

Carl Braaten's Jeremiad: ELCA is Just Another Liberal Protestant Denomination

Colleagues,

The ELCA's national assembly a week ago produced no explosions. On the hot-potato sexuality issue the delegates voted for the status quo. A fortnight or so before the assembly, veteran ELCA theology prof Carl Braaten published an open letter to the ELCA national bishop. This hot-potato was one of his sub-texts. The core caveat in Carl's public letter was that the ELCA was becoming (probably had already become) "just another liberal American Protestant denomination." And what was the bishop going to do about it?

Since then 2 (yes, only two!) of you have asked: What do you think of Braaten's letter to bishop Mark Hanson?

Well, Carl didn't send it to me, and I wasn't in the loop of those who received it. But the two of you put hard copies (4 pages) into my hands. So I did read it and afterwards did think some thoughts. For summer's end, here they are.

First of all, a summary of Braaten's open letter—if you've had no access to the text.

Paragraph #'s

1. There is a serious brain drain, so many good guy theologians are abandoning the ELCA— jumping ship to the Roman Catholic Church [RCC] and to the Orthodox Church of America [OCA]. Why?
2. Here are the names: Jaroslav Pelikan, Bob Wilken, Jay

Rochelle, Len Klein, Bruce Marshall, David Fagerberg, Reinhard Huetter, Mickey Mattox Why do they leave? Why? Why? Why? Is there a message? Who has ears to hear?

3. Here's why. It's the PULL of orthodox teaching in these churches plus the PUSH of the ELCA, which "has become just another liberal protestant denomination." The ELCA is no longer "e" or "c" or "o," (evangelical, catholic, orthodox = Carl's key adjectives for genuine Christian theology) which was "the heart of Luther's reformatory teaching and the Luth. Conf. Writings." The RCC is now more hospitable to confessional Lutheran teaching than the ELCA is.
4. I can't do what they've done, re-invent myself. From my Madagascar missionary-kid roots, my 5-decade "long paper trail" – I'm an heir to the Luth. confessing movement. Liberal protestantism is heresy. ELCA is there. But I'm not about to cut and run. There is no place I know of where to go. The kind of Lutheranism I learned—from pious missionary parents and from the great 20th century Lutheran theologians I name here (a dozen of them)—is "near extinction" in the ELCA. There is no evidence to the contrary in what comes from the many voices and sources who speak for the ELCA. "Pious piffle...the aroma of an empty bottle" is all that remains. These good guys (all friends/colleagues of mine) left for this reason: ELCA is just another liberal protestant denomination. They are not stupid, nor rash, but serious Christians. And it ought to concern you immensely, as well as other ELCA leaders. Or are y'all saying "good riddance?"
5. I read all your episcopal letters. They too are no different from those coming from liberal protestant leaders of other American denominations. Sure, they are left-leaning politically. So am I. Here's my track record. But all that doesn't equal "transforming Lutheranism into a liberal protestant denomination in doctrine, worship,

and morality.”

6. Similar thing has happened with DIALOG, the magazine some of us Luther Seminary profs founded in 1961—to get midwest Lutherans into the world-wide orbit of Lutheran theology—and eventually “e” and “c” and “o.” We edited it for 30 years, then resigned and started PRO ECCLESIA with its commitment to the “Great Tradition’ of e, c, & o. Since then DIALOG has become the “very opposite of what we intended,” nothing seriously Lutheran, the aroma of an empty bottle. Even worse, the mouthpiece of the denominational bureaucracy.
7. Some future historian will try “to explain how this self-destruction of conf. orthodox Lutheranism came about.” You, Mark, spoke recently about the hoped-for day when RCs and Lutherans commune together. Unlikely. Despite the Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification (between Lutherans and Rome), the confessional chasm widens as we “embark on a trajectory that leads to rank antinomianism.”
8. I won’t leave, but persons and congregations are talking of schism. They will do something since apostasy is on the horizon. It’s all about “taking Scriptures seriously.” That has been the mantra of “every orthodox theologian of the Great Tradition.” We’ll soon find out—if the ELCA takes the Scripture seriously. [Carl is referring to the homosexuality issue and the August assembly of the ELCA.] “Whoever passes the issue off as simply a hermeneutical squabble is not being honest.” That’s ecclesiastical anarchy, sometimes called pluralism. To each his own. [Carl also says it in (somewhat fractured?) French: Chacun son gout! I think the phrase is: Chacun ≠ son gout!]
9. I’m sorry it has come to this situation in the church, where I—as well as many pastor/missionaries in my extended family—have served for whole lifetimes. I speak for them

too in saying that this church . . . is not remaining faithful to the kind of promises they made upon their ordination.

10. Is there a remedy? Are we at the point of no return? Apparently.
11. One day we will have to answer before the judgment seat of God. No one will be at our side to help. We all will have many things for which to repent. We all will cry: Lord, have mercy!

So far Carl's open letter to Bishop Mark Hanson.

Seems to me—

Para #1 & 2

1. Pelikan's move into Russian orthodoxy he recently described as this: "I thought it was about time that I became de jure what for ages I'd been de facto." So he represents no trend. I have not seen the "statements" of any of these other folks about their departures, if they made any. Did they leave the ELCA "because of the gospel," or as R.J. Neuhaus said at the time of his departure when he gave his apologia three years ago for swimming the Tiber: because he wanted an authoritative church, that was e and c and o, and that had the backbone to say: "In matters of doctrine and ethics—this is right, that wrong." It is clear that the Bishop of Rome does that. At that time ThTh devoted two postings to RJN's statement [archived on the Crossings website—www.crossings.org—May 2 and 9, 2002]. To me it signalled that "Mother-Missouri Synod" might still be RJN's genetic markers, and a "big" and "really catholic" authority figure for what is right and wrong was just irresistible. He did not claim that

there was a “better” Gospel in Rome. That is the marker for “Augsburg catholics” for where the church is or isn’t. So I wonder if the dear departed whom Carl laments made any mention of churchly authority being normed by the Gospel [Aug. Cong. 28], as a reason for their departures. I have my hunches.

Carl asks: “What is the message here from these departures?” I wonder. It is not at all clear. Carl does not say that it is theology and church life being normed “according to THE gospel.” But if that were what they said, then it seems to me that they’re wearing blinders if they find Rome to be home. Significant is the fact that Carl never uses the “Gospel-dipstick” for his critique. Even more telling, the word “Gospel” appears nowhere in his four-page letter.

3. The ELCA is a liberal protestant denomination. Sure, it’s true. Agonizing, yes. But why should a “senior citizen” theologian be so surprised, so vexed? One reason for Carl, I suspect, is that he was a major voice in the formation of the ELCA. It was designed to be better—more Lutheran, for sure—than it has become. What happened? My question: Why have faith in any denomination’s orthodoxy? Didn’t we ex-Missouri Synod ELCA members learn that a generation ago? Didn’t Carl learn that in the imperfect old Norwegian and subsequent denominations that he grew up in? Denominations are an American invention in church history, only in the last couple hundred years of the church’s 2000-yr history. Most American Christians seem not to be aware of that, though others in the world Christian communion know that. American denominations have always been a mixed bag. As is the ELCA today. And denominations, so say the experts, are now passing away.

I think it is safe to say that there are NO New Testament

rubrics for how to run a denomination. No wonder they yin and yang, and may well be collapsing after a century or two.

Granted, what follows is ad hominem, but still I wonder. Does Carl's lament about the ELCA signal a chromosome passed on from his Norwegian pietism that a "pure" church is possible? "Ecclesiola in ecclesiae" was the motto we learned in seminary for Pietism's sense of church, namely, "a smallish pure church within the larger mixed-bag denomination or territorial church." I wonder.

4. "Pious missionary parents." Is that a clue for a pietist gene? Carl's yardstick for OK-ness is "e" and "c" and "o," evangelical, catholic and orthodox. But as Luther was wont to ask: What does that mean? What constitutes e and c and o? In Carl's letter to Hanson we don't learn that. Perhaps he thinks "everybody knows." I doubt it. Another of his markers is the "Great Tradition." Yet here too, who says what that tradition is and who—especially today—is in it? The 16th cent. Reformation was precisely a controversy about that "great tradition"—and there were divergent answers. If the Great Tradition is THE Gospel, then some of today's Roman theology is still elsewhere. Witness the indulgences granted during the Pope's recent visit to Cologne. And that is also true for the ELCA. Some of its sectors are elsewhere. But not all.
5. That's what they're also arguing about in the LCMS (possibly now a "conservative" mainline protestant denomination at the other end of the spectrum from the ELCA's alleged liberal generic protestantism). Where is the Great Tradition to be found across the whole spectrum of American denominations? Both inside and outside American Lutheranism—and inside and outside Rome—you can find a variety of alternatives to Augsburg's claim (and

confession) of that great tradition. So in which one(s) can you find THE great tradition?

6. Does Carl notice how telling this is? So it seems to me. He and his buddies didn't succeed in keeping DIALOG, their own baby, in the e & c & o of the Great Tradition. I.e., they failed. So what concrete counsel does he have to help Bishop Hanson shape up the big ELCA when they failed to do it with "little" DIALOG? He doesn't offer any. Seems more like: "Somebody's got to do something, and you, bishop, are the guy in charge." But what clout do bishops really have—even the bishop of Rome—for keeping the troops in line? Augsburg Art. 28 answers that question in terms of "bishops according to the gospel." It claims that coercion won't work, but other resources will. Too bad Carl doesn't tap that to give his own bishop some counsel.
7. "Rank antinomianism." That's the burr that really scratches, I betcha. It was the upcoming ELCA Orlando Assembly and the homophile hassle that vexes Carl. Is that also true for most, or all, of the dear departed? I wonder. That surfaces again with Carl's "glib" statement about hermeneutics—and "taking the Bible seriously." "Taking the Bible seriously" has been a mantra for the ELCA's "anti" folks on the homophile issue. Carl even cites Pannenberg hyping it. But it has more ancient roots as well, as a classical Pietist axiom: "Just read the Bible for what it says!"
8. "Whoever passes the issue [homosexuality] off as simply a hermeneutical squabble is not being honest." Sorry, Carl, it IS hermeneutics. And if you are the Lutheran theologian that you claim to be, you should not have made this utterance. Nor should you have said "passes off." You may be PO'd, but hermeneutics is no "pass off" item. The Reformation earthquake was epi-centered in Biblical hermeneutics. So claims Melancthon in the opening

paragraphs of Apology Art. 4. So does Luther all over the place. In our ELCA hassle it is NOT old-fashioned vs. hist.critical-liberal, but law/promise LUTHERAN hermeneutics vs. Pietist “Just read the Bible for what it says!” Both the traditionalists and the revisionists in the ELCA are regularly arguing their cases from “just take the Bible for what it says,” both implicitly claiming that hermeneutics is no big deal. Bob Bertram’s classic axiom is true: “Biblical hermeneutics is at no point separate from Biblical soteriology.” How you read the Bible is always connected to how you think folks get saved. Pietist soteriology is different from the Augsburg Aha! about the matter. Someone (and you COULD do it) needs to tell the pietists in the ELCA—both left and right—that their mostly Biblicist hermeneutics is linked to a less-than-Biblical soteriology. “Taking the Bible seriously” is no criterion for anything. Jesus was crucified for NOT taking the Bible seriously in terms of Rabbinic hermeneutics! And Jesus said the same about them, using his own (law-promise?) hermeneutics: He cites the Hebrew scriptures and says “go, and learn what this means....”

9. “The kind of promises made upon their ordination.” Yup. What was that promise? When it happened to me, here’s what I thought I was promising: To read the Bible (norma normans = the norm that norms everything) using the hermeneutical “norm” of the Augsburg Confession (a norma normata = a norm that is itself normed by the Gospel). Classical pietists don’t do that. It’s hard for me to see that Carl is doing that either.
10. “Is there a remedy? Are we at the point of no return?” Carl’s proposes no remedy. Could be that if they couldn’t save DIALOG, he too is helpless to save a denomination that was supposed to be “e and c and o” from becoming just another Protestant entity.. But he wishes

Mark would work a miracle.

11. "One day we will have to answer before the judgment seat of God. No one will be at our side to help." I hope Carl doesn't really believe that last sentence. If so, someone needs to tell him (in advance!) to lean on his scar-marked Defense Attorney standing at the judge's right hand. Or is this a slice of a pietist version of Judgment Day where the verdict is rendered according to one's faith, of course—but also a tad according to works?

Doubtless Carl memorized this chorale verse in his pious Norwegian Lutheran family home, as did I in my German version of the same. He—and all of us—need to sing it to each other:

"Trust not in [church] princes [nor denominations], they are but mortal.

Earthborn they are and soon decay.

Vain are their counsels at life's last portal,

When the dark grave engulfs its prey.

Since mortals can no help afford,

Place all your trust in Christ, our Lord.

Hallelujah! Hallelujah!"

There is indeed Someone "at our side to help." Also for the ELCA.

Carl mentions a "paper trail" of his half-century of publications—some of which I've read, but not all. From what I remember of that trail he's regularly been a spokesman for that trustworthy Someone. Some one of us needs to tell him.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder