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Whatever Became of Carl Braaten? Selective Critical Reflections on Carl E. Braaten's *Because of Christ: Memoirs of a Lutheran Theologian*¹

Gary M. Simpson

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Carl Braaten as “a Lutheran theologian” is one thing, but Carl Braaten as “a Lutheran theologian” is quite another! Just so, some commemorate his influence with joy; others remember him less cheerfully. This situation neither surprises nor much disturbs Carl—I’m going to say “Carl” because we have been friends, not bosom buddies or even close personal friends, but friends nevertheless. He has also been for me an important mentor, one- or two-steps removed, so to speak.

Carl candidly admits this ambivalent estimation and perhaps even sees it as a mark of a theologian. After all, claims Carl, “the idea of a *noncontroversial theology* [is] an oxymoron” (*Memoirs*, 58)! Still, a second factor contributes to “Braaten-ambivalence,” and it resides in Carl himself, in the rhetorical modes and moods that he has honed. Simply put, two Carls show up in his vocation as a Lutheran theologian. In order to come to grips with “the two Carls,” first, I will

review his understanding of the vocation of a Lutheran theologian; second, I will stipulate certain traits of each of the Carls; third, I will chart the career path of the two Carls; and finally, I will take a deeper look at the toll on others, and on Carl, that one of the two Carls has exacted.

Memoirs, of all possible genres, deserve especially to be read and commented upon through a hermeneutic of respect and generosity, that reverential posture of first resort, of shalom, of gratitude, even of joy. Only as a necessary last resort ought readers of memoirs observe that duty entailed in a hermeneutic of suspicion to bear a posture of critique in order to protect others from harm. Still, even this duty of suspicion embedded in the responsibility to protect must meet the norm of respect.

Vocation of a Theologian, and Lutheran Too

“The theologian’s task,” asserts Carl, “is to turn the spotlight of the gospel on the intellectual challenges of our time and to keep the church from crossing the line from orthodoxy into heresy” (*Memoirs*, vii). Having so stated this twofold assignment, he turns immediately to elaborate a little on heresy. Heresy is “debilitating... causes spiritual anemia... [and] substitutes ideol-

1. Carl E. Braaten, *Because of Christ: Memoirs of a Lutheran Theologian* (Fortress Press, 2010) [hereafter referred to in an unconventional manner as *Memoirs* with page numbers in parentheses in the text]. Braaten taught systematic theology for twenty-three years at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago [hereafter LSTC].

ogy for real theology...[having] stricken large segments of Christianity in Europe" (*Memoirs*, vii–viii). He then notes:

But I am not interested in pinning the label "heretic" or "apostate" on any theologian. Oh, well, there may be a few such, especially those in outright denial of the divinity of Christ or the resurrection of Jesus. (*Memoirs*, viii)

Will This Predicted Temperance Hold or Not?

Commendably, Carl tells us that Christocentricity has always been "the center of my existence as a Christian theologian" (*Memoirs*, viii). He finds this in Martin Luther's memorable "*was Christum treibt*" ("what conveys Christ") and in the Lutheran Confessions' "*propter Christum*" ("because of Christ"), the main title of *Memoirs*. Theologians are called to stand on the shoulders of the great theological traditions. It is not their task "to invent a new Christianity out of his or her religious experience and imagination." Already in the Preface he begins to excoriate "radical theological feminists" for doing the latter (*Memoirs*, ix).

Carl notes, "These memoirs relate my struggle to reclaim the original intent of the Lutheran Reformation...[that is,] to summon the church to become truly evangelical, catholic, and orthodox" (*Memoirs*, xi). In point of fact, his own self-understanding is: "evangelical without being Protestant, catholic without being Roman, and orthodox without being Eastern" (*Memoirs*, xi). As he progresses through *Memoirs*, "Protestantism" increasingly becomes more and more his favorite pejorative, especially when coupled with "liberal." In *Memoirs* at least he more often caricatures "liberal Protestantism" than analyzes it (*Memoirs*, 166–171). In the mid-1970s Carl participated in a Vanderbilt University writing project

along with well-known theologians from numerous Protestant seminaries and divinity schools, nearly all senior white males. He notes that "the conversation changed so drastically" when younger scholars, who were "mostly liberationist, feminist, postmodern, post-Christian, and pro the LGBT ideology," were invited in for the second phase of the project.

The entire experience for me was an eye-opener. It became unmistakably clear to me that liberal Protestant theology had come to a dead end, and that for Christian theology in America to have a future, it would need to move in an entirely different direction. (*Memoirs*, 116)

As we will see, this experience played a crucial role in the emergence of "the two Carls." Carl points out that several peer Lutheran theologians, some of whom he himself had mentored, have taken leave of their Lutheran confession and become Roman Catholic precisely because of the contamination of American Lutheranism by liberal Protestantism. Still, "I have never been able to imagine myself as other than Lutheran under the existing conditions of church division" (*Memoirs*, ix).

The Two Carls: Treatiser and Tractator

Who are the two Carls? There is Carl-the-treatiser and Carl-the-tractator.² A treatiser writes treatises; a tractator writes tracts. Carl-treatiser writes and edits quite wonderful books as well as articles in journals and chapters in books edited by himself and others, many of which I myself have assigned as required reading in my classes.

2. I use these now archaic English nouns; see Oxford English Dictionary Online at: <http://www.oed.com/>.

Carl-tractator writes editorials, delivers conference speeches, composes short essays and pithy, indeed, fiery letters. And yes, Carl-tractator shows up prominently throughout *Memoirs*.

What is a treatise and what is a tract? The classic 1897 *American Encyclopedic Dictionary* notes that a treatise “may describe a composition of any length...” and then cites William Gilpin’s succinct description: “When we write a treatise, we consider the subject throughout. We strengthen it with arguments—we clear it of objections—we enter into details—and, in short, we leave nothing unsaid that properly appertains to the subject.”³ This describes a significant portion of Carl’s

as well as when comparing and contrasting different theologians (*Memoirs*, xiii). For instance, Carl-treatiser examines the deficiencies of someone’s particular theological claim (the *Non*) and likewise highlights the strengths and soundness also entailed within a claim (the *Sic*). He then regularly takes up in like fashion someone else’s related claim. This sets up rich, textured, evenhanded, and fruitful contrasts and comparisons that promote the educational appeal of a treatise to “consider the subject throughout,” as Gilpin classically put it. “So it went,” for example, “I could not come down hard on one side and ignore the other. In modern theology there was Kähler against Ritschl, and I learned from both” (*Memoirs*, xiii). Vintage Carl-treatiser!

Paul Tillich was Carl’s dissertation adviser, and his influence shows up especially in Carl-treatiser’s *Sic-et-Non* approach (*Memoirs*, 27-41). I myself, as a young pastor and aspiring theologian, learned a ton from Carl’s many treatises, both the book-length and the essay-length ones. I learned not only the breadth of theological content and the depth of a Gospel-grounded analysis, but also I came to appreciate evermore deeply the *Sic-et-Non* mode and mood of theological inquiry and rhetoric—a dialectically serious and critical, yet careful, generous, reverential and flourishing discovery of the evangelical “because of Christ”! Treatises generally embody a kind of social-emotional mood, a poise that respects, even reverences, the potential fruitfulness within the God-given created particularity of real embedded humans, of flesh and blood theologians—finite, fallible and fragile candidates for God’s mercy. While not the only possible approach for producing treatises, Carl-treatiser’s *Sic-et-Non* dialectical mode and mood does offer an admirable, even artful and ethical,

“I could not come down hard on one side and ignore the other. In modern theology there was Kähler against Ritschl, and I learned from both” (*Memoirs*, xiii).

published work, though surely not its entirety.

Carl-treatiser commonly moves “dialectically between *Sic et Non* [*Yes and No*]” when considering a particular theologian

3. “Treatise,” in *American Encyclopaedia Dictionary*, eds., Robert Hunter, J. A. Williams, and S. J. H. Herrtage (Chicago: R. S. Peale and J. A. Hill, 1987).

rhetorical practice.

Tracts, on the other hand, are usually briefer than treatises, though that is not their most salient characteristic. As one scholar once put it, tracts are rhetorically bent “to be...argumentative [rather] than educational.”⁴ Especially since the mid-1980s, Carl has also power-walked the path of tract proliferation. It is this, especially, that has led to widespread Braaten-ambivalence, a level of ambivalence induced far beyond the verity that a “noncontroversial theology [is] an oxymoron.”

Tractators not only routinely fall short of the educational bar, but they also regularly exceed the salutary bounds of fruitful argumentative discourse. Tractators travel beyond the salutary in three ways. First, they strive at all cost to establish urgency where they perceive that the lackadaisical, the unreliable, the inept, the renegade, or even the traitorous have taken over. To do so, tractators traffic in apocalyptic. Rather, they deal in a kind of faux apocalyptic, often indistinguishable from the run-of-the-mill rhetoric of ranters and alarmists.⁵ Faux apocalyptic prematurely posits the imminent end of all things as we know it. As one well-regarded analyst of apocalyptic rhetoric has noted,

it is very human to vociferate apocalyptically when something that we prize is taken away from us, whether a baby rattle or a bank account, whether our sense of class or national pride, or our sense of how things should be generally. The true apocalyptic seizure is something different from apoplexy!⁶

4. See A. R. Buckland, “Tract,” in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th Ed., (New York: Cambridge, 1911), XXVII, 117/2.

5. Braaten himself notes the prevalence of false apocalypticism in Carl Braaten, “From Apocalyptic to Somatic Theology,” *Dialog* 13 (Autumn 1974): 297–301.

6. Amos N. Wilder, “The Rhetoric of

The tractator’s faux apocalyptic typically trades on thinly argued but nevertheless tenaciously orated narratives of decline. Tractators manufacture these incessant worst-case scenarios whereby every day in

“If it is true that the ELCA has become just another liberal Protestant denomination, that is a condition tantamount to heresy.... I wish I could deny it”
(*Memoirs*, 167).

every way everything is getting worse and worse. Carl-tractator employs this mode and promotes this mood right from the get-go in *Memoirs*. I have “witnessed...the near collapse of confessional theology in Lutheran seminary education, the eclipse of catechesis in Christian education, massive ignorance of doctrine on the part of laity, and wanton disregard of church discipline among bishops and pastors” (*Memoirs*, ix).

Carl-tractator peppers *Memoirs* with unsubstantiated innuendos of worst-case

Ancient and Modern Apocalyptic,” *Interpretation* 25 (October 1971): 440. Braaten himself has an important essay on “The Significance of Apocalypticism for Systematic Theology” in the same issue of this journal.

scenarios of decline. Examples abound but here are a few: “If it is true that the ELCA has become just another liberal Protestant denomination, that is a condition tantamount to heresy....I wish I could deny it” (*Memoirs*, 167). “[T]he kind of Lutheranism I learned...and taught in a Lutheran parish and seminary for many years is now marginalized to the point of near extinction” (*Memoirs*, 167). The ELCA has “embark[ed] on a trajectory that leads to rank antinomianism” (*Memoirs*, 169). “Each person and each congregation will do what they deem fitting and appropriate in view of the apostasy that looms on the horizon of our beloved Lutheran Church” (*Memoirs*, 170). And the following:

In looking for evidence that could convincingly contradict the charge that the ELCA has become just another liberal Protestant denomination, it would seem reasonable to examine what is produced by its publishing house, theological schools, magazines, publications, church council resolutions, commission statements, task force recommendations, statements and actions by its bishops. The end result is an embarrassment; there is not much there to refute the charge.... [A]ll that is left of the Reformation heritage is the aroma of an empty bottle. (*Memoirs*, 167)

Without question, reasonable examination is the rhetorical mode and mood that Carl-treatiser would undertake. “There is not much there” is the faux apocalyptic rhetoric that Carl-tractator in fact employs. Indeed, Carl-tractator packed all of these examples into his 2005 open letter to Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson, which he then includes in *Memoirs* (165–171).

Tractators routinely reach into their rhetorical quiver in order to arm their selectively plotted narratives of decline with the logical fallacy known as *post hoc ergo*

propter hoc (“after this therefore because of this”), to which too many people commonly succumb. This fallacy cunningly conflates correlation and causation—e.g., after the 1960s therefore because of the 1960s. The popular fallacy loads up the narrative of decline with historical causality for the rendezvous with doomsday, thus performing its apocalyptic service. In *Memoirs*, as we will see below, it is “after the mid-1980s Commission for a New Lutheran Church, which wrote the constitution of the new ELCA, and therefore **because** of the Commission for a New Lutheran Church.” For Carl-tractator, the ELCA as constituted is itself the effective cause of decline. Point blank.

Once so armed with historical causation, tractators search out the narratively undernourished and dole out just enough morsels of truth to get them to come back for another morsel, always accompanied by the relentless revving up of the narrative’s rhetorical decibels. By so doing, tractators aspire to rally troops for political battle in a zero sum, take-no-prisoners, winners-take-all theater, first by radicalizing the leadership, then by creating a sense of belonging for frontline troops, and finally by lending spine to true believers who in a pragmatic culture like North America’s are forever tempted to do little. Establishing urgency and mobilizing troops requires tractators to stay on message: repeat, repeat, repeat; rehash, rehash, and rehash again the apocalyptic narrative.

Narrating the imminent rendezvous with the final fall leads tractators to betray both the educational and the argumentative in a second way. Faux apocalypticism turns tracts Manichaean. Like Mani’s dualism of old, tractators habitually reduce the state of affairs to stark binary opposites—good versus evil, angels vanquishing demons. Rich, textured continuums of careful reflection no longer exist. Here

especially, in this dualistic environment with its amplified decibels ever increasing, Carl-treatiser's *Sic-et-Non* mode and mood finds no room in the Manichaeian inn. The controversy between Carl-tractator and Carl-treatiser is joined. And on the Lutheran landscape, at least, Carl-tractator shoves Carl-treatiser outside the gate.

The tractator's penchant for the apocalyptic and the Manichaeian leads to a third characteristic of tracts. Apocalyptic, Manichaeian polarization goes totalistic. You either concur *in toto* with the tractator's claim or you turn apostate *in toto*. Crucial distinctions between heresy, on the one hand, and theological disagreement, deficiency, flaw or imperfection, on the other, seem to dissipate under the white heat of apocalyptic fire and Manichaeian purism. Because of their totalism, tractators traffic notoriously in innuendo. They hunt for heresies, and invariably for heretics. If you oppose me on one point, you oppose me on all points, all the way down. Because tractators want to rally troops, they name names, not only unacceptable theological formulations. They name the angels for reverence and the demons for scorn. By demonizing individuals, they warn the troops to avoid anything that comes out of demonic mouths. Thus the tractator's totalism!

But why, especially when the landscape looks Lutheran, did Carl give up on Carl-treatiser and devolve into Carl-tractator? Perhaps there is a hint in the following. "What lies behind the watering down of the theological curriculum in today's seminaries is the fact that many students, perhaps most, are ill prepared for the academic rigors of theological study" (*Memoirs*, 22). Did Carl-treatiser finally despair that a treatise's mode and mood had become impotent for summoning Lutheran students and pastors "to become truly evangelical, catholic, and orthodox"

(*Memoirs*, xi)? Did he dilute his own summoning with surges of tractarian fire water in a desperate, ironic strategy to stem the rising tide of the decline of theological competence?

Going Tractator

The tractator temptation did not gain a hold on Carl all at once. In his earliest years as a theologian he highlighted a number of crises that the Lutheran church faced and addressed them in treatise fashion. Even his early editorials for *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* display, despite their brevity, treatise-like traits. Three things fueled his early crisis posture. First, he began his teaching career during the early years of the 1960s, a time of cultural tumult on a range of issues. Second, he had studied and inwardly digested German crisis theology during the first half of the twentieth century. Finally, he tells us that his own seminary teachers had remained aloof from, or perhaps even unaware of, the rich reflections on faith and life undertaken across the breadth of German crisis theology and other emerging theological movements.

