

A WINCE, NOT A WINK, FOR THE LUTHERAN HANDBOOK

A winking Luther. Lake Wobegon humor about jello and hot dishes. It's all in *The Lutheran Handbook*, by Augsburg Fortress. Over 100,000 copies have been sold. It's been a real money maker.

But there's a **fine line between clever and coarse**. The *Handbook* crosses that line – again and again. More importantly, the text is wrong about basic Lutheran teaching. Consider the following:

1) Wrong on Baptism. The *Handbook* states: “Baptism is received by a believing heart that trusts in God’s word. In the case of infant baptism, the baptized person ‘borrows’ one from his or her parents and sponsors.” (p. 35, emphasis added).

No! A baptized infant does not borrow “a believing heart” from others. Rather, God gives faith in baptism. “Faith” is God’s doing, not ours. As Luther writes:

Further, we are not primarily concerned whether the baptized person believes or not, for in the latter case baptism does not become invalid. Everything depends on the Word and commandment of God. This, perhaps, is a rather subtle point, but it is based upon what I have already said, that baptism is simply water and God’s Word in and with each other; that is, when the Word accompanies the water, baptism is valid, even though faith be lacking. For my faith does not constitute baptism but receives it. Baptism does not become invalid even if it is wrongly received or used, for it is bound not to our faith but to the Word.”

(*Large Catechism*, IV, 52-53; Tappert, p. 443.)

Thus adult baptism is simply delayed infant baptism. The adult and infant alike are both saved by the alien righteousness of Christ.

2) Wrong on the image of God. The *Handbook* says that “you were made in the image of God” (p. 135).

But what does Gen 1:27 mean? It does not mean “reflecting God.” The ancient Hebrews **absolutely** rejected idolatry. They would never regard a man or woman as being like God in any real sense.

In Gen. 1:27 the image of God is a task: “I give you dominion...” In context “image” means you have a certain job, to exercise dominion over the earth.

In the New Testament the image of God, lost in the fall, is restored in Christ: “you have put off the old ... and put on the new nature ... after the image of its creator” (Col 3:10; cp 1:15).

3) Wrong on law/gospel. The *Handbook*: “Law and gospel can’t be defined strictly. They are ways we experience [God working in us]...” (p. 88).

To be sure, God is at work in us but in a way that is hidden, that is inaccessible to our feelings and experiences. He is active; we are passive. We cannot “experience” or “see” him working in us or in others. Faith is not sight.

4) Wrong on theologians of the cross. “The theologian of the cross knows that ... God shows up in those things that seem weak, foolish, and insignificant to human eyes” (p. 137, emphasis added).

To the contrary, God doesn’t “show up” at all. He is hidden under the cross. He promises to be present in Word and sacrament – apart from these all life is ambiguous.

5) Wrong on evil. There is actually a chapter titled: “How to identify and avoid evil” (pp. 112-13). But you cannot identify evil in a simplistic way and you cannot avoid it. Evil often appears as something good or a good cause. As Paul says, “Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Cor 11:14).

6) Wrong on prayer. *Handbook*: “Some prayer involves silent mediation as a means of listening for God’s voice” (p. 92).

No, silence is not a medium through which God works. Rather, “faith comes by hearing” (Rom 10:17).

Luther: “We should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through his external Word and sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil” (*Smalcald Articles* III/8; Tappert, p. 313:10).

7) Crossing the line from clever to coarse. Just a few of many examples:

- “Lifting and extending your arms in an open prayer position may help cool your body by dispersing excess heat. If you’ve been perspiring, though, avoid exposing others to your personal odor” (p. 19).

- “Do not attempt to make change from the plate if your offering is in cash” (p. 41).

- “Your manure cure didn’t help me either” (p. 56).

- “If getting burned at the stake is unavoidable, request dry wood” (p. 66).

- “Break wind” to banish the devil (p. 127).

Are these funny? No. The *Handbook’s* **coarse humor** trivializes both evil and the cross.

To be sure, we’re all for good humor, but *The Lutheran Handbook* makes one wince.