**Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on the Condemnation of Anabaptists**

## INTRODUCTION

During the sixteenth-century reformation in Central Europe, a variety of statements were made by representatives of the churches of the *Augsburg Confession* condemning the teachings of "Anabaptists" (those who denied infant baptism and thus, in the reformers' view, practiced rebaptism). In our own century, these statements and condemnations have become highly problematic, not only for our relationship with the Mennonite Church USA and other Christians who trace their heritage to sixteenth-century Anabaptist reformers, but also for our own self-understanding as a part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. Particularly in the light of dialogues between Lutherans and Mennonites in Europe in the latter decades of the twentieth century, and in light of exploratory conversations between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Mennonite Church USA (2002–2004), it is desirable to clarify the focus of those sixteenth-century condemnations, and it is possible in most cases specifically to reject their applicability to the Mennonite Church USA.

## THE SOURCES

The condemnations of Anabaptists by sixteenth-century Lutherans derive from several sources with different levels of authority for present-day Lutherans.

- One source includes the judgments of individual persons like Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon; however, because of their roles in the formulation of Lutheran practice and doctrine, many contemporary Lutherans and Mennonites may regard their statements as having a continuing authority or influence. Some of these writings demonstrate the misunderstanding that Anabaptist teaching in general was seditious and treasonous and warranted capital punishment. In most cases, however, the articles being condemned were not taught by Menno Simons or the other Anabaptist reformers considered the forebears of the Mennonite Church USA.
- A second source of condemnations is the *Formula of Concord* of 1577, a document written to resolve disputes among Lutherans, which condemns a series of erroneous statements that were not to be tolerated or permitted in the church, public affairs, or domestic life within Lutheran territories (FC SD XII.2). While apparently aware that Anabaptists were divided into many different groups (FC EP XII.2), the condemned teachings were ascribed to Anabaptists in general. At a time when civil authorities resolved religious differences, the failure to identify which Anabaptists taught these errors led to the imprisonment, exile, and execution of persons not guilty of the errors. In most cases, the condemned articles were not taught by the Anabaptist reformers considered the forebears of the Mennonite Church USA.
- A third source of condemnations is the *Augsburg Confession* (CA V, IX, XII, XVI, XVII, and possibly CA VIII and XXVII). Because John Eck and others had accused the Lutheran reformers of being Anabaptists themselves, these articles sought first to demonstrate their continuity with the apostolic faith, and secondly condemned "the Anabaptists and others who teach..." what they judged to be in conflict with the apostolic faith. The *Augsburg Confession* did not, however, attempt to clarify which groups of Anabaptists adhered to the rejected teaching; in most cases, the condemned articles were not taught by the Anabaptist reformers considered the forebears of the Mennonite Church

USA. Two of these articles (CA IX on baptismal faith and practice and CA XVI on participation in the police power of the state) may in fact apply to the teaching Menno Simons and other Anabaptist forebears; additional dialogue is necessary to ascertain whether they apply also to the teaching and doctrine of the Mennonite Church USA.

**OUR DECLARATION**

- The ELCA repudiates the use of governmental authorities to punish individuals or groups with whom it disagrees theologically. We reject any arguments of Luther and Melanchthon in which they hold that governmental authorities should punish Anabaptists for their teaching. We also repudiate any use of statements in the *Formula of Concord* to the same effect. Although the ELCA believes that the modern state has a duty to restrain evil and promote good in the world, no church should use the state to impose its own beliefs and practices on others. We express our deep and abiding sorrow and regret for the persecution and suffering visited upon Anabaptists during the religious disputes of the past.

- The ELCA notes that the *Augsburg Confession* (specifically, CA VIII and XXVII) made indirect references to teachings professed by some people often associated with Anabaptists and sometimes named as forebears to the Mennonite Church USA. Furthermore, we note that direct references to Anabaptists in this confession (specifically CA V, XII, and XVII) describe the teachings of a few people who, apart from denying the efficacy of infant baptism, had little in common theologically with the forebears of the Mennonite Church USA. Thus, the ELCA declares that all such condemnations in the CA do not apply in any form to today's Mennonite Church USA.

- The Augsburg Confession's condemnations of the Anabaptists in the matter of baptismal faith and practice (CA IX) and participation in the police power of the state (CA XVI) are properly the subject of future conversation between our churches. We note that Lutheran churches in France and Germany have adopted statements declaring that these condemnations are not church-dividing and that they do not apply to Mennonites in their countries. The Lutheran World Federation has begun conversations with the Mennonite World Conference and we support their efforts to ascertain whether the differences that remain between our two churches in these matters are in fact church-dividing.