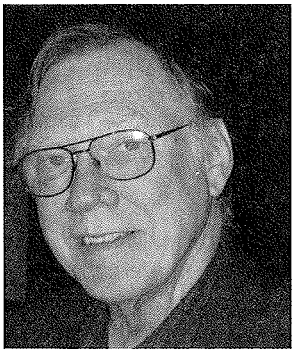
Reflections on the Lutheran Tradition's Approach to Doctrine, Tradition, and Revelation

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The aim of this short paper will be to provide an answer to how someone from the Lutheran tradition of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada might respond to the following questions:

1. What is dogma or doctrine in your tradition?
2. What are considered to be doctrinal statements?
3. Who can make doctrinal statements?
4. What is the relation between doctrine and revelation?

In answering these questions, the Lutheran tradition of the ELCIC, I would suggest, would begin with the faith affirmation of the Trinity as "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" and the dynamics of their relationship. It is my contention that for Lutherans it is the dynamic relationship between the three persons of the Trinity that informs Lutheran doctrine and life. That is, the Father is at work in the life of the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Son is at work in the life of the Father and the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is at work in the life of the Father and Son. All this is an ongoing equal dynamic that is working in history toward the final time when God shall be all in all.

A more concrete way of seeing this dynamic within the Lutheran tradition is to view the Trinity as involving "Continuity" (integration/identity), "Change" (alteration/ growth), and "Vision" (transcendence /transformation). Of necessity I will need to be brief, but as you know, there is much more written by and about Lutherans that could be said. To be more specific:

Under the dynamics of the Father "Continuity" — for the Lutheran tradition — I would identify:

1. Justification by Grace through faith.
   Lutherans believe that forgiveness and salvation come to us solely by the grace of God, apart from any "good" works we might do. It is this belief that undergirds the activity of baptism, both infant and adult. God's basic relation to the world is through love, which has been and is manifest through the incarnation and work of Jesus Christ, the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit, and the supportive action of Creation. A good relationship with God can and should lead to good works, but one's behaviour does not provide any foundation for final salvation. In Luther's words, we all are *Simul Justus et peccator*. In our lives, we are ever-captive of sin and ever-touched by the saving work of God in Christ. For Lutherans, baptism is complemented by confirmation, which normally is a period

of study and affirmation around the age of 12.

2. Biblical Scriptures.
   Lutherans hold the Biblical Scriptures to be foundational to their tradition. Within the ELCIC the Bible is understood to be a document to be understood as a whole (Old and New Testaments) in light of its historical context, while faithfully witnessing to the Word of God. For Lutherans, the Biblical Scriptures are themselves the work of the Trinity, subject to all the dynamics noted herein.

3. Book of Concord (from the Reformation), the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds, as well as the history of church (including the writings of Luther and others), and Luther's catechisms, as well as the Augsburg Confession.
   Lutherans, while affirming that the Book of Concord, the creeds and the actions of the church in history give faithful testimony to the work and word of God as properly understood, they also recognize that there can be a variety of interpretations of these documents and actions. Therefore, they seek in light of the Scriptures and God's grace, to dialectically uncover an understanding of these materials, which clarifies the variety of value stances and interpretations of those who make various assessments of them. Any consequent judgments as might be deemed necessary will then follow from such dialectics within the Lutheran community, as actions of the whole. This follows the practice at the time of the development of the Book of Concord, as well as the practice that was followed with the recent establishment of concord with the Anglican Church and the concord with the Roman Catholic Church on the matter of Justification.

4. Law and Gospel.
   In the Lutheran tradition, the Law, as seen in the Ten Commandments and other moral injunctions in the Old and New Testaments is affirmed to do three things:
   1. The Law reveals sin in our lives and reveals our need for the Gospel of Grace.
   2. The Law helps to identify boundaries, which can work to resist injustices in society and other evil activities that work to undermine God's Gospel of Grace.
   3. The Law works as guidance for a life of good discipleship under God's Grace.

   For Lutherans all this is affirmed in the recognition that the Gospel always stands behind the Law, acknowledging that all of us need God's grace in our day-to-day lives because of sin (the ongoing brokenness of our relationship to God), and we need to hold the reality of Law and Gospel together in our lives. This reality is an ever-present fact of our lives as Lutherans.

5. Theology of the Cross.
   In the Lutheran tradition, there is the recognition that the good that God is at work establishing is often hidden within what appears to be the opposite perception by most others. A prime example is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and his resurrection. In short, Theology of the Cross acknowledges the suffering of all people, and affirms God's identification with it. But it also recognizes that God, in response to this suffering, is working through a person's ambiguous reality, to recreate life in the future (in maybe hidden ways), for the renewal of all creation (of which they are a part, now and in the future). The theology of the Cross recognizes the basic ambiguity of historical life, and God's willingness to be placed in the center of it, to transform it. Put another way, the problem is not that often people may not recognize or lack the will to do what they need to do as Christians for their neighbour. But that they often have more than one neighbour to serve, whose needs may be

simultaneously incompatible to meet, at any particular time or place in history.

6. Call to Mission for Others.

   ELCIC Lutherans believe in the priesthood of all believers, which means that they are called upon to exercise their faith active in love. This is a call to mission with and for others. In the words of a national convention of the ELCIC, "We believe, teach and confess that the Holy Spirit calls and gathers the whole church into the mission of God, which takes seriously both the reality of the world, and the reality of Christ, with equal care." This will obviously require attention to matters of context, asking where people or the environment are hurting, and it will also require asking where God is acting by Grace to address this distress of which Christians can be a part. Clearly this is an ongoing task, but one Lutherans believe is always before us as Christians.

Under the dynamics of the Son — Change — for the Lutheran tradition, I would identify:

1. Reason.

   As a part of the creation of human beings, we have been given the gift by God of high powers of intellectual reason (which I might acknowledge we haven't always used wisely). Nevertheless, in light of this gift, Lutherans believe we are called upon by God to use this gift for the benefit of all persons, communities, cultures and creation.

2. Science.

   Science has provided significant insights into how we humans have been a part of and can be a more responsible part of the creation with its challenges and opportunities for us as God's creatures. Lutherans believe that as Christians, persons need to be aware of the ever-changing insights that are emerging through science, so as to be better informed about how best to understand the meaning of what can best ground Lutheran theology in the world, and thereby can better act.

3. Culture.

   Lutherans understand that their tradition exists in many parts of the world and within many different cultures. As persons in each of these cultures develop their own ways to embrace the Lutheran tradition in light of their culture, the Lutheran tradition and the Christian witness as a whole is enriched. Through dialogue between and relationships with persons from various cultures, all peoples are enabled to obtain a fuller knowledge of God and God's activity in the world.

4. Sin.

   In the Lutheran tradition, sin is the result of the ever-present tendency of all persons to displace God's will with their own will, and thereby live out of a broken relationship with God. It is out of such a broken relationship that things like injustice, greed, lust, envy, idolatry and marginalization occur. It is into this context that God's grace enters the picture. In the words of Rev. Paul Gehrs, "Lutheran theology ever calls us back to [an unbroken]... relationship with God. This is the first relationship restored by grace. This is the relationship broken by every sin. This is the solid ground and fresh winds that help us build right relationship with others [and creation] in our lives."

5. Power.

   Within creation all parts have been given by God the power and place "to be" as an interdependent mutually supportive whole. As we

enhance this power, we support God's desire for all parts of creation (including persons) to better become what God calls them to be. The Lutheran tradition affirms this and also recognizes that any undermining of this power in any part of creation (e.g. by discrimination through class, gender, community, race, age, pollution, etc.) constitutes an abuse of power that needs to be resisted. Rather, Lutherans believe that as Christians we are called to help the growth and fulfillment of all parts of creation, human and non-human, as a dynamic mutually integrated whole.

6. Dialogue with other Believers (Christians and Interfaith... who reflect on their experience and faith)

Lutherans recognize that God is at work throughout all the creation (and among all denominations and peoples of other faiths). They also recognize that any doctrinal formulation or interpretation of God (who is infinite) and God's activities is always finite, because it occurs in a time and place and is developed or reported by persons who are not infinite. Therefore, a fuller theological understanding will only occur as persons from different traditions dialogue together from their various insights and perspectives (through bodies such as the Canadian Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches). The aim here is not to find some minimalist common denominator, but rather a richer picture through which to view God's relation to all people and creation, and God's ongoing activity in the world. Even within the Lutheran Church ELCIC, decisions are finally made on theological matters by representatives from local churches or synods in dialogue and resolved in a convention (synodical, national or through the Lutheran World Federation).

Under the dynamics of the Holy Spirit — Transformative Vision — for the Lutheran Tradition, I would identify:

1. Eschatological fulfillment.

Following the celebration of All Saints Sunday (a remembrance that Lutherans also hold dear throughout the liturgical year), Lutherans affirm that God has knit God's people (past, present and future) together in one communion in the mystical body of Jesus Christ. In light of this, they ask God to grant them grace to follow God's blessed saints in lives and commitment and to know the inexpressible joys God has prepared for those that love God now and in the future.

2. Hope.

Lutherans pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven." While recognizing the pervasive reality of sin in the world, they also celebrate the power of God's grace in salvation, and God's activity in the world, transforming human activity into God's purposes. They believe that God's power rests finally not in preventing the evil people may do, but in transforming it to God's purposes. In this, Lutherans live in hope, resisting sin as they can and looking forward to what God is yet to accomplish, of which they yet may be a part.

3. Justice as the future God seeks.

Lutherans know that, as people form communities, there needs to be some structure or procedure by which both the good of the whole and the individual is accomplished and safeguarded. Because of sin, and the fact that often meeting the

needs of some neighbours can preclude meeting the needs of other neighbours, (thereby undermining justice or creating injustice), Lutherans believe there is no perfect structure or procedure that is possible (justice at best can only be proximate justice), short of the final justice of the Kingdom of God. Nevertheless, Lutherans look to the coming Kingdom of God, toward which God is even now working, through history. Consequently, they seek to be a part of such activity by God as it is discerned to be happening through the work of the Holy Spirit in any place or time.

4. Prayer.

Lutherans affirm the importance of regular prayer and devotions in their daily life. Through prayer they believe that they are placed in communion with God and may thereby, with the help of the Holy Spirit, better discern what God is doing in their lives and how they might have a closer relationship with God. However, they also recognize, that in their prayers, it is God's will that will necessarily be done, not theirs. Nevertheless, Lutherans find in prayer an act of God's support to become one with the future that God seeks for all persons and creation.

5. Love.

Following the writings of St. Paul, Lutherans affirm the three basic marks of the Christian, namely faith, hope and love. They also follow St. Paul in declaring that the greatest of these is love. It is love that is the proper foundation of how we are to relate to our neighbour, as it is the foundation for God's relation to the world through Jesus Christ. Lutherans therefore seek a life that embodies faith active in love, and look for ways to realize this in the present and the future.

6. Spiritual Renewal for Mission.

Lutherans see themselves as in mission with and for others. They also believe that such mission is not possible without opportunity for regular Spiritual renewal, given the ongoing challenges of history and sin. As was pointed out earlier, such renewal can come through prayer as a part of communal and personal devotions. However, Lutherans believe that such renewal needs also to come through regular reception of the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. In the Eucharist, Lutherans believe they encounter not just the remembrance of, but the ever-available "real presence" of Christ, and through this encounter they are renewed in their mission as God's disciples.

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