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The ELCA—*Quo Vadis?*

Mark D. Menacher

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), *quo vadis?* Whither goest thou? As a corporation in the United States, it is not only grammatically but also legally correct, as the Latin denotes, to refer to the ELCA in the second person singular. As many are aware, the ELCA was formed by the merger of the American Lutheran Church (ALC), the Lutheran Church in America (LCA), and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC), which went into effect on January 1, 1988. The verb “to merge” comes from the Latin *mergere*, meaning “to dip, to plunge, or to sink.”¹ In ELCA parlance—post-merger—one refers to the ALC, LCA, and AELC as predecessor church bodies. The ALC, formed in 1960, and the LCA, formed in 1962, each resulted from mergers of their predecessor bodies, a total of fourteen for the ALC and seven for the LCA.² In contrast thereto, the AELC formed in 1976 due to dissension in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Given the catalyzing role of the AELC in the formation of the ELCA and the subsequent, influential placement of some its leaders in the ELCA, in hindsight some in the LCMS may view the formation of the AELC as rather providential.

In 1982, all three ELCA predecessor church bodies voted to proceed toward the formation of a new Lutheran entity. To implement this plan, the existing Committee on Lutheran Unity was replaced by a seventy-member Commission for a New Lutheran Church. At their respective, concurrent national conventions in August 1986, the three ELCA predecessor 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 for their merger.

¹ *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 7th edition (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press), 634. See also *Langenscheidts Großes Schulwörterbuch Lateinisch-Deutsch*, 5th ed. (Nördlingen: C. H. Beck'sche Buchdruckerei), 741.

² Lowell Almen, *One Great Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 9-12.

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Not all, however, were enamored with the proposed amalgamation. As the *Los Angeles Times* reported on the voting during the LCA's convention:

Plans to announce the results [of voting] simultaneously to the assembled [at all three conventions] via a telephone hookup failed. During a lull in the wait for connections to be made, defrocked LCA Minister Daniel N. Solberg walked up to the podium microphone here to denounce the merger, beginning: "Thus says the Lord, I hate your adulterous merger, your whoring after corporate idols . . . your congregations will wither and your people fall away." The sound was turned off, delegates started clapping rhythmically to drown out Solberg and the session was adjourned. Police officers later removed Solberg from the building.³

Solberg, brother of pop singer David Soul, had been removed from the LCA's rolls the previous June for his political activism in Pennsylvania against corporate America. Despite his inability to alter either the course of U.S. corporate policy or the ELCA merger, Solberg's brash comments have proved rather prophetic for the post-merger ELCA.⁴ Despite the ELCA's intentions to start 1,200 new congregations in the first seven years of its existence, quite the opposite has happened. According to its own statistics, the ELCA began its life in 1988 with 5.3 million members in 11,133 congregations. By 2011, those figures had withered to 4.1 million members in 9,638 congregations, declines of 23 percent and 13 percent, respectively.⁵ In that light, the interrogative "ELCA, whither goest thou?" becomes indicative: "ELCA, wither goest thou." In the past twenty-five years, whither have more than one million ELCA members gone and to what depths has this merged, ecclesial corporation sunk to effect such an exodus?

By most criteria of success, the ELCA is a failed merger. The anabaptism of Lutheran terminology in the confluence of secular and religious

³ John Dart, "3 Lutheran Churches to Merge Into 4th Largest in Protestantism," *The Los Angeles Times*, August 30, 1986. http://articles.latimes.com/1986-08-30/local/me-14279_1_evangelical-lutheran-churches (accessed November 21, 2013).

⁴ Dart, "3 Lutheran Churches to Merge into 4th Largest in Protestantism." Preceding Solberg, W. Douglas Roth was also removed from the LCA's rolls the previous year for similar political activism. An account of events from David Soul's perspective is available at <http://www.davidsoul.com/the-fighting-ministers/> (accessed November 21, 2013).

⁵ <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-ThreeExpressions/Churchwide-Organization/Communication-Services/News/Resources/Stats.aspx> (accessed January 21, 2013). These statistics change annually.

humanism, the institutional narcissism executed and enforced by its choreographed churchwide assemblies, the self-referential ecumenical harlotry, the perversion of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions in the service of socio-political agenda, the decades of internal dissension and divisions, and the precipitous loss of membership make questions of “whence” or “whither” or even “what” seemingly difficult to formulate much less answer precisely. Moreover, given the ELCA’s fractious existence thus far, probing the deleterious symptoms of its malaise cannot readily reveal the aetiology of the ELCA’s *Lebenslage*, or perhaps better, its *Todeslage*. Therefore, to cut to the chase, the remainder of this essay will proceed with the assertion that the ELCA is both blithely possessed by and spiritually enslaved to a false gospel, namely the false gospel of inclusivity. What does this mean?

Moving past the traditional, Lutheran-sounding language found in the first sections of the ELCA’s constitution, with headings Confession of Faith, the Nature of the Church, and the Statement of Purpose, one finds in Chapter 5, Principles of Organization, paragraph 5.01.b, the following:

This church, in faithfulness to the Gospel, is committed to be an *inclusive church* in the midst of division in society. Therefore, in their organization and outreach, the congregations, synods, and churchwide units of this church shall seek to exhibit the *inclusive unity* that is God’s will for the Church.⁶

Plainly, the synergistic application of the key terms in this paragraph infers a divine mandate to reinterpret and subsume the terms gospel, church, and unity under the principle of inclusivity. Unfortunately, the ELCA’s inclusivity is selectively inclusive. Preceding the constitution itself, in self-contradictory fashion, Article VIII of ELCA’s Restated Articles of Incorporation reads, “Except as otherwise provided in the Church’s Constitution, the Church shall have no members with voting rights . . . Members of congregations of the Church shall not, as such, have any voting rights with respect to this corporation.”⁷ Taken together, the

⁶ Constitution, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, as adopted by the Constituting Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in American in Columbus, Ohio, April 30, 1987, revised June 3, 1987, 23 (emphasis added; hereafter ELCA 1987 Constitution). Notably, the ELCA’s constitution has been amended at every churchwide assembly since it began operations in 1988. The current version can be found at http://www.elca.org/~media/Files/Who%20We%20Are/Office%20of%20the%20Secretary/Constitutions/PDF/CBCR_2011_November.pdf (accessed January 21, 2013). Subsequent references will be made to the original constitution unless otherwise indicated.

⁷ ELCA 1987 Constitution, 12.

ELCA's governing documents reflect the ultimate organizational principle enshrined in *Animal Farm*, George Orwell's 1940s critique of communism. Modified for the ELCA this becomes, "All animals are included, but some animals are more included than others." Like the ELCA's tripartite organizational structure, its so-called congregational, synodical, and churchwide "expressions,"⁸ the ELCA's false gospel of inclusivity manifests itself primarily in three, interdependent hypostases: institutional, ecumenical, and socio-political.

I. The False Gospel of the Institutional Church

Institutionally, although the ELCA, at least as per its constitution, "confesses the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" and "confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior" and "accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments" and "accepts the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds" and "accepts the Unaltered Augsburg Confession," and "accepts the other confessional writings in the Book of Concord,"⁹ nowhere does the ELCA's constitution state that the ELCA actually believes any of that. Further, although the ELCA's constitution also states, "All power in the Church belongs to our Lord Jesus Christ, its head. All actions of this church are to be carried out under his rule and authority,"¹⁰ given the ELCA's momentous decisions and actions contrary to both Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, as directed by its leadership and as dictated by its supreme authority, namely its own churchwide assembly, the question necessarily arises, to which christ might the ELCA's constitution be referring? Again, whereas the third article of the Nicene Creed confesses belief in the "one, holy, catholic, apostolic church," the ELCA's constitution describes the church to be "an inclusive fellowship," deriving "its character and powers both from the sanction and representation of its congregations and from its *inherent* nature as an expression of the broader fellowship of the faithful In length, it acknowledges *itself* to be in the historic continuity of the communion of saints; in breadth, it expresses the fellowship of believers and congregations in our day."¹¹

Nothing in this self-referential description pertains to the work of the Holy Spirit who through the gospel "calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with

⁸ ELCA 1987 Constitution, 23, Chapter 5. Principles of Organization, 5.01.c.

⁹ ELCA 1987 Constitution, 20, Chapter 2. Confession of Faith, 2.01-2.06.

¹⁰ ELCA 1987 Constitution, 20, Chapter 3. Nature of the Church, 3.01.

¹¹ ELCA 1987 Constitution, 20, Chapter 3. Nature of the Church, 3.02; emphasis added.

Jesus Christ in the one true faith,” as Luther teaches in his explanation of the third article of the Apostles’ Creed.¹² In the ELCA, faith alone appears to have been relegated to the private spheres of its non-voting, congregational members whose only real power is exercised with their pocket-books and feet. Finally, despite “accepting” the Unaltered Augsburg Confession and the teaching in Article V that God has instituted the office of preaching to give the gospel and sacraments as a means to give the Holy Spirit to obtain justifying faith,¹³ the ELCA’s initial constitution, “Chapter 10. Ministry,” sought to establish a ministerial structure based instead on the law, and particularly law demanded by other ecclesial traditions. This paragraph states,

During the same period of 1988–1994, this church shall engage in an intensive study of the nature of ministry, leading to decisions regarding appropriate forms of ministry that will enable this church to fulfill its mission. During the course of such study, special attention shall be given to:

- 1) *The tradition of the Lutheran church;*
- 2) *The possibility of articulating a Lutheran understanding and adaptation of the threefold ministerial office of bishop, pastor, and deacon and its ecumenical implication;*¹⁴

The question arises: what other mission and office is the church called to fulfill than to proclaim the gospel by which sinners are justified by faith alone in Jesus Christ apart from works of the law?¹⁵

¹² Martin Luther, “The Small Catechism,” *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 345 (hereafter BoC). See also *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche*, 9th edition (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), 511–512 (hereafter as BSLK).

¹³ BSLK, 58, “Solchen Glauben zu erlangen, hat Gott das Predigtamt eingesetzt, Evangelium und Sakrament geben, dadurch er als durch Mittel den heiligen Geist gibt, welcher den Glauben, wo und wenn er will, in denen, so das Evangelium hören, wirket, welches da lehret, daß wir durch Christus Verdienst, nicht durch unser Verdienst, ein grädigen Gott haben, so wir solchs glauben.” Tappert’s translation of Predigtamt as “the office of the ministry” (BoC, 31), apparently reliant upon the Latin title *De ministerio ecclesiastico*, does not represent the German in either letter or spirit as proclamation is chiefly a word-event to invoke faith rather than a service activity of some sort.

¹⁴ ELCA 1987 Constitution, 48, Chapter 10. Ministry, paragraph 10.11.A87.b.1–2. italics original. For a variety of reasons, some of which will become apparent, this paragraph has been deleted from this chapter which itself has been significantly modified and moved, appearing now as Chapter 7.

¹⁵ When the ELCA proposes to study something, that often indicates intent to move away from Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions, or both.

II. The False Gospel of Ecumenism

From the outset, the ELCA has constitutionally mandated and declared that God's word in Jesus Christ and the pure proclamation of his gospel are not enough (*non est satis*) for the ELCA's self-understanding as a Lutheran Church. By deriving its inclusive fellowship from its false gospel of inclusivity, which selectively includes the ideologies and ecclesiologies demanded by secular trends and canon laws, respectively, the ELCA has excluded more than the voice of its congregations. By exchanging the *viva vox evangelii Iesu Christi* for its false gospel of inclusivity, the ELCA has necessarily excluded itself from the fellowship (*koinonia*) of the Holy Spirit.

The ELCA's ecumenical agenda is essentially an expansion of its institutional expression. In other words, the ELCA's ecumenical agenda is not driven by ecumenism but rather by the implementation of its false gospel beyond itself and yet predominately in relation to itself. For example, at first glance, the ELCA's stated "goal of eventual full communion" with the Roman Catholic Church¹⁶ would seem to contradict not only its broader ecumenical aspirations but also its constant socio-political activism, both of which are often diametrically opposed to Vatican ecumenical and social doctrines. Viewed from the perspective of the ELCA's false gospel of inclusivity, however, such contradictions are readily accommodated, though not reconciled, because being inclusive as understood by the ELCA is its own universal (catholic) criterion and goal. How does this work?

By the time the ELCA commenced operations on January 1, 1988, two other broad ecumenical groups were well underway, the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) in the U.S.A., founded in 1962, and the Leuenberg Church Fellowship, established in 1973 by the *Leuenberg Agreement*, which is today called the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE), with membership incidentally not confined to Europe. Of the ten COCU churches, known since 2002 as Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC), the ELCA has, through bilateral agreements, declared itself in full communion with five, namely the Presbyterian Church (USA), The Episcopal Church, the United Church of Christ, the Moravian Church—Northern Province, and the United Methodist Church. At its churchwide assembly in August

¹⁶ ELCA News Service, "Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue Completes Round Ten" (04-084-FI), April 29, 2004. The full news release is available at <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Communication-Services/News/Releases.aspx?SearchCriteria=Completes+Round+Ten&&SearchCriteria=Completes+Round+Ten&a=5268> (accessed January 21, 2013).

2001,¹⁷ the ELCA also voted to become a “partner in mission and dialogue” in the nascent CIUC, which provides the ELCA with participant (i.e., associate member) status. Although the *Leuenberg Agreement* grants altar and pulpit fellowship to its now 105 member churches based on the principles of Article VII of the Augsburg Confession,¹⁸ as they view it, the ELCA has to date no affiliation with CPCE.

If the ELCA were truly ecumenical, or at least as ecumenical as it portrays itself, then it would seem justified to argue that the ELCA not only should have but also would have from its inception pursued full (communion) memberships with the 100-plus array of churches available through both COCU and Leuenberg. Instead, the ELCA has negotiated only four full-communion accords encompassing just six church bodies, all of which have been achieved through bilateral dialogues exclusively between ELCA and these few churches.¹⁹ Furthermore, if the ELCA were truly as inclusive as its false gospel would seem to necessitate, then again it not only should have but also would have struck full communion arrangements with all 10 CUIC denominations rather than just five. Notably, the ELCA has no full communion accords with any of the predominantly black CUIC bodies, namely, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. This disparity would seem to underscore that the ELCA’s false gospel of inclusivity discriminately considers some more included than others.

¹⁷ <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Communication-Services/News/Releases.aspx?SearchCriteria=%22churches+uniting+in+Christ%22#&&SearchCriteria=CUIC&a=5262>; (accessed January 21, 2013).

¹⁸ See Mark D. Menacher, “Confusion and Clarity in Recent German Ecumenism,” *LOGIA: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* 13, no. 2 (Eastertide 2004): 23–32.

¹⁹ *The Formula of Agreement* established full communion between the ELCA and three Reformed churches, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ in 1997. In 1999, the ELCA and the Episcopal Church began their goal of full communion with the passage of *Called to Common Mission* (CCM). In that same year it established full communion with the Moravian Church via *Following Our Shepherd to Full Communion* (http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Following_Our_Shepherd_To_Full_Communion.pdf; accessed December 8, 2013). In 2009, the ELCA reciprocated a resolution passed by the United Methodist Church in 2008 to establish full communion based on a document titled *Confessing Our Faith Together: A Proposal for Full Communion between the ELCA and UMC* (http://www.gccuic-umc.org/index2.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_view&gid=15&Itemid=235; accessed December 8, 2013).

As self-contradictory, or perhaps as hypocritical as its ecumenical inclusivity may be, none of the preceding interdenominational undertakings has been particularly disruptive or divisive for the ELCA. In stark contrast thereto, the ELCA's full communion agreement with the Episcopal Church (ECUSA), titled *Called to Common Mission* (CCM), has created substantial dissension and division in the ELCA. More significantly yet, the ELCA's endeavors to initiate and advance the so-called *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (JDDJ) have led the ELCA, in the name of church unity ironically, to dissociate itself from any credible claim to subsist as a Lutheran church. Both will be treated in order.

Called to Common Mission

When the *Concordat of Agreement*, the full-communion proposal between the ELCA and the ECUSA failed to be adopted by the ELCA's 1997 churchwide assembly, its defeat was not accepted by ELCA proponents of "full-communion" between these two churches. Instead, the ELCA Churchwide Assembly requested a revision of the *Concordat*, one that would enable full-communion to proceed by addressing the concerns of those who opposed the *Concordat*. In subsequent months, a small committee chaired by Martin E. Marty drafted a revision whose full title is *Called to Common Mission: A Lutheran Proposal for a Revision of the Concordat of Agreement*. Necessarily, CCM retained the *Concordat's* most controversial provision, namely the obligation that the ELCA adopt the tradition of "historic episcopacy" or historic episcopal succession to effect full-communion with the Episcopal Church.

In order to make this quintessential, Episcopalian demand, stipulated in the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral (1886/1888), appear to be "confessionally Lutheran" enough to propose to the ELCA's 1999 churchwide assembly, Marty's drafting team engaged in what may arguably be called the greatest act of deception ever cultivated by an ecclesial denomination in the history of North America. CCM paragraph 11 states,

"Historic succession" refers to a tradition which goes back to the ancient church, in which bishops already in the succession install newly elected bishops with prayer and the laying-on-of-hands. At present, The Episcopal Church has bishops in this historic succession, as do all the churches of the Anglican Communion, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America at present does not, although some member churches of the Lutheran World Federation do. The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1886/1888, the ecumenical policy of The Episcopal Church, refers to this tradition as "the historic episcopate." In the Lutheran Confessions, Article 14 of the *Apology*

refers to this episcopal pattern by the phrase, “the ecclesiastical and canonical polity” which it is “our deep desire to maintain.”

When the ELCA Presiding Bishop, H. George Anderson, announced the passage of CCM to the 1999 Churchwide Assembly, assisted by this fraudulent use of the Lutheran Confessions, he is reported as declaring, “It is the will of God.”²⁰

Faced after its passage with continuing opposition to CCM in the ELCA by the WordAlone Network, proponents of this deceptively titled “Lutheran Proposal” continued to beat their pseudo-confessional drums. For example, David S. Yeago, formerly a professor at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, which has recently been subsumed by Lenoir-Rhyne University, boldly claimed in *Lutheran Forum*,

We must say No to polemics, which claim to represent true Lutheranism, but obscure the clear endorsement in our Confessions of that body of practice now called the historic episcopate as a bond of communion between the Churches: “On this matter, as we often testified at Augsburg, we desire with the greatest eagerness to preserve the polity of the Church and the degrees of office in the Church, even if these were established by human authority. For we know that the Church’s order was set up by the Fathers in this way, as the ancient canons describe, by a good and helpful plan (Apology XIV 1).”²¹

Not surprisingly, David Yeago was not alone in his opinion. According to Carl E. Braaten, neither Luther nor Melancthon “nor the majority of Lutheran theologians around the world and most of the seminary faculties of the ELCA” saw any reason that “the adoption of the episcopal office in apostolic succession would contradict the Lutheran Confessions.”²²

Commenting on these developments and particularly on the ELCA’s 2002 recommendation that its congregations no longer celebrate Reformation Day, Heike Schmoll of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, whose journalistic prowess also helped bring the *Joint Declaration* to its knees in Germany, observed in a Reformation Day editorial,

In the wake of their Anglicanization, the American Lutherans are on the way from being a “confessional church,” which is led by the con-

²⁰ The author is grateful to Pastor John Fahning for relaying his eyewitness account.

²¹ David Yeago, “Gospel and Church: Twelve Articles of Theological Principle amid the Present Conflict in the ELCA,” *Lutheran Forum* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2000), 21–22.

²² Carl E. Braaten, “Episcopacy and the E.L.C.A.,” *dialog: A Journal of Theology* 39, no. 3 (Fall 2000), 220.

tents of its proclamation, to being a “constitutional church,” which is defined by its ordering of ministerial offices. For this reason, as of late, the American Lutherans have directed their interests, in a way wholly uncharacteristic of the Reformation, to the office of bishop and ecclesial structures and appear to have forgotten that an evangelical bishop is a pastor among pastors.²³

Wherever the ELCA may be going guided by its self-referential compass, it has not gone unnoticed either in the Lutheran world or in the secular press internationally that the ELCA shall not be deterred on its path by either objective facts or by internal factions.

Unfortunately for Martin Marty and his drafting team, the erroneous confessional conjecture fabricated in CCM paragraph 11, known to be false when drafted, eventually came to light. Research originally published in 2002 in *LOGIA: A Journal of Lutheran Theology*²⁴ and later disseminated to all Lutheran World Federation (LWF) member churches would eventually lead both the ELCA and the LWF central office in Geneva to cease using their invented Lutheran confessional support for the adoption of the historic episcopacy.²⁵ Despite this change of mind, though not change of heart, no academic or other professional ethicist and no elected or appointed church leader in the ELCA has acknowledged or admitted to any wrongdoing in either the drafting or prosecuting of the fraud used to ensure the passage of *Called to Common Mission*.

Whereas Article VII of the Augsburg Confession states that it is enough (*ist genug, satis est*) for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the pure teaching/preaching of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments,²⁶ the ELCA, in contrast and contradiction, has knowingly utilized grand deception in order to conform its ordained ministry to the dictates of the Anglican Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, whose principles reflect the religious intolerance enshrined in the English Parliament’s 1662 Act of Uniformity. This Act, introduced during the Restoration of the British monarchy, banished all non-episcopally ordained ministers from the Church of England²⁷ and prescribed them to be treated

²³ Heike Schmoll, “Kommentar—Die Wahrheit des Protestantismus,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 253 (October 30/31, 2003): 1; author’s translation.

²⁴ See Mark D. Menacher, “Called to Common Mission—A Lutheran Proposal?” *LOGIA: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* 11, no. 1 (Epiphany 2002): 21–28.

²⁵ See Mark D. Menacher, “Ten Years after JDDJ the Ecumenical Pelagianism Continues,” *LOGIA: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* 18, no.3 (Holy Trinity 2009): 27–45.

²⁶ BSLK, 61; BoC, 32.

²⁷ Menacher, “Called to Common Mission—A Lutheran Proposal?,” 25–26.

by the church as if they “were dead.”²⁸ Apart from a few exceptions to CCM in “unusual circumstances,” known in the ELCA as the “exceptions clause” passed in 2001, seventeenth-century Anglican religious intolerance and its enforced episcopalianism now govern the ordering of the ELCA’s ordained ministry.²⁹ The ELCA’s false gospel of inclusivity calls this the will of God, but what kind of a god is that and what kind of a christ is the head of the ELCA’s fraudulent decision-making process?

Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

As should be apparent, the various manifestations of the ELCA’s ecumenical Pelagianism stem from its abandonment of the gospel of justification by faith alone in favor of its own inclusive gospel of make-believe. This becomes particularly poignant in its dealings with the Counter-Reformation denomination overseen by the Bishop of Rome, especially in relation to the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. Obviously, a review of the events from its inception in 1993 to its non-signing on Reformation Day in Augsburg in 1999 exceeds the confines of this essay. In quick summary, however, the initial draft of JDDJ was revised twice due to the copious objections from LWF member churches around the globe.³⁰ Shortly thereafter, a petition drive in Germany garnering the signatures of more than 160 university theologians effectively derailed the *Joint Declaration*. Undeterred, however, the LWF central office joined in secret negotiations with Vatican representatives, one being Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, to draft a document to rescue JDDJ.³¹ Instead of

²⁸ See John T. Wilkinson, *1662—And After: Three Centuries of English Nonconformity* (London: The Epworth Press, 1962), 218–219.

²⁹ Bylaw 7.31.17 passed by the ELCA’s 2001 Churchwide Assembly reads: “*Ordination in Unusual Circumstances*. For pastoral reasons in unusual circumstances, a synodical bishop may provide for the ordination by another pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America of an approved candidate who has received and accepted a properly issued, duly attested letter of call for the office of ordained ministry. Prior to authorization of such an ordination, the bishop of the synod of the candidate’s first call shall consult with the presiding bishop as this church’s chief ecumenical officer and shall seek the advice of the Synod Council. The pastoral decision of the synodical bishop shall be in accordance with the policy developed by the Division or Ministry, reviewed by the Conference of Bishops, and adopted by the Church Council.” See *2001 Pre-Assembly Report to the Congregations* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2001), 81.

³⁰ See Dorothea Wendebourg, “Zur Entstehungsgeschichte der »Gemeinsame Erklärung«,“ *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 10 (December 1998): 140–206.

³¹ Johannes Wallmann, “Die Demontage einer fast fertigen Brücke: inwiefern die »Gemeinsame Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre« gescheitert ist,” *Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift* 18 (2001), 172–173, especially note 2. Wallmann reports that the *Official*

JDDJ, that document, *Official Common Statement (OCS)* with Annex, which bore a doctrine of justification congruent with Tridentine teachings,³² was eventually signed before the world's media in Augsburg by Vatican and LWF officials.³³

It should be recalled that JDDJ was conceived as a vehicle for the LWF and the Vatican to declare that the sixteenth-century condemnations relating to the doctrine of justification no longer applied.³⁴ This admirable undertaking would have been groundbreaking had anyone at the LWF noticed that the Lutheran confessional writings contain no condemnations of the Roman Church's doctrine. In contrast, the Council of Trent generated no shortage of condemnations (anathemas) against all manner of people for either holding Protestant positions or denying papal doctrines. For example, Trent's Decree on Justification is composed of sixteen

Common Statement was initially drafted in Regensburg on November 1, 1998, by Lutherans Joachim Track, chair of the LWF Committee for Theology and Studies, and Johannes Hanselmann, former Bishop of Bavarian, and by Roman Catholics Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and ecumenist Heinz Schütte. Track contributed authoritatively during the final OCS consultations. Thomas Kaufmann and Martin Ohst describe the situation in context: "While JD was being worked out behind the scenes according to established usance of cabinet politics and secret diplomacy, Pope John Paul II published the Bull of Indiction of the Jubilee Year 2000 on the First of Advent 1998." See Kaufmann and Ohst, "Unvereinbar oder inhaltsleer—Der päpstliche Ablass widerlegt die Rede vom Rechtfertigungs-Konsens," *Die Zeichen der Zeit* 53 / *Lutherische Monatshefte* 39, no. 2 (September 1999): 20; author's translation.

³² See Wallmann, "Die Demontage einer fast fertigen Brücke," 184, and also Wilfred Härle, "Lutherische Formeln—tridentinisch interpretiert," http://www.w-haerle.de/texte/Lutherische_Formeln.pdf (accessed November 21, 2013).

³³ For a fuller discussion, see Reinhard Brandt, "Der ökumenische Dialog nach der Unterzeichnung der Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre und nach Dominus Iesus—Ein Überblick über strittige Aspekte aus lutherischer Sicht," in *Konsensdruck ohne Perspektiven?*, ed. Uwe Rieske-Braun (Leipzig: EvangelischeVerlagsanstalt, 2001), 11-13, 29-32.

³⁴ Not mentioned in the cover letter of Dr. Noko, general secretary of the LWF at that time, the impetus for the development of JDDJ arose as early as 1986, after the publication of the study *Lehrverurteilungen – kirchentrennend? I Rechtfertigung, Sakramente und Amt im Zeitalter der Reformation und heute*, ed. Karl Lehmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg (Freiburg: Herder / Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), in English as *The Condemnations of the Reformation Era: Do They Still Divide?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990). In light of this study, the executive committee of the LWF desired a translation of this work into English to initiate a similar process amongst LWF member churches. When this was delayed, in 1993 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) suggested an alternative plan to prepare by 1997 an official declaration that the sixteenth-century condemnations between Lutherans and Roman Catholics no longer applied. This plan was adopted by the LWF Council. See Wendebourg, "Zur Entstehungsgeschichte der . . .," 148-149.

chapters followed by thirty-three canons, with the latter containing the anathemas against the Reformation teaching on justification. Canon 30 anathematizes anyone who rejects purgatory,³⁵ and Canon 33 anathematizes anyone who contravenes any of the preceding thirty-two Canons. Thus, all Protestants,³⁶ and not just Lutherans, who reject the notion of purgatory are thus doubly cursed by the Tridentine Decree on justification, except perhaps for those “crypto-Tridentine Protestant Christians”³⁷ in the LWF and in its member churches who adhere to “common statements” in JDDJ.

Fortunately for members of the ELCA, these Tridentine threats of anathematization are fading into the background. On All Saints’ Day, 2010, the results of the eleventh round of U.S. Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue were published under the title *The Hope of Eternal Life*,³⁸ and sixteen months later, “during their meetings at the Vatican [held February 14–16, 2012] . . . ELCA leaders presented ‘The Hope of Eternal Life’ . . . to Cardinal Kurt Koch, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.”³⁹ On purgatory, among other matters, this dialogue document states,

³⁵ Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* . . . (Latin–German), Peter Hünemann, editor, 37th ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1991), 521 §1580 (author’s translation).

³⁶ Even Anglicans, who consider themselves to maintain certain aspects of “catholic” tradition such as the concept of bishops in historic succession, reject purgatory. See Article XXII of the Thirty-Nine Articles in the *Book of Common Prayer* . . . According to the *Use of the Episcopal Church* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), 872.

³⁷ Brandt, “Der ökumenische Dialog . . .” 16–18, 24. Brandt refers to those who hold to the common statements in JDDJ as “*Kryptotridentisten*.” Brandt also cites Bishop Walter Kasper to support the notion that only those who adhere to the common statements in JDDJ are not anathematized by the Council of Trent. In a similar way, §44 of the 1995 draft of JDDJ states, “Nothing is thereby taken away from the seriousness of the condemnations related to the doctrine of justification. They did not simply or altogether miss the point. Where the basic consensus is not adhered to they still apply today.”

³⁸ Available on the ELCA website at: <http://www.elca.org/~media/Files/Who%20We%20Are/Ecumenical%20and%20Inter%20Religious%20Relations/Hope%20of%20Eternal%20Life.pdf> (accessed January 21, 2013).

³⁹ ELCA News Service, “ELCA, Vatican leaders meet.” February 22, 2012, 12-08-MRC available at: http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Communication_Services/News/Releases.aspx?SearchCriteria=elca%2c+vatican+leaders#&&SearchCriteria=elca%2c+vatican+leaders&a=5268 (accessed January 21, 2013).

The complex network of beliefs and practices surrounding the relation of the living to the dead—purgatory, masses offered for the dead, indulgences applies to the dead, prayers for the dead—were seen by the Reformers as *deeply antagonistic to that evangelical proclamation*.⁴⁰

Then, just a few pages later in the concluding commentary, lurks one seemingly innocuous sentence that reads, “Ecumenical rapprochement *requires*, however, that Lutherans *not* condemn Catholic teaching about the practice of indulgences as *inherently* contrary to the Gospel.”⁴¹ By not rejecting purgatory and thus the need for indulgences, the ELCA has apparently removed itself from papal anathematization regarding justification.

From the time that the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* was not signed on October 31, 1999, until the end of 2012, the Vatican has issued nineteen indulgences, and the ELCA has not objected to any of them. Not surprisingly, the ELCA’s false gospel of inclusivity also apparently accommodates purgatory and indulgences. Perhaps the ELCA will also be issuing its own indulgences by the time it, as an LWF member church, celebrates the 500th anniversary of Luther’s Ninety-five Theses against indulgences “*with* the Roman Catholic Church and with other Christian world communions.”⁴² Although the ELCA’s false gospel of inclusivity can obviously be more than indulgent, such indulgence neither reflects nor embodies the propitiatory grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

III. The False Gospel of Socio-Political Activism

The ELCA’s socio-political activism creates, arguably, the greatest controversy in and for the ELCA because such activism is the least theological or most pseudo-theological or perhaps simply a-theological

⁴⁰ *The Hope of Eternal Life*, 60 §23; emphasis added. Luther in the *Smalcald Articles* states, “Finally, it is nothing other than simply the devil [*nichts denn eitel Teufel*], for [the pope] above and against God to advance his lies about masses, purgatory, monastic life and one’s own works and divine service (which are then the papacy proper) . . .” (BSLK 432, 5–7; author’s translation). Tappert’s translation of *eitel Teufel* as “most diabolical” (BoC, 301) does not adequately communicate in this context the concept of lies originating from the devil. In either case, the phrase “deeply antagonistic to that evangelical proclamation” hardly reflects understanding purgatory either as “most diabolical” or as a papal lie of the devil.

⁴¹ *The Hope of Eternal Life*, 70 §270; emphasis added. That the ELCA does not find purgatory, understood as a papal lie of the devil, to be “inherently contrary to the gospel” is rather striking.

⁴² *Lutheran World Information* (LWI), September 2005, 19. http://www.lutheranworld.org/What_We_Do/OCS/LWI-2005-PDF/LWI-200509-EN-low.pdf (accessed January 21, 2013); emphasis added.

manifestation of the ELCA's false gospel of inclusivity. Characteristic thereof, the ELCA News Service routinely reports about ELCA leaders advising or admonishing secular politicians on almost every societal concern and controversy of the day. Similarly, the ELCA's numerous social statements not only mimic the machinations of parliamentary political parties but are frequently preceded by choreographed periods of "study" in which Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions are either diluted or drowned by philosophical principles that are derived from either secular humanism or religious humanism or both.

By necessity, a false gospel is law, and thus, the ELCA's socio-political expression of its false gospel of inclusivity can only be promulgated via its constitution and bylaws internally and externally via its political lobbying efforts. Moreover, this false gospel represents the first use of the law rather than the second (i.e., the *usus civilis* (or *usus politicus*) rather than the *usus theologicus*, respectively). In relation to the two kingdoms doctrine, the political use of the law pertains to the kingdom on the left, that by which God keeps some semblance of civil order over the destructive displays of power exercised by sinful human beings. The theological use of the law, on the other hand, comes to the fore in the proclamation of the word of God, where its impact on the human conscience cannot be quantified with the human senses or conformed to the human will.⁴³ In the ELCA, unfortunately, the line between these two applications of the law is intentionally blurred beyond recognition. According to Luther, such cooking and brewing of the two kingdoms together is the work of none other than the devil himself.⁴⁴

⁴³ In addition to Luther's famous appearance at the Imperial Diet at Worms, for example, see also *Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. J. F. K. Knaake, et al. (Weimar: Böhlau 1883ff), 12:335, 17–23 (hereafter WA): "Now if an emperor or a king would ask me what my faith might be, I should tell it to him, not because of his command but because I am obliged to confess my faith publicly before anyone. If, however, he continued and wanted to command that I should believe in this or that way, I shall say, 'Dear Lord, look after your own worldly reign. You have no authority to touch God in his kingdom. Therefore, I will not obey you at all'" (author's translation).

⁴⁴ "I must always drum in, grind in, drive in, and wedge in such difference between the two kingdoms, whether it is written or spoken so often as to be irksome. For the vexatious devil also never ceases to cook and to brew these two kingdoms into one another. In the name of the devil, the secular lords always want to teach and master Christ, how he should run his church and the spiritual regiment. Likewise, the false parsons and the fractious agitators always want, not in God's name, to teach and control how one shall order the secular regiment. Thus, the devil is so very intemperate on both sides and has much to do. May God bridle him, amen, if we are worthy." WA 51:239, 22–30 (1534/35); author's translation.

The crowning jewel in the ELCA's efforts to sequestrate the two kingdoms took place on August 21 at its 2009 churchwide assembly. At that gathering, the ELCA asserted thus:

RESOLVED, that the ELCA commit itself to finding ways to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support and hold publicly accountable life-long, monogamous, same-gender relationships (Resolution 1; adopted 619-402).

RESOLVED, that the ELCA commit itself to finding a way for people in such publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church (Resolutions 2; adopted 559-451).⁴⁵

From the previously issued social statement, *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, also adopted at that same assembly on August 19 (676-338),⁴⁶ it becomes plain that the ELCA's notion of a "publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationship" is to be equated with the institution of marriage. Furthermore, by recognizing and legitimizing such relationships to be effectively defined as marriage, including provision for partners in same-sex relationships to participate as spouses in the ELCA's health insurance program, the ELCA has made itself as a legally incorporated entity into a promoter, purveyor, and protector of same-sex "marriage" on a national level. How can the ELCA justify its actions?

As may be anticipated, the ELCA's social statement on human sexuality starts with a ruse to the kingdom on the right and seeks to center itself on the notion of love. After quoting Matthew 22:36-40, that the greatest commandments involve loving God and one's neighbor, the document continues, "This social statement addresses the question: how do we understand human sexuality within the context of Jesus' *invitation* to love God and love our neighbor (Romans 13:9-10; Galatians 5:14)?"⁴⁷ Further on, with reference to the kingdom on the left, the social statement explains,

Lutherans understand that God's law, in its civil use, permeates and undergirds basic structures of human society to support life and pro-

⁴⁵ Mark S. Hanson, *Message to Rostered Leaders*, August 22, 2009, available at <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/JTF-Human-Sexuality/Message-to-Rostered-Leaders.aspx> (accessed January 21, 2013).

⁴⁶ <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/JTF-Human-Sexuality.aspx#Table%20of%20Content> (accessed January 21, 2013).

⁴⁷ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *A Social Statement on Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, available at <http://www.elca.org/~media/Files/What%20We%20Believe/Social%20Issues/sexuality/Human%20Sexuality%20Social%20Statement.pdf> (accessed January 21, 2013); emphasis added.

tect all people in a world that remains under the sway of sin. Such social structures, (11) as the Lutheran Confessions identify them, include ministry, marriage and family, civil authority, and daily work. (12) Because these structures are temporal, anticipating the arrival of God's promised future, they must respond continually to human needs for protection and flourishing.⁴⁸

Then, mixing the two kingdoms together, the sexuality study later states,

Recognizing that this conclusion differs from the historic Christian tradition and the Lutheran Confessions, some people, though not all, in this church and within the larger Christian community, conclude that marriage is also the appropriate term to use in describing similar benefits, protection, and support for same-gender couples entering into lifelong, monogamous relationships.⁴⁹

Notably, because the ELCA "does not favor cohabitation arrangements outside of marriage"⁵⁰ but has nonetheless approved "publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships," one can only conclude that by putting itself in the same-sex "marriage" business, the ELCA has elevated itself on par with, if not above both the kingdom on the left and the kingdom on the right. As the political and theological controversies within the ELCA have shown, this situation raises a number of basic concerns that have by and large gone unaddressed.

Amidst all the controversy and commotion, what proponents and opponents of the decisions made by the ELCA's 2009 Churchwide Assembly have apparently failed to fathom is how deceptively vacuous the concept of "publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships" actually is. Purely logistically, if the ELCA has put itself in the same-sex "marriage" business, then the ELCA must also obligate itself to conduct, record, and certify all such "weddings" as would any state or national government. So, what provision has the ELCA made for overseeing its same-sex "marriages" on either a synodical or national basis? Similarly, if the ELCA has put itself in the same-sex "marriage" business, then it is also obliged to be in the same-sex fidelity and, if necessary, divorce business. So, how is the ELCA to oversee the state of, and if necessary, the dissolution of its same-sex "marriages"?

More critically, if the ELCA does not undertake this pseudo-statutory obligation required of itself, then any and every such ELCA same-sex

⁴⁸ *A Social Statement on Human Sexuality*, 7 (notes in parentheses are original).

⁴⁹ *A Social Statement on Human Sexuality*, 18.

⁵⁰ *A Social Statement on Human Sexuality*, 32.

“marriage” would be little more than an illegitimate manifestation of a homosexual⁵¹ couple’s subjectively shared fantasy, which has been ecclesially externalized, socio-politically sanctioned, and ritually blessed by the ELCA’s wholly unaccountable, churchwide legislative authority. Given that the ELCA has no statutory authority whatsoever, none of its same-sex “weddings” will in reality render anything other than successive incidents of cohabitation paradoxically rejected by the ELCA. Most hypocritically, if the ELCA is actually, though misleadingly, in the pseudo-marital business, then why has it not granted the same sex opportunities to heterosexual couples seeking to sleep together, on occasion in the parsonage, in mutually agreed, sexually active, public displays of cohabitation lasting for the self-determined lifetime of such relationships?

Led by its false gospel of inclusivity, in which “some are more included than others,” the ELCA has legislated to endow homosexual relationships and their homoerotic activities with legitimacy and privileges that it denies to heterosexuals. Furthermore, whereas the ELCA has invoked Christ’s commandment to love God and neighbor to legitimize this socio-political expression of its false gospel, Luther was critically aware of the sophists’ use of natural opinion and reason to replace Christ with a bejeweled notion of love.⁵² Finally and perhaps most incisively, the ELCA’s advocacy of homosexual love metaphorically represents the nature and orientation of the ELCA itself. Etymologically, the prefix *homo-* connotes the “same.” Subsequently, the words homosexual and homoerotic describe a passionate desire for the same, and nothing is more the same than the self. Viewed from this perspective, both homosexual orientation and homosexual expression arguably represent a highly concentrated and yet extremely animalistic form of narcissism. By granting to homosexuals its full, institutional legitimacy to be accountable effectively only to themselves, the ELCA has merely proffered to homosexuals what it already grants to itself. Unbridled narcissistic love is the antithesis of kenotic divine love.

Viewed comprehensively, whether the testimony of Scripture or the witness of the Lutheran Confessions, whether the rigor of intellectual integrity or the demands of basic honesty, whether the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, or the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 13:14), nothing in all creation seems able to separate the ELCA from being

⁵¹ Notably, the ELCA’s social statement does not address or discuss the topic of homosexuality as a term, thus sidestepping the issue altogether.

⁵² “*Eiiciunt gemmam Christum, et dicunt eam gemmam esse charitatem.*” “The jewel Christ is cast out, but they say it is the gem of charity.” WA 40, 1: 165, 5-6; editor’s translation.

wholly enamoured with itself and thereby accountable only to itself. The ELCA's self-justification by faith alone in its false gospel of inclusivity alone constitutes its institutional, ecumenical, and socio-political agenda. With reference to Resolution 3-21A passed at The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's 2001 Convention, the ELCA is no longer an orthodox Lutheran church body.⁵³ Neither is it a heterodox Lutheran body. Instead, the ELCA is a homodox, ecclesial corporation teaching itself as gospel (cf. Matthew 15:9).

IV. Conclusion

Viewed theologically, the ELCA's plight is plainly discernable and easily diagnosed and was done so nearly 500 years ago. Lecturing on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans during 1515–1516, Luther redeveloped Augustine's use of *incurvatus in se*, based on the Hebrew **יָרָא**, commonly translated as "iniquity," to describe our sinful, human nature. According to Luther, this nature "knows nothing but its own good, or what is good and honorable and useful for itself, but not what is good for God and other people." Turned in on itself in this manner, it "uses not only physical but even spiritual goods for [its] own purposes and in all things seeks only [itself]."⁵⁴ Vainly magnifying the light of such crooked, human nature and comparing it to the light of grace,

It sees, seeks, and works only toward itself in all matters, and it passes by all other things and even God Himself in the midst, as if it did not see them, and is directed only toward itself [This nature] sets itself in the place of all other things, even in the place of God, and seeks only those things which are its own and not the things of God. Therefore it is its own first and greatest idol. Second, it makes God into an idol and the truth of God into a lie, and finally it makes idols of all created things and of all gifts of God.

Further,

This is spiritual fornication, iniquity, and a terrible curving in on itself [*fornicatio spiritualis et iniquitas et curvitas nimia valde*]. Therefore, this wisdom is not a light, but it can much better be called darkness,

⁵³ See Response to "Request for CTCR Opinion Concerning Continued Eligibility of an Inactive Emeritus Member Under Article VI of the Constitution of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod," 3, available at: www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lc&id=259 (accessed January 21, 2013).

⁵⁴ *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., ed. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann (Saint Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955–1987), 25:345; (hereafter AE); WA 56:356, 1–9.

[and] . . . insofar as it turns all knowledge in upon itself, it is the most complete darkness. Nor can it by its nature do anything else than turn in upon itself. For it cannot love God and His law, as the apostle here says.⁵⁵

Finally,

[Human] nature has been so deeply curved in upon itself [*in seipsam incurua*] because of the viciousness of original sin [*vitio primi peccati*] that it not only turns the finest gifts of God in upon itself and enjoys them (as is evident in the case of legalists and hypocrites), indeed, it even uses God Himself to achieve these aims, but it also seems to be ignorant of this very fact, that in acting so iniquitously, so perversely, and in such a depraved way [*inique, curue et praeue*], it is even seeking God for its own sake.⁵⁶

So, *quo vadis* ELCA? *Incurvatus in se*. Round and round and round it goes. Where it stops, nobody knows.

To conclude, the ELCA was conceived in 1988 to be a new Lutheran church, but in twenty-five years it has twisted itself into a non-Lutheran ecclesial corporation. Turning ever more quickly in upon itself, the ELCA simultaneously spins ever further from God and sheds ever more members, as if by centrifugal force. Such *incurvatus in se* in the ELCA has become a vicious circle, in Latin *circulus vitiosus*, in German, most fitting, *ein Teufelskreis* (a devil's circle). As it spins with ever greater velocity, the ELCA also sinks to ever greater depths of institutional, ecumenical, and socio-political depravity, all in the name of God. At this juncture, the only creedal formulation credible for the ELCA to confess would be that, like itself, which has no direct biblical foundation, namely, "descended into hell."

However, all is not lost. The ELCA News Service may soon be reporting that the ELCA has *recycled* its Lutheran roots, is entering another *round* of ecumenical dialogue, and will continue to *circumscribe* Scripture and Lutheran Confessions to *revolutionize* post-Christian society—*soli ELCA gloria*.

⁵⁵ AE 25:346–347; WA 56:356, 18–357, 17.

⁵⁶ AE 25:291; WA 56:304, 23–29.