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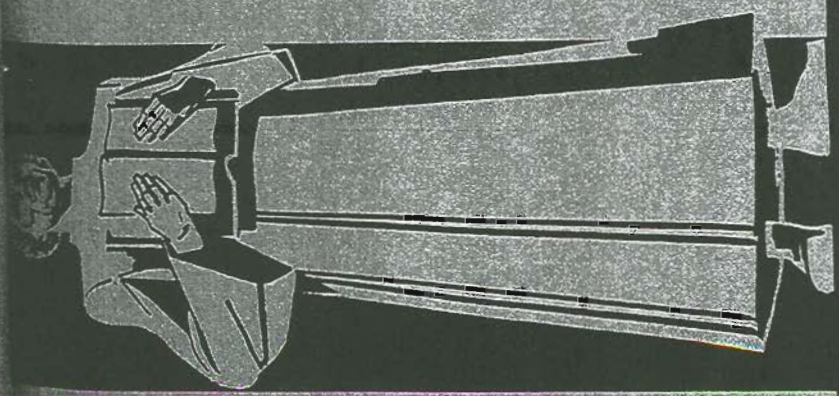
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# Current Lutheran Beliefs and Misbeliefs According to "A Study of Generations"

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IN THE LAST TEN years a number of sociological studies dealing with Lutherans have appeared in the United States. In 1968 R. Stark and C. Y. Glock issued *American Piety: the Nature of Religious Commitment*. The next year J. K. Hadden published *The Gathering Storm in the Churches*. In 1970 Walter Theophil Janzow made a study of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod's beliefs and practices, entitling his study, *Secularization in An Orthodox Denomination* (available from the publisher, University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan). In the same year Dr. Lawrence L. Kersten published *The Lutheran Ethic: The Impact of Religion on Laymen and Clergy*. Kersten's research was focused on the distinct characteristics of the religious ideology of four Lutheran denominations in southern Michigan. In Kersten's study the following branches of Lutheranism were involved: The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WS), the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LC-MS), the American Lutheran Church (ALC), and the Lutheran Church in America (LCA).

Dr. Kersten showed that Lutheranism has an ethic, developed by Martin Luther and the theologians that followed Luther, whose views are represented in the ecumenical creeds and in the Lutheran Confessions as given in the Book of Concord of 1580. The Michigan investigation showed that a distinctly Lutheran orientation toward God, man, life, and religion was found to exist, especially when compared with Roman Catholicism, other forms of Protestantism and Judaism.

In 1972 a more ambitious type of religious research appeared, called *A Study of Generations*. It was sponsored and paid for by the Lutheran Brotherhood and published by Augsburg. This volume is based on over seven million pieces of data from 4,745 persons out of 316 congregations of the Lutheran Church in America, the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. It gives a religious profile of six million confirmed Lutherans belonging to 15,000 congregations.

The authors and collaborators of this nearly half-million dollar project are four social scientists, headed by Dr. Morton P. Strommen, president of Youth Research Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota, an educational psychologist, counselor and Lutheran clergyman. Assisting were the Rev. Milo L. Brekke, and Ralph Underwager, also members of the Youth Research Center, and Lutheran clergyman. Rev. Brekke is a doctoral candidate in educational psychology and Dr. Underwager has a doctorate in clinical psychology. The fourth member was Dr. Arthur L. Johnson, a professor of sociology at the

University of Minnesota, and an active lay church leader. *Time* has said about this book ". . . seems assured of becoming a classic." Dr. George Elford, Research Director of the National Catholic Educational Association claims that *A Study of Generations* is the best piece of religious research ever done." Dr. James E. Dittes of Yale University wrote in the Foreword: "Lutherans can be assured that their portrait has been drawn here sensibly and responsibly by a skilled team. The first thorough denominational portrait has set high standards for others to follow."

The authors wrote: "The task of assembling the information could be compared with the task of fitting together 7,000,000 pieces of massive jigsaw puzzle with the box cover picture missing. To minimize the subjective influence of the research team in assembling the data, empirical methods were used which would allow the data to organize themselves" (p. 286). Most of the 7,000,000 answers are said to have grouped themselves around 78 descriptive dimensions, which formed 14 factors.

Compared with the Glock research the controls employed by the four-man research team factored out many of the things that made the study of Glock deficient in that it had glaring oversimplifications and generalities. Thus Glock equated prejudice and anti-semitism with "orthodox" or conservative theology.

The publishers of *A Study of Generations* claim that it is the most complete study ever made of the personal beliefs, values, attitudes and behavior of a major religious group in the United States. The Lutherans who participated were between the ages of 15 and 65. There is in this book a storehouse of information for today's church leaders. This penetrating book transcends the usual measurement of a church's vitality-statistics, that usually give the assets, income, geographic location, membership and activities of individual or collective churches. Because of the sufficient magnitude of the research here for the first time is revealed the diversity and general posture of what church members of three major Lutheran church bodies value, believe and do.

A study of generations emphasis was in part a control to check age and educational differences against 740 items on the interviews. The four major generations are 15-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-65. However, the subgenerations of youth: 15-18, 19-23, 24-29 were also significant to the study. Much of the study of youth verifies concepts developed by Erik Erksion's study of life cycles and especially his works on Luther and Ghandi.

This massive study gives answers to questions relating to the clergy-laity gap, outlines the tension factors between generations, sets forth the prejudices, behavior patterns, biblical knowledge, educational influence, mission concepts, social involvements, peer orientation, concepts about law and order and many other data.

The book was organized into four sections. Section I has three chapters. Chapter 1 gives the reason for the research study, while Chapter 2 presents a general overview of the social characteristics of Lutherans, showing among other things the erroneous character of a number of Lutheran myths held till now. Chapter 3 deals with

methodology and contains what might be termed a layman's introduction to statistics and sociological research. Section II has chapters 4-9. Chapter 4 states the beliefs and opinions with action in the manner of Simon's *Value and Teaching*. Chapter 5 deals with the heart of Lutheran piety. Chapter 6 is called: "Law-oriented Lutherans." Chapters 7 and 8 are closely related to the previous two chapters, dealing with mission and ministry and Lutheran life styles. Section III embraces the last three chapters of the volume. Chapter 10 shows how there is tension between the generations. Chapter 11 is entitled: "Slices of Diversity," and Chapter 12 gives a summary of the study. Section IV has three appendices, the first of which describes how the study was conducted. A bibliography and an index increase the utility of the volume.

It is impossible adequately to summarize the many interesting data supplied by Strommen and his associates. The reader is urged to buy, or somehow secure *A Study of Generations*, study and analyze the 400 pages of this sociological study of American Lutheranism. It constitutes a mine of information relative to Lutheranism at the end of the sixth decade and beginning of the seventh decade of the twentieth century.

In this article the focus of attention will be on the beliefs and misbeliefs of American Lutherans. The Study asserts that "the massive and decisive struggle in the last quarter of the twentieth century is going to be about beliefs. In every area of human activity the decisive questions are narrowing down to issues of belief" (p. 101).

*A Study of Generations* endeavors to answer questions like these: What is a Lutheran? What do Lutherans believe about God? about Jesus Christ? Do Lutherans know what it means to be saved? Do they understand and feel the gospel? What is their understanding of justification by faith alone? What is the relationship between belief and prejudice?

The Report of Strommen and his colleagues points out that such factors as age, occupation, level of education, sex or financial status determine a Lutheran's attitude toward belief and behavior. Most Lutherans are reported as accepting a transcendental view of life as their basic orientation. What a Lutheran values and believes will determine his behavior in the community and in the church.

The Report claims that in general, most Lutherans choose a God-directed life over the self-directed life, the supernatural over the natural, dualism over monism. There are, however, a considerable number of Lutherans who by contrast emphasize the value of self-development. "Persons preoccupied with values of self-development place a high priority upon pleasure, personal freedom, physical appearance, achievement, and recognition, preferring the natural over the supernatural. They adopt a world view and life style that can become inimical to the purposes of the church. About one out of four rejects transcendental values in favor of the values of self-development" (p. 287). That means that 25% of Lutheranism is completely out of step with historic Lutheranism.

*A Study of Generations* further claims that "for most Lutherans faith in Jesus Christ is at the heart of what they value and believe. For them Christianity is to believe and know Christ; in that sense they believe and know the gospel. This life orientation emerges as one of the most distinctive characteristics of a Lutheran" (p. 287). However, only 66% of Lutherans hold this position, thus indicating a radical departure from historic Lutheranism on the part 34% of today's Lutherans. Three out of every ten Lutherans doubt the divinity of Jesus Christ. Four out of ten Lutherans are not certain about the existence of God!

According to the interpretation of the four researchers most Lutherans would consider themselves conservatives in their theology and have accepted the historic doctrines of Lutheranism as set forth in the confessional writings of the Book of Concord. The Biblical accounts of the birth, death and resurrection of Christ are firmly held by most Lutherans. Other doctrines according to the *Report* generally subscribed to by Lutherans are: the Bible as God's Word, the law of God as a guide and judge of men's lives; Christ's death as the atonement for sin. They believe in the gifts of the Spirit, Baptism, and the real presence in the Holy Communion, the Second Coming of Christ, the value of intercessory prayer.

#### PRESENT NEGLECT OF IMPORTANT DOCTRINES

Some Biblical teachings, stressed by Lutheranism in the past, are now being neglected. According to the *Study* they are: the doctrines of eternal life, providence, and sanctification (p. 288). Some Lutherans classify themselves as fundamentalists while others claim they are liberals. While the term "fundamentalism" occurs repeatedly in the *Report*, it is never defined.

#### LUTHERANS AND BIBLICAL MIRACLES

The Strommen Report shows that there are wide variations on many beliefs and attitudes to Christian behavior. About 33% of Lutherans do not believe in Biblical miracles as described in the Bible. The creation of the world by fiat command, the deliverance of Israel by the miracle of the parting of the waters of the Red Sea, the miracles of Elisha and Elija, the incarnation of God as man, the resurrection of Christ, the ascension and second return could all be involved. 82% of the members of the LC-MS believe the miracles the way they are said to have happened in the Bible, as compared with 69% in the ALC, and 61% in the LCA.

#### LUTHERANS AND THE HEREAFTER

Three of every ten Lutherans do not believe in a life after death. For these individuals the grave is the end of man's existence. This also means no heaven or hell.

#### LUTHERANS AND OTHER RELIGIONS

Seven out of ten Lutherans believe that all religions lead to the same God, while four out of ten agree that all religions are equally important to God. These Lutherans are either ignorant or do not believe the claim of Christ: "I am the way the truth and the life,

no man cometh unto the father but by me" (John 14:6) or the declaration of Peter: "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12, RSV).

Some Lutherans do not appear to be very consistent in their thinking. Thus according to the *Report* "Three out of four Lutherans say all religions lead to the same God, yet three out of four Lutherans, and some of them must be the same people, say belief in Jesus Christ is absolutely necessary for salvation. Half of the respondents reject the statement that all religions are equally important before God, but only 13% agree that being ignorant of Jesus prevents salvation. Something very curious is going on (p. 169)." One solution to this discrepancy is that the preaching and religious instruction in the three major Lutheran Church bodies is defective or that opposing points of view on fundamental doctrines are being set forth in the pulpit and in the printed material to which Lutherans are exposed in their instructional programs.

*The Gap of Generations* in commenting on this strange situation says:

The most we can say is that most Lutherans appear to say belief in Jesus is necessary FOR ME and the Christian faith is right and true FOR ME. They appear to reject statements implying the same for the other person. What this means for the traditional model of mission is not clear. It seems to imply that the mission sermon appealing for support for the salvation of the heathen is politely turned off by most Lutherans (p. 172).

#### LUTHERANS AND MISSIONS

In the past Lutheran Churches, like other Christian Churches took the missionary command of Christ seriously, namely, "to make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:20). Lutheran churches, both in Europe and America, were convinced that people needed to become converted in order to be saved Christians. The Lutheran Churches have sponsored and supported mission endeavors on the six continents and on many islands found in the various oceans of the world. The *Report* published by Augsburg Publishing House states that Lutherans are confused about the mission of the church. While they believe faith in Christ is a necessity for them, this is not the case for other people, who can reach God through the religion they have chosen. The authors of the *Report* say about this type of thinking: "This may be called relativism or synergism. Whatever it is called, Lutherans are not likely to respond enthusiastically to the rallying cry, 'Evangelize the world!'" (p. 172).

The *Report* took cognizance of the beliefs and attitudes of members of the Lutheran Church in America, The American Lutheran Church, and The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. The data furnished indicate that more lay members of the LC-MS "tend toward a stronger conservative or even fundamentalistic stance than do laymen in the ALC and LCA" (p. 269).

20% of the LC-MS laity believe that if people of other countries are ignorant of Christ, that they cannot be saved. The same position is held by 10% of the members of the ALC and 8% of the LCA (Item 422).

#### LUTHERANS AND THE DEVIL

The devil is described in Holy Writ as the demonic personality that tempted Eve in Eden, that caused David to number the people, who tempted Jesus in the wilderness and who is active tempting and seducing people to sin. Luther and the Lutheran Confessions believe in Satan's reality and in his activities. Associated with the devil's existence is the corollary doctrine of evil angels who according to the New Testament on occasion took bodily possession of human beings. According to the *Report* 75% of the members of the Missouri Synod believe in the Devil's reality, while only 50% of the ALC, and 33% of the LCA.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JUSTIFICATION AND SANCTIFICATION

Historic Lutheranism has emphasized the necessity of the correct relationship between justification and sanctification. Luther taught that justification occurred the moment a person believed that Jesus Christ had paid for his sins by His vicarious and substitutionary death upon the cross. This faith was created in the individual's heart by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace, either by the Word or the Sacraments. The moment a person's sins are forgiven he is declared righteous and he becomes a member of God's family. Salvation is 100% a gift of God, the forgiven sinner cannot contribute anything toward his justification and salvation. The *Report* shows how serious misconceptions exist on this important matter in American Lutheranism. 33% of the members of the ALC indicate that loving your neighbor and doing good for others are absolutely necessary for salvation. More members of the LC-MS (20%) definitely reject these assertions than do people affiliated with the ALC or LCA.

#### LUTHERANS AND THE SACRAMENTS

Ninety-five percent of Lutherans state that faith, prayer, Baptism are important to them. Only 5% claim that they are of little importance or of no importance. 54% state that Baptism is very important to them. However, only 28% "strongly agree" that "in the Holy Communion we are given the true Body and Blood of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins."

#### LUTHERAN BELIEFS ABOUT CHRISTOLOGY

Two of the ecumenical creeds of Christendom confess the Virgin Birth of Christ. Two Gospel passages set forth the truth that Mary became pregnant because the Holy Spirit brought about this condition in her womb. According to the *Report* only 40% of Lutherans agreed with the statement: "Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary" (p. 379). Historic Lutheranism has held to and confessed its belief in the deity of Christ,

who is depicted in the New Testament as possessing the attributes of omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence. 56% of Lutherans reject Christ's omnipresence. According to John 1:3, Colossians 1:16 and Hebrews 1:2, Christ is set forth as the Creator of all that exists. Yet 54% of Lutherans who are supposed to draw their doctrines and beliefs solely from the Holy Scriptures, deny that Jesus Christ created everything.

A vital part of Christian doctrine is the correct understanding of the nature and purpose of Christ's death. One of the statements to which responses were requested was: "Jesus died for sinners. As a substitute, he suffered the just penalty due to us for sins in order to satisfy the wrath of God and to save guilty men from hell" (p. 379). Only 37% would strongly agree with this statement. Only 24% would assert about those people who deny the substitutionary death of Christ or disbelieve the Pauline statement about the nature of Christ's atoning death that they are not true Christians.

#### THE NATURE OF THE SCRIPTURES

Historically Lutherans have recognized only one source for doctrine and ethical directives, the Holy Scriptures. That "the Bible is the Word of God, and that God inspired men to report verbally what he said. The Bible in the original text contained no errors," only 24% were willing to accept in 1970.

#### THE METHOD OF SALVATION

Two of the "solos" of the Lutheran Reformation were *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. Salvation is a gift of God and it is God's grace which prompted Him to create faith in people's hearts in Christ crucified. 59% believe that the main emphasis of the Gospel is on God's rules for right living (Scale 15, Item 17, p. 369). 50% said: "God is satisfied if a person lives the best life he can" (p. 369). Half of the nearly 5,000 Lutherans interviewed hold that "God is satisfied if a person lives the best life he can." That at birth a person is neither good or bad is the conviction of one-half of Lutheranism, a stance which conflicts with the Scripture on original sin and the statements in the Lutheran Confessions that subscribe to the doctrine of original sin. 44% believe that "Salvation depends upon being sincere in whatever you believe" (p. 369). 31% contend that "If I believe in God and do right, I will get to Heaven" (p. 369).

#### LUTHERANS AND THE CHARISMATIC MOVEMENT

One of the great problems affecting Protestant and Lutheran Churches has been the charismatic movement in the last decade (1960 onward). Speaking with tongues and miraculous healing were practices and beliefs limited to the holiness churches and Pentecostal churches. Congregations have been divided, pastors have been expelled from some churches, others have resigned and formed their own churches. Some pastors are speaking about "Luthercostals," others are employing the term "Lutheran charisciples." On page 119 the Strommen report informs us:

The charismatic movement has had an impact on Lutheran-



ism. Six percent are sure they have had an experience of speaking in tongues and 12% think they have. This compares with 12% who were willing to say that anyone who did not believe speaking in tongues should be practiced today was not a true Christian. An additional 15% agree that speaking in tongues should be practiced but aren't willing to say that a person who disagrees isn't a true Christian (Scale 44, Item 79). A significant minority of Lutherans are either involved in the charismatic movement or fairly receptive to it.

From other sources, we learn that Lutherans adopting the charismatic theology have shown a willingness to worship and cooperate with Roman Catholic, Reformed churches and even theological liberals. This of course condones erroneous teachings rejected by the Lutheran Confessions. The doctrine of baptism held by Pentecostals is not the understanding of this sacrament in the Confessions. Neo-Pentecostals do not hold that the Holy Spirit operates solely through the means of grace.

Indifference to doctrine and ignorance of Bible teaching could be the reason why two out of three Lutherans are ready for the merger of all Lutherans in one Lutheran Church in America, a dream that has been vigorously promoted for a number of years by leaders in all Lutheran denominations, except the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

Again the writer asserts that *A Study of Generations* contains a wealth of information and only certain aspects of this study have been set forth. Since Lutheranism, however, has a definite ethic, it would not be out of place to call attention to some conclusions that can be made about the current Lutheran scene. The heart of Lutheranism can be succinctly stated in the four solas: *sola Scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide, solus Christus*.

For many Lutherans the Bible is not the Word of God and the source for obtaining a correct world view, but they allow philosophy, human reason or the current feelings and beliefs to determine their *Weltanschauung*. Millions of Lutherans are as bad off as the heathen, because like the latter they do not know the plan of salvation. Since for a significant minority Christ is not God, he cannot be a Savior. Many Lutherans deny the need for a Savior and believe in salvation by works. Again for at least one-fourth of Lutheranism this life constitutes man's existence.

Beliefs, attitudes and practices are determined by what people are taught or what they adopt from their secular reading and contacts with non-Lutherans. Indications are that the Lutheran religious press and many Lutheran seminaries have been partly responsible for many of the misbeliefs and doctrinal errors found in Lutheranism today.