says that the polygamy issue is over and done with. She says: The younger you are the more likely you are to know someone who is polygamous. The more likely you are to know someone who is polygamous, the more likely you are to support polygamy. The opposition is aging out.

Opps, sorry – wrong issue. She says that the gay-sex issue is over. Is she right about the future?

In the Judeo-Christian West, monogamy is tied to the recognition that only two people, one man and one woman – no more, no less – can generate children.

Moreover, the evidence of the social sciences is overwhelming: **Children do best raised by a mother and father in a low-conflict home.**

Two lesbians cannot do that. They have to get “their” children through a sperm donor – a third party. Thus lesbian “families” **intentionally** deny children a father – even as they use a man to generate children.

The same is true for gay “families.” They **intentionally** deny children a mother. This also is harmful to kids.

Moreover, if gay marriage is accepted, why not polygamy? If marriage is about “love” and “consenting adults,” there is no logical reason to confine it to couples and pairs drawn from different sexes.

Polygamy is gaining acceptance. Some Mormons and many Muslims practice it. And lesbian “families” sometimes include in some way the sperm-donating men who created the children for the lesbians to raise.

All of these alternate “families” have harmful consequences for children.

4. Should pastors be paid or tipped for weddings and funerals?

Tipping pastors is inappropriate. Whether or not they are to be paid depends on whether the wedding/funeral is for a member or non-member.

Pastors should officiate at weddings and funerals for members as part of their call – for no payment or tip.

For non-members pastors should be paid \$200 to \$300 or more because, even if the pastor uses material from a previous wedding or funeral, these events require at least 10 hours of the pastor’s time.

WORLD WATCH

WHAKATANE

Raise your hands and step away from the hedgehog!

A 27-year old New Zealand man was arrested for throwing a hedgehog at a 15-year old boy. The police officer said the man was arrested “for assault with a weapon, namely the hedgehog.”

The boy had a welt and puncture marks in his leg.

The assailant was eventually fined \$545. He had originally claimed that a group had been playing Hacky Sack with the hedgehog.

NEW YORK

The ELCA: “A hierarchical church system”

The New York State Supreme Court has ruled in favor of the ELCA Metro New York Synod in its lawsuit against St. John’s Evangelical Lutheran Church.

The Synod won the right to take over the property of St. John’s. Here is part of the Court’s ruling:

Turning to the merits of the petition, as a member congregation of NY Synod and ELCA, St. John’s is part of a hierarchical church system in which the activities of the member churches are subject to review and control by the regional synod...

Implicit in their association with ELCA is St. John’s ‘pledge’ to be governed by the provisions of St. John’s Const., which states, among other things, that ‘this congregation is subject to the discipline of the [ELCA] (St. John’s Const., § 6.01).’ [Emphasis added]

(To read the complete Final Disposition of the Court, see www.cbmslaw.com/news/)

VANCOUVER

“Human Rights” Tribunals against Christians

Canada is becoming hostile territory for Christians:

- In 1999 a Christian printer was fined \$5,000 for refusing to print a series of pro-pedophilia essays. He spent \$40,000 in legal fees trying to defend himself.
- In 2005 the Knights of Columbus of Port Coquitlam, B.C., were fined for refusing to rent their hall for a lesbian wedding.
- Many clergy have been brought up on charges of preaching against homosexual behavior.
- In 2002 the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission ordered the Saskatoon *Star Phoenix* to pay \$1,500 to each of three complainants for running an ad that quoted Bible verses against homosexual behavior.

The decision was overturned by an appeals court . . . four years later.

BRUSSELS

Where have the intelligent bishops gone?

Cardinal Godfried Danneels, after sending his retirement letter to the Vatican, expressed distress that there are not brighter men in the Church hierarchy:

“When I look at the synod assembly [of bishops], so many good people are there with really pastoral hearts. They are good shepherds. But from time to time I think it would be good if five percent of them were also thinkers, who don’t lack hearts. We need among the bishops and cardinals some really intelligent people.”

(*The Tablet* 5/31/08, p. 6)

VATICAN CITY

No hitting the Pope and no girls allowed

The Vatican has issued a new decree against the ordination of women priests, punishing them and the bishops who ordain them with automatic excommunication.

Excommunication is usually “*ferendae sententiae*,” imposed as punishment. But some offences, including heresy, schism, and laying violent hands on the Pope, are considered so serious that they trigger automatic excommunication, or “*latae sententiae*.”

The decree says that women priests and the bishops who ordain them are to be excommunicated “*latae sententiae*.”

FAIRFAX

Two ELCA Synods Stand With the Virginia Episcopal Diocese in Property Dispute

Two ELCA synods – the Virginia Synod and the Metropolitan Washington D.C. – have joined a friend-of-the-court brief **against** eleven Episcopal congregations that left The Episcopal Church.

In April 2008 a County Court judge had ruled that the Virginia Divisions Statute says that the majority of a congregation is entitled to its property when there is a division within the denomination.

The Episcopal Church claims it owns all congregational property and that the state’s “division statute” “discriminates against hierarchical churches in favor of congregational ones.”

The eleven congregations have joined the Convocation of Anglicans in North America (CANAm), a missionary branch of the Church of Nigeria.

LONDON

Hospital beds face Mecca 5 times a day

From the Church of England newspaper:

“At all levels of [British] national life Islam has gained state funding, protection from any criticism, and the insertion of advisors and experts in government departments. For example:

- A Muslim Home Office adviser was responsible for the aborting of the legislation against honor killings, arguing that informal methods would be better.
- In the police we hear of girls under police protection having the addresses of their safe houses disclosed to their parents by Muslim officers who claim to be doing their religious duty.
- While men-only gentlemen’s clubs are now being dubbed unlawful, we hear of municipal swimming pools encouraging ‘Muslim women only’ sessions.
- In Dewsbury Hospitals staff waste time by turning beds to face Mecca five times a day — a Monty Pythonesque scenario of lunacy, but astonishingly true....”

JERUSALEM

Archbishop Venables Will Not Commune

The Anglican Archbishop of the Southern Cone, the Most Rev Gregory Venables, has said he will go to the 10-year gathering of Anglican bishops at Lambeth Palace, but he will not take communion there.

Speaking at a press conference at a gathering of Anglicans in Jerusalem, Archbishop Venables said he will not go to the communion table at Lambeth because:

“We are in a state of broken communion. In 2008 those same people [American and Canadian bishops] have continued to walk away from the gospel. I have to show that what they have done is seriously wrong.”

Three bishops from the Church of England have announced they will not even attend Lambeth. The Rt Rev Wallace Benn, Bishop of Lewes, will not be attending because, as he said,

“The fabric of the communion has been torn by the revisionists. As such, the communion does not really exist.” (Virtueonline.com, 6/25 and 6/27)

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with Vacation Bible School this week.

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