

## ON BEING A PRESBYLUTHETERIAN

*Zachary O. Wilson*

Reports of the theological differences between Reformed and Lutheran Christians have been greatly exaggerated. To be sure, finding differences and points of conflict between these two scions of the Reformation remains easy. People point out the differences in our understandings of the Lord's Supper, the uses of the law, and how we number the ten commandments, among other things. However, what Lutherans and Reformed folks have in common makes a much longer list: *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, the understanding of God's sovereignty, the theology of the cross, and even the doctrines of election and predestination. The history of strained theological partnership is all the more surprising, given all that we share.

The strain began, more or less, early in the 1560s, when Lutheran theology flowed down the Neckar River, Reformed theology flowed up the Rhine, and the two met querulously in Heidelberg. The ensuing conflict led the elector Frederick, ruler of the Palatinate, to attempt to resolve the theological disharmony and bring political concord to his realm. So in 1562, at Frederick's behest, Zacharias Ursinus, a student and pal of Melancthon, and Kaspar Olevianus, a sometime-resident of Geneva and associate of Calvin and Beza, penned the *Heidelberg Catechism* to accomplish their ruler's pacific desires. They failed.

If Ursinus and Olevianus couldn't pull it off, then I am hardly up to the task set by Frederick. Hence, expecting no miracles and lacking the elector's sword to prompt the conciliatory action of the Holy Spirit, I tread once again down this fraught path.

I am a pastor of the denomination called the Presbyterian Church (USA). Presbyterianism drinks from two sources, Reformed theology and Scottish nationalism. In North American Presbyterianism, a Scottish accent still commands respect and a 20% pay bump for pastors (or so it seems). Otherwise, Scottish influence is pretty negligible. My own Presbyterian identity, which has pretty much nothing to do with Scotland at all, arises from my parents' choice to raise us at First Presbyterian Church of Yakima, Washington—a choice in which the word "Presbyterian"

played little part and family history even less. I can't even confess to being seduced by the subtle allure of Calvin's *Institutes*.

But First Pres left an indelible mark on me. Through its ministrations my early ecclesial role models were not giants of the Reformation or the early church but missionaries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. My heroes were Hudson Taylor (perhaps the first missionary in nineteenth-century China who did not assume becoming a Christian involved learning how to tie a four-in-hand or properly press a petticoat) and Cameron Townsend (the first missionary who actually attempted to complete Luther's work of vernacularization by bringing every human community the Bible in their own language). The missionaries I met and spent time with as a child were compelling examples of the adventure that I believed, and still believe, the Christian life ought to be. They held much more sway in my youthful imagination than any pastor. The intellectual battles of history and theology were still deemed important—but compared to the spiritual battles of the mission field, the stakes seemed awfully low.

Contrast this with the single popularly acclaimed saint of twentieth-century Lutheranism, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As compelling as his story is, it risks being lost in a halo of hagiography. The same is the case with the reformers. Their lives were on the line, but in our time and place their deeds cannot be duplicated.

What Lutherans need is not to dispense with their rightly-loved Bonhoeffer and Luther, but to add to the list—and add living people. When you don't actually know people who put their lives on the line for their faith *today*, who do great and dramatic deeds for the gospel *today*, such stories, no matter how well told, are removed from everyday life and drained of their power.

For all my loyalty to the living missionary spirituality I found at First Pres that has kept me Presbyterian, I did marry a Lutheran and have long been attracted to the "dark side." People often suggest—inevitably upon learning that we are pastors in different denominations—that

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confessional differences might strain our marriage. But what unites us is much stronger than what divides us; our conflicts have much more to do with cleaning than christology. That doesn't mean our confessions don't have differences. The differences that are cited most often, at least to me, are our understandings of the Christian life and the Lord's Supper.

Presbyterians and the Reformed generally, I am frequently informed, are anthropological progressivists, believing that true Christians must be improving or they are no Christians at all. And if Christian faith requires improvement, then faith is not sufficient for salvation—works are required. To this inference Lutherans rightly object. Certainly it is easy for Reformed theologians to resurrect works-righteousness, but when they do it is at the price of misunderstanding the bulk of the Reformed witness. The truth is, both traditions speak of sanctification and, synonymously, regeneration. The issue is not whether we both believe in sanctification—both traditions assume its truth and reality—but in what we believe sanctification consists.