Carl was determined not to waste the signs of the times in the emerging "crisis in the church," the title of the first issue of *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*—he was the founding editor-in-chief. He titled his 1962 essay, "The Crisis of Confessionalism," even though today he feels it necessary to say that he does "not now think that there was much of a crisis [in 1962], certainly not as compared with Lutheranism in America today" (*Memoirs*, 53). A disavowal of that sort seems necessary once Carl-tractator commits to his 1980s-induced faux apocalyptic narrative of decline. From the early 1960s on, Carl-treatiser analyzed a spate of crises: from crisis of law and a crisis of hope to an ecumenical crisis, a secularism

crisis, and a racial crisis that presented the church with a crisis over the public significance of the church and Christian vocation. These treatises established him as a promising theologian, and he continued in this mode and mood during the 1970s as new crises arose.

During the late 1970s, as a consequence of the Vanderbilt writing project, Carl took a decided turn toward what some might describe as a more conservative Lutheran theological direction. During the 1960s and into 1970s he had freely engaged emerging issues in theology, especially around liberation themes. As increasing numbers of mainline Protestant churches and theologians learned more and more about liberation theology and progressively leaned in more liberationist directions, Carl took on a more polemical posture toward liberation theology and its growing foothold within mainline Protestantism. What began in 1976 as “the challenge of liberation theology” turned by 1984 into naming “the Trojan horse of liberation theology” within liberal Protestantism, culminating in 1985 with the suggestion that “apostasy” and “heresy” were surely in the wind.⁷ During this same period Carl-treatiser was still engaging new crises, notably a Christological crisis brought on by certain prominent advocates of religious pluralism. Carl-treatiser argued vigorously and rightly, I believe, for the uniqueness and universality of Jesus. As Carl notes in his Preface, heresy is “especially” at stake, for instance, “in outright denial of the divinity of Christ” (*Memoirs*, viii).

Carl-tractator, however, was now on the rise. What began in 1983 as a frantic search for “the [Lutheran] magisterium” became by 1984 a full-bore “crisis of

authority.” He really ratcheted up his tractarian mode and mood while serving on the Commission for a New Lutheran Church. He was opposed “from the start” to the so-called “quota system modeled on the principles of the left wing of the Democratic Party.” The “quota system” soon anchored the narrative of decline because it was out to “emasculate the ‘old boys’” who had furnished theological authority in the ELCA’s two largest predecessor bodies (*Memoirs*, 123, 122). Here, quite plainly, is the primal source of Carl’s apoplexy gone wild, that is, gone tractarian!⁸

Already in 1989 Carl-tractator bemoaned the initial assembly of the ELCA: “What we have witnessed in this convention was one more step forward in the making of an American Protestant denomination,” which for him means, “one more step backwards.” In 1991 Carl-treatiser investigated full-fledged “apostasy in American theology” but Carl-tractator used that inquiry to allege “the il/legitimacy of Lutheranism in America,” in which “the confessional core of Lutheranism was vanishing before our eyes” (*Memoirs*, 140), hopelessly deluged by an “antinomian...neo-pagan gnostic

8. Much of what Carl objected to he blames on the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC), the moderate congregations and pastors that The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod had driven out of its denomination during the late 1970s. The AELC vigorously pressed the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America to join in forming a new Lutheran church in the United States. Candidly speaking, the AELC is the church body into which I was called and ordained as a Lutheran pastor in 1977.

9. Carl Braaten, “The Making of an American Protestant Denomination,” *Dialog* 28 (Autumn 1989): 244.

7. The words in quotation marks are Carl’s, and they appear as essay titles or parts thereof; see his own bibliography (*Memoirs*, 180–202).

culture.”¹⁰ Having apocalyptically hiked the decibels on his narrative of liberal Protestant decline, Carl-tractator’s only remaining vocation was to promulgate a heroic, all-or-nothing “call to faithfulness” that can be either heeded or renounced. No discussion needed.

In the Lutheran landscape from the mid-1980s forward, Carl appeared fully dressed in tractator attire, treading well-worn trails blazed by droves of self-styled apocalyptic tractators. He candidly records the concerns voiced by various ELCA bishops that he had indulged in and inflamed others to join in widespread “Higgins bashing”—Higgins Road being the location of the ELCA’s churchwide offices. He even admits that bashing “certainly went on” in the “call to faithfulness” conferences—“bashing” being popular shorthand, of course, for the tractator’s mode and mood (*Memoirs*, 140). He also mentions, but without bearing any particular responsibility himself, that “the atmosphere was charged with rancorous criticism of almost everything going on” in the ELCA (*Memoirs*, 130). Many succumbed to tractarian mode and mood. “I have not,” noted Carl on another occasion, “acquired a great reputation for communicating theological ideas at room temperature.”¹¹

Carl-tractator proceeded to justify his own tractarian mode and mood in two ways. First, there is really no need to get specific about the dissemination of heresy, something that Carl-treatiser would never countenance. In 1991 then Presiding Bishop Herbert Chilstrom pleaded with Carl “to be specific” about allegations of “mutations of the gospel,” Carl’s admitted euphemism for heresy. Carl-tractator insists bluntly, “From where I was sitting,

the handwriting on the wall was so clear, I felt a person had to be blind not to see it. For me it seemed hardly necessary to provide chapter and verse to prove” heresy—he cites six, one being “the twin tenets of American culture religion, gnosticism and antinomianism,” to which we will return below (*Memoirs*, 140–141). What are we to think when someone who has long deplored the absence of a magisterium and the loss of episcopal discipline seems himself to have so cavalierly dismissed a specific reprimand about serious matters given directly by the Presiding Bishop of one’s own ecclesial body? Can it really be morally adequate if there is a case of serious heresy for a prominent theologian of the church to warrant his point of view by blithely referring to personal perceptions of handwriting on the wall?

The second justification for Carl-tractator’s mode and mood follows: “We are, after all, in a fierce struggle for the soul of Lutheranism as a confessing movement; and we are contending, not against flesh and blood, but against powers and principalities that are stronger and more numerous than we are.”¹² Ought theologians of the church knowingly succumb to the utilitarian manner of justifying the employment of problematic means by citing the righteousness of one’s ends? Sadly, for many who have learned much from Carl-treatiser, myself surely included, Carl-tractator’s accommodation to the culture of American incivility, innuendo, allegation, and ridicule seems nearly complete, at least when Carl writes for Lutheran landscapes.

Pinning the Antinomian Label

Carl fits his 1991 resignation from LSTC snugly within his standard tractator narra-

10. Carl Braaten, “The Illegitimacy of Lutheranism in America?” *Lutheran Forum* 28 (1994): 43.

11. *Ibid.*, 38.

12. *Ibid.*

tive of decline, and he does so by endorsing his long-time friend and colleague Robert Jensen's *apologia*:

What made Carl Braaten overturn his life is a judgment: seminaries of the ELCA are now institutions emphatically inhospitable to theological work and instruction, and are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. (*Memoirs*, 127)

Beyond Carl-tractator's *post hoc ergo propter hoc* construal of the formation of the ELCA as the across-the-board cause of the Lutheran devolution into the evils of liberal Protestantism, which you can also hear in Jensen's *apologia*, two other factors conspicuously appear in the story line of his resignation. First is the "various forms of heresy emanating from radical theological feminism," which he first encountered in 1972 when Rosemary Radford Ruether wrote "a stinging rejoinder" to a 1971 essay on women's liberation that he had written for *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* (*Memoirs*, 109). The heretical potential becomes actual in liturgical God-language. While Carl-treatiser is perfectly capable of tackling these issues (*Memoirs*, 112), the temptation to tractator mode and mood seems at times to overwhelm him. Carl recalls how in the late 1980s he just plain "quit going to chapel" at LSTC after writing a letter of protest to the administration at what he notes was the very "first time" that a "blatant" excising of trinitarian language took place in the LSTC morning chapel (*Memoirs*, 109).¹³

13. Carl-tractator takes over, for instance, where he lumps together various feminist theologians into the category of "post-Christian feminism" when some are clearly not "post-Christian," even though he assures his reader that this is "accurate" (*Memoirs*, 109). And, how bound up is "So I quit going to chapel" with Carl-tractator's

"Radical theological feminism" also figured prominently in "the straw that broke the camel's back" leading directly to his resignation, an incident regarding the appointment of an LSTC faculty, which is too complicated to unravel here (*Memoirs*, 128–130).

The second factor dominating his decision to resign from LSTC was the "radical transformation of the ethos and modus operandi of the school" (*Memoirs*, 121). At the heart of what Carl calls the "radical transformation" was the addition of nine Christ Seminary—Seminex faculty at LSTC. In Carl's telling, this is a story about how "in due course" a seminary (LSTC) that had been "a microcosm of ethnic pluralism in American Lutheranism" became "dominate[d]" by the "German background" of these "like-minded" Seminex faculty (*Memoirs*, 120). Having myself been a Seminex student, I can tell you that they were not like-minded. It would not take much for Carl-treatiser's *Sic-et-Non* mode and mood to figure that out.

On the one hand, Carl indicates, "These things happened [at LSTC] not because of any conspiracy, but simply because of the personal competence and energetic leadership of these Seminex colleagues" who "were all intelligent and well educated, with an impressive work ethic" (*Memoirs*, 120). On the other hand, there is a decided air of consternation in his telling that begins to tweak the mode and mood of Carl-tractator. It begins with sentences like: "the old guard at LSTC was marginalized" and "soon the day-to-day administration of LSTC was firmly in their hands." Likely, Carl would say that these were just facts. But soon the decibels get elevated in

by then well-honed mode and mood? Hard to know from a distance, but surely it is part and parcel of Carl-tractator's stylized narrative of decline in *Memoirs*.

the narrative of decline: “[Seminex faculty as] advocates of progressive agendas;” “the poison of political correctness spread into every aspect of seminary life;” “the cult of egalitarianism drove out every remnant of elitism;” “Orwellian shades of 1984 had arrived” (*Memoirs*, 120–121). After so elevating the decibels it seems that Carl-treatiser himself even finds it necessary to interrupt, however momentarily, the predominant tractator mode and mood with the disclaimer that all “this was not unilaterally the work of Seminex faculty,” the “this” being “the transformation of LSTC into a modern Protestant seminary, hospitable to the many isms of American culture” (*Memoirs*, 121).

But momentary it is! The tractator temptation remains alive and tempting and presses in relentlessly on Carl. Over the next three paragraphs, Carl-tractator’s consternation turns absolutely apoplectic. First, he alleges a general statement that on the face of it implicates LSTC as a whole. “The theology that backed up the ‘paradigm shift’ at LSTC was either antinomian or a close relative” (*Memoirs*, 121). All the reader gets for substantiation for this generic allegation of heresy is ironic false modesty: “This is merely the opinion of one faculty member who taught at LSTC for thirty years” (*Memoirs*, 122). Bad enough, this tractator mode and mood, a reader might think! However, as already noted in our opening section, Carl had sought in his Preface to quell his readers’ jitteriness regarding the theologian’s task of “keep[ing] the church from crossing the line from orthodoxy into heresy” with this assurance:

But I am not interested in pinning the label “heretic” or “apostate” on any theologian. Oh, well, there may be a few such, especially those in outright denial of the divinity of Christ or the resurrection of Jesus (*Memoirs*, viii).

That assurance might lead readers to assume that “the label” would be pinned only on those who deny the uniqueness and universality of Christ, like the thoroughgoing religious pluralists, or who outright reject the Trinity, like certain post-Christian feminists.

Now, however, in the sentence immediately following the generic allegation of antinomianism at LSTC, Carl-tractator’s apoplexy springs a second, more lethal leak. He names names, the source of the heresy: Robert Bertram and Edward Schroeder, two Seminex professors of systematic theology, Carl’s own specific discipline at LSTC. Only Bertram had come to LSTC in 1983. He had been a prominent theologian and member of both the U.S. Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue team and the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. Carl-treatiser had once even lauded Bertram by putting him on his “short list” of three prominent Lutheran theologians who kept the doctrine of justification by faith alone vibrant on the U.S. scene.¹⁴ Bertram and Schroeder both taught, says Carl-tractator correctly, that Lutheran confessional theology, and Luther as well, does not teach what is often called, and meant to be, a “third use of the law,” which, beyond the first two uses, guides the Spirit-led new creature in Christ.

