

Is Robert Gagnon, the New Glue for Linking “Conservatives” in ELCA and LCMS?

Colleagues, Pastors both in the LCMS and ELCA who consider themselves conservative are rallying around Robert Gagnon as their theological guru to fight the liberals in both churches on the hot potato of homosexuality. And Gagnon isn't even a Lutheran. Even more amazing is that his lenses for reading the Bible are anti-Lutheran. But he knows that God abominates gays and lesbians, and he's written a big book to show that this is precisely what the Bible says. His pitch to his allies who happen to be Lutherans is: “Even though I am not a Lutheran, you people are, and you always rest your case on what the Bible says, right? Well, then”

ELCA folks are being sucked in. Gagnon has been a major speaker for at least 3 large ELCA gatherings that I know of. He must also have a following in the LCMS, because he's the featured speaker on “The Use of Scripture Concerning Homosexuality” for the upcoming symposium at Concordia Seminary (St. Louis), Missouri Synod's largest seminary. The topic: “The Challenge of Homosexuality – The Church Responds.” And Gagnon doesn't come cheap. For an ELCA appearance two years ago his fee was \$1000. Maybe that was just for Lutherans, and now that US Lutherans really “appreciate” him, I wonder if the fee's gone up or down.

I've not encountered Gagnon live, though friends have. But I have read the book which makes him a hero both in the ELCA and apparently also in the LCMS. It was back in the spring of 2002 when a local ELCA clergy conference discussed it and I was asked to respond. The specs are: Robert Gagnon, THE BIBLE AND

HOMOSEXUAL PRACTICE – TEXTS AND HERMENEUTICS. Abingdon, 2001. Gagnon is professor of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theol. Seminary. He is Presbyterian.

Some of my words to that clergy conference were posted as ThTh 205 (May 16, 2002). Here are a couple of paragraphs:

9. *At our last meeting we were instructed from Robert Gagnon's book [The Bible and Homosexual Practice – Texts and Hermeneutics]. Gagnon is gaining popularity in the ELCA among the folks who know that homosexuality is wrong. At least one ELCA synod featured him a few weeks ago, and later this year the LUTHERAN FORUM has him as their keynote speaker for a big get-together in Kansas City. That is not good news – in more ways than one. Gagnon claims no Lutheran heritage, and he shows that to be true. He has no clue about Lutheran hermeneutics, about reading the Scriptures with law/promise lenses – nor of the theology of the cross, nor of hidden/revealed God, the building blocks of our heritage. Augsburg-conscious Lutherans need to instruct Gagnon, not be instructed by him.*
10. *Gagnon reads the Bible with scholastic hermeneutics, the same hermeneutics of those who declared the Augsburg Confessors heretics. Those scholastics critiqued the Augsburg Confessors for “ignoring the Bible” – especially in those places where the Bible clearly commends “works.” Their hermeneutic reads the Bible as a codex, a canon of God's teaching – what to believe, how to behave, how to worship. Apology IV calls that hermeneutic destructive of the Gospel. If that's right, then Gagnon is wrong. “Augsburg” hermeneutics reads the Bible as God's X-ray pictures and God's therapy for the patients. In its particulars it's a “patient chart.”*

11. *Thus Luther can say that Leviticus – all of Leviticus – is irrelevant for Christ-followers. It's the hospital chart of some other patient. It's no more relevant for a Christian than the chart of the person lying next to you in the hospital. ML's label for Leviticus was "Juden Sachsenspiegel." What their own civil code–called "Sachsenspiegel"–was for Saxons, so Leviticus was for Jewish society. Yes, he could even say that Leviticus was GOD's civil ordinance for Jews, but it still had no divine jurisdiction in Saxony. In Saxony, God (with the left hand, of course) had given Saxons their own civil law, the "Sachsenspiegel." Here's a clear either/or: Leviticus provides key texts for Gagnon in the homosexuality hassle. Ditto for his Lutheran disciples. Luther, by contrast, said Leviticus was irrelevant.*
12. *Another item: Gagnon's notion of sin ignores the new definition for sin that came with Jesus. "Sin is that they do not believe in me," says Jesus in John. Or in Paul's words: "Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." He seems to have no clue on this. Or that with the coming of Jesus anything cosmic has changed.*

Since Concordia Seminary (St. Louis) is my alma mater (Class of 1954) I thought it proper to write to the current seminary president and warn him about Gagnon. Many times in Ezekiel (e.g., 3:18) God urges such intervention. Here are some of those paragraphs:

Dear Mr. President, Today I received the Summer 2004 issue of the seminary magazine FOCUS. Although many of the pages are cheering, page 9 is not–not cheering for me (and doubtless not cheering for many other alums) to hear about our alma mater.

Your invitation to Robert Gagnon as "major presenter" for your September symposium scandalizes 801-alums who learned

confessional theology within your walls. Not only is Gagnon an admitted non-Lutheran, he is explicitly anti-Lutheran (anti-Augsburg Confession & Apology) in his fundamental theology. Starting with how he reads the Bible. In Augsburg terms Gagnon's allies are the scholastic Confutators whose critique of the AC—using as they did zillions of Bible passages—pushed Melancthon to articulate the classic Lutheran hermeneutics of Apology 4. And you know how roundly he condemns the hermeneutic of the Confutators in that article. "They bury Christ" is one of his "milder" critiques. Gagnon is in their train.

For Gagnon to be giving the essay on "The Use of Scripture..." on this hot topic at any Lutheran seminary, let alone at Concordia St. Louis, is—to use one of his favorite words in his now (in)famous book—an "abomination."

I know he is becoming the hero of the ELCA folks who abominate homosexuals, but with your own crisper vision (so I thought) on the law-promise center of Augsburg-hermeneutics, I didn't think you'd go for Gagnon. His hermeneutic for reading the scriptures is de facto that of Karlstadt at the time of the Reformation. Since Karlstadt finally had to leave the Wittenberg seminary because his gospel was an "other" gospel that undermined law/promise hermeneutics for Biblical exegesis and preaching, why would you want to re-instate one of his latter-day pupils to a seminary podium?

As an alumnus of Concordia Seminary, I suggest you dis-invite him despite the consequences. The consequences of leaving him on the program are even grimmer—for the Gospel and for Lutherans who think that's of some import. He can not be expected to bring "Anothen to phos." [=the seminary's motto: Light from above.] His way of reading the Bible sheds darkness, especially on the Gospel-core of the scriptures. Your presidential calling is not to aid and abet that, but to

prevent it.

Sincerely yours, EHS

I'm not trying to kill Gagnon. I'm in Ezekiel's train warning my fellow Lutherans not to get tangled in Gagnon's ganglions. Unless he no longer reads the Bible the way he did in his book. Might his increasing presence at Lutheran (?) venues have given him the Augsburg Aha!? I'm not optimistic. But it could be that Gagnon has changed, that, like Paul after Damascus, he's now promoting a Gospel that his book opposes. However I've heard nothing of that sort. The invitations he's getting from Lutherans unhappy about homosexuals testifies that what he said in his book is his theology still. And that theology is bad news—not just for Lutherans.

Ironies abound. LCMS voices criticize the ELCA for cozying up to the Reformed in church fellowship, but take instruction from a sturdy Calvinist, instead of Luther, on how to read the Bible. Another irony is the “fellowship” Gagnon, a Calvinist, generates between ELCA and LCMS folk when gay/lesbian is the issue.

Gagnon allies are multiplying in the ELCA. Besides the WORDALONE Network with its firm “no” to gays and lesbians, there has recently arisen the “Durado Covenant” in the ELCA. Durado covenanters are pastors of “beeeg” congregations voicing their own “no” in advance of the anticipated “yes” coming on this issue at next summer's ELCA assembly. Might these ELCA folks and their LCMS confreres (no women pastors there, of course) find their way to each other over the Gagnon bridge?

Comes now the recently completed Missouri Synod convention where the “moderate” conservatives successfully resisted the “immoderate” conservatives—the mild ones fending off the wild ones—from top leadership positions. Concordia Seminary St. Louis

is Missouri's "moderate" seminary, doubtless pleased to see the wild ones put away. But Gagnon is the featured Biblical guru for Concordia's upcoming symposium on "the" issue. He's already got a big fan club in the ELCA.

How about this? Might he eventually be persuasive enough to have "moderate conservatives" (more precise: Biblicist Lutherans)—in both LCMS and ELCA—currently on different sides of a denominational wall, but in full consensus on the gay issue, finally "tear down that wall" and embrace each other? Wouldn't that be an ecumenical supernova! A new configuration in USA Lutheranism, perhaps called Conservative American Lutherans—Albeit Moderate in Their Yearnings. And guess who just might get chosen to lead CALAMITY? Who better than the one who brought them together, a Presbyterian professor from Pittsburgh! Is that possible truth, or patent fiction?

Either way, Christ's peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder