

Augsburg Confessional Theology and the Sexuality Debate Part Two: A Canadian Sequel to Last Week's Post.

Colleagues,

One of the responses to last week's post came from Canada. Co-crosser Hal Remus alerted me to the parallel debate in the ELCIC [Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada] and he sent me the "nay" and the "yea" documents, both of which I pass on to you here. Just plain "super," to my mind, was the Augsburg-Confession-grounding of the yea-sayers.

Hal tells me that this Augsburg-anchored text comes from "a small group of Alberta pastors . . . in response to their fellow Alberta pastors who issued a Confessional Ministerium Statement stating their convictions that the ELCIC was "depart[ing] from the traditional faith and practice of the Church" with its openness on the homosexual issue.

To learn more about the nay-sayers, go to <http://www.confessionalministerium.ca/>

To learn more about the yea-sayers, go to <http://www.webelieveinthegospel.org/20201.html>

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

We the members of the Confessional Ministerium have entered into this fellowship for mutual encouragement and accountability, as we work to fulfill the vows we made at our ordination. We do so for our sake, for the sake of the congregations we serve, and for the sake of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.

We are aware of forces within the ELCIC that would divert it from the traditional faith and practice of the Church catholic, thus we believe it necessary to confess and call attention to the following.

- *We confess that the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God and the norm for the faith of the Church, containing all things necessary for salvation. As such the Bible is to be read, preached, taught and obeyed in its plain canonical sense, respectful of the church's historic and consensual reading.*
- *We accept, teach, and confess the Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian Creeds. We also acknowledge the Lutheran Confessions as true witnesses and faithful expositions of the Holy Scriptures.*
- *We confess the Holy Sacrament of Baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to be the means through which individuals are brought into the body of Christ. We confess the Sacrament of Holy Communion to be the means by which the baptized believer is nourished by the reception of the true body and blood of Jesus Christ. Through these sacraments and through the rite of confession and absolution, the Christian receives forgiveness of sins.*
- *We submit to and proclaim the unique and universal Lordship of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, humanity's only*

Saviour from sin, judgment and hell. By His atoning death and glorious resurrection, He secured the redemption of all creation. We proclaim this Gospel in the hope that all will come to Him in repentance and faith.

- *We acknowledge and submit to the exercise of proper and Godly authority within the church by those called and set apart for the ministry of oversight. We also acknowledge that those called to this ministry, whether Pastors, Deacons, or Bishops, are to exercise that authority within the bounds of Scripture, Creeds, and the Lutheran Confessions.*
- *We acknowledge the marriage relationship of one man and one woman as an order of God's good creation. This relationship is the proper place for sexual intimacy, the basis of the family, and the primary place where people are instructed and grow in faith. Children are to be welcomed as a gift to the marriage relationship. We repent of our failures to maintain and uphold this standard and call for a renewed commitment to lifelong fidelity in marriage and abstinence and support for those who are not married.*
- *While we hope and pray the ELCIC will not choose to depart from the traditional faith and practice of the Church we believe it necessary, as leaders of congregations, to prepare for that possibility and prayerfully discern in which direction we must go in order that we might preserve our unity with the one holy catholic and apostolic Church.*

We make this statement, aware of our complete and total dependence on the grace of God. We trust the Holy Spirit will complete what is lacking, lead and guide us, and our congregations in faithful discipleship.

The response:

WE BELIEVE IN THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST

An Open Letter to the Rostered Leaders and Congregations of the
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

April 8, 2009

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the
communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Every generation encounters its own crisis of faith. Each crisis
is a call for the church to return to the heart of its faith in
order to reflect and discern. What does it mean to be church?
What is the Gospel? What do the Holy Scriptures and the
Confessions say concerning the issues? Our identity as Lutherans
is centered in the Gospel, articulated most clearly in Article
IV on Justification in The Augsburg Confession:

*Furthermore, it is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of
sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or
satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and
become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake
through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us
and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and
eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon
this faith as righteousness in his sight, as St. Paul says in
Romans 3[:21-26] and 4[:5] (CA IV:1-3, Kolb, Wengert, p. 38,
40).*

Healthy discussion on issues of concern is made possible because
our identity as Lutherans is never in question. As the reformers
so carefully summarized our faith in Article IV, we “receive
forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace

for Christ's sake through faith..." Christ is the peace between us and the source of our unity (Ephesians 2:14-22). Our unity in Christ and as the church is a gift of the Holy Spirit. This means that despite our most vigorous disagreements, we are nonetheless part of the one body of Christ. We have been baptized into Christ and so we belong to him and relate to one another as one family of God. "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (Ephesians 4:5-6).

Yet, there are some pastors who have formed a group called the "Confessional Ministerium" who seek to separate themselves from the ELCIC. The Confessional Ministerium has created a brochure entitled, "The Confessional Ministerium: The Courage to Be Lutheran." This brochure states that there are "forces within the ELCIC" who have taken a "revisionist understanding of the gospel" with regard to "the heated controversies regarding human sexuality and the attending profound gift of God in marriage." The members of the Confessional Ministerium have also committed to resign from the ELCIC as a group "when we agree that the gospel has been abandoned."

The purpose of this open letter to the churches is to provide a response to the Confessional Ministerium, especially with regard to the allegations that the church has revised and is about to abandon the Gospel. To do this we return to the Lutheran Confessions to seek clarity on the question: What IS the Gospel? We must never tire of asking this fundamental question as it is the teaching upon which the church stands or falls. Finally, this letter is also a call to seek the unity of the church, the body of Christ, and to refrain from schism.

We confess our faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But what is the Gospel? In The Apology of The Augsburg Confession the

following definition of the Gospel is given: the Gospel is, "strictly speaking, the promise of the forgiveness of sins and justification on account of Christ" (Ap IV:43, Kolb, Wengert, p. 127).

In *THE FREEDOM OF A CHRISTIAN*, Luther also writes: "The Word is the gospel of God concerning his Son, who was made flesh, suffered, rose from the dead, and was glorified through the Spirit who sanctifies. To preach Christ means to feed the soul, make it righteous, set it free, and save it, provided it believes the preaching" (Dillenberger, ed., p. 55).

These two beautiful passages ring out like a clarion bell almost five centuries after they were originally written. They are decisive in their proclamation of the Gospel as "the promise of the forgiveness of sins and justification because of Christ." Because God is the God of steadfast love, God's promises are trustworthy and true. They are eternally valid. In Baptism our identity is forever changed. God freely chooses to make us sons and daughters of God, members of God's family. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, God has chosen to extend the promise of forgiveness of sins to us. This is the Gospel.

So where do we as human beings come in? The only way to receive a promise is to trust that God's promise in Christ is for us too, that is, to have faith in the promise. Such faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit. "For faith does not justify or save because it is a worthy work in and of itself, but only because it receives the promised mercy" (Ap IV:56, Kolb, Wengert, p. 129). And as Paul also writes, "... if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9).

The reformers expressed two main concerns in articulating the Gospel as God's promise. First, it makes Christ necessary for

salvation. The Gospel is the exclusive domain of what God is doing for us. All of our own efforts to save ourselves through our own good deeds, achievements, or personal piety fall short. "There is no one who is righteous, not even one...there is no one who seeks God" (Romans 3:10-11). Expanding on this passage in Romans, Luther writes: "When you have learned this you will know that you need Christ, who suffered and rose again for you so that, if you believe in him, you may through this faith become a new man in so far as your sins are forgiven and you are justified by the merits of another, namely of Christ alone" (FREEDOM OF A CHRISTIAN, Dillenberger, p. 56).

Second, the reformers had a pastoral concern to comfort the terrified consciences of those who believed themselves condemned because of their inability to fulfill the law or meet some moral standard of perfection and purity. If we are responsible for our own salvation, then how can we ever be assured that we have done enough, or loved enough, or are perfect enough? The reformers therefore rejected as "incorrect and harmful when it is taught that the gospel is, strictly speaking, a proclamation of repentance or retribution and not exclusively a proclamation of grace. For in this way the gospel is again made into a teaching of the law, the merit of Christ and the Holy Scriptures are obscured, Christians are robbed of true comfort, and the door is opened again to the papacy" (FC Ep V:11, Kolb, Wengert, p.501).

In summary, the Gospel makes Christ necessary for salvation and comforts terrified consciences. The Gospel is the pure expression of God's unconditional and gracious love for the ungodly, the condemned, sinners, that is, for us all. In short, the Gospel is about what God is doing through Christ for us. It is never about what human beings can do to save themselves.

