

## AFLC and the The AALC.

by  
Kristofer Carlson  
October 2006

The Association of Free Lutheran Churches (AFLC) was originally comprised of congregations of the Lutheran Free Church that did not go along with the vote to join the American Lutheran Church. The Free Lutheran Church had a Pietist orientation, an orientation that persists in the AFLC today. Lutheran Pietism is an attempt to combine the Lutheran emphasis on pure doctrine with the Reformed emphasis on personal piety and a vigorous Christian life. Because the experience of salvation is emphasized, the objective nature of that salvation is neglected. The assurance of salvation rests not in baptism, (the “I am baptized” of Martin Luther,) but in my experience of that salvation, and in my living out of the sanctified life. Thus Gospel becomes Law: a yardstick used to measure spirituality; a plumb line used to measure deviations in one’s spiritual walk. The liberal theologian Albrecht Ritschl treats Pietism as a retrograde movement of Christian life towards Catholicism, drawing a parallel between the subjective basis of the Christian life in Catholicism against the objective basis of the Christian life in Lutheran theology.

This represents the AFLC today. They “accept” the three ecumenical creeds, Luther’s Small Catechism, and the unaltered Augsburg Confession. Note that they “accept” these creeds and confessions, but do not subscribe to them. They have neither a *quia* nor a *quatenus* subscription---they have *no* subscription. The AFLC’s statement of principles rejects any congregation’s being held to account by other congregations---and this includes doctrine. Thus each congregation is free to do as it likes, to believe as it likes. But interestingly, this applies to objective doctrine, but not to personal piety.

In part VI of the AFLC’s Declaration of Faith we find the following statement: “The Christian seeks to refrain from those acts, thoughts, and words which are against a stated law of God.” This sounds good. After all, our faith is demonstrated by our works, and we were created unto good works. But the basis for these works is not my own effort, as the AFLC statement indicates, but in the objectiveness of our salvation. “The more objective the *basis* of my salvation, the more effective the subjective *experience* of my salvation” (Dr. Harold Senkbeil). In the AFLC personal piety rests not in the objective work of Christ and in his alien and imputed righteousness, but in the effort of the Christian who seeks to refrain from “acts, thoughts, and words which are against a stated law of God.” Thus Gospel becomes law. The effect of the law is to create more sin and thereby to slay me (Romans 7). Pietism has the opposite effect of that which it intended.

Interestingly, the AFLC maintains a clergy roster. An applicant to the clergy roster of the AFLC is held to certain standards of doctrine and personal piety. We have on our roster a man who first applied to the AFLC, but refused to join when the colloquy committee tried to press upon him a synergistic explanation of salvation---that God goes only so far, and we do the rest. By imposing a doctrinal standard upon clergy applicants, the AFLC imposes such standards upon their member congregations, and does so in violation of its

stated principles. Notice that the AFLC has rejected the objective basis of Lutheran doctrine. Yet they impose a subjective piety in its place when they will not accept a pastor who has been divorced.

In the AFLC's Declaration of Faith we find the following statements: "True Gospel preaching endeavors to meet the needs of all who hear: the believer who desires to grow in his life with God, the seeking and uncertain souls who want to see Him, the hypocrite who must be awakened from his self-righteousness, and the hardened sinner who must still be called to saving faith." Notice that the goal of preaching is not the proper proclamation of the Gospel, but in the awakening of the self. The stated goal of Gospel preaching in AFLC churches is self-improvement. The Gospel is simply a yardstick or a plumb line held up by the preacher so that the hearer can find themselves wanting and be motivated toward action. But it gets worse. In the AFLC's Declaration of Faith we find the following statement: "The Sacraments must always be met by the response of faith in the heart of the recipient to be efficacious." The waters of baptism, the body and blood of Christ, are powerless unless apprehended by the response of faith in the heart of the recipient. Thus faith is not an act of God by which we are made alive and declared righteous, but is instead my own act of accepting what God has offered. This is not Lutheran doctrine, but is instead a Calvinist doctrine. Thus the AFLC is a Calvinist church body, not a Lutheran one.

The Free Lutheran Church emphasized the freedom of the local congregation. Their ideas on church polity are remarkably similar to those of the Congregationalists, and it appears some Lutherans may have borrowed their ideas. In church bodies with a congregational polity, power rests with the individual congregation rather than with a church hierarchy. Individual churches choose their own minister and regulate their own internal discipline. Any external authority can only offer advice, even in matters of doctrine and practice.

The AALC recognizes the source of authority rests with the congregation, but that congregations voluntarily transfer a portion of their authority to the church body. (Constitution, Article 6, section 1.) Yet as part of this voluntary association, churches own their own property, may dispose of it as they will, and may choose to leave The AALC at their discretion. (Constitution, Article 6, Section 2.) The AALC does not have a pure congregational polity; we have a hierarchy with a narrow range of powers, effective only in particular areas such as: ensuring faithful adherence to doctrine, applying discipline, and enlisting cooperation with the programs approved by member congregations in convention. (Constitution, 06.02.02.05. ff; 07.01.02. ff.)