Is There a Hole in the Net of the “Word Alone Network?”

Colleagues,

> Is there a hole in the net of the “Word Alone Network?” Seems so to me. Evidence for that are the front and back pages of the recent “Network News” of May-June 2004. Back page is WAN’s Mission Statement; front page is WAN’s April convention resolution on “sexual life.”The texts on these two pages are in crass contradiction to each other. And the issue is fundamental: What is the WORD in the Word Alone Network? Back page says it’s “Jesus the Christ.” Front page says it’s the Bible, and the WORD Incarnate from the mission statement is conspicuous by his absence. Jesus the Christ never ever gets mentioned—let alone “used” to craft the resolution.

The Word Alone Network, as I understand it, is a gathering of unhappy campers within the ELCA, initially galvanized into existence—and action—when the ELCA adopted the policy that a bishop HAD TO have a hand in the ordination of new pastors in order for it to be kosher. Granted, this was part of the package of the ELCA’s friendlier affiliation with the Episcopal Church USA. And if that made them happy, why not?

But some ELCA folks said “Bishops are OK for folks of the Augsburg Confession. That’s no big deal. But when you make them a requirement, something YA GOTTA do or have, then you’ve kicked the trip-wire. Remember Melanchthon’s drumbeat in Apology 4 that REQUIRE is the verb that’s linked to the law, while OFFER is the verb that goes with Gospel.”

The ELCA subsequently opened some crawl space—an “exceptions” bylaw—which softened the YA GOTTA for bishops present at

ordinations. WAN is now looking at other items in the frazzled fabric of our ELCA. Homosexuality is a current hot potato. WAN's annual convention (April 25-27) addressed that. The upshot was their page one resolution adopted "with a unanimous voice vote."

Read it and weep.

Unanimously they voted for Biblicism.

Thus deserting the "Lutheran grassroots" they seek to preserve, and—worst of all—opting for an "other" Gospel that supplants the genuine Gospel proclaimed in their own mission statement, "the Word manifest in Jesus Christ." The mission statement says that "reform and renewal of the church" is WAN's goal. But "other" Gospels cannot do that. Why didn't somebody tell them at that convention? Were there no "grass roots Lutherans" at that gathering?

Here's the evidence. See for yourself.

The WORDALONE Mission Statement (emphasis added):

> *WordAlone is a Lutheran grassroots network of congregations and individuals committed to the authority of the WORD MANIFEST IN JESUS THE CHRIST as proclaimed in Scripture and safeguarded through the work of the Holy Spirit. WordAlone advocates reform and renewal of the church, representative governance, theological integrity, and freedom from a mandated historic episcopate.*

The Resolution (emphasis added): Concerning the Gift of Sexual

Life and Its Divinely Created Structure

Whereas, THE SCRIPTURES TESTIFY that God created the gift of sexuality (Genesis 1 and 2; Mark 10:6-9; Ephesians 5:28-33); and

Whereas, THE SCRIPTURES CLEARLY TEACH that marriage is a lifelong bond of faithfulness between one man and one woman and the context for which sexual intercourse is reserved (1 Corinthians 6:15-20; Hebrews 13:4; Galatians 5:16-19); and

Whereas, that BIBLICAL TEACHING about sexual life has shaped and continues to shape the moral fabric of civilization in profound and positive ways; and

Whereas, that BIBLICAL TEACHING about sexual life is facing unprecedented challenges in society and the church; and

Whereas, a tradition so universal and valuable should not be changed without overwhelming BIBLICAL and confessional WARRANT;

Therefore, be it resolved that the WordAlone Network honor and uphold BIBLICAL TEACHING about sexual life and its vision for marriage and urge all Christians to do likewise; and

Be it further resolved, that any proposed change in standards and definitions for sexual life or marriage which contradicts this BIBLICAL TEACHING be rejected; and

Be it further resolved, that this resolution be conveyed to the ELCA Task Force on Human Sexuality, to the ELCA Conference of Bishops, to the Church Council of the ELCA, and The Rev. Mark Hanson, presiding bishop of the ELCA.

Approved by the WordAlone Network Annual Convention Roseville, Minnesota April 27, 2004

The difference literally jumps off the page. What happened to the WORDALONE manifest in Jesus the Christ?

Previous ThTh postings have rung the changes on Blessed Bob Bertram's classic axiom: "Biblical hermeneutics is at no point separable from Biblical soteriology." In nickel words: How you read the Bible is always linked to how you think people get saved. Differences in one "how" bring differences to the other "how." The Augsburg Aha!—regularly hyped in these postings—links the two "how's" this way: Law-Promise lenses for reading the Bible is the "hermeneutical how," and justification by faith ALONE is the "salvation how." They're Siamese twins.

