

# As usual, freedom is at stake



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One of the most important fights in the Lutheran Reformation centered on the power of interpretation. Though it isn't often recognized, the issue has surfaced again. As usual, freedom is at stake.

The Reformation donnybrook developed between Luther and Erasmus. A legendary intellect of the time, Erasmus criticized Luther for speaking with too much certainty on theological issues. The Scripture is ambiguous, he said, so interpreters should be more modest, recognizing that the final interpretation is up to the church.

Luther answered directly. The overall message of Scripture—the promise of God's abiding love in Christ Jesus—rings out of it like a pealing bell. Occasional obscure passages can be left to stand or clarified accordingly. So the biblical message is available to all. No authoritative teaching office—professorial, episcopal or papal—is necessary. As Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice..." (John 10:27)—whether or not they have degrees,

wear clerics or hold high offices.

Erasmus wasn't Luther's only critic at this point. In fact, there's never been a shortage of Lutherans making Erasmus' argument. Most commonly, it is heard on the lips of the powerful who, persuaded of an agenda of their own, want to push the church in a particular direction, setting up their own mandates.

Recognizing this threat, the Lutheran confessions—after the Scripture, the most important documents in our church—insist with Luther that the biblical word always has to have first place. The constitution of the ELCA follows suit, ranking the Lutheran confessions after the Scripture and making itself subject to both the Bible and the confessions. In fact, according to several people involved in shaping it, originally the ELCA deliberately left the power of interpretation open, as Lutherans have traditionally done, not vesting it in any office.

But it hasn't worked out that way. So we've heard the old, familiar saw—the Scripture is ambiguous and so are the confessions on, for example, matters like ministry and sexual ethics. Well, maybe that is partially true. The Scripture allows freedom and leaves the shape of ministry open, without setting up eternally valid and every-

where required forms. And while it clearly prohibits sexual abuses, the Bible doesn't answer questions about how such standards apply in every situation of life. To the extent that this is true, however, it would make sense to do what Lutherans have done in the past, letting the various interpretations stand and working out standards accordingly. But the ELCA has done something different. In the first revision of the constitution, it claimed the power of interpretation for the national offices, placing it in the office of the secretary with a possible appeal to the national Church Council. Either way, neither Scripture nor confession has the last word.

So what alternatives are available? The name WordAlone is an appeal to the old Lutheran argument. As a formal organization and through its alliances with others, it has launched a powerful protest against abuse of churchwide authority. The result, with some help, was a big victory in the 2001 Indianapolis Assembly, restoring the legitimate biblical and confessional freedom in the office of ministry—even

if it is yet to be seen whether the bishops who supported the amendment will follow suit. Will they grant exceptions from the ELCA and The Episcopal Church USA full communion agreement requirement that all new pastors must be ordained by a bishop?



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But if the power is going to be something more than protest, something beyond ordinary politics, the real power has to be exercised where it is finally found: in the Word alone, that is, in Scripture and confession, in word and sacrament, in the Gospel. That is the critical step. As I've had the chance

to talk with leaders of WordAlone over the past months, I've heard them making that turn—from protest to profession, from conflict to confession. The church is a political organization, no doubt about it. But finally, the only power the church has is in Christ Jesus: the power to forgive sinners, to free the captive, to stand at graves declaring the resurrection of the dead. Such power is bestowed, unambiguously, under the sign of Good Friday and Easter, by the Spirit of the risen Christ. It is the only real freedom.

## ELCA organization is flawed

I attended the 2001 Churchwide Assembly (CWA) of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) as a voting member.

The assembly did not confront any of the serious challenges of the ELCA—the publishing arm’s financial crisis, the dramatic decline in missionaries and church starts nor seminary students’ crushing financial burdens.

But the ELCA’s problems are deeper. Their roots go to the heart of the ELCA’s organization and operation.

We are told the ELCA has three primary expressions—congregations, synods and the churchwide organization. But founding documents “freeze out” any authority of synods or congregations. Only the Churchwide Assembly (CWA) can amend the constitution. Synods and congregations have to live with CWA decisions.

Another problem is the absence of checks and balances. Amending the ELCA constitution without Church Council action requires approval at two national assemblies, almost an impossibility. But the national Church Council can propose amendments that become effective after passage at one churchwide assembly.

The Church Council, however, is

elected by the Churchwide Assembly, under the careful direction of national leadership who have little incentive to find candidates critical of existing leadership.

The election process for national leadership is bizarre. Congregations, synods or congregational members have no opportunities to question potential leaders.

So, the ELCA has unrepresentative government, no checks on authority and elects leaders it knows little about—not a recipe for success.

Without the consent of the governed, leadership is without legitimacy. When leadership lacks legitimacy, the governed look elsewhere for direction. When congregations conclude they have no influence in the ELCA national assembly, they will look elsewhere. The real threat to the ELCA is that congregations increasingly will find it irrelevant and ignore it.

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[For a longer version of this article see “ELCA Churchwide Assembly is a flawed process” under *Newsletter* on the WordAlone Website homepage at: [www.wordalone.org](http://www.wordalone.org).]

## German Church rejects historic episcopate as sign of unity

**By Pastor Kris Baudler**  
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In a bold document that has stunned the international ecumenical community and has thrown into question the future of ecumenical dialogues, the *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland* (EKD) has rejected apostolic succession (as defined in the Anglican and Roman Catholic traditions) as a basis for or sign of the unity of the church of Christ. The EKD is the largest Protestant church in Europe, comprising the Lutheran and Reformed Churches of Germany

The document, known as “*Kirchengemeinschaft nach evangelischem Verstaendnis*” (KneV), became official on Oct. 30 but was largely lost in the headlines following Sept. 11. The German Church’s official theological “chamber” or “think tank” produced the document.

All future dialogue for the EKD is to be based on the Leuenberger Concordat of 1973, which advocated ecclesial communal fellowship without a stress on visible unity. The document states that “the church” is found in the expression of the local congregations and not first and foremost the universal church.



The document, which has been adopted by the EKD and is now official church policy, sees Jesus Christ revealed through Word and Sacrament as the sole source for the unity of the church.

[For a full report by Pastor Baudler see “German Church rejects historic episcopate.” under *Newsletter* on the WordAlone Website homepage at: [www.wordalone.org](http://www.wordalone.org).]