

# Two opposing theologies reside in the ELCA

by Mark C. Chavez, director

Physicians must diagnose the primary illnesses of their patients. Treating the patient's symptoms is necessary, but if the physician does not treat the primary illness, the patient does not get well.

The WordAlone Network maintains that the primary illness of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is the crisis over the authority of the Word of God in the life of the ELCA. The authority of Jesus the Christ and the authority of the inspired Word of God in the Bible are routinely called into question in one form or another throughout the ELCA.

The symptoms of the ELCA's illness abound – steady decline in membership; the numbers of missionaries and new mission starts are less than half of what they were in 1988 when the ELCA began; divisive conflict over sexuality issues; ecumenical agreements that compromise key Lutheran teachings in multiple directions; pagan worship practices in some ELCA churches; lack of accountability to ELCA's faith and standards; multiple gospels being proclaimed and the list goes on.

Some of the surface issues or symptoms get a lot of press in the ELCA. Some do not and are more hidden. The primary illness usually does not get much press, but here is an exception:

. . . [Presiding Bp. Mark] Hanson said: Two “hermeneutics” or paradigms are at work among the members of the ELCA that make agreement difficult on scriptural and theological matters. The Rev. Craig L. Nesson, academic dean and professor of contextual theology, Wartburg Theological Seminary, an ELCA seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, writes that there is a “traditional approach” and a “contextual approach” in interpreting Scripture, **both of which are valid and irreconcilable**, Hanson told the bishops. Similarly, Dr. Marcus J. Borg, Department of Philosophy, Oregon State University, Corvallis, writes that there are two irreconcilable “paradigms” in which Christians differ in their understandings of the Christian tradition and their interpretation of Scripture, creeds and the confessions, he said. Hanson said he's heard people with different understandings of Scripture and theology seeking to find a place for their views in the sexuality recommendations. (ELCA News Service, March 11, 2005)

I agree that there are two conflicting and irreconcilable positions in the ELCA. I disagree that they are both valid. The questioning of the authority of God's Word in the ELCA results not from just two conflicting paradigms, but from two basic theologies in the ELCA. The theologies begin with opposite presuppositions and conflict with each other on almost all major teachings of the Christian faith. The table on page 7 illustrates the major differences.

There are more than two theologies in the ELCA, but all can be grouped under one of two general headings – confessional Lutheran or liberal Protestant. Confessional Lutheran includes at least a few distinguishable theologies or emphases. There are many more in the liberal Protestant grouping.

The dividing line between the two groups may not always be sharp – some ELCA members might say they are on both sides of the table depending on the particular teaching. In truth, liberal Protestant theology is one way that we sinners trap ourselves in idolatry – making the god that we want and think we need. If we are honest with ourselves and with God, then we have all embraced willingly the teachings of liberal Protestant theology in one form or another throughout our lives.

Most of the table would accurately describe the primary illness in other Protestant denominations in North America. Some Roman Catholics in North America also use a theology that is essentially liberal Protestant, though official Roman Catholic theology fits with most, but not all, of the confessional Lutheran teachings.

By the way, if you want to see the cutting edge of liberal Protestant theology, search on the Internet for “progressive Christianity.” You’ll quickly find names like Marcus Borg and other members of the Jesus Seminar – a group of mainly theologians who studied and wrote about an “historical Jesus,” using strictly academic critical analysis of scientific and historical evidence without reference to faith or theological considerations. According to their writings, Jesus was an itinerant sage who dined with social outcasts and who was not resurrected from the grave. Or look at Ebenezer Lutheran Church’s website, [www.herchurch.org](http://www.herchurch.org), for a specific ELCA church that is on the “cutting edge.”

More teachings could be listed in the table to illustrate the differences between the two basic groups of theologies, but these are sufficient for a general description and diagnosis. Here are some brief comments on the different teachings using CL and LP as abbreviations for the two groups.

**Truth:** CL works with the presupposition that there are absolute truths and that God reveals them to sinners. Jesus says, “I am the way and the truth and the life.” LP asserts that truths are not absolute, but vary with context and personal experience. We search for them and when we discover them, we claim the Holy Spirit has inspired and led us to the discovery.

**Holy Bible:** CL sees the Bible as God’s Word that says sinners are the problem. LP sees the Bible more as human words about God and therefore the Bible is a problem – ancient, hard to understand, addressed to different people and cultures and so on.

**Triune God:** CL accepts God’s self-revelation as the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. LP sees problems with only one name for the Trinity (in particular “Father” and “Son”) and believes we can create and imagine new names.

**Original sin:** CL holds to article II of the Augsburg Confession – apart from new birth in Christ we are “full of evil lust and inclination.” LP says, “God made me this way and God doesn’t make junk,” thereby denying the need for a total new birth in Christ.

**Son of God:** CL boldly confesses Jesus as “the way” that sinners are brought by the Holy Spirit to God the Father. LP says there is more than one way to find and experience God. Jesus is only one of the ways. Some go so far as to say that everyone will be saved, which is known as universalism.

**Holy Spirit:** CL confesses that the Holy Spirit comes to sinners by means of God’s external Word – Jesus Christ and Scripture – that exists outside of and apart from sinners. LP separates the Holy Spirit’s work from the external Word and says that the Spirit uses internal human words and experiences to reveal new truths.

**Law:** CL confesses that God’s law, revealed in the Bible, demands righteousness of sinners until the end of time. LP says that most of the law in the Bible is outmoded and no longer applies to anyone.

**Gospel:** CL confesses that the Gospel of Jesus gives what the law demands – righteousness. The Gospel fulfills the law. LP says that the Gospel nullifies the law.

**Resurrection:** CL confesses that God physically raised Jesus – body, soul and all – from the dead. LP says that resurrection is spiritual or metaphorical, not physical, and LP often asserts that the apostles created a myth to cope with the tragic loss of their leader.

**Repentance:** CL confesses with Martin Luther in the first of the 95 Theses – “When our Lord and master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” LP says that we need not repent of our entire lives. Humankind decides what needs to be repented and what doesn’t.

**Justification:** CL confesses that when God justifies sinners, He puts the old Adam and Eve in all of us to death and raises us to a new life in Christ. LP says that God sets the old Adam and Eve in us free to keep on living. As some have quipped, “justification of sin rather than the sinner.”

**Faith in Jesus:** CL confesses that faith in Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation. LP says that faith in Jesus is not necessary for all people. The Lutheran, November 2005, included an essay by a dying Lutheran theologian that asserted, “The only final condition for eternal participation in Christ’s victory is that we be dead.”

**Sanctification:** CL confesses that by means of our new birth in Christ, the Holy Spirit makes us holy, blessing us with the very righteousness of Christ. Because LP denies original sin and the radical work that God does in justifying the ungodly, it sees wholeness existing naturally in the world, and even goes so far as blessing sinful behavior.

**Holy Baptism:** CL confesses God uses baptism to join sinners to the death and resurrection of Jesus. LP tends to view baptism as a membership card that entitles individuals to rights and freedoms that they demand. They use baptism to serve their wants, needs and desires.

**Holy Communion:** CL confesses that Jesus is present with his body and blood to forgive sins. It is His supper and He is the host. LP shifts the focus to a church as the host of a banquet and celebration, making sinners the host of the meal, rather than Jesus.

**Church’s mission:** CL believes that Jesus’ great commission in Matthew 28:18-20 sets the primary mission of the church – preaching and teaching Jesus to everyone. LP emphasizes social justice causes as the mission of the church. The causes are well intentioned and truly part of the church’s needed social ministry, however social ministry is not the unique mission of the church.

**Kingdom of God:** CL confesses that God’s kingdom comes from the new creation and breaks into this old creation here and now in the presence and work of His Son and Holy Spirit. The kingdom is not of this world. God brings the kingdom to us from above and from the future that He prepares. LP tends to view the kingdom as being of this world and the building of it is our work – often sounding like a utopian earthly kingdom that we prepare from below in this world.