When Biblicism is the "how" for reading the Bible, its Siamese twin for the "how" of salvation is legalism. Here's their joining. The Bible is read as "Biblical teaching," God teaching us what we are to believe, how we are to worship, how we are to behave. Here's the salvation twin that comes with Biblicist hermeneutics: Salvation is obeying the teaching—for doctrine, for worship, for ethics. Even "justification by faith alone" can become a teaching. When you believe it, you please God. God says: You're OK, aka, you are saved. Salvation by virtue of believing and doing the right things is legalist salvation. No matter how pious it sounds. Salvation by trusting Christ's promise is something else.

Jesus's constant conflict with Jewish scripture scholars was precisely this. They opposed him with "Biblical teaching." "Biblical teaching says this adulteress ought to die. Biblical teaching says No work on the Sabbath, and you're doing it all the time. Biblical teaching has an escape clause for marriage; it's called divorce. Biblical teaching specifies ritual washing and your disciples don't do it. Biblical teaching says that tithing mint & dill and cummin is sufficient. Biblical teaching

. . . Biblical teaching . . . Biblical teaching . . . .” We all know what the grand finale of this Biblicist hermeneutic and its legalist soteriology was: they crucified “the Word manifest in Jesus the Christ.” The paradigm persists. Christ gets wasted (so Apology 4) where the Siamese twins of Biblicism/legalism reign.

The ThTh drumbeat has been: you need a law-promise hermeneutic first of all even to find the Christ-Promise in the Bible. If you don’t find and then “offer” that promise to folks, there really is nothing salvational in the Bible worth trusting, worth having faith “in.” It is faith in THAT Promise, and in nothing else, which justifies, which pleases God and elicits the verdict: “You too are my beloved daughter, beloved son. You’re OK.”

With its commitment to “the Word manifest in Jesus the Christ,” WAN’s mission statement is in the ballpark of the Augsburg Aha! WAN’s convention resolution is not. It opts for a hermeneutic and soteriology that wastes (ignores) the specific Christic Word hyped in the Mission Statement.

I imagine that a thoughtful practicing Jew could sign the WAN resolution. Since “Jesus the Christ” goes unmentioned, that scandal wouldn’t confront him. And on the plus-side for Jewish faith, the resolution is all about Biblical teaching. In Hebrew that’s Torah. That’s what practicing Jews are all about—learning God’s Torah and living according to it.

When St. Paul’s opponents in Galatia get labelled Judaizers, that’s not a dirty word. Judaizer is a technical descriptive term. Galatian Judaizers are not Jews opposed to Jesus. They are pro-Jesus. They are Christ-confessors—or so they think—and doubtless baptized. But here’s the twist: They are folks who are proposing to legalize the Gospel, “turning Christ’s promise

into Torah." Of course, that is "moronic" (Paul's actual term)—since you really cannot turn a promise into "teaching." Promises are offered. Torah is taught.

Yet Torah-twisting happens within Christ's church. It happened in that very first generation of Christians—and has been happening ever since. Seems to me it's happening again in the resolution WAN is offering us. The resolution is a flatout testimony to Torah, the clean contrary of the promise. If anybody should know, Lutherans should know that Torah will never bring about "reform and renewal of the church." Au contraire. It's the chronic problem in Christ's church, never the solution.

And that chronic problem is present on both sides of the homosexuality debate in the ELCA today. Both liberals (the supposed ELCA establishment) and conservatives (like the WAN folks) ground their positions on "Biblical teachings." It's a Torah-tug-of-war. Reminds me of Luther's quip about his critics to the left and to the right: "They are like two foxes apparently running in opposite directions, but their tails are tied together." Neither side in the ELCA tug-of-war (so far as I have seen) shows any signs of "grounding our position in Christ's promise." And they all claim to be Lutherans. O tempora! O mores!

I know it's a baaad pun, but the WAN resolution is "wan" in Webster's definition of that adjective—"suggestive of poor health, sickly, pallid, lacking vitality." That's true of every Torah-fight within the Body of Christ. Sick. Yet even that was too pallid a label for St. Paul when he confronted this "other Gospel" in his Galatian congregation. His verdict on Jesus-the-Christ-turned-into-Torah was "anathema" (1:9). Does the Pauline pejorative persist?

Some of the Word Alone folks are friends of mine—though after this posting that may change! My caveat about their resolution's Biblicism comes as an amicus curiae offering, with this encouraging word: GO back to your Mission Statement. Somehow at the annual convention you were led astray. Sharpen your focus on the Augsburg Aha! about that "WORD Alone manifest in Jesus the Christ." He's God's own Aha!—something new, amazingly new—for Biblical hermeneutics and Biblical soteriology. Our crucified and risen Messiah is not "Biblical teaching."

Christ is God offering sinners a new deal. You don't "teach" an offer. Christ "makes" it; we "trust" it. Of course, you know that. OK, then run with it—also in the homosexuality hassle. That will indeed bring "reform and renewal" in the ELCA. Also in WAN. Nothing else does. Better said, nobody else does.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder