

African Lutheran Churches Rebuke their Western Siblings

Colleagues,

This past week two of you on the Crossings listserve sent me copies of documents from national Lutheran churches in Africa—one from Kenya, one from Tanzania—both of them rebuking the ELCAmerica and the Lutheran church of Sweden for their “apostasy” regarding homosexuality.

The “shock, dismay and disappointment” expressed in these documents as well as their counter-confession “Here we stand, we will NOT do otherwise” is itself dismaying and sad. For these reasons:

1. It's all about the Bible, and these African churches learned how to read the Bible from the European and American missionaries who brought that way of Bible-reading to them. And they learned it well. But what they learned was a less-than-Lutheran way to do it. It was reading the Bible with the mindset of “opinio legis,” as the Lutheran confessions label it, the “mentality of law,” and not with the “mind of Christ.” That's even more serious than “less than Lutheran.” That's less than—yes, even worse—CONTRARY to Jesus' own way of reading the scriptures as the four NT Gospels present him. That's the stuff of super sadness and dismay. [More on this below.]

And we Western Lutherans taught it to them as our conservative, evangelical, pietist, often biblicist and (possibly) legalist missionaries brought the Gospel to them. It is the authority of the Bible—never once “the Gospel”—that is the drumbeat of the African message back to Western-world Lutherans. Over and over again these two

documents confess—now sadly and dismayingly—that their “hope is built on nothing less” than the Bible’s authority, not on “Jesus’ blood and righteousness.”

Now that’s a frightful statement. But what would you conclude from your own reading of the two documents? The Tanzanian one is five pages. It’s called The Dodoma Statement. You can find it here: <http://www.elct.org/news/2010.04.004.html>

The Kenya text is closer to one page. You can access it at <http://steadfastlutherans.org/?p=7287> No surprise, I found it on the website of the “Steadfast Lutherans,” the LCMS group that succeeded in unseating synod president Kieschnick (not steadfast enough) in this summer’s Missouri Synod convention. Their candidate, Matthew Harrison, super-steadfast, was elected in Kieschnick’s place. So it’s also no surprise that the Kenya confessors praise the “International Lutheran Council,” a Missouri-Synod-generated affiliation for steadfast Lutherans worldwide who choose to eschew the less-than-steadfast folks in the Lutheran World Federation.

IN THE TANZANIAN TEXT

Over and over again:

*weaken the authentic Biblical truth
Word of God dating from time immemorial
ELCT stands firmly on the foundation of the Word of God
as taught in the Bible
the Bible is self-interpreting
Holy Scripture is accurate, fixed and unchangeable
[gay] marriages that the Bible has not countenanced
in the Word of God dwells principles of life
sabotages the foundation of the Word of God*

*mindful fo the Word of God and its profound meanings
ELCT vehemently refuses misinterpretations and scandalous
use of Holy Scriptures*

*We must remain forever mindful of the Word of God
stand up, study the Word of God, and refuse strange
teachings.*

IN THE KENYAN CONFESSION

*anti-scriptural development
rejected the authority of the Scriptures as the Word of
God.*

*under the authority of the Scriptures
contrary to God's will as clearly expressed in the Holy
Scripture*

*we must confess the Word of God
remain faithful to the Scriptures
by the Scripture the Lord will save the Church in the
World*

2. I was struck by one sentence in the Kenyan text, which provides a deeper clue, I think, to this adamant drumbeat for the authority of the Bible—not only that “we” mission-sending Lutherans taught them, but how it now is at work within them.”. . . we further state that it beats our logics and saddens us very much that the church of Sweden, which at the reformation was the pillar of Biblical Reformation within Christendom has now decided to go apostate”

“It beats our logics” is a revealing statement. Probably more than the Kenyans intended. Throughout the church’s history two logics have been in conflict, the logic of opinio legis and the logic of the mind of Christ. Two different mindsets. In Luther’s Galatians commentary he

calls these two different grammars. Labels for the two in Reformation days were semi-pelagianism vs. faith alone, theology of glory vs. theology of the cross.

3. Isn't this what St. Paul was confronting over and over again in his mission ministry? Not only in his Galatian congregation, but also in Corinth. Go to 2 Cor 3:6ff. I'll appropriate some of Paul's "boldness" (v.12) and give an EHS-rendering of his text, linking it to our topic. 2Cor.3:6-17

"God has made us competent to be deacons of a new covenant, not of the law's verbatim letters—"this is kosher, this is NOT kosher"—but of the Spirit, the Spirit now loose in the world since Jesus was raised from the dead. For the law's kosher/non-kosher letters always kill the ones trusting them, even when these letters are words in the Bible—as they are by the zillions. But the Spirit emanating from Easter gives life.

"That ministry, that divine operation, of death was chiseled into the tablets of the decalogue. No life coming from it at all—even for alleged commandment-keepers. Au contraire! Yet it did have its glow-ry, its razzle-dazzle. So much so that Moses had to veil his face lest the Israelites get scorched as he brought the tablets to them. But it was the glow of death, now set aside—Hallelujah!—by the super-glow of the divine operation of the Spirit emanating from Easter. The glow in the prior covenant resulted in condemnation for its adherents, the second one in their justification; that's the difference between dying and surviving the heat coming from those tablets. One divine operation was set aside, the second one that came is permanent. Guess which one has the more glow!

"Well then, since we're basking in the glow that doesn't

incinerate, that lasts, we've got chutzpah. We don't veil our face about the new divine operation that's been entrusted to us. Yet we need to look again at the Moses operation. It was not only Moses, there also was a veil that afflicted the Sinai congregation too. This veil was not on their faces, but inside their heads. Their minds were hardened. Not God's law itself got into their mindset, but an "opinio legis" got added on to God's law, an opinion that said "If you do what the law says, you'll be kosher with God." It moved into the mind with sclerotic effect. No self-purgation could correct it.

[And, sadly, it's still going on. To this very day when folks with that affliction read the old covenant (or for that matter both old and new testaments) in the 21st century, that same veil kicks in. It blocks folks from reading the old covenant aright, and they never get to the new one.]

"Only in Christ is the veil set aside. When one turns to the Lord Christ, the veil is removed. And in the transaction, as the opinio legis veil disintegrates, the mind of Christ moves in. Now the Lord Christ and the Holy Spirit are in cahoots, of course, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." [ESV]

4. Wouldn't this help the Kenyan and Tanzanian Lutherans? I can see that they are not helped by what I remember of the rationale that accompanied the ELCA action last year—and the lengthy study documents that preceded it. Most of it about "love" and "commitment" and pages of social science research to support the ELCA's move into open arms for its homosexual members. Though they don't actually say that, the Africans are critical of "sloppy agape" and social science groundings for church action. Rightly so, I'd say.

Both doctrine and practice need better foundations—like patent linkage to THE cornerstone.

Seems to me that the ELCA action was the right thing, but for the wrong reasons. The reasons did not come from Lutheran Reformation roots. No wonder the Africans reprimand us. The proposals offered now and then on the Crossings website have sought to ground such open-arms welcome in a Lutheran theology of creation, and a law/promise hermeneutic for reading those “killer texts” in the Bible.

The Bible IS an authority, but not the authority that *opinio legis* gives it, namely, a legal authority wherein “everything that this book says is God’s Word telling us what we must believe and do—or else!” The authority of the Bible is derivative from the authority of the Gospel. The Bible is the authority for learning/hearing what the Good News is. It opens our eyes to see that the term “Word of God” as used in the Bible itself never refers to printed words on parchment.

That is an item for which today’s Lutherans world-wide should thank Luther, though the African statements don’t reflect it when they speak of God’s Word. “Wort Gottes” (word of God) when Luther uses the term, is the Gospel, the merciful promise, not the book. When Luther refers to the Bible he uses “die Bibel,” or “die heilige Schrift” (holy scripture). When he says something like: “We have God’s word for it that sinners are forgiven,” he does not mean “we have the Bible” for it, but “we have God’s promise”

5. Imagine how the African statements would be different if God’s Word as promise were to replace every reference to God’s Word as the Bible. And that goes for the current

hullabaloo in the ELCA too, where God's Word as promise seems lost in the rhetoric coming from either side. Neither the allegedly liberal ELCA establishment, nor the ex-ELCA purist new North American Lutheran Church builds on that cornerstone. Which shows that both Biblical liberals and Biblical purists can be afflicted with the opinio legis veil when reading the Bible. So long as that persists, the rescue offered in Corinthians 3 never happens: "Only in Christ is the veil set aside. When one turns to the Lord Christ, the veil is removed. And in the transaction, as the opinio legis veil disintegrates, the mind of Christ moves in. Now the Lord Christ and the Holy Spirit are in cahoots, of course, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."

I don't expect to be alive when this conflict may someday come to closure. It's been 150 years in the USA since slavery of Africans, once claimed to be "based on the Bible," was formally abolished. Yet in the USA that racial gap is still not completely bridged. So this one too may take generations. Nevertheless Paul's conclusion to his discourse on the veil is encouraging: "Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart."

Which are sufficient grounds for saying
Peace and Joy!
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