Consider this statement of Luther: “There is no justification without sanctification, no forgiveness without renewal of life, no real faith from which the fruits of new obedience do not grow.” Now consider the thirteenth article of Calvin's French Confession: “We believe that everything required for our salvation has been offered and communicated to us in Jesus Christ. He is given to us for our salvation, becoming for us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30), so that if we refuse Christ, we renounce the mercy of the Father in whom we have our only refuge.” The Reformed tradition echoes Luther's anthropology so frequently that it is difficult to portray them as antithetical. Consider another quotation, this time from the twelfth article of Calvin's French Confession: “In reality, those who are rescued are no better than those who

are left in corruption and condemnation,” or in Lutheran talk, *simul justus et peccator*. If the Reformed remain true to their theological roots, they'll find themselves much closer to Luther than either Lutherans or Presbyterians would expect.

The crux of our respective confessions' differences in understanding the Christian life and the Lord's Supper comes down, I think, to the Reformed tradition's unease with paradox. In a theology course at Princeton Theological Seminary, a Reformed doctoral candidate once told my wife, when she described the Lutheran anthropology of *simul justus et peccator*, that she “couldn't be that way.” This, of course, didn't change the reality that she is, in fact, *that way*.

Now in all honesty, everyone ought to feel a certain unease with the paradoxical, because paradox, like mystery, is invoked all too often to avoid the intellectual heavy-lifting that theology requires. In the sixteenth century, concepts not nearly as complex as paradox were used to flummox the uneducated masses. A healthy suspicion of authority, especially in the eminently corruptible church, implies a healthy suspicion of paradox. But to deny the uncomfortable truth of *simul* anthropology by proposing a progressivist understanding of the Christian life is no solution. Not all Reformed theology is counterparadoxical, but the fact remains: it's a lot more intellectually satisfying to a Renaissance philosopher to say that the Christian is improving than to say that the Christian is improving and failing miserably... at the same time.

A similar paradox problem arises with Reformed theology of the Lord's Supper. Reformed folks have trouble with the Lutheran doctrine of the Lord's Supper for essentially metaphysical reasons. We don't like the intellectual inconsistency of the doctrine of ubiquity. The reason for this dislike arises from a legitimate concern with christology and the attributes of God. Jesus is fully God and

fully human. Well, says the Reformed theologian, if Jesus is truly human, one attribute of humanity is locality. A human being cannot be in two places simultaneously. So, to the Reformed theologian, the Lutheran doctrine of ubiquity undermines orthodox Chalcedonian christology—and thus the truth of the whole faith. If Jesus is at the right hand of the Father and in Ames, Iowa, at the same time, in what way can we believe Jesus to be human?

The Lutheran responds that if one divine attribute, say omniscience, is transferable to the humanity of Jesus Christ, why not ubiquity too? Can't we let God decide what makes Jesus truly human? A good response, but it dodges the anthropological question and resurrects the *cur deus homo* question. If God chose the incarnation to be necessary to our salvation, why would he undermine that decision by, essentially, making it unnecessary through the muddling of divine/human attributes?

However, Presbyterians ought not let metaphysical misgivings stand in the way of Christ's promises: “This is my body... This is my blood.” Presbyterians and Lutherans may argue about *how* Christ is present, but we ought not argue *that* Christ is present. The distinction between a real physical presence and a real spiritual presence is a remnant of metaphysical dualism that neither Lutheran nor Presbyterian theologians can defend anymore. The whole notion of the transferability of attributes is a metaphysical one that is properly shrouded in mystery. The transferability or non-transferability of God's ubiquity to Jesus Christ is a metaphysical way to explain, or explain away, the impossibility of a person being in two places at once. They both assume that heaven's physicality is essentially similar to ours, which prevents God from defining Himself and His attributes as He chooses. The metaphysical disagreement, while interesting, is essentially speculative. That we have a difficult time distinguishing the spiritual from

the physical does not mean that God harbors similar difficulties.

The argument, in fact, is properly a semantic one—when Jesus used the verb “is” as a mathematical equivalent and when he used it in a less logically defined sense. It’s a pretty hard question to answer scripturally. When Jesus told the parables, was his use of “to be” meant to be taken as a description of literal reality? Well, yes and no. Was there *really* “a man who had two sons” (Luke 15:11)? That’s hardly the point of the story. It’s extremely difficult to make Jesus’ language—whose meaning is often multivalent—fit into the categories of western philosophy. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try, but it does mean that we’d best admit that our vision, among our other senses, is a bit dim at this point.

Enough about paradox. Presbyterians could stand to learn from Lutherans how to develop and maintain a sense of theological identity. Even the most embattled of factions within the Lutheran church are unified on account of this one standing-or-falling-church thing: justification. And if you want to know what Lutherans think about justification, the Book of Concord is the agreed-upon witness. While theological trendiness is alive and well in both Presbyterian and Lutheran churches, the trends don’t make it into the Lutheran confessional canon—it’s closed. While a closed confessional canon conflicts directly with the notion of *semper reformanda*, it beats the reality of the theologically correct Presbyterian alternative: an open Book of Confessions.

Since the adoption of the Confession of 1967, the “Westminster Standards” no longer unify the Presbyterian church. The Standards encompass three documents, namely the Westminster Confession and the Longer and Shorter Westminster Catechisms. (The purist would note that the Directory of Public Worship and the Form of Church Government are considered constitutive as well.) The Westminster Assembly, convened in

1646 in the midst of the English Civil War (1642–1649), was a failed effort to cast off both the monarchy and episcopacy. A congress of 121 Puritan clergy were supposed to ensure the military support of the Covenanters, the episcopoidal *de facto* government of Scotland at that time, by assuring them of a Reformed theological basis for the new Church of England and thus for England itself. There would be a Church of England, certainly, but

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it would be Presbyterian. While the Presbyterian revolution was violently squashed in the Restoration (sending a bunch of Puritans to North America), the Westminster Standards have endured to this day.

Throughout American Presbyterian history, there has been a never-ending series of arguments about what the “essential tenets” of the Westminster Standards and the Reformed faith are. Ministers were allowed to “scruple,” or disavow, portions of the Standards that were deemed non-essential. This was meant to avoid conflict and supply a bigger Presbyterian tent. As most efforts at tent-enlarging do, this one failed. As soon as people were comfortable with their right to “scruple” what was onerous, they got started arguing about what was essential, too. In a master attempt to get people to quit arguing about the Westminster Standards altogether, the PC(USA) added a number of Reformed confessional documents to what is now called the “Book of Confessions,” enlarging the tent again and watering down confessional identity in the process.

While I’m no guardian of the perfection of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, they did once give a recognizable shape to Presbyterian identity. What does a Presbyterian

believe nowadays? Well, it kind of depends. Theologically, I still think an open Book of Confessions is the best way to go. Practically, however, the result of our open book has been to erode our confessional identity into an insuperable theological mush. No Presbyterian layperson gets to master anything as unifying and beautiful as Luther’s Small Catechism. Instead of learning the Westminster Standards, we learn nothing at all. Picking one particular confession would apparently exclude the Züricher Heinrich Bullinger’s Second Helvetic Confession, John Knox’s Scots Confession, or, God forbid, the world-stopping Brief Statement of Faith of 1991. Presbyterian theological diffuseness is, no doubt, the result of a great deal more than an open Book of Confessions—but that Book sure doesn’t help.

After all that, is there anything Lutherans can learn from Presbyterians? Well, maybe a thing or two.

While it is true that polity has become a proxy for theology in American Presbyterianism, at least our polity is quite transparent. Not a single Lutheran I’ve ever met—including professors, pastors, and former bishops—has been able to elucidate a clear understanding of how their church makes decisions, or why the church does it that way. Examples of political opacity abound. But the ELCA first-call process is the most outstanding example of polity gone wrong. Both pastors and churches are expected to trust a synod to know them well, have their best interests at heart, and winnow the prospective candidates to three or so, based on the wisdom or whims of the Synod staff. No one likes this system. Every church and every pastor regards it as something to manipulate. Every synod staff person is sick of being blamed for it.

In the Presbyterian church, congregations post open positions online and accept applications from all qualified candidates. The process is overseen by the presbytery but carried out by the congregation. There is no intrigue

about why Jim's name was submitted for a call and Janet's wasn't. The congregation looks at both Jim and Janet and Johnny too. Congregations and pastors are free to choose as they like. The presbytery can exclude candidates they deem unsuitable but that must be done openly in conversation with the congregation. This is another case where the theologically incorrect system is better than one where congregations and clergy with the right connections get what they want because of masterful manipulations, and the unconnected end up petulant at the arbitrary source of their woes. Presbyterians are plenty petulant, but at least it's a little clearer that we're the cause of our own woes.

Polity is one thing, but Lutherans could even learn from Reformed iconoclasm. Two things must be said up front. First, the destruction of idols is thoroughly biblical. Second, the threat that visual art in church poses to Christian spiritual health is largely imaginary. The image-barren architecture of a Reformed meeting house is, perhaps, more disturbing than any statue of Mary.

But some historical context is in order. A great deal of Scottish Presbyterian iconoclasm lay in the inseparability of the Roman church from foreign rule. The Roman rulers of Scotland used the icons of the church to serve their political ends and in so doing, according to the average Scotsman's mind, subverted the place of God. In response, the Scots brutally destroyed much of the beauty of Celtic catholic Scotland. While I regret the devastation, I don't weep for the destruction of what was wrested from a church wrongly protecting the reign of foreign monarchs. The destruction of the one might well have been contingent on the destruction of the other. Only now that those Scottish buildings and images have lost their political and social reality can we easily decry the philistine pharisaism of the Caledonian iconoclasts. Reality is a little more complicated.

Additionally, iconoclasm understands that the old is passing away. Passing away is a nice way of saying dying or destroyed. If we don't understand our ecclesial constructions as temporary and contingent, we're going to be a bit too surprised when God makes something new. We shouldn't be guarding the eggs that God plans to make into an omelet. Those eggs are going to be broken, and when we get over our anger at God for breaking such beautiful parables of His creative power in nature, that omelet is going to taste darn good.


Reformed iconoclasm, in principle if not in statue-smashing detail, can serve to rid Lutherans of their preoccupation with "right worship." I'm astonished by the occasional Lutheran pastor who believes that not adding water to the wine of the Lord's Supper creates serious theological consequences. I have even seen Lutherans muttering something or other to the elements as the Lord's Supper is prepared. Worship in this way becomes not about worshiping God but about worshiping properly. And while I'm all for worshiping properly, I think tying liturgical rubrics to the apron strings of heaven is theologically and historically irresponsible. No order for worship sprang fully formed from the godhead. What worship is to be has to be discerned. Scripture provides direction to help us form standards. But these standards ought not be given arbitrary authority by using specious historical arguments.

There is nothing wrong with Lutheran liturgy or arguing about what properly constitutes worship that is both evangelical and catholic. On the rare Sunday I'm not leading worship I would much rather find myself in a Lutheran church than in a Presbyterian one—mostly because I know that the gospel will be in there somewhere, no matter how hard the pastor or church tries to hide it.

The same goes, frankly, for the "eucharist." It is certainly truly right and salutary for us to give thanks and praise to God. But us giving thanks,

and Christ giving himself, are quite distinct and very different things. It is right to have a eucharist in Christian worship, but a eucharist is no substitute for the Lord's Supper.

Ecclesiastical rapprochement has its place. That the church is not one is a sin. However, to create oneness artificially by avoiding real differences is silly. The watering-down of both Presbyterian and Lutheran confessional identity is clearest in our churches' recent pacts: the Formula of Agreement, which permits Presbyterians and Lutherans to share clergy, and Called to Common Mission, which permits the ELCA and the Episcopal Church (USA) to do the same. No one in any of the three churches involved seems to have noticed that they are mutually contradictory agreements. CCM insists upon a doctrine of ministry that is directly at odds with Reformed theology (and, if you ask me, Lutheran theology as well), yet no bishop has raised this objection to the calling of Reformed clergy—who are not properly authorized, according to Episcopal order, either to preach or to administer the sacraments.

What this tells me is that the theological differences between the Reformed and Lutheran churches are of much less import than the theological ignorance, much of it willful, in both. So it is that I'm less inclined to worry about the divisions within Christianity than the lack of Christianity within Christianity—Reformed, Lutheran, or whatever. The good old Presbyterian notion of providence allows me to trust that God will somehow turn our sinful division to the good. The best we can expect of ourselves is an earnest attempt to allow God access to the eggs we're protecting. 

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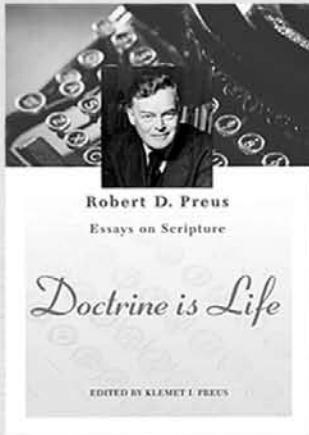
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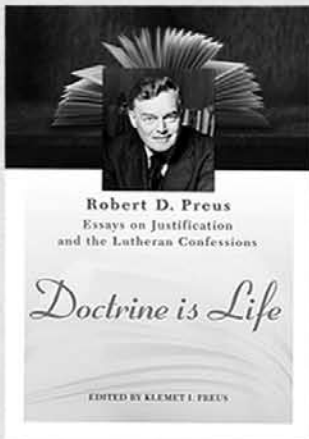
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