

# Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

## *Thirty Theses on a Failed Merger*

by

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### **Background**

In 1978, The American Lutheran Church (ALC) and the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) began a process to create a single church body. They were soon joined by the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC), a splinter group from the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. In January 1979, the Committee on Lutheran Unity (CLU) began its work, and at simultaneous conventions on 8 September 1982, all three church bodies voted to proceed toward the formation of a new Lutheran church. To implement this plan, the CLU was replaced by a seventy-member Commission for a New Lutheran Church (CNLC).

In August 1986, again at simultaneously held conventions, these three church bodies voted to adopt the necessary procedures to achieve their own dissolution, to accept the constitution and bylaws of their new church, and to implement the proposed agreement and plan of their merger. At its constituting convention in Columbus, Ohio held from 30 April to 3 May 1987, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) came into being. On 31 December 1987, the ALC, LCA, and AELC became “predecessor church bodies,” and on 1 January 1988, the ELCA became the fruit of their labours.

The brief history of the ELCA since its inception is a history of failure to create what was originally intended, namely a new Lutheran church. The following thirty theses portray the main reasons for and the unfortunate repercussions of this failure.

### **The ELCA - Thirty Theses on a Failed Merger**

1. Since its inception the ELCA has existed in an illusory state of politicized self-mythologization.
2. The ELCA exists in this state because the institutional ELCA fosters neither a Christ-centered church nor a gospel-inspired church nor a scripturally faithful church nor a Lutheran confessional church nor even a theologically coherent church.
3. Instead, the institutional ELCA presides over a politics-ridden, ecclesial corporation.
4. As such, the institutional ELCA demands more allegiance to its constitutional polity than it allows faithful commitment to Jesus Christ and to his gospel as the very foundation of biblical and Lutheran confessional reality.
5. Characteristically, the institutional ELCA in its political activism confuses the essence of God’s righteousness - freely granted to each believer through a pure proclamation of the gospel in word and sacrament - with a caricature of “human rights” patterned on secular design.

6. The institutional ELCA's idealization of politically correct dogma promotes not only inclusion of the sinner but also encourages, contrary to Scripture, institutionalized inclusion of sinning.
7. In the priesthood of all believers, however, Christians are not mandated "rights" but are made right (justified), not by the works of religious or political law but by faith alone in Jesus Christ whom God put forward as a means of atonement for sin (Romans 3).
8. Thereby, Christians are no longer their own; they have been bought with a price (I Corinthians 6 and 7).
9. Bewitched instead by the allure of human sin (Gal 3), the institutional ELCA has bartered its theological inheritance for a political prize; thereby exchanging the divinity and lordship of Jesus Christ for the secular hermeneutic of "methodological atheism."
10. Theologically, the institutional ELCA no longer seeks or is able to differentiate between "law and gospel" because the institutional ELCA has raised itself above the word of God as revealed in both divine law and salvific gospel.
11. Spiritually, the institutional ELCA prefers to manage the media rather than proclaim God's word of divine truth whose nature it is to make believers free (*eleutheros* in Greek), i.e. to make them "Lutheran" (John 8, 15, 16).
12. Ethically, the institutional ELCA conforms its individual and corporate ambitions to the attainment of its religiously disguised, secular-humanistic ideologies and ecclesial-political goals, observing no higher authority or power than the decisions orchestrated at its non-representative "churchwide" assemblies.
13. Constitutionally, the institutional ELCA subordinates its stated acceptance of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions to the dictates of its politically expedient agenda.
14. Bureaucratically, the institutional ELCA squanders its resources on expanding its ecclesial and secular influence rather than spreading the unlimited and unvanquishable power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.
15. Ecumenically, the institutional ELCA champions polity-oriented, institutional alliances based on the non-creedal ideology of "visible, organic unity" which contradicts the true unity of the church already embodied in Christ himself (*Augsburg Confession* - Article 7).
16. Socio-politically, the institutional ELCA devises ever new ways to "cook and brew" together the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world, a speciality which Luther described as the devil's work (M. Luther - WA 51:239).
17. The political culture of the ELCA has been further exacerbated by the inception of a number of politically driven, self-styled "reform" groups.
18. Like the institutional ELCA, some of these "reformist" groups also misappropriate biblical and Lutheran confessional terminology to mask their inherently political natures.
19. Like the institutional ELCA, some of these "reformist" groups are willing to sacrifice biblical and Lutheran confessional principles in order to achieve their own ELCA-dependent, political agenda.

20. Like the institutional ELCA, the ecclesial-political campaigns attempted by some of these “reformist” groups to “Remodel” the institutional ELCA have too often been simultaneously undermined by their superficial endeavours to “Reinvent” their public images and by their shameful efforts to “Repress” their internal critics.
21. Some of these “reformist” groups have spawned or threaten to spawn a number of small churches or “churchlets” which claim to be in various stages of reforming or of leaving either the ELCA or an ELCA “reformist” group or both.
22. These churches or churchlets are further divided among themselves and even within themselves according to idiosyncratic alliances of various description, declaration, or socio-political persuasion.
23. These divisive and thus destructive politics between the institutional ELCA, its “reformist” groups, and their ecclesial progeny have now spun irreconcilably out of control.
24. The endemic political fracturing which characterizes the life of the ELCA belies the term “merger” to describe the 1989 emergence of this supposedly “new Lutheran church.”
25. Through the course of the ELCA’s brief, fifteen to twenty year history, it has become clear that the ELCA was not formed when three “predecessor church bodies” united to create a “new Lutheran church.”
26. Instead, the ELCA was incorporated when three Lutheran churches were merged with and were submerged by the politics inherent in the secular-humanist, political ideologies upon which the institutional ELCA was fashioned.
27. The secular-humanist, political ideologies incorporated constitutionally into the ELCA have been deliberately manoeuvred to supplant the biblical and Lutheran confessional witness upon which this “new Lutheran church” was allegedly founded.
28. To its credit, the institutional ELCA has successfully deceived large portions of its membership into believing that religiously practised, secular humanism is the same as historically forged, confessional Lutheranism.
29. To its discredit, the delusional self-indoctrination and self-mythologization - religiously fabricated by the institutional ELCA - may camouflage but cannot conceal the atheism inherent in such secular-humanist, political ideologies.
30. Because the doctrine of justification by faith is the article by which the church stands or falls, a Lutheran church which fails to live by faith alone in the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ alone has lost its justification to exist and needs to be superseded by an honest, faithful, Lutheran Christian witness, subservient to and united by the pure proclamation of the gospel as the power of God for the salvation of all who believe (Romans 1).

## **Conclusion and Proposal**

When confessional Lutherans in the ELCA organized to oppose the ratification and implementation of *Called to Common Mission* (CCM), the fraudulent ecumenical accord between

the ELCA and the Episcopal Church in the USA (ECUSA), they united around the principles embodied in Article 7 of the *Augsburg Confession*. Augsburg 7 states that the true unity of the church happens where Christians gather around the pure proclamation of the gospel as communicated in both word and sacrament. To their shame and discredit, after the passage of CCM on 19 August 1999, these same confessional Lutherans have been unable to maintain the principles of Augsburg 7 even among themselves.

History shows that about every twenty to thirty years, whether in larger or smaller segments, Lutheranism in the USA undergoes some sort of realignment or reconfiguration. Due to the political policies of this failed merger, the ELCA is decreasing in membership, is centralizing its power in the Office of Presiding Bishop, and is legislating itself ever further away from the principles of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions upon which the Lutheran Reformation changed the shape of Western Christianity.

To date, the ELCA has existed for nearly twenty years. Whether through internal and institutional wastage or through eventual ecumenical evaporation or both, the ELCA is politicizing itself out of existence. Legislation adopted at the 2005 Churchwide Assembly to restructure the ELCA bears witness from within that the institutional ELCA needs to change. Unfortunately, even the most well-intentioned constitutional reforms and institutional alterations cannot salvage the failed venture which began with such high hopes in the mid-1980's.