

# The Sacraments of the ELCA: Are They Valid?

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For this presentation I have been asked to comment on the theological questions and the practical problems raised for our pastors and congregations by recent developments in the ELCA concerning the doctrine and practice of the sacraments. The ELCA decision to enter full altar fellowship with Reformed churches is perhaps the main catalyst for this concern, but there are a number of other disturbing developments.

On one level, these new developments should cause no new practical problems for us. We were not in altar and pulpit fellowship with the ELCA before, and we are not in fellowship with them now. We could not join in the use of the sacraments with them before, and we cannot join in with them now. In this respect nothing has changed. What is new, however, is the question whether the ELCA's departure from scriptural doctrine has gone so far that we can no longer recognize the validity of their sacraments. Can we, for example, assume that people coming to us from the ELCA have been validly baptized?"

In discussing the sacraments of a heterodox church we must distinguish two questions: 1) are the sacraments being celebrated in a proper, God-pleasing way? (are they *legitimate*?) and 2) do real sacraments still exist in this church? (are they *valid*)? There are cases in which we recognize that illegitimate abuses or false notions have become attached to the sacramental practices of a church, but the church still has real sacraments because it retains all the essential elements of Christ's institution. For example, there were many obvious abuses in the Eucharist of the medieval Roman church (the communion in one kind, the sacrifice of the mass, masses without communicants, the Corpus Christi. etc.). Nevertheless, our confessions recognized the reality of the sacraments of the Roman church, because they still used the words and elements that Christ had commanded, and they recognized the real presence of his body and blood. Concerning the Roman limitation on distribution of both elements in the Sacrament the Confessions say:

We indeed excuse the Church which has borne the injury [the poor consciences which have been deprived of one part by force], since it could not obtain both parts: but the authors who maintain that the use of the entire Sacrament is justly prohibited, and who now not only prohibit, but even excommunicate and violently persecute those using an entire Sacrament, we do not excuse. Let them see to it how they will give an account to God for their decisions. *Apology*. Trig., p 361.

Even though the leaders of the church were sinning shamefully in depriving the people of the reception of one of the elements, the essence of the sacrament was retained and the communicants received a real sacrament. For another example, the Roman church had falsely diminished the blessing of baptism by limiting it to sins committed before baptism, but they retained the essentials of a trinitarian baptism.

On the other hand, if one of the essential elements of a sacrament was missing such as the reception of the elements, then there was no sacrament. In the Roman procession when the consecrated elements were paraded around but not eaten, there was no sacrament.

However, this blessing or the recitation of the words of institution of Christ alone does not make a sacrament if the entire action of the Supper, as it was instituted by Christ, is not observed (as when the consecrated bread is not distributed, received, and partaken of, but is enclosed, sacrificed, or carried about), but the command of Christ, *This do* (which embraces the entire action of administration in this Sacrament, that in an assembly of Christians bread and wine are taken, consecrated, distributed, received, eaten, drunk, and the Lord's death is shown forth at the same time) must be observed unseparated and inviolate, as also St. Paul places before our eyes the entire action of the breaking of bread or of distribution and reception. 1 Cor. 10, 16.

[Let us now come also to the second point, of which mention was made a little before.] To preserve this true Christian doctrine concerning the Holy Supper, and to avoid and abolish manifold idolatrous abuses and perversions of this testament the following useful rule and standard has been derived from the words of institution: *Nihil habet rationem sacramenti extra usum a Christo institutum* ("Nothing has the nature of a sacrament apart from the use instituted by Christ") or *extra actionem divinitus institutam* ("apart from the action divinely instituted"). That is: If the institution of Christ be not observed as He appointed it, there is no sacrament. This is by no means to be rejected, but can and should be urged and maintained with profit in the Church of God. And the use or action here does not mean chiefly faith, neither the oral participation only, but the entire external, visible action of the Lord's Supper instituted by Christ, [to this indeed is required] the consecration, or words of institution, the distribution and reception, or oral partaking [manducation] of the consecrated bread and wine, [likewise the partaking] of the body and blood of Christ. And apart from this use, when in the papistic mass the bread is not distributed, but offered up or enclosed, borne about, and exhibited for adoration, it as to be regarded as no sacrament; just as the water of baptism, when used to consecrate bells or to cure leprosy, or otherwise exhibited for worship, is no sacrament or baptism. For against such papistic abuses this rule has been set up at the beginning [of the reviving Gospel], and has been explained by Dr. Luther himself. *Thorough Declaration*. VII; Trig. p 1001-1002.