Let us now turn to the claims found in the brochure entitled, "The Confessional Ministerium: The Courage to be Lutheran." The

Confessional Ministerium expresses deep concern “for the direction the ELCIC has been taking towards a revisionist understanding of the gospel.” Has the ELCIC, through its constitution, faith, and practice ceased to profess the Gospel as “the forgiveness of sins and justification because of Christ”? As a human institution, its actions reflect the paradox that we are at the same time saint and sinner. Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit has created the church and is found within it whenever the Gospel is preached and the sacraments are rightly administered. Wherever Christ alone is proclaimed and terrified consciences are thereby comforted, THERE is the Holy Spirit and THERE is the church.

The Confessional Ministerium, on the other hand, insists that “the traditional faith and practice of the Church catholic” on the question of human sexuality and marriage is a matter of the Gospel. To make the church’s historical understanding of human sexuality and marriage a matter of the Gospel is precisely where the Confessional Ministerium errs. For this would mean that faith alone in Christ alone is no longer sufficient. One must also have an unwavering faith in a particular practice of the church. But this is to turn the UNCONDITIONAL Gospel of Christ into a CONDITIONAL gospel, which is no Gospel at all.

Ironically, those who accuse others of abandoning the Gospel have themselves revised and abandoned it by turning it into law. Rather than confessing that faith in the Gospel is sufficient for salvation, the Confessional Ministerium wants to add something extra to it, that is, to make a particular traditional practice of the church a requirement of faith equivalent to faith in the Gospel. However, “Faith is that worship which receives the benefits that God offers; the righteousness of the law is that worship which offers God our own merits. God wants to be honored by faith...” (Ap IV:49, Kolb, Wengert, p. 128). How is the Confessional Ministerium’s advocacy of the righteousness

of the law different from the “judaizers” that Paul refutes in Galatians, those who wished to add circumcision as a requirement or condition for believers? In response to those who sought the righteousness of the law, Paul exclaims: “I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing” (Galatians 2:21).

As Robert W. Jenson wrote in LUTHERANISM: THE THEOLOGICAL MOVEMENT AND ITS CONFSSIONAL WRITINGS, “ ‘The gospel’ is the Reformation label for that promise which, if true at all, is unconditional: the promise made in the name of one who has already satisfied the condition of death and therefore has all future in his gift... The gospel tolerates no conditions. It is itself unconditional promise” (p. 44). The reformers also had strong words for those in their day who denied that faith in the promise was enough for salvation: “Therefore those who deny that faith justifies do away with both the gospel and Christ and teach nothing but law” (Ap IV:70, Kolb, Wengert, p. 132). In his Large Catechism Luther writes: “...all who would seek to merit holiness through their works rather than through the gospel and the forgiveness of sin HAVE EXPELLED AND SEPARATED THEMSELVES FROM [THE CHRISTIAN] COMMUNITY” (emphasis added, LC, Part II, The Third Article: 56, Kolb, Wengert, p. 438).

We are grieved that members of the Confessional Ministerium are committed to separating themselves from the church on the basis of a matter that is not the Gospel. In The Large Catechism, Luther taught that the church, as a creation of the Holy Spirit, lives under the banner of God’s grace and forgiveness: “Further we believe that in this Christian community we have the forgiveness of sins, which takes place through the holy sacraments and absolution as well as through all the comforting words of the entire gospel” (LC, Part II, The Third Article: 54, Kolb, Wengert, p. 438). As such, the church is to be a place where “there is full forgiveness of sins, both in that God

forgives us and that we forgive, bear with, and aid one another” (LC, Part II, The Third Article: 55, Kolb, Wengert, p. 438). As St. John writes: “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God” (1 John 4:7).

We appeal to all brothers and sisters in Christ to trust that “The Holy Spirit will remain with the holy community or Christian people until the Last Day” (LC, Part II, The Third Article: 53, Kolb, Wengert, p. 438). The church is a gift of the Holy Spirit and, by faith, we trust that the Spirit abides with the ELCIC to this day and into the future as the ELCIC proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all people. Along with the reformers who expressed their true desire for unity in the church, we call upon all pastors and congregations to remember that “we are all enlisted under one Christ, we are all to live together in one communion and in one church” (CA Preface: 4, Kolb, Wengert, p.30).

“May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters.” Amen. (Galatians 6:18).

Abbreviations:

- Ap – The Apology of the Augsburg Confession
- CA – CONFESSIO AUGUSTANA (The Augsburg Confession)
- FC – The Formula of Concord
- LC – The Large Catechism

Sources:

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