

(Still) In Bondage to Biblicism – “ELCA Study on Sexuality: Part Two”

Colleagues,

LET THERE BE LIGHT

“It’s better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.” That was the motto of a Roman Catholic organization, whose mailings somehow came my way years ago. I think they were the Christophers. Perhaps they still exist. I no longer remember what they did. But their motto I’ve not forgotten. So here’s striking a match—if not to light a candle, then to see if we can find where the candle is in the darkness of the ELCA’s homosexuality hassle. And darkness there is. Also in this just-published (September 2003) “ELCA Study on Sexuality: Part Two” [ESSP2]. It consists of two booklets [hereafter B1 and B2]—24 and 49 pages respectively.

Tim Hoyer reviewed an earlier publication from the ELCA task force in Thursday Theology #262 (June 19, 2003). [Archived on the Crossings website: <www.crossings.org>] He called it “short on promise, long on law.”

ESSP2 brings no relief. And that is doubly painful, since “law and gospel” are hyped over and over again in B2 of the publication as Lutheranism’s treasure—but never used to bring light into the homosexuality hassle.

B1 is a “Background Essay on Biblical Texts.” Two senior ELCA Bible scholars (one “traditional” on the homosexuality issue, one not so) conduct the survey.

They review the scholarly literature on the “hot potato” passages in the Bible, the ones that speak (or maybe they do not) about homosexuality. And there are only a few such passages—three at most in the OT (the major one in Leviticus) and three in the writings of Paul in the NT. None of these six references is a “discussion” of the topic. Two of the OT texts are stories of male gang-rape. In the other four texts same-sex activity is one item in a roster of wicked behavior. In Leviticus the penalty for all items on the list is the same: “they shall be put to death.” In the NT lists “Gentile” same-sex behavior signals that God has already “given them up” (Romans). In the other two lists the sanction is “no inheritance in the Kingdom of God” (I Corinthians), and in I Timothy they are “contrary to the glorious Gospel.”

B1 is a marvelous piece of work. It covers the waterfront—and does so with nickel words so we all can understand what’s going on in these “hot potato” texts, and also how tough it is to get at the “real” meaning of the key terms.

But B1 does not answer the question it poses for itself at the very beginning: “How is it that biblical scholars, studying the same texts and using comparable methods of interpretation, come to different conclusions?”

In their 4 “final observations” the two professors conclude:

1. Homosexuality as a sexual orientation is unknown in the Bible.
2. Where the Bible does speak of same-gender sexual relationships, some interpreters say this, others say that.
3. The “fault line” between these interpreters is not liberal vs. conservative. [Even Luther’s own translation of the Bible on these texts comes out “liberal” on one passage

and “conservative” on another!]

4. Although “the Bible is the primary place to which Christians turn to discern God’s will,” decisions concerning homosexuality “cannot be arbitrated by Biblical scholars alone.” There’s no one answer in the Bible. So, as strange as it may sound, the Bible’s “help . . . remains modest.” Those who “seek the mind of Christ in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit” on homosexuality, say these two professors—remember they are on opposite “sides” in today’s debate—need to look elsewhere for help.

The “how come they come to different conclusions?” question is left unanswered. Look elsewhere, we are told. Such counsel, “look elsewhere for help,” may come as a jolt to folks who claim to take their signals from the Bible, but it is perhaps the best directive in all of ESSP2. Look elsewhere. But then where? B2 does, in one sense, look elsewhere by examining other data about homosexuality—historical, psycho-social, “scientific.”

But that’s looking in the wrong place for how to read the Bible. The fancy word for that is hermeneutics. Looking in those places does not bring light, the needed light, to these Biblical texts. It does not light a candle, does not lighten our darkness.

It has been the frequent claim (a.k.a. Ed’s one-string banjo) in these postings that the “Augsburg Aha!” about how to read the Bible does indeed lighten our darkness. So “look elsewhere.” yes. First of all look at HOW you actually are reading the Bible, and if you’re doing it wrong, then “look elsewhere” for a better way to do so. And for the ELCA task force, that factors out like this: since you are the ELCA., look to the “CA,” the Confessio Augustana, the primal Augsburg Confession (1530) for what “L” means. And in doing that you see that the “L” is all about the “E”-vangel, the Gospel. Capitalize on the “Augsburg Aha!” about reading the Bible with lenses that distinguish law

from gospel.

ESSP2 could have done so. But it does not. Perhaps the task force wants ESSP2 to show us the wide diversity in ELCA opinion. Also that such diversity comes from serious folks of good will and faith—not from screamers to the left or to the right. That it does indeed do. But will the next production, ESSP3, finally USE Lutheran hermeneutics to lighten our darkness? If so, why wait so long—to be Lutheran in reading the Bible and wrestling this one to the ground?

THE DARKNESS OF BIBLICISM

Another quote/anecdote. Way back when (possibly during my grad. studies in Germany half a century ago) there was this famous German professor, of whom it was said: “With every brilliant lecture he sheds darkness on a wide variety of subjects.” ESSP2 brings no new light to the subject. There is still darkness. And that is sad, of course. For the people of good will and good heart on the task force want to illuminate, want to light candles. Why then darkness? The fundamental reason—so it seems to me—is expressed in the topic listed above for this posting: “(Still) In Bondage to Biblicism.” Biblicism is the way the Bible is used in ESSP2. And that’s darkness, not light.

Calling it “Biblicism” will doubtless raise hackles within the task force whose hard work is presented here. Yet this is not an ad hominem evaluation, a smear word. Some of the folks I know. They are good people. Biblicism is an objective predicate, not about a person, but a term for a specific way of using the Bible. It’s finally a bad way, because, to use the most critical word in the Augsburg Confession, it’s short on Gospel, and thus “buries” Christ.

Biblicism IS a dirty word—across the board of the theological spectrum. Even conservative theologians object to being tarred

as Biblicists. They don't "worship" the Bible, they say. [Agreed.] They worship Christ. [Agreed.] And then on the rebound from Christ they go "back to the Bible, [allegedly] taking it just as it is, and reading it for what it actually says" and then "doing all that the Bible says we should do." Aye, there's the rub—doing what the Bible tells us to do. See below.

But, folks will say, ESSP2 can't possibly be biblicist. It's an ELCA study, not one coming from the Missouri Synod! True enough. But Biblicism is just as much at home in today's liberal churches as it is in conservative ones. There may well be debate between the left and the right on "just what the Bible says," but once that is determined, Biblicists both left and right are all committed to obeying what the Bible says. But that's not the Gospel's candle. As an "-ism" biblicism is darkness. It's an "other" Gospel. Like the demons in Jesus' parable about empty houses, it finds easy access when THE Gospel hasn't moved in to manage the store.

[When THE Gospel hasn't moved in to manage the store—that's the problem. Past ThTh postings have discussed that—also in the ELCA. Also postings authored by others than yours truly. See, e.g., ThTh 250 (March 27, 2003) by Kevin Born and Tim Hoyer: "Your Gospel is too Small. A Look at Two Recent ELCA publications" (on ethics and evangelism).]

The test question for Biblicism is: How do you USE the Bible? The "use" word is the biggie. HOW do you use the Bible on the rebound from faith in Christ? Biblicists regularly answer: "we go back to the Bible, take it just as it is, and read it for what it actually says and then do what the Bible tells us to do." And what does the Bible tell us to do? Answer: What we are to believe (teachings) and how we are to behave (ethics).

It sounds so kosher. How could that be an "-ism," let alone an

“other” Gospel?

Well, for starters, that is the Bible-use of the originally “kosher” folks who found Jesus to be teaching and acting contrary to the Hebrew Bible. If there was anything clear in that Bible it was “don’t work on Saturday.” Jesus behaved contrary to that clear word of the Bible. And then when he had thechutzpah to claim “No, this is really the work of God I am doing on Saturdays,” the verdict against him was the super dirty word “blasphemy.” He’s claiming to be equal to God. Commandment #1 says that’s a no-no—a super no-no, the primal no-no “in the Bible.”

Kosher (=doing the right thing) according to Jesus’ critics was “going back to the Bible, reading it for what it really says and then doing what the Bible tells us to do.” Jesus failed that kosher-test. For which Christians say: Hallelujah!