The reality of the Sacrament then does not depend on the piety or faith of the administrator, nor is it removed by every incorrect understanding of the sacrament which he may hold. A jewel retains its value regardless of the character and opinions of the messenger who delivers it. But if the very nature of the thing is changed, if a piece of gravel is substituted for the diamond, its value is lost. Even if the messenger says, "I am bringing you a diamond," it is still a piece of gravel. If any essential element of the sacrament is omitted, there is no sacrament. It is not enough to merely use the prescribed elements and to parrot the words of institution, but the words must be used in the sense and meaning which Christ intended. The Confessions follow Luther's belief that those who empty the words of institution of their meaning have no sacrament.

In the same manner I also speak and confess (he says) concerning the Sacrament of the Altar, that there the body and blood of Christ are in truth orally eaten and drunk in the bread and wine, even though the priests [ministers] who administer it [the Lord's Supper], or those who receive it, should not believe or otherwise misuse it. For it does not depend upon the faith or unbelief of men, but upon God's Word and ordinance, unless they first change God's Word and ordinance and interpret it otherwise, as the enemies of the Sacrament do at the present day, who, of course, have nothing but bread and wine; for they also do not have the words and appointed ordinance of God, but have perverted and changed them according to their own [false] notion. *Thorough Declaration*, VII; Trig. p 983.

Do the sacraments of the ELCA fall into the category of illegitimate sacraments which we may not make use of because of the false teaching and wrong practices associated with them, or have they at least in some cases been emptied of essential elements of Christ's institution so that they are no longer real sacraments?

### **A Practical Difficulty**

One practical difficulty in discussing the sacraments of the ELCA is that we must distinguish between official statements and policies, statements by leading theologians which are nevertheless unofficial, practices which are encouraged by the church, practices which are tolerated by the church, and practices which may occur occasionally but which are discouraged by the church. We will have occasion to refer to all of these factors in the course of our discussion, but we should not lose sight of the degree of difference between them.

The pluralism of doctrine and practice in the ELCA makes it hard to say exactly what their doctrine and practice is.

At the present time ELCA's official doctrinal position is limited largely to the doctrinal preface of its constitution and a few other statements. There are a number of reasons for this very limited doctrinal position. One reason, of course, is that in its relatively brief history ELCA has not had time or occasion to declare itself on many doctrinal issues. Official statements will undoubtedly multiply as time goes by. Another reason for the very limited doctrinal platform is that many in ELCA do not want to have their doctrinal stance too narrowly defined. Very little doctrinal discussion preceded the formation of ELCA. The merging bodies proceeded toward merger with the assumption that they already had a sufficient degree of doctrinal unity to form one church body. This does not mean that they assumed that they were in complete doctrinal unity. Quite the contrary! They realized, for example, that they could not reach agreement on the doctrine of the ministry. This lack of agreement could not be allowed to holdup the merger, so it was set aside to be resolved later. In their opinion this disagreement was not fundamental enough to prevent the merger.

The only prerequisites for merger were a common confession of faith in the Triune God and in Christ as Lord and a constitutional claim of allegiance to the authority of Scripture and to the Lutheran Confessions. Such a paper confession is what the planning commission produced and what ELCA ratified as its *Confession of Faith (COF)*. Fortunately, however, for our discussion of the sacraments, the ELCA last year adopted an extensive statement on the use of the sacraments ("The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament"). We will refer to these two official documents wherever they have material relevant to our discussion, but we will also refer to less official sources.

We will now turn to a discussion of the sacraments of the ELCA under three headings: the Lord's Supper, baptism, and the ministry.

## **The Lord's Supper**

### **Lutheran Altars for Reformed Communicants Reformed Altars for Lutheran Communicants Reformed/Lutheran Altars for Everybody**

At its 1997 convention the ELCA declared full altar fellowship with three Reformed churches: the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ. This resolution ignored the critical differences between Lutheran and Reformed beliefs concerning the Lord's Supper. Michael Rogness, a professor at Luther Seminary in St. Paul commented, "Our people realize that these differences exist, but they don't believe they are--in official language, church dividing, or in unofficial language, a big deal." At Marburg Luther thought the Zwinglian denial of the real presence in the Lord's Supper was a big deal and refused fellowship with the Reformed. Unfortunately, the majority of Lutherans in America no longer agree with him.

The ELCA is also ready for altar fellowship with the Episcopalian Church. This agreement was temporarily shelved because of the reluctance of some members of the ELCA to accept an episcopalian polity. This delay, however, is due to disputes about the doctrine of the ministry, not to unwillingness to commune with Anglican churches. It is anticipated that this agreement will be adopted at the next ELCA convention. The ELCA is also considering a communion agreement with the Moravian church. Although ELCA does not have formal altar and pulpit fellowship with all churches, for all practical purposes most of its congregations have totally open communion.<sup>1</sup> Some local ELCA congregations offer open invitations to communion without any limitations or qualifications. Not even a belief in the real presence of Christ's body and blood is required for attending. However, one congregation I visited had the following announcement:

Holy communion is open to those who accept the real presence of Christ.

This sounds like a limitation until "real presence" is understood in the light of the statement of another ELCA congregation:

Every baptized person who trusts the promise and presence of Jesus Christ in this meal is welcome at the Lord's table. Our Lord promises that when bread and wine are set aside, blessed and offered to us to eat and drink and received by us in faith, he is present in us.

Is there any Reformed church in the world that could not accept this statement? It does not refer to the presence of Christ's body and blood in, with, and under the bread and wine, but only to Christ's presence in the hearts of believers. No wonder intercommunion between the ELCA and the Reformed is "no big deal."

A column in the August 1998 issue of *The Lutheran* (p 21) shows how the term "real presence" has taken on a new meaning in the ELCA. A questioner asked:

My congregation recently made communion more open to visitors. In light of 1 Corinthians 11-27-29 (Paul says communicants should examine themselves and discern "the body"), wouldn't the bulletin be a good place to teach visitors--as well as Lutherans--what we profess regarding the eucharist?

The answer:

Yes, but Paul's concern isn't about the real presence. He wants real community, love, and service. Read verses 20 and 21: "When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's Supper. For when the time comes to eat, each one of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk." The body Paul wants the Corinthians to discern in verses 28-29 is the church. He is warning the Corinthians to help those who come to communion and don't have enough to eat.

We are fed by Christ's body and blood in order to minister in Christ's name. Thus, we are called to discern Christ in the hungry of the world. For example, while the news of the Asian financial crisis focuses on its impact on our stock investments, we need to look closely to see how many poor people are now malnourished there. Then we can act. This is discerning the body.

One does not know whether to laugh or cry at such exegesis. No wonder communion with the Reformed is "no big deal."

Principle 33 of the ELCA statement on the sacraments, nevertheless, does assert a belief in the real presence.

### *Jesus Christ is Truly Present in this Sacrament*

*Principle 33.* In this sacrament the crucified and risen Christ is present, giving his true body and blood as food and drink. This real presence is a mystery.

*Background 33a.* The Augsburg Confession states: "It is taught among us that the true body and blood of Christ are really present in the Supper of our Lord under the form of bread and wine and are there distributed and received." The Apology of the Augsburg Confession adds: "We are talking about the presence of the living Christ, knowing that 'death no longer has dominion over him.'"

*Background 33b.* "The 'how' of Christ's presence remains as inexplicable in the sacrament as elsewhere. It is a presence that remains 'hidden' even though visible media are used in the sacrament. The earthly element is... a fit vehicle of the divine presence and it, too, the common stuff of our daily life, participates in the new creation which has already begun."

The quotation from the Augsburg Confession asserts the sacramental union, but the way the reference to the living Christ is used seems to raise questions whether the focus is on the presence of Christ in, with, and under the elements.

Principles 49 and 50 officially endorse open communion and state the goal of expanded joint Communion.

### *We Practice Eucharistic Hospitality*

*Principle 49.* Believing in the real presence of Christ, this church practices eucharistic hospitality. All baptized persons are welcomed to Communion when they are visiting in the congregations of this church.

*Application 49a.* Admission to the sacrament is by invitation of the Lord, presented through the Church to those who are baptized. It is a sign of hospitality to provide a brief written or oral statement in worship which teaches Christ's presence in the sacrament. This assists guests to decide whether they wish to accept the Lord's invitation. In the exercise of this hospitality, it is wise for our congregations to be sensitive to the eucharistic practices of the churches from which visitors may come.

*Application 49b.* When a wedding or a funeral occurs during a service of Holy Communion, Communion is offered to all baptized persons.

### *Lutherans Long for Unity at Christ's Table*

*Principle 50* Because of the universal nature of the Church, Lutherans may participate in the eucharistic services of other Christian churches.

*Background 50a.* This church's ongoing ecumenical dialogues continue to seek full communion with other Christian churches.

*Application 50b.* When visiting other churches Lutherans should respect the practices of the host congregation. A conscientious decision whether or not to commune in another church is informed by the Lutheran understanding of the Gospel preached and the sacraments administered as Christ's gift.

*Application 50c.* For Lutheran clergy to be involved as presiding or assisting ministers in the celebration of Holy Communion in other churches, a reciprocal relationship between the denominations involved should prevail.<sup>2</sup>

We see that open communion is pretty much at the discretion of the communicant. Joint communion requires inter-church agreement. Any sense of responsibility for the proper preparation of the communicants is absent.

ELCA's practice of open communion and joint communion creates a whole range of possibilities in the celebration of the Lord's Supper: Reformed communicants who do not believe in the essential presence of Christ's body and blood to the elements may receive the Sacrament at the altar of Lutherans who do; Lutheran communicants who believe in the essential presence of Christ's body and blood may receive the Sacrament at the altar of Reformed Christians who do not; Lutherans may attend joint communion with Episcopalians, some of whom hold the Lutheran view of the Supper, some of whom hold the Catholic view, some of whom hold the Zwinglian view, and some of whom hold the Calvinistic view: there may be joint celebrations in which it is unclear what the respective views of the consecrator, distributors, and recipients are. In which of these cases are the communicants receiving the true body and blood of Christ? When I was still in the parish ministry, I was familiar with a case in which an LCA congregation used a Methodist vacancy pastor, who used the Lutheran form of the words of consecration and distribution when he conducted services in the Lutheran church, but who had announced to the congregation that he did not believe the words, but was saying them only for the benefit of the Lutherans. Whose belief and intention takes priority here, that of the officiant or that of the host church?

In reality, dealing with this issue is quite simple. We should have no practical problems here. All of the aforementioned celebrations of the Lord's Supper are illegitimate celebrations which a true Lutheran should shun. We should warn the Reformed recipients at a Lutheran celebration against the danger of receiving Christ's true body and blood to their condemnation. We should warn Lutherans against the sin of receiving the Lord's Supper where the real presence is denied and against the sin of distributing the Holy Supper to Reformed communicants who are unprepared to receive it. In some cases it may be very clear that Christ's words of institution have been emptied of their meaning by an open repudiation of their meaning like the denial of the Zwinglians which is condemned by our confessions. In other cases there may be such a muddle of views that we can't say definitively whether the sacrament is really being celebrated according to Christ's institution or not. We do not have to be able to unravel every case. We fulfill our responsibility when we have done two things: kept away from all such celebrations and warned others against them. We can leave judging the individual cases to the Lord.

### **Infant Communion**

At its 1997 convention the ELCA overwhelmingly approved "The use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament," a document which endorsed infant communion. The new statement provided for "communion of the baptized," while an earlier guideline had indicated that "communing infants is precluded." Baptism is now the only required preparation for Communion (though it is recommended that infants be old enough to eat before they commune). In many cases, instruction will now follow reception of the Lord's Supper rather than preceding it. The new statement, while not mandating or even promoting infant communion, endorses a practice that has long been advocated and practiced by some members of the ELCA. Paul R. Nelson, ELCA director of worship, said, "This will articulate the ELCA churchwide understanding of how administration of the sacraments should be practiced. It will encourage congregations and their pastors to discuss the sacraments, teach the sacraments, and reflect on the way churches practice the sacraments in light of what the larger church says."

We will quote this part of the statement in its entirety.

#### *The Holy Communion is Given to the Baptized*

*Principle 37.* Admission to the Sacrament is by invitation of the Lord, presented through the Church to those who are baptized.

*Application 37a.* When adults and older children are baptized, they may be communed for the first time in the service in which they are baptized. Baptismal preparation and continuing catechesis include instruction for Holy Communion.

*Background 37b.* Customs vary on the age and circumstances for admission to the Lord's Supper. The age for communing children continues to be discussed and reviewed in our congregations. When "A Report on the Study of Confirmation and First Communion" was adopted, a majority of congregations now in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America separated confirmation and reception of Holy Communion and began inviting children to commune in the fifth grade. Since that time a number of congregations have continued to lower the age of communion, especially for school age children. Although "A Statement on Communion Practices" precluded the communion of infants, members and congregations have become aware of this practice in some congregations of this church, in historical studies of the early centuries of the Church, in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, and in broader ecumenical discussion.

*Application 37c.* Baptized children begin to commune on a regular basis at a time determined through mutual conversation that includes the pastor, the child, and the parents or sponsors involved, within the accepted practices of the congregation. Ordinarily this beginning will occur only when children can eat and drink, and can start to respond to the gift of Christ in the Supper.

*Application 37d.* Infants and children may be communed for the first time during the service in which they are baptized or they may be brought to the altar during communion to receive a blessing.

*Application 37e.* In all cases, participation in Holy Communion is accompanied by catechesis appropriate to the age of the communicant. When infants and young children are communed, the parents and sponsors receive instruction and the children are taught throughout their development.

*Background 37f.* Catechesis, continuing throughout the life of the believer, emphasizes the sacrament as gift, given to faith by and for participation in the community. Such faith is not simply knowledge or intellectual understanding but trust in God's promises given in the Lord's Supper ("for you" and "for the forgiveness of sin") for the support of the baptized.

*Application 37g.* When an unbaptized person comes to the table seeking Christ's presence and is inadvertently communed, neither that person nor the ministers of Communion need be ashamed. Rather, Christ's gift of love and mercy to all is praised. That person is invited to learn the faith of the Church, be baptized, and thereafter faithfully receive Holy Communion.

### **The Age of First Communion May Vary**

*Principle 38.* Common mission among the congregations of this church depends on mutual respect for varied practice in many areas of church life including the ages of first Communion.

*Background 38a.* "In faithful participation in the mission of God in and through this church, congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization—as interdependent expressions of this church—shall be guided by the biblical and confessional commitments of this church. Each shall recognize that mission efforts must be shaped by both local needs and global awareness, by both individual witness and corporate endeavor, and by both distinctly Lutheran emphases and growing ecumenical cooperation."

*Background 38b.* There is no command from our Lord regarding the age at which people should be baptized or first communed. Our practice is defined by Christ's command ("Do this"), Christ's twin promises of his presence for us and for our need, and the importance of good order in the Church. In all communion practices congregations strive to avoid both reducing the Lord's Supper to an act effective by its mere performance without faith and narrowing faith to intellectual understanding of Christ's presence and gifts. Congregations continually check their own practices and statements against these biblical and confessional guides.

*Application 38c.* Congregations of this church may establish policies regarding the age of admission to Holy Communion. They also may gain pastoral exceptions to those policies in individual cases which honor and serve the interdependence (koinonia) of congregations of this church.

*Application 38d.* Out of mutual respect among congregations, children who are communing members of a congregation of this church who move to a congregation with a different practice should be received as communing members (perhaps as a pastoral exception to the congregation's general policy). They and their parents also should be respectful of the traditions and practices of their new congregation. Even if transferring children have received education appropriate to their age in a former parish, the new congregation's program of instruction is also to be followed.

Arguments advanced in favor of infant communion are the claim that it is supported by tradition, that baptism is the only requirement for Communion, that it is the right of the baptized to commune, and that refusal to commune baptized infants casts doubt on infant baptism.

It is true that infant communion has been practiced in the Eastern church, but Lutherans do not base their doctrine and practice on tradition or the example of others. It is clear from Paul's statements in 1 Corinthians 11 that infants should not commune because communicants must be able to examine themselves and discern the presence of Christ's body and blood. While we do not set an arbitrary age when these qualifications can be met, we have no evidence they can be met by infants and very young children.

It appears that the ELCA decision was based on sentiment, a desire to allow maximum diversity of practice, a desire to allow an ecumenical accommodation to the Eastern church, and a failure to give careful consideration to the qualifications set in Scripture for attending the Sacrament with blessing.

The main practical problem that this new practice raises for us is that occasionally former ELCA families may come to us who have relatively young children who have already been communing for many years. If they are still quite far from the age at which the other young people of the congregation will begin to receive the Lord's Supper, it would be wise to ask them to discontinue their attendance at the sacrament until they are confirmed, so as not to introduce diverse practices into the church. If they are relatively close to the age of confirmation, the pastor should examine them to see if they are prepared to attend the Lord's Supper. If they give evidence of proper preparation, they might be allowed to continue attending. In no case should they be permitted to attend without clear evidence of proper preparation.

### **Use of Other Elements**

On a number of occasions I have run across reports of ELCA congregations or groups substituting other elements for the bread and wine, such as Coke and chips. It is clear that the underlying view behind such celebrations is that the Lord's Supper is simply a fellowship snack and we may substitute appropriate contemporary foods which we enjoy sharing. It should be obvious that such celebrations are not the Lord's Supper, but this does not lessen the gravity of such blasphemous celebrations. I have never seen any evidence



that such celebrations have the sanction of the ELCA. The recent statement reaffirms use of the scripturally-prescribed elements.

### *Bread and Wine are Used*

*Principle 44.* In accordance with the words of institution, this church uses bread and wine in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Communicants normally receive both elements, bread and wine, in the Holy Communion.

### **Summary**

Taken as a whole, the ELCA statement affirms loyalty to the Lutheran teaching of the Sacrament, while allowing for many practices that are not in harmony with that view. It is noteworthy that the statement is more concerned with the ecclesiastically-prescribed use of the sacrament than with the right doctrine of the sacrament as derived from Scripture.

### **Baptism**

Here the key question is whether the baptism of the ELCA is trinitarian? At first glance it would seem the answer is obvious. The official ELCA confession declares:

*This church confesses the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. COF 2.*

We and many members of ELCA are very happy to see this statement as the foundation of ELCA's confession. This part of the confession we could endorse wholeheartedly if we did not know what lay behind it. It is clear from the circumstances which surrounded its adoption and from public explanations of it that this confession is whitewash which hides an ugly reality.

First of all, ELCA's confession of the basic principles of the ecumenical creeds and the Lutheran Confessions is intended to give the unwary the impression that ELCA is a church which remains faithful to the doctrinal traditions of the church, it is claimed that such a confession makes ELCA a conservative church. Agreement on this basic core allegedly gives the church freedom to differ on other matters. (See *The Lutheran*, Sept. 7, 1988, p. 9)

This allowance for doctrinal diversity is bad enough in itself, but there is serious reason to doubt whether even these very basic doctrinal affirmations can be taken seriously. When the planning commission was drawing up ELCA's confession of faith, Elwyn Ewald (AELC) proposed that the words "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" be dropped from the confession to avoid sexually exclusive language. Other representatives opposed the deletion on the grounds that the language is taken directly from Scripture and that deletion of the words could prove offensive at a time when the church's language is in transition. After the opposing viewpoints had been presented, the motion to delete the reference to the persons of the Trinity failed by only three votes, 30-33. (ALC Press Release, Feb. 27, 1984) Debate about the necessity and desirability of using the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in baptism has continued in ELCA. Some continue to advocate baptism in a gender-neutral name for God. One suspects that ELCA Lutherans have not heard the last of the question of "Father, Son and Spirit."

