

Leaving One Denomination to Find a Pure One

Colleagues,

Steve Petty, one of our Crossings crowd, is a member of an ELCA congregation in Iowa. He recently (5/14/2011) told me this: "Some folks in our congregation are looking for other denominational connections. They've sent this statement (attached) to our members. I'm hoping that you, Ed – making clear the GREAT distinction of law and gospel to fellow Lutherans – would set the congregation on a right course of action."

Below is the statement from the unhappy campers in Steve's congregation. After that comes my response to him. I didn't think I could fulfill this desire that I "set the congregation on a right course of action." Nevertheless, as you would expect, I did say something.

Peace and Joy!

Ed

7 Issues and Concerns about the ELCA

1. The Authority of Scripture: – Pastor Mark Hanson, Presiding Bishop of the ELCA, stated that there are two competing hermeneutics – or ways of interpreting the Bible – in the ELCA. The first is the traditional, orthodox view that considers the Bible to be the final authority on faith and life in the church. The second is to contextualize the meaning of what the Bible says, seeing it as conditioned by the time and culture in which it was

written, and turning to current theories of sociology, psychology, and personal experience to revise much of what it says.

2. The Naming of God: – There is a movement in the ELCA to move away from the use of the Trinitarian name of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the new Evangelical Lutheran Worship hymnal, this is now only one option among others to be used in referring to God. One can go through an entire worship service without ever invoking the name of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” In the recent “Rite of Reception” service held in San Francisco July 25, 2010 to receive onto the roster of the ELCA 6 pastors who were previously barred from the ministry because they would not abide by the church’s prohibition against practicing homosexual pastors, the service included prayers to “God, our Mother” and “Sophia, Wisdom, and Mother of us all”. The congregation was also given several options to use for “The Prayer of Jesus” (Lord’s Prayer), one of which began, “Our Mother who is within us, we celebrate your many names. Your wisdom come, your will be done, unfolding from the depths within us.” Whereas such types of worship have been present in some churches in the ELCA for some time, this was an official service of the Sierra Pacific Synod and included the participation of 3 ELCA bishops. And there has been no word of correction or rebuke or even mild concern expressed by any other bishop or official of the ELCA.
3. The Lutheran Understanding of Sin: – The Task Force on Human Sexuality stated that they could not come to an agreement on the nature of sin. This was not a statement disagreeing on what particular acts are sinful, it was an admission that they could not agree on what constitutes sin itself.
4. Who Jesus Is: – There is no agreement in the ELCA on

whether one needs to believe in Jesus for salvation. In the ELCA “Lutheran Study Bible” published by Augsburg, the original note accompanying Matthew 28:16 – 20, the Great Commission from Jesus, in which Jesus says, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations,” explains this by stating, “That does not mean make everyone disciples. Most people who are helped by Jesus and believe in him never become disciples. Jesus includes in salvation people who do not believe in him or even know about him.”

5. What is the purpose of the Church: – The revisionists emphasize that the church is a “public church” whose task is to be an agent for social change seeking to bring about justice in the world. The issue of the church being involved in society has taken over the importance of the sacramental ministry of the church, rather than choosing wisely the few issues to which it speaks and then do so compellingly from its own moral teachings.
6. Virgin Birth: – A recent article on the ELCA website states that “the virgin birth isn’t as important as believing in the resurrection, but it’s still the official position of the ELCA”, portraying this doctrine of the church, which is confessed in the creeds of the church, as an optional teaching. What is next to be chipped away by the ELCA leadership? [This distressing article was finally removed from the ELCA website as of Mon. Nov 8, 2010 – without comment – nonetheless it was on the ELCA website for over two years].
7. Marriage: – The issue of homosexuality is really the issue of God’s intention and desire to create boundaries around sexuality for our protection and for the benefit of children. Those boundaries are that sexual relations belong within a committed, covenant relationship, i.e. marriage, between one man and one woman.

Dear Members of _____ Lutheran Church,

As a group of concerned members (now formally called GOSPL) we would like to share our concerns about the direction of the ELCA. Most of you are aware of the decisions that were passed at the 2009 Church Wide Assembly. As controversial as those decisions have been, we have been informed about other actions by the ELCA that are as much or more concerning than those decisions. We feel these decisions and actions do not support the Biblical teaching we have grown to appreciate here at St _____.

At this year's annual meeting, our congregation voted in favor to join an organization called Lutheran CORE (Coalition for Renewal). Lutheran CORE is an association of individuals, congregations, and renewal groups. It is not a church body. On January 18th, 2011 Pastor _____, a pastor from the Old East and Old West Point Churches in the Northeast Iowa Synod and a spokesperson for CORE, came to educate us (the congregation) about CORE and what their beliefs/goals are. If you would like to view his presentation, it is available on DVD from the church office. During his presentation he educated us about 7 Issues and Concerns about the ELCA (see the enclosed letter), that we would like to share with you. Please take time to read the enclosed letter, and after doing so, take some time to reflect on how you feel about those seven issues.

Pastor _____ has graciously offered to receive any questions/concerns you might have about CORE through email correspondence. His email address is xxxxxxxx. He will be undergoing some surgery during the first of May, so please be patient while waiting for his reply.

If you have any thoughts/concerns about this letter please feel free to contact the following:

[25 names]

The following people also share our concerns:

[Seven names]

Steve, I think I am incapable of doing what you wish—"set the congregation on a right course of action." From the rhetoric of "their" statement it seems clear to me that it is a "lost cause" to try to move them away from their Biblicist legalism with paper statements about each of their 7 pts. Sadly.

The problem of Biblical legalists is that they are trusting an "other" Gospel instead of the one offered by the crucified and risen Jesus. And linked with that "other Gospel" is this "other" notion of salvation: Salvation is granted by God when you are "faithful" to the Bible, believing and doing everything it says.

That is a different "faith" and "Salvation" from what the Bible itself actually proposes, of course. Never once does the Bible say: Saving faith = believing every word of this book. Its core message is what Paul told the terrified Philippi jailer: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved."

It's that simple. Nowhere in the Bible does the Bible say "Believe the Bible."

So this form of Biblicist/Legalism is of the same sort of religion as Islam. "Believe and practice everything in the book." Their book is the Quran. For these folks in your congregation—lost in the desert of Biblicist legalism—THE BOOK is the Bible.

They are hanging their hearts on the Bible as their God. This is not only deserting Christ, it's breaking the first commandment.

Only when this false faith is replaced by “the real thing,” a faith focused exclusively (no addenda) on Christ, only then would it be fruitful to talk with them about the seven gauntlets they are throwing down in their statement.

So it seems to me.

Then it might be useful to talk about their statement and help them see the false-faith, misfocused faith, that runs through it.

1. *The Authority of Scripture:* – There is a *Biblicist* way and a *Jesus-focused* way to speak of Scripture’s authority. Within the ELCA and within CORE and within in the NALC there are folks who get it right and folks who get it wrong. All these three, all denominations in the USA, are a mixed bag on this.
2. *The Naming of God:* – There are dingbats in all denominations, ELCA included, who waffle on this. From what I know of this waffling it’s linked again to what people proclaim as the hub of the wheel of faith. The trinitarian formula Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the ancient church’s language for keeping faith focused on the Christ-center. That’s how they unpacked the formula. That’s the way Luther unpacked the Trinitarian formula in his Large Catechism: “Trinity = the way to talk about God so that it comes out as Good News, aka Gospel.” It’s still good today. It’s also what the ELCA’s constitution professes.
3. *The Lutheran Understanding of Sin.* The ELCA is committed (in its constitution) to this definition: “[Our churches] teach that since the fall of Adam all human beings who are propagated according to nature are born with sin, that is, without fear of God, without trust in God, and with concupiscence. And they teach that this disease or

original fault is truly sin, which even now damns and brings eternal death to those who are not born again through baptism and the Holy Spirit. They condemn the Pelagians and others who deny that the original fault is sin and who, in order to diminish the glory of Christ's merits and benefits, argue that human beings can be justified before God by their own powers of reason." [Augsburg Confession, Article II, (1530). When the Roman Catholic critics at Augsburg rejected this definition, the confessors responded with a multi-page defense of their statement.]

4. Who Jesus Is: – The ELCA constitution is clear on this. There are dingbats in all denominations that waffle here too. In everything I have read/heard from Bishop Mark Hanson, he is not a waffler.
5. What is the purpose of the Church: -The ELCA constitution is "perfectly clear" on this. Sure, there are folks who don't practice this. True of all denominations. Also in the LCMS. There are no perfect denominations—anywhere in the world. Ditto for the CORE folks and the NALC. To seek to create a "pure" denomination is to make a denomination into one's God. Clear idolatry. Jesus was agin such a notion.
6. Virgin Birth: – There is the Biblicist way and the Christ-the-center way to address this one. That would take a larger essay to work out the details.
7. Marriage: – "The issue of homosexuality is really the issue of God's intention and desire to create boundaries around sexuality for our protection and for the benefit of children."

NOT TRUE. Seems pretty plain to me that the "issue" – the deeper, possibly deepest, issue – in your congregation is the conflict between two different ways of reading the Bible: Biblicist-legalist or "Christ-the-center." And then the Bertram

axiom comes into play, namely, that Biblical hermeneutics and Biblical soteriology are two sides of the same coin. One is real gold. The other isn't. It may look shiny (=pious), but it is not reflecting "the true light, which enlightens everyone."

So it seems to me.

Cheers!

Ed