What’s really so bad about Biblicism is its impact on justification by faith, another Lutheran shibboleth recited regularly in B2. Bertram’s ancient axiom, “Biblical hermeneutics is at no point separate from Biblical soteriology,” proves true in B2. [See his essay “The Hermeneutics of Apology IV” in the Bertram archive on the Crossings web site.]

B2 doesn’t offer any alternative hermeneutic to the kosher-test that Jesus failed. Its on-going drumbeat is a pious, but mis-focused, drumbeat of Biblicism. Here are signals of that malady:

1. We “are confident that God’s word will be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.” This opening confidence in B2 comes right after the Bible scholars say the opposite in B1 when it comes to the tough texts.
2. “The Bible is authoritative for the faith and life of this church.”
3. “For Lutherans the meaning of Christ’s life, death, and

resurrection is spelled out in the relationship of law and Gospel.” And then, as though this were in synch with that statement “we seek to follow God’s will as revealed in the commandments of the law.”

4. “We are a community of faith around the scriptures, the source of the church’s teachings.”
5. ESSP2 is pursuing a “biblically based Christian ethic.”
6. More than once we hear that we are concerned about “what the Bible teaches us.”
7. Whatever be the church’s decision on homosexuality, it shall not “strike at the foundation of biblical authority and church teaching.”
8. The overarching motto for the entire ELCA project on sexuality is “Journeying together FAITHFULLY.” Faithful to what or whom? “Faithful to God, the Bible, Christian teaching, and who we are in the body of Christ and what God calls us to do.” Missing in that list is the one proper object of faith (and thus faithfulness) according to the Augsburg Aha! – Christ’s Gospel promise. If that were the basis, the grounding, for being faithful in ESSP2—as simple as that sounds—everything would be different. Especially the dead-end street we ran into with the survey of biblical scholars (B1). And the dead-end street throughout B2. Over and over again throughout the 47 pages of B2 we learn that “some in the ELCA say this; others in the ELCA say the opposite.” We are never given any help for discerning which alternative is “better” than the other. Since both can usually be argued “from the Bible,” we are hamstrung—[Is the task force itself is hamstrung?]-since “faithfulness to the Bible” is the final yardstick. More on this below.

LIGHTING A CANDLE

If some of the rhetoric above sounds like “cursing the

darkness,” here are some candles.

To #1 above, a candle

God’s word is indeed a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, when touched to the right match. Christ offers a specific match to light the candle for reading the scriptures, different from the one his critics used, different from the one struck in ESSP2. Both Christ and his critics honored the scriptures and gave it authority. Yet their USE of the Bible, so he claimed, was darkness, and its promoters blind. He claimed that his was real light, and theirs real darkness, specifically when “you search the scriptures.” Both Sts. John and Paul make this light vs. dark reading of the Bible fundamental to their proclamation. Is it any different today?

A candle for #2

Bible’s authority. That’s a big one. That was at the core in the Wars of Missouri 30 years ago. It’s at the center of ESSP2 too. To put it bluntly, ESSP2’s view of Biblical authority is cheek-by-jowl with the one in Missouri then—and possibly still now. More on this in subsequent ThTh postings. Possibly I’ll just pass on to you what I learned 50 years ago (Summer Semester 1953 at the University of Erlangen) about Biblical authority after the Augsburg Aha! It’s been the Biblical hermeneutic of Crossings since its beginning.

A candle for #3

“For Lutherans the meaning of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection is spelled out in the relationship of law and Gospel.” Not wrong, but not right either. At best misfocused, at worst mis-used. “The distinction (not relationship!) between law-and-Gospel” is the hermeneutic proposal of Augsburg for how to read the Bible, how to read the world. It’s not a “teaching.” In the Augsburg tradition it’s lenses for reading texts, not the texts themselves. ESSP2 never ever uses these lenses for reading

either the Word or the World. B1 is reading the Bible; B2 is reading the world. Neither ever comes close to USING the law/gospel lenses for doing the reading.

At Andy Weyermann's funeral in Milwaukee on Saturday last [My 6th funeral in 6 months. Memento mori's abound in more ways than one], many of the "ancients" gathered for the celebrative liturgy. One of those veterans, Dick Koenig, in conversation thereafter said: "Ed, the ELCA knows all the Lutheran jargon and recites the epigrams regularly—Christ the center of the Scriptures, Law and Gospel, justification by faith alone, faith active in love—but in stuff coming from the headquarters, there's no signal that anyone knows how to USE them." My sentiments too. Especially knowing how to use the Augsburg Aha! about Law and Gospel for reading the Bible. Exhibit A is ESSP2, especially when this howler "we seek to follow God's will as revealed in the commandments of the law" is the ethical maxim linked to the solid Christ statement cited in the previous paragraph.

For reading Word and world on homosexuality with these lenses, see candle #8 below.

A candle for #4

Not the Bible, but the Gospel is the source (=fountain head) of Christian teaching. So says Augsburg. And Augsburg is even feisty enough to say that at that fountainhead there is only ONE teaching, namely, the "doctrina evangelii," the doctrine of the Gospel. "Doctrina" is the singular. There is only one doctrine. "Evangelii", of the gospel, is the subjective genitive for what the one doctrina is. The one teaching IS Gospel. Why then 28 articles in the AC? Good question. Bertram's ancient answer: The 28 articles of the AC "articulate" the one and only Gospel as it links to the 28 topics of the AC. Thus AC Article 1 = Gospel-grounded talk about God; AC 2 = Gospel-grounded talk about sin,

etc., all the way to #28.

To designate the Gospel as the one and only “teaching” could still mislead if the “learner” didn’t “hear” the Gospel’s own grammar. Gospel is not something to learn (like the ABCs), or something to accept as true (the earth is round) but an “offer” to be trusted. A freebee tossed our way by Christ. “Here. Catch. Your sins are forgiven. Trust me.”

The Lutheran “community of faith” circles round the Gospel, not the scriptures. Such language recalls the Wars of Missouri from 30 years ago. But the fight then—and seemingly now both in the ELCA and the LCMS—is the biblicist one: is the Gospel or the Bible at the center when we circle the wagons?

A candle for #5

You guessed it. Instead of a “biblically based Christian ethic,” the candle for the darkness is a Gospel-based ethic that “properly” distinguishes law and gospel.

A candle for #6

“What the Bible teaches us.” There are many “teachings” in the Bible. Augsburg claimed there was really only one “doctrina.” So how to read those many teachings? It’s the same as “how to read the Bible?” Augsburg answers: with a law/Gospel hermeneutic. Without that hermeneutic there is no way to read the teachings and have them come out gospel-grounded. Especially on the homosexuality hot potato. The 28 articles of the AC are the primordial Lutheran “How to” for reading the Bible this way.

A candle for #7

“The foundation of biblical authority and church teaching.” You fill in the blank: “The foundation of biblical authority and church teaching is_____.”

A candle for #8

“Faithfully” doing anything in the Augsburg tradition is constantly bouncing everything off the center of faith-in-Christ, which is faith in Christ’s Gospel-promise. That is the way, that is the only way, to be “faithful to God, the Bible, Christian teaching, and who we are in the body of Christ and what God calls us to do.” “Faithful to the Gospel” is the constant dipstick proposed by the Augsburg Aha! for testing everything in the life and work of the church.

ESSP2 has not yet done that job, has not yet shown the way. The ELCA’s study is still under way. More light may come. But so far it’s under a bad star, which unhappily is the literal meaning of “dis-aster.” Not good news at all. But the resources for hitching the ELCA wagon to a good star, a bright star are there. They are in the Lutheran firmament. Take and “use.” And if you need some how-to assistance on this, past ThTh postings could help, such as Tim Hoyer’s earlier review listed above and now posted on the Crossings web-page <www.crossings.org> Once you get to the website you can find more postings that address homosexuality with law/gospel lenses. They are listed in the ThTh roster under these dates:

- 1999
 - Jan. 28
 - Feb 4
 - May 27
 - June 17
- 2001
 - June 28
- 2002
 - Jan 17
 - Jan. 24
 - Feb. 7
 - May 16

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder