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Toward A More Responsive Process for Formulating Statements of the Lutheran Church

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Traditionally, Christians have spoken of the "teaching authority" or the *magisterium* of the church. It derives from Jesus' command to the apostles to "teach (disciples of all nations) to keep all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19), and from Paul's charge to Timothy to hand on to others intact the sound teaching that has been entrusted to him (2 Timothy 1:13-14; 2:2; 3:14-4:5; etc.). Both in the Pastoral Epistles and in John's gospel (e.g., 14:26; 16:13) this is seen to be the work of the Holy Spirit within the church and within each faithful member.

There are several ways of approaching this task. For Eastern Christianity it means, essentially, that nothing can be changed, only clarified if necessary. Coptic Christians are especially proud of their past thirteen centuries of unchanged tradition and liturgy. No one can deny the depth and vitality of faith that can result from such an approach.

The Western tradition operates on a different premise. Since Jesus promised that after his departure the Holy Spirit would lead the apostles into all truth, new interpretations of truth can emerge over time in response to new situations. For Roman Catholics the consensus of the successors of the apostles (i.e., the bishops) in communion with the successor of Peter, the chief apostle (i.e., the Bishop of Rome), is the guarantee that the Holy Spirit is indeed leading the church in the truth-seeking process, just as Jesus promised.

Because of their experience of the late medieval papacy, the Lutheran reformers rejected this view as inadequate. Even so, they did not adopt the view of some Protestants who seem to believe that the Holy Spirit just as infallibly operates through

the processes of egalitarian democracy in the hands of a bureaucratic oligarchy. Therefore, we need to ask the question how one might characterize a Lutheran approach to the "teaching office".

I believe that there are three essential components that must each be given adequate weight in any process leading to a teaching statement from our church. They are all derived from our understanding of how the Holy Spirit works in the church.

- 1 Our commitment to Scripture, the ecumenical creeds, and the Lutheran confessions;
- 2 Our commitment to the teaching role of the ordained ministry; and
- 3 Our commitment to the role of the entire *laos* in testing the truth of the church's teaching before it can be fully received as God's will.

There will always be some awkwardness in according proper weight to each of these components in any one process, but we have to keep trying. It is tempting to oversimplify. Some people are alarmed at the suggestion that we need anything more than commitment to Scripture and confessions; in their view, all issues worth addressing are already settled and only a few proof-texts need be adduced. Others believe that the teaching office of the ordained is all we need: Just turn controversial issues over to a small committee of theological professors, bishops, or executives and the results will be reliable. Still others have boundless confidence in the truthfulness of the current majority opinion among the laity of the church, and that should settle everything.

For my part, I see disaster lurking in any attempt to reduce the role of any of these three components in the process of formulating our church's teaching statements. Surely our early attempts to deal with abortion and sacramental practices have taught us this much. Let's try to envision a process that gives due weight to each component.

First of all, we are a confessing church. This means that we are not free to approach contemporary issues as if there were no Triune God, no saving Gospel, no inspired Scriptures to serve as "the only source of the church's doctrine and the authoritative standard for [its] faith and life," and no confessional witness to the correct understanding of the Gospel.

In this day and age, as in any other, a church that operates with these unalterable principles (Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada Constitution, XVIII, 1) cannot even entertain the possibility of taking any position that renders the authority of Scripture secondary to something else. At the close of the 1989 ELCIC convention in Saskatoon we were warned about “biblicism”, and rightly so. Biblicism is how the devil twisted Scripture to support his cause (Matthew 4:1–11). The use Jesus made of Scripture in response to Satan is *not* biblicism. As a church we are committed to the proper use of Scripture and to obedience to the Word of God when we have heard it, irrespective of how it may clash with the norms of the society in which we live. Any person who is not prepared to do this belongs in another part of Christ’s church, one that does not share our confession of faith.

Working from this basic perspective, here’s how I would see our church develop position statements on social issues, moral questions, and worship practices:

The first task is to define the issue being addressed. This can be done by a convention of the church, by the national Church Council, or by the appropriate division of the church.

The proper division then solicits input from every possible sector of the church, with the stated purpose of gathering and sharing the insights and experiences of all. The division’s responsibility at this point is to provide a forum for the full interchange of perspectives among all the church’s members so that the entire church has access to the insights of everyone. The division, therefore, collates and distributes all responses *as they are submitted*; if summaries are used, they must not distort either the content or the relative balance of views expressed.

Everyone is asked to study carefully and prayerfully all the collated responses and then to address this key question: On the basis of what you have learned from the submissions of others, is there anything in your original submission which you would now wish to modify or change?

The division then draws up a proposed “Statement” based on the revised submissions. A group of theologians, bishops, pastors, and lay leaders then would work through this document and might modify it. The division approves the statement

in the form in which it is to be transmitted to the convention for action and shares it with the whole church.

The foregoing process may seem cumbersome, but it has much to commend it. No elite group can prevent full and free communication among all members of the church as collectively we open ourselves to one another and seek the mind of Christ. At the same time, those who are entrusted with the teaching office in a special way have opportunity to exercise that trust at a critical juncture, but not in secret. Everyone can see what material they received and what they did with it. The church in convention can decide the final shape and content of the official statement.

We all need to trust that the surest approach to a God-pleasing exercise of the teaching authority of the church is one that promotes the fullest and freest interchange among all God's people within the context of our Scriptural and confessional commitments. Whether the subject is abortion, sacramental practices, human sexuality, or ministry in the church, we have nothing to fear and everything to gain from such an approach.