

# The slightly Lutheran congresswoman

By [David Heim](#)

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When reports started circulating that Republican presidential contender Michele Bachmann was a member of a congregation in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, I thought: this could be interesting.

The WELS is a small (400,000-member) denomination known for its rigid confessionalism--a description that is not just mine but one used by most other Lutherans. (See [Lutheran Churches in the World](#), produced by the Lutheran

World Federation.) WELS adheres to a strict interpretation of the Lutheran confessions of faith that were written in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and its rigidity is such that it broke off relations with the conservative Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod in the 1960s and refuses cooperation with church bodies other than those with which it is in total theological agreement. I don't think there are any. (CORRECTION: That isn't strictly accurate: the WELS is in fellowship with one other church body in the U.S.--the tiny (40,000-member) Evangelical Lutheran Synod--as well as with some Lutheran groups abroad. --DH)

Anyway, I thought it would be interesting to have a presidential candidate who is a conservative Christian not as in "conservative evangelical" but as in conservative, creedal, sacramental, confessional Lutheran. How would her Lutheran understanding of the two kingdoms, and of law and gospel, shape her politics?

But it turns out Bachmann no longer belongs to the WELS's Salem Lutheran Church, hasn't attended Salem for months, and claims no ties to the WELS. This came out after the *Atlantic* [pointed out](#) that the WELS officially regards the papacy as the Antichrist and that this might be a political liability for Bachman.

The *Atlantic's*

comment roused several commentators [to say](#) that they were shocked that anyone was shocked by WELS's stance. After all, isn't that what Lutherans believe? Well, not most of them.

Mollie Hemingway, for example, [writing](#) in the *Wall Street Journal*, took the view that of course Lutherans think the papacy is the Antichrist, and aren't they are entitled to their beliefs? She sought to minimize such "strong rhetoric" by pointing out that the "current pope, Benedict XVI, is particularly close to the Lutherans."

Well, yes, the current pope is close to some Lutherans, and he even helped forge an agreement with the Lutheran World Federation on justification. But Hemingway might have admitted that the pope is not close to WELS Lutherans, and that WELS Lutherans would have nothing to do with any ecumenical conversation or agreement with him.

In any event, Bachmann does not appear to have distinctive WELS-related views on the papacy or on anything else. As Sarah Posner [reports](#), Bachmann is a conservative Christian "mishmash"--a Lutheran "moved by Francis Schaeffer to get involved in conservative politics, who attended a law school founded by a Pentecostal and a Christian Reconstructionist."