

Responses to ThTh 376 about Carl Braaten's Open Letter to the ELCA Bishop

Colleagues,

Quite a few responses came in to last week's posting. Here are some of them. Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

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1. A "writer and independent [= I've got no church teaching job] scholar" from Minneapolis, Minnesota. Thank you for your Thursday Theology of August 25, "Carl Braaten's Jeremiad." I'd like to make one small comment about the following statement:

"Both the traditionalists and the revisionists in the ELCA [sc. on the homosexuality debate] are regularly arguing their cases from 'just take the Bible for what it says,' both implicitly claiming that hermeneutics is no big deal."

While what you say here is true, it is nevertheless somewhat misleading. Now, many folks would label me a revisionist, i.e. one who advocates for change in the ELCA's policies regarding sexuality. It's true that we do regularly hear so-called revisionists arguing from exegesis: "My exegesis is bigger than your exegesis," we sometimes say. Yet I'd like to remind your readers that

revisionists have also been regularly heard making the case for policy change from Lutheran law/Promise hermeneutic. Not always, not everyone, but often enough. In fact, it was heard a couple of times in Orlando [=last months' ELCA national assembly]—sadly, not by bishops or theologians. (I was there as a Voting Member, and would have offered the case myself had I been so lucky as to get in front of a live microphone.)

Indeed, the folks at Goodsoil (revisionists, all) sport this snazzy Luther quote on their website:

“Christ offers us such freedom that we must simply tolerate no master over our conscience but insist on our baptism and as people called to Christ and made righteous and holy through him say, “This is my right, my treasure, my work and my defense against all sin and unrighteousness (which the law can produce and lay upon me)”.

And Bishop Mark Hanson himself, whom I will not label a revisionist in public, said this recently on the “Grace Matters” radio program:

Question: “Bishop Hanson, do you believe in the Bible?”

Hanson: “No, I believe in the living Triune God, who meets us in the words of Scripture. But I don’t believe in the Bible as the ****object**** of my faith. The object and the subject of my faith is the living God who took on human flesh in Jesus the Christ, whose spirit works through the biblical writers calling me to faith, bringing me to repentance, and freeing me in forgiveness, that I might immerse myself in the lives of my neighbors in service, in the struggles for justice and peace in the world.”

And I point to Timothy Hoyer, a frequent contributor to Crossings, as another example of one who “gets it.”

Now, on the part of the so-called traditionalists, I must admit I’ve never, ever heard anyone arguing against policy change from a properly Lutheran law/Promise perspective. That is, with the possible exception of the blessed Gerhard Forde. (Now I say POSSIBLE exception because he was a bit sly on the topic of law and sexuality, grounding his conclusions in an odd concept of “symbolic participation” in a “unity in [biological] difference.”) I’m not saying law/Promise arguments have never been made by traditionalists, I’m just saying I’ve never heard them—and, in the past five years, I’ve listened often and deeply.

- 2. An Anglican Divine in Saskatchewan*
Thanks for this. I was at a conference last week in Whitehorse, Yukon, where the Dean of the Cathedral showed me Braaten’s letter. Amazing: my response to the Dean focused on the lack of Gospel-centredness... I will enjoy forwarding this on to him.
- 3. An ELCA Pastor in the Twin-Cities, Minnesota*
Easy there Ed!

You served up no picture of what the ELCA is becoming except another liberal protestant denomination that turns the Bible to whatever the social justice issue is of the day. Where is the law with your promise? I told you some time ago that you had changed my mind, however, after what I heard of the politics in play in Orlando I am not so sure anymore.

But yes, hermeneutics are important, and my colleague (who was a voting member) reports to me that it seems that there are two ways of reading the Bible and she (who

voted for all three recs) doesn't think the two will be reconciled within this denomination.

I am disheartened that Dr. Braaten forgot about the great Advocate in his letter, I trust that emotions are high on his end. But, when I made my vows I too took them with an eye towards the day when I would be held to account for each soul that passed under my care.

And yes, I do want to know what would make us different from, say, the UCC were we to go the way of all American denominations casting further left while each state becomes more and more red? What's our message? Law and Promise? Where's the law for the left?

4. An ELCA Pastor in Ohio I was not aware of the letter to Bishop Hanson. Thanks for the early morning theological workout. I was privileged to have been a student of Walter Bouman, however, I must admit I was an arrogant senior who had just come back from internship and, of course, knew everything. I.e., Only after being in the parish did I start to absorb and really learn what Walter taught.

I was at his funeral Aug. 23 and the image that echoed in my head as I was reading this TTh was that of Bishop Steve Bouman [Ed: Walt's cousin, preacher at the service] speaking about the Caravaggio (?) painting of Paul on the road to Damascus—Knocked flat on his back by the gospel. Bishop Bouman reflected that Walter had been knocked flat on his back by the resurrection and never got over it.

I bring this up because, although as a denomination I'm not sure we in the ELCA are bowled over by the gospel in this way, there are certainly those in the church who "get it", and who never get over it. When you're flat on

your back in the dust, denominationalism is adiaphora, it would seem, or maybe I don't get it.

Thank you for pointing again to the Scarred Defense Attorney who is on our side. That alone knocks me off my high horse.

- 5. Retired ELCA Pastor in Massachusetts*Just read the piece on Carl Braaten's letter to Mark Hanson. Good analysis, etc. [A while ago] we visited with [so-and-so], a good friend of [X], one of the "dear departed" mentioned by Braaten laments who moved over to Rome. When X was leaving for Rome he sent this friend a letter, explaining his reason: He wanted to "be in a place where he could adore the Virgin Mary." Sad if that was/is truly the deciding factor.
- 6. An ELCA Seminary Professor*Your Braaten analysis. Wonderful summary! And response! Indeed, "someone of us needs to tell him"!
- 7. An ELCA Pastor in Missouri*[In] the ecclesiology [of the "evangelical, catholic, and orthodox" folks], one gets the sense that "bigger is better" in understanding what church is really all about. That means, I think that whatever "we" ELCAers define by church ought not be by "individual, local preference" but had better mesh with what the "broadly based, ecclesial determination," for which these theologians want to claim NT support. Well, I suppose that's true in Acts 15, when Paul did in fact meet with his Jewish-Christian brothers [and sisters?]. But isn't Paul more an apologist for the Gospel to the rest of the assembly, rather than allowing his "local preference" of bringing the Gospel to the Gentiles be compromised? Wasn't the insistence that Luther ought NOT act by "local preference" more like the charge of his critics that he was "a wild boar in the

vineyard"? Of course, when he did appear for a hearing—such as it was—before the “broadly based, ecclesial determination,” the bigger church was NOT better. Anyway, the real point I want to make here is that I don’t see any confessional grounding in AC 7 in what the “Lutheran” theologians of “e, c, and o” promulgate, let alone your marvelous point in your response to Carl (and, to me, a key issue in this whole debate today) that the hermeneutics of Apol. 4 are worth another look, also for our “Final Accounting.”

8. A Lutheran Chaplain in Ohio I “had to” drop you a note on this one about Braaten’s open letter. . . . As I continue on my own faith and ministry journey, I reflect on how deeply I have been infected with what I call “Seminex theology”, Law-Gospel Reconstructionist theology, or theology based in the Augsburg Aha. I’m just winding up a year supervising chaplain residents. One of them is a Lutheran Deaconess who, of course, was schooled in Valpo [=Valparaiso University]. She was raised LCMS, but at some point came to the conclusion she had to jump ship. She calls it Valpo theology—and we both hope that those of us who “get it” will be able to continue spreading the word about our Eternal Defense Attorney whom you mention at the end of last week’s posting.
Keep on keeping on!
9. A Lutheran Theology Professor in Canada. Superb, not just the correcting of facts (Pelikan and Neuhaus) but also dragging Braaten over Schroeder’s Razor. Yeah, yeah, I know, it’s not YOUR razor....
10. An ELCA seminary professor. I appreciated your “dialogue” with Carl’s open letter. I am particularly grateful for your persistent reminder that the gospel is always at the heart of everything that the church believes and does and

that God's word is always law/gospel. I, like you, was disappointed that Carl never proposed any remedy for the malady which he laments and that he never noted that the church's life is dependent on the gracious good news which is the gospel. . . Christ's radical redemptive work which is the reason why the church exists for the sake of the world. How blessed we are that this Christ remains our precious Advocate.

- 11. Finally a lengthy one asking for a response. So I pass on this info about him. Dr. Jose (Joe) Fuliga is the retired former president of the Lutheran Church in the Philippines, also one time dean of the LCP theological seminary in Baguio. His doctoