

Dear Congregation members of Nazareth Evangelical Lutheran Church,

The Nazareth Church Council has several concerns with [Bishop Eaton's letter](#). Our concerns are summarized below. More detailed information follows the summarized concerns.

Here is a summary of our concerns:

Our [letter of dissent](#) spelled out two areas of concern. Bishop Eaton responded to one of the two concerns: The Doctrine of Hell/Universalism (the concept of Universalism assumes that everyone goes to Heaven.) The Bible is clear that hell exists and that it is not empty. See the following passages:

- Matthew 10:28
- Luke 12:5
- Matthew 5:22
- Matthew 10:28
- Matthew 11:23
- Luke 16:22-23
- 2 Peter 2:4-6
- Revelation 20:13-15

Although Christ died for the sins of the whole world, the Bible is clear that not everyone will accept his gift of salvation. See the following passages:

- John 3:18
- John 1:9-13
- Matthew 7:13-14

In Revelation 21:1-5 (referred to in the Bishop's letter), everyone in attendance inherits eternal life. However, judgment occurs in Revelation 20:11-15, and the only people remaining were those whose names were written in the book of life.

The Bishop refers to the Augsburg Confession in her letter. Article IV of the Augsburg Confession mentions that belief is needed for salvation.

The Bishop refers to the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, article XI.28 in her letter. This article also mentions that belief is needed for salvation.

The letter below gives more details about the above summary.

Dear Congregation members of Nazareth Evangelical Lutheran Church,

Your Church Council prayerfully submits this response to Bishop Eaton's letter to the

congregation members of Nazareth. According to our bylaws, the Church Council is to “Work with the pastors and staff in providing for the spiritual care of the congregation and in promoting its material welfare.” We believe it is our responsibility as your Church Council to explain our concerns regarding the Bishop’s letter.

The letter of dissent asked the Bishop to respond to two main areas of concern. Out of those two, she chose to address one: whether or not there is a hell, or if anyone will go there – i.e. universalism. She immediately dispels worries of the general philosophical belief of universalism within the ELCA, and then spends the rest of her letter making a clear case for “Christian universalism” -- i.e., because of Jesus’ atoning work on the cross, all are saved, regardless of their faith.

“Christian universalism” is not Biblical. The Bible is clear that hell exists and that it is not empty. See Matthew 10:28 – “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” Also see Luke 12:5 “But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!”

We agree that the gospel is universally offered to all people and available to everyone, but the Bible is clear in many places that it will not be universally accepted and received by everyone. John 3:16 makes it clear that Christ died for the sins of the whole world. However, John 3:16 also points out that whoever believes in him shall have eternal life. In John 3:18 it says, “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” Further, John 1:9-13 states “The true Light who gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But to all who did receive Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God – children born not of blood, nor of the desire or will of man, but born of God.” Additionally, Matthew 7:13-14 says “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”

Bishop Eaton shared her hope that “at the end of time, God will redeem all things, including all humankind in the new heaven and new earth that is promised.” To support this hope, she referenced Revelation 21:1-5. We concur that in Revelation 21:1-5, all people who are in attendance at this time will inherit eternal life. However, that is only because of what has taken place prior to this. Verses 20:13-15 state, “And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” So, it stands to reason that the people who were left standing after this (those referred to in Revelation 21) all had their names written in the book of life (they had been born again and trusted Christ for the forgiveness of their sins) so

they all received eternal life dwelling with God in the new heaven and new earth. They were all saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. This is very different from Bishop Eaton's hope that all will be redeemed regardless of their faith.

The Bishop also stated that she believes that God alone knows if hell is empty or not. While we do agree that God is omniscient, and knows all, He has clearly stated in his Holy scriptures that hell is not empty. (See Matt 5:22, Matt 10:28, Matt 11:23, Luke 16:22-23, 2 Pet 2:4, Rev 20:13-14) To support her idea that it may be empty, however, the Bishop mentions that she takes great comfort in St. Paul's assertion in Romans 8:38-39, and she wrote it out as follows in her letter: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of Christ Jesus our Lord." The Bishop left out two key words at the end of the verse that make it clear that only those who trust in Christ for salvation will avoid eternal damnation. The last line of verse 39 actually reads, "will be able to separate us from the love of **God in** Christ Jesus our Lord. The addition of these two words makes it clear that our salvation and hope to not be separated from the love of God in hell, only comes through trusting in Christ. Secondly, Romans 1:7-8 points out that Paul clearly knew he was speaking to fellow Christians when he said "nothing can separate 'us' from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The Bishop also references the Augsburg Confession, Article IV, stating: "that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith." However, Article IV also includes this statement: "...men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins."

For further Biblical references for this teaching, the Bishop points us to the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, article XI.28. This article in the Book of Concord, (see below) and reiterates that the preaching of repentance and the promise of the Gospel is universal. However, it clearly states that only those who repent and believe will be saved. We also encourage you to look up the scripture references for yourselves within article XI.28:

Therefore, if we wish to consider our eternal election to salvation with profit, we must in every way hold sturdily and firmly to this, that, as the preaching of repentance, so also the promise of the Gospel is universalis (universal), that is, it pertains to all men, Luke 24:47. For this reason Christ has commanded that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations. For God loved the world and gave His Son, John 3:16. Christ bore the sins of the world, John 1:29, gave His flesh for the life of the world, John 6:51; His blood is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world, 1 John 1:7; 2:2. Christ says: Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest, Matt. 11:28. God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that He might have mercy upon all, Rom. 11:32. The Lord is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance, 2 Pet. 3:9. The same Lord over all is rich unto all that call

upon Him, Rom. 10:12. The righteousness of God, which is by faith of Jesus Christ, unto all and upon all them that believe, Rom. 3:22. This is the will of Him that sent Me, that every one that seeth the Son and believeth on Him may have everlasting life, John 6:40. Likewise it is Christ's command that to all in common to whom repentance is preached this promise of the Gospel also should be offered Luke 24:47; Mark 16:15.

The Bishop also referred to Ephesians 2:8-9 as the cornerstone on which the ELCA's official confession of Faith is based: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God - not the result of works, so that no one may boast." In contrast to the Bishop's hope for God to redeem all humankind that she shared earlier in her letter, the Confession of Faith found in the ELCA Constitution, Chapter 2, Section 02 states: "This church confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the Gospel as the power of God for the salvation of all who believe."

Revelation 3:20 reminds us "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me." Jesus knows that not everyone will answer his invitation and open the door to a relationship with him. Many, like those living in Laodicea, as John describes in Revelation, will choose to reject his call. Lukewarm, and with hardened hearts, they will remain blind to the fact that they have accepted a false righteousness (Hebrews 3:7-8.) To these, Jesus will say, "I never knew you, depart from me." (Matthew 7:21-23.) Sadly, they will not enter the kingdom of heaven. But for those who do open the door of their heart, repent, and trust Christ to forgive their sins, then we who were once enemies of God, through Christ, can become his adopted son or daughter! **That is good news!** Nazareth must continue to remain faithful to this true Gospel message.

We leave you with one last thought from Paul's letter to Titus, who like Timothy, had become one of Paul's beloved disciples. Paul left Titus behind on the island of Crete to help continue and strengthen the work that had been done there. Paul's letter is personal encouragement and counsel from Paul to Titus, a young pastor, who, though well-trained and faithful, faced continuing opposition from ungodly men within the churches where he ministered. Titus was to pass on that encouragement and counsel to the leaders he was to appoint in the Cretan churches. Paul's counsel for all of us as members of the Church Council of Nazareth Evangelical Lutheran Church includes: Titus 1:7-9 "For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach... He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it." We humbly pray that we, as the Church of Jesus Christ, will heed Paul's counsel to Titus above, and remain faithful to the "trustworthy word."

Your brothers and sisters in Christ,
The members of Nazareth Evangelical Lutheran Church Council