The writings of prominent ELCA theologians also raise doubts about whether the ELCA is truly a trinitarian church. As an example we could take Braaten and Jenson's *Christian Dogmatics*. The chapter on the trinity was written by Jenson. In the spectrum of ELCA it is relatively conservative since it rejects the feminist elimination of "Father and Son" and maintains, "In functional continuity with biblical witness, 'Father, Son, and Spirit' is the proper name of the church's God." (I, 87) However, after reading Jenson's presentation one cannot be sure if Jenson believes in the three persons of the Trinity in the traditional sense of the term. I think not. This

section, like much of the text, is written in an obscure jargon. Readers cannot help wishing that Braaten and Jenson had remembered that one of the chief goals of theological writing is to communicate clearly. Does Jenson's view clearly communicate the doctrine of the Trinity? Judge for yourself.

The trinitarian name did not fall from heaven. It was made up by believers for this God with whom we have found ourselves invoked. "Father" was Jesus' peculiar address to the particular transcendence over against whom he lived. Just as by this address he qualified himself as "Son" and in the memory of the primal church his acclamation as Son was the beginning of faith. "Spirit" was the term provided by the whole biblical theology for what comes of such a meeting between God and a special human being of his. It is involvement in this structure of Jesus' own event—prayer to the "Father" with the "Son" in the power of and for "the Spirit"—that is faith's knowledge of God. Thus, "Father, Son, and Spirit" summarize faith's apprehension of God.... But in the event so summarizable "Father, Son, and Spirit" came together also simply as a name for the one therein apprehended, and apparently did so before all analysis of its suitability. (I, 93)

Jenson appears to be claiming that the names "Father, Son and Spirit" are simply words for describing different ways that we may experience a religious "encounter" with a vaguely revealed divine being. His further elaboration of his theory supports this interpretation.

"Father, Son and Spirit" is a slogan for the temporal structure of the church's apprehension of God and for the proper logic of its proclamation and liturgy. (I, 99)

For Jenson the names "Father, Son and Spirit" respectively seem to correspond to past, present, and future aspects of religious experience. There are three persons of the Trinity because our religious experience can be thought of as past, present, or future. (I, 129)

Jenson explicitly rejects the eternal pre-existence of the Second Person of the Trinity:

Instead of interpreting Christ's deity as a separate entity that always was—and proceeding analogously with the Spirit—we should interpret it as a final outcome, and just so as eternal, just so as the bracket around all beginnings and endings. Jesus' historical life with a sending by the Father, the filial relationship between this man and the transcendence to whom he turned temporally occurred .... Truly the Trinity is simply the Father and the man Jesus and their Spirit as the Spirit of the believing community. (I, 155)

In later sections of his book Jenson tries to soften or blur the preceding statements. He denies that his teaching implies that the Father and Spirit are created by Jesus and that it destroys all individual terms of the persons. Jenson's method is to make provocative statements like the ones quoted above and then to surround them with a confusing fog of orthodox terms and philosophical gobbledygook. He would undoubtedly be amused by our approach of taking isolated quotations from this presentation and protest that such excerpting is unfair to his overall message and does not catch the subtlety of his thought. But despite his disclaimers to the contrary, Jenson's doctrine of God must be classified as a strange brew of temporal modalism (the belief that God is not three distinct persons, but has different ways of appearing) and process theology (the belief that God evolves along with the world). He effectively denies the clear distinction of the three persons of the Trinity. The most favorable construction one could put on Jenson's work is that he leaves the existence of a personal God in doubt. What a tragedy that the simple proclamation of the Triune God found in Scripture and the clear, if somewhat overly philosophical statements of the early centuries are submerged in obscure theorizing which is neither clear nor simple.

At any rate, it is clear that the writings of prominent ELCA theologians raise doubts about whether they retain the trinitarian faith, even where they retain the trinitarian name. Overall, however, it seems that most

ELCA congregations and pastors baptize in the triune name with the intention of baptizing in the name of the Triune God and that we should continue to regard their baptism as genuine. However, whenever some other formula has been substituted for "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," the baptism is at best doubtful. For this reason the person in question should be baptized in the name of the "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." This is true whether the substitution has been an outright rejection of the Father and Son as when terms like Mother and Sister are substituted, or the substitution uses functional terms like "Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier."

The recent sacramental statement affirms trinitarian baptism, but contains some ominous phrases.

### *We Baptize in the Name of the Triune God*

*Principle 24.* Holy Baptism is administered with water in the name of the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Baptism into the name of the triune God involves confessing and teaching the doctrine and meaning of the Trinity. The baptized are welcomed into the body of Christ. This is the community which lives from "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit...."

*Background 24a.* The Church seeks to maintain trinitarian orthodoxy while speaking in appropriate modern language and contexts. While a worldwide ecumenical discussion is now under-way about such language, we have no other name in which to baptize than the historic and ecumenically received name.

*Background 24b.* It is in the crucified Jesus that we meet the God to whom he entrusted all, who raised him from the dead for us, and who poured out the Spirit from his death and resurrection. Washing with water in this name is much more than the use of a "formula." The name is a summary of the power and presence of the triune God and of that teaching which must accompany every Baptism. Without this teaching and without the encounter with the grace, love, and communion of the triune God, the words may be misunderstood as a magic formula or as a misrepresentation of the one God in three persons, "equal in glory, coeternal in majesty." What "Father" and "Son" mean, in biblical and creedal perspective, must also be continually reexamined. The doctrine of God teaches us the surprising theology of the cross and counters "any alleged Trinitarian sanction for sinful inequality or oppression of women in church and society."

*Application 24c.* Some Christians, however, are received into our congregation from other churches in which they were baptized "in the name of Jesus Christ." There are some whose Baptisms were accompanied by trinitarian examination and confession of faith, and whose Baptisms have occurred within the context of trinitarian life and teaching. We will do well to avoid quarrels over the validity of these Baptisms.

*Application 24d.* Outside the context of trinitarian life and teaching no Christian Baptism takes place, whatever liturgical formula may be used.

We can say that this statement affirms the necessity of using the triune name and of the intention to baptize in the name of the Triune God. One wonders, however, what lies behind Background 24a. "The Church seeks to maintain trinitarian orthodoxy while speaking in appropriate modern language and contexts. While a worldwide ecumenical discussion is now under-way about such language, we have no other name in which to baptize than the historic and ecumenically received name." We fear we have not heard the end of this.

## **The Ministry**

One occasionally hears remarks from confessional Lutherans, including some in the LCMS questioning the validity of the sacramental acts performed in the ELCA on the grounds that the sacraments of a woman pastor are not valid because she is not a real pastor.

The Lutheran church has never made the validity of the sacraments dependent on the gender of the officiant. For example, the validity of emergency baptisms performed by women, which was rejected by the Reformed, was accepted by confessional Lutherans. Sacramental acts performed by women pastors are illegitimate because the officiants are acting contrary to God's will in assuming the pastoral office. True Lutherans should not accept the service of such pastors. But the validity of the sacraments that women pastors perform is dependent on whether or not they have followed Christ's institution, not upon their gender.

This criticism of the sacraments of women pastors is based on a faulty understanding of the doctrine of the ministry which bases the validity of the ministry, on the necessity of pastors being male so that he can represent the image of Christ.

### **Conclusion**

Although there are many abuses present in ELCA's use of the sacraments and there is reason to be concerned that growing departure from the teachings of Scripture may destroy the validity of their sacraments, the present evidence does not justify a blanket conclusion that the ELCA is not celebrating the sacraments validly. In some individual cases the abuses may be so serious that the validity of the sacraments is destroyed (for example, when alien elements in baptismal formulas are substituted for what Christ commanded). We need to examine such situations on a case by case basis. We will also need to continue to speak against an illegitimate use of the sacraments in such abuses as open communion and neglect of proper instruction.

### **End Notes**

<sup>1</sup> There is a difference between open communion and joint communion. In open communion members of different churches are welcomed at the celebration of one church. In joint communion clergy of different churches join together in celebration of the sacrament. In a joint communion the pastor of one denomination consecrates, but a pastor of another church does the eucharistic prayers and joins in the distribution.

<sup>2</sup> See also Braaten and Jenson, II, p. 337, 361.