

“How to Respond to...”

OTHER LUTHERANS

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Adapted from “Test the Spirits” by Pastors Dan Fleischer & Dave Schierenbeck (†CLC)*

Introductory Thought: Traditionally, a church body or individual who identified themselves as “Lutheran” could state complete agreement with the teachings of “the Apostolic, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds and the Particular Symbols of the Lutheran Church as published in the Book of Concord of 1580, *because they are a true exposition of the Word of God*”¹. Unfortunately in recent years, many “Lutherans” have abandoned these Scripturally grounded confessions in favor of “new thinking” or “new theology.” In this day and age, if you come in contact with a fellow Lutheran, you may very well be meeting an individual who has been taught and believes that the Bible is full of myths and errors or even doubts that Christ rose bodily from the dead. Because of the clear divide among “Lutherans” today, it is important for us to recognize the differences between various Lutheran church bodies.

What do some Lutherans today teach?

The ELCA teaches...²	But the Bible Says...
The Bible contains errors, myths, and contradictions	Proverbs 30:5; John 10:35, 17:17
The true God is not Triune	Matthew 28:19
Satan is not a real being, only a symbol	Ephesians 6:11, 1 Peter 5:8
It is questionable that Jesus rose from the dead physically	1 Corinthians 15:3-4, Luke 24:38-40
Jesus Christ may not have been born of a virgin	Isaiah 7:14, Matthew 1:23, Luke 2:35
Salvation may be found in other religions	John 14:6, Acts 4:12
Evolution is a possible explanation for the origin of the world	Genesis 1, Exodus 20:11, Hebrews 11:3
Agreement in the Gospel” is sufficient for the practice of religious fellowship	Romans 15:5-6, 16:17-18; 1 Corinthians 1:10
Women may serve as pastors	1 Timothy 2:11-14, 3:2; 1 Corinthians 14:34-35.
Abortion is a mother’s choice	Psalms 127:3, 139:13; Jer.1:5
Homosexuality/lesbianism is an acceptable lifestyle	Romans 1:26-28, 1 Cor.6:9-11

¹ CLC Constitution, Article III

² Some of these errors are not part of the official doctrinal stance of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) but are being taught or tolerated in some of their churches and seminaries.

The Missouri Synod (LCMS) teaches... But the Bible Says...

Membership in lodges is allowed	Romans 16:17-18, 2 Corinthians 6:16-17
Membership in scouting and fraternal benefit societies is allowed	Romans 16:17-18, 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22
Woman suffrage (voting privileges) is allowed	1 Timothy 2:12-14
Joint church work engaged in with other churches without regard for teaching differences	Romans 16:17-18, 1 Corinthians 1:10
Open communion is allowed	1 Corinthians 1:10, 10:17
Doctrinal discipline is not carried out faithfully	Romans 16:17-18

The Wisconsin Synod (WELS) teaches... But the Bible Says...

Religious fellowship with false teachers should be terminated when it appears that they are <u>persisting</u> in their error and that additional efforts to lead them back to the way of truth will serve no purpose	Romans 16:17-18
Membership in fraternal benefit societies (e.g. Thrivent Financial for Lutherans) is acceptable, though these societies provide financial support to false teachers	Romans 16:17-18, 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22
Headship principle (women are not to have authority over men) applies to all areas of life (even areas such as business and politics), not just church and home ³	1 Timothy 2:11-14, 3:2; 1 Corinthians 14:34-35

Why can't we all just "agree to disagree?"

In 1978, during the early years of attempts at forming the ELCA, no doctrinal discussions were taking place between synods. A call for unity among Lutherans in America was seen as necessary. During this time, it is noted that "the LCA (now ELCA) was 'already committed to inter-Lutheran fellowship and saw no need for doctrinal discussions,' holding the position that 'there must be room for theological diversity' among Lutherans within an organic union."⁴

³ Many WELS members and pastors would deny that this is a teaching of the WELS. This is due to the WELS reluctance to teach such a doctrine publicly. However, the following is taken from the official Doctrinal Statements found on the WELS official website, under the "What We Believe" section:

"20. Christians also accept the biblical role relationship principle for their life and work in the world (1 Co 11:3; Eph 5:6-17). Christians seek to do God's will consistently in every area of their lives. We will therefore strive to apply this role relationship principle to our life and work in the world. 21. Scripture leaves a great deal to our conscientious Christian judgment as we live the role relationship principle in the world. In Christian love we will refrain from unduly binding the consciences of the brothers and sisters in our fellowship. Rather, we will encourage each other as we seek to apply this principle to our lives in the world."

⁴ Leppien, Patsy A., and J. Kincaid. Smith. *What's Going on among the Lutherans?* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Pub. House, 1992), p. 335.

The idea of theological diversity within a synod being tolerated and even promoted is one which is completely contrary to Scripture. And yet, sadly, it is a reality that many churches have accepted.

This "agree to disagree" mentality is one that many Lutheran denominations and Christian religions rejoice in and even flaunt in this day and age. With so many saying, "It's just different interpretations," "We're all worshipping the same God," and, "God doesn't want us to be divided," we have to ask, "What does God say about 'agreeing to disagree'?"

In 1 Corinthians, Paul exhorts and reprimands the Christians at Corinth regarding the divisions among them:

"Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment." [1 Cor. 1:10]

"Now in giving these instructions I do not praise you, since you come together not for the better but for the worse. For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you." [1 Cor. 11:17-19]

Rather than accepting differences in doctrine, God tells us in His Word that He is steadfastly against such a practice. God does not desire an outward unity in spite of doctrinal differences, but rather a perfect unity on the basis of faith in the truth of His Word.

Why does doctrinal unity really matter?

Imagine having a decorative throw blanket with an image woven on its front. Sometimes, with throw blankets, threads will begin to come loose. Over time, as these threads loosen, people begin to pull out those threads. Initially, the woven image is still largely intact. It may have some threads missing, but you can still clearly see the image. The problem is as you pull out threads, other threads are loosened. Eventually, more threads become loosened and pulled, until there comes a point when you can hardly tell what the image is. Soon, the blanket is so thin and full of holes that it is not even a blanket anymore.

This same process happens with churches. For selfish reasons, a church body will decide to remove doctrinal teachings or change them completely. At first, these minor changes seem harmless, the whole message of Christ is still largely intact. Unfortunately, it does

not often stop there. Once a church decides to rely on some other source for doctrine outside of Scripture, it becomes easier and easier to “pull out” other doctrines. Eventually, the message of Christ becomes disfigured and even lost, and the main purpose of the church –helping shepherd souls to heaven- is gone.

This is the danger of false teaching in churches. Even so-called “minor” teachings, when taught contrary to God’s Word, are dangerous -able to spread rapidly.

“But shun profane and idle babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness. And their message will spread like cancer. Hymenaeus and Philetus are of this sort, who have strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some.” [2 Timothy 2:16-18]

“A little leaven leavens the whole lump.” [Galatians 5:9]

When someone tells you, “We’re practically the same,” the point isn’t how *few* differences (errors) there are, the point is that *there are doctrinal differences*. As blood-bought children of God, we should strive to do God’s will in all things. And one central aspect of His will is to avoid false teachings of any kind. “Behold, I am against the prophets,’ says the Lord, ‘who use their tongues, and say, “He says”” (Jer. 23:31), and “If anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:9).

How do I respond to other Lutherans?

May we learn to respond as Luther himself responded, “No, my dear man, don’t come to me about peace and unity at the cost of yielding God’s Word, because with such loss we have lost eternal life and all things. Here we cannot yield to please you, nor any other person, be he friend or foe. Besides, the Word has not been given to establish outward and worldly unity, but to give us eternal life. The Word and doctrine itself will create unity and fellowship. Where there is agreement in these, the rest follows. Where there is no agreement in these, there no unity can be maintained. So don’t talk to me of love and friendship, where one wants to shorten the Word of God, for we are told that not love, but the Word gives us eternal life, God’s grace, and all heavenly treasures.”⁵

Other available resources:

- “Concerning Church Fellowship”
- “Handbook of Denominations in the United States” by Mead & Hill
- “Out of Necessity: A History of the Church of the Lutheran Confession” by Lau
- “What’s Going on Among the LUTHERANS” by Leppien & Smith

⁵ (Translated by Pastor G.W. Fischer from the St. Louis Edition of Luther’s Works, 8:810 ff.)