

ELCA Launches Project on How to Read the Bible

Colleagues,

Pastor Robin Morgan supplies this week's ThTh posting, some reflections on "literalist" Bible-reading in connection with the ELCA's current project to find a better way to "read and understand the Bible." Apparently such literalist Bible reading still afflicts the membership of the "liberal" ELCA. I know that's true. But it may surprise some folks, especially those at the supposed other end of the spectrum in the LCMS. For "Biblical literalism" was what the fight was all about in the 1970s in the LCMS. [That's obviously a partisan opinion. Even more partisan is my saying it was "literalism vs. Lutheranism.."] That conflict put yours truly and 44 of my colleagues at Concordia Seminary (St. Louis) out on the street with the verdict "cannot to be tolerated in the church of God, much less be excused and defended." Hence Seminex; hence Crossings; hence this website's constant one-string-banjo about law-gospel hermeneutics as the distinct Lutheran proposal for how to read the Bible. Will that banjo's tune get into the ELCA's project—even as a minority opinion? If the handful of Seminex-alum-bishops in the ELCA would hustle for it, it might have a chance.

And law-gospel Bible-reading is still challenged in the LCMS. Listen to this recent PR about a summer offering from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis:

"Two Kinds of Righteousness: A Better Paradigm than Law and Gospel. This workshop will explore the liabilities of overextending the application of the Law-Gospel dynamic and allowing it to become a polarity, which inevitably swallows any ability to speak positively about the Law. The ultimate damage

done to parishes and individual Christians as they succumb to antinomianism and/or legalism will be explored and discussed. It will be suggested that the two kinds of righteousness provide a much better and more Lutheran way of approaching the theological task in a home and parish setting.”

We survivors of the Wars of Missouri know where that workshop is going. Can you hear the father of Missouri, C.F.W. Walther, also the founder of Concordia Seminary, who established “law-gospel” as the trademark of Missouri’s Lutheranism—can you hear him turning over in his grave? And if this course description should ever get back to Wittenberg, blessed Martin would twitch too in his tomb before the pulpit of the Castle Church. “Better and more Lutheran” than the Meister himself! That’s chutzpah!

Just for the record, Law-Gospel hermeneutics says:

1. The Bible is “medical” literature, the hospital “charts” of afflicted patients, with The Doctor’s diagnosis and then the Same Doctor’s therapy offered.
2. Its law messages diagnose human sickness.
3. Its Gospel message offers the therapeutic healing ultimately centered in the crucified and risen Christ.
4. Proceed as follows: probe the law’s diagnosis in any Bible text deep enough to see how it “necessitates” this Christ to heal the patient.
5. Probe again how the text applies its Christic therapy to the patient.
6. Repeat 4 & 5 with yourself and your audience as the patients.

Enough of that. Here’s Robin.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Ed decided I didn't have enough work to do right now and so handed on to me "The Authority of Scripture," a paper by Craig Nesson, academic dean and professor of contextual theology at Wartburg Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa, that was presented to the Conference of Bishops in March. This paper was presented in conjunction with the ELCA push to develop resources to help our increasingly biblically-illiterate church folk learn to read the Bible. Ed had discovered the reference to this paper in the April 2006 issue of "The Lutheran" in an article by Daniel J. Lehmann entitled "Work launched on guide to reading, understanding the Bible." So, here I am reading Nesson's paper and, in the process, having flashbacks from my college days in the 70s when I was a literalist Bible believer – the focus of Nesson's argument. He obviously sees the ELCA's role as one of dialogue partner with the literalists. This paper is a step toward offering some starting points in such a conversation for those of us who espouse that the word of God is inspired rather than inerrant.

Nesson outlines five points that he will address in this paper: 1) the meaning of 'inspiration', 2) the importance of attending to the 'literal sense', 3) the 'surplus' of biblical texts, 4) the functioning of 'canon within the canon' in the interpretive process, and 5) the role of the Christian community in deliberating the authority of the Bible for faith and life. Nesson looks at all of these points through the lens of 2 Timothy 3:16-17: "16All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: 17That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."

I purposely quote it in the King James because 2 Tim 3:16-17 in the KJV is THE text of literalists, although the NIV is O.K.

now, too. But back in the 70s, KJV was the only version to use. It was easier to memorize since it is more poetic and the language just odd enough to catch in your head. The KJV also needs to be explained more thoroughly so that na•ve seekers like me could be more completely inculcated with the doctrines being promulgated.

But I digress.

Nessan's basic point is that "when it comes to establishing the authority of Scripture, our primary resource is the communal experience of God's people over time." He quotes Luther from "How Christians Should Regard Moses" as saying "One must deal cleanly with the Scriptures. From the very beginning the word has come to us in various ways. It is not enough simply to look and see whether this is God's word, whether God has said it; rather we must look and see to whom it has been spoken, whether it fits us. That makes all the difference between night and day."

Nessan quotes a lot of big names: Bultmann, Ricoeur, Gadamer, Calvin, Tracy, even George Marsden from the evangelical side. It's a wonderful review of basic biblical hermeneutics that we all learned in seminary. Go ahead and download it, it's definitely worth reading from that perspective.

<http://www.thelutheran.org/doc/extras/nessan.pdf>

But I'm not going to analyze it point-by-point here because it doesn't really address the mindset that drives people to the literalist camp. I keep thinking of a 20-year-old kid on a big college campus who is terrified out of her mind about how to be out here in the world and what such a paper would have meant to her. Just one more way the institutional church has no clue what's going on.

My boyfriend and I went to a Lutheran campus church (one of the ELCA predecessor churches) and got ignored. I even went to a Lutheran campus event with one of my friends, but since I wasn't part of the "already-Lutheran in-crowd" I didn't know the lingo. I talked to my English teacher about her Catholic faith and she said she didn't think I was mature enough yet for grace. We got involved with Transcendental Meditation for awhile, but that "cosmic custard" approach to spirituality didn't really do it for me.

One evening when I was washing walls in the lab of the hospital where I was a part-time janitor, my co-worker started witnessing to me. He was also a student at the university I was attending. Previously, he'd spent his first year out of high school at the US Air Force Academy. Then he'd come home and spent the next two years smoking dope, dropping acid and picking up trash with the city crews. Not until he got involved with the literalist Bible believers did his life start to turn around.

I'd always wanted to know the Bible. I'd grown up in a mainline denomination (not Lutheran) and so knew little of Scripture other than the basic mainline moral imperative to "be nice." I started going to the small group meetings my co-worker attended and then signed up for the three-week class that laid the biblical groundwork for this literalist perspective.

This wasn't just about Bible knowledge, however. I got community in the small groups, Biblical knowledge that was absolutely true (or so they told us) and one other thing – spiritual experience. This was also a charismatic group and at the end of the three-week class, most everyone began speaking in tongues. It was a heady combination for a fearful 20-year-old trying to find her way in the world – certainty about truth, community and a personal spiritual connection with God.

I spent 10 years with this group. It had an international network that was headquartered in Ohio where many of us went for further training and fellowship events. That was still the time of Woodstock nation and so each summer we gathered for a Woodstock-like week of camping, music, learning and general good, wholesome Christian fun.

At least those of us outside the inner circle gathered for that. As it turned out, the leadership was gathering with other intentions in mind. Orgies, wife-swapping and all manner of extra-marital sexual activity well lubricated by generous amounts of alcohol had become normal leadership fare. In the wake of the exposure of these activities and the ensuing power struggles, I left.

I desperately wanted to become an atheist. Thousands of dollars in therapy bills and life-rebuilding time later, I couldn't quite make it to Madalyn Murray O'Hair's side of the street. I could still speak in tongues, which irritated me no end. I finally gave in and decided there was, indeed, a God.. Then we moved to St. Louis.

For some reason, my husband looked up the nearest Lutheran church in the yellow pages and we went one Sunday. I didn't really want to, but the kids needed some spiritual training. A couple weeks later when I was off with a friend from out-of-town, Ed showed up at our church to do adult forum and my husband brought home brochures about Crossings. I still wanted to learn and since I was new in town, I called what I thought was the Crossings' office hoping to get a catalog of their classes. Instead I got Ed answering the phone in his kitchen. The rest is history.

Ed introduced me to Jesus. That's what Lutherans have that other people want. A relationship of trust with God's messiah.

Keep your lutefisk and your brats. Keep your green book and your pristine pipe organs. The depth of a relationship with Jesus is what exposes and heals the core fears and need-to-control at the root of the literalist frenzy. Everything else comes later.

I learned that God held me accountable for my own life. That was an amazing aha for me. My life is my responsibility, I couldn't hand my life to some leader and think I was doing God's will. But even in the midst of the mess I'd made of my life was this incredible grace (that I didn't have to be mature at all to be given) through Jesus who lived and died and was raised FOR ME! Maybe this is just words for some of you who've been droning through worship in the red book or blue book or green book since you could read, but that really is GOOD and NEW for those of us who didn't grow up with it. The legalistic bind the literalists eventually get themselves tangled up in is so far from real grace that I completely understand why they have so little mercy available for anyone else.

The community will come. The biblical hermeneutics will come. However, I couldn't allow the literalist theological structure in my head to be completely dismantled until I trusted Christ enough to know that no matter what happened and what seminary professors told me about the Bible, Jesus was going to be right at my side through it all. Then I could let go of the literalist interpretations. He will never leave me nor forsake me.

My advice to the ELCA is don't mess with the literalists unless you're willing to make a long-term commitment to working one-on-one with these people. I know, and Ed will concur, that I have been a high-maintenance, long-term pastoral project in his life. I have had infinite questions and challenge what he says every step of the way. My life in the ELCA has been somewhat of

a roller coaster, even as a leader, because I refuse to get side-tracked by what I consider to be penultimate tasks when we aren't accomplishing the ultimate task we've been given to do.

Putting together resources to help people learn and understand the Bible is a good idea. Just make sure we keep the First One first.

Robin J. Morgan