The “third use of the law” issue has been a neuralgic question for some time in Lutheran circles, and it is also more complicated than can be addressed thoroughly in this setting. In *Memoirs* Carl-tractator offers no analysis of the question; he offers only single-sentence definitions of each use, definitions too vague to be analytically

14. Carl Braaten, *Justification: The Article by Which the Church Stands or Falls* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 17. The other two on Carl-treatiser’s short list are Robert Jenson and Gerhard Forde.

helpful. Still, Carl-tractator states: “They [Bertram and Schroeder] reject[ed] the third use of the law...[and along with] [m]any modern Lutherans...have jumped from the frying pan of legalism into the fire of antinomianism....[Bertram and Schroeder] moved in a straight line from the rejection of the third use of the law to the support of the gay/lesbian agenda that has since taken the ELCA by the throat” (*Memoirs*, 121).¹⁵

Antinomianism is quite rightly a serious issue. However, it seems that Carl-tractator simply alleges “antinomianism” or “a close relative [to antinomianism]” or “rank antinomianism” when Carl-treatiser has produced little to refute those who disagree on any grounds whatsoever with the historic norm of heterocentrism and the moral condemnation of same-sex sexuality. This is especially true when he conflates those who reject a Lutheran teaching of the third use of the law with antinomian heretics, as he does with Bertram and Schroeder. Both of them, like Carl himself, follow natural law moral reasoning on questions of sexuality. Bertram himself, in fact, never did suggest a new sexual norm.

Conflating the third use of the law issue with antinomianism is a Carl-tractator thing, and a mistake. I offer the following as food for thought.

1. In 1966 Carl-treatiser noted that “Lutherans are found to be far from a consensus” on the third use of the law. He even notes, “Here we do not wish to raise the historical question whether Luther and the Lutheran confessional writings actually taught a third use. Enough has been written on that to keep the matter forever in

15. Dear readers, let me alert you again that I am invested here, since Schroeder and Bertram were my dissertation advisors, which also vests me with first-hand knowledge of their theologies.

doubt.” He did, however, plant his flag, however aslant, and argued, “it would be better not to speak of a third use of the law.”¹⁶ I say “aslant” because he attributes this caveat against the third use to “many minds.” Still, he goes on to adopt the resulting argument as his own point of view, even noting that we discover “a link” between taking Christ as our example and “the first use of the law.” “The neighbor is the link.” There is no mention whatsoever of antinomianism.

2. In 1983 Carl-treatiser skirted altogether the third use of the law issue in his *Principles of Lutheran Theology*.¹⁷ Was the neuralgia too much? Or the question too complicated? Or what?
3. In his 1987 essay honoring the very vocation of Robert Bertram, Carl-treatiser planted his flag more vigorously on the third use of the law question: “this [Carl’s own point of view] is not so much the third use of the law as the second use of the gospel.”¹⁸ Here Carl-treatiser makes no mention whatsoever of antinomianism.
4. Robert Benne, himself a frequent critic of the ELCA, especially of its 2009 position on same-sex sexuality, and a former LSTC colleague of Carl’s, said the following in 1998 on the third use of the law: “For the mainstream Lutheran ethical tradition, however, there is no third use of the law that stipulates a specifically Christian form of existence replete with distinc-

16. Carl Braaten, “Reflections on the Lutheran Doctrine of the Law,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 18 (February 1966): 80–81.

17. Carl Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 127–133.

18. Carl Braaten, “Whatever Happened to Law and Gospel,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 14 (April 1987): 117.

tive patterns of obedience.” He even defends this mainstream Lutheran ethical tradition against the allegation of “antinomianism.”¹⁹

Not until Carl-tractator’s faux apocalyptic, Manichaean, totalistic mode and mood generally steamrolled Carl-treatiser on the Lutheran landscape, and especially over sexuality, does Carl-tractator allege a “straight line” from critics of the third use of the law to the heresy of antinomianism. Bertram and Schroeder not only teach the

first and second uses of the law, they also teach the second use of the gospel and criticize a third use of the law. They are thereby in no way antinomian. Carl-treatiser’s own fledgling thoughts on the third use remain more reliable than Carl-tractator’s allegations in *Memoirs*.

So, *caveat lector*—reader beware—of Carl tractator’s farraginous *Memoirs*. Still, praise God and thank Carl for Carl-treatiser, the better herald of Lutheran theology!

19. Robert Benne, “Lutheran Ethics: Perennial Themes and Contemporary Challenges,” in Karen Bloomquist and John Stumme, eds., *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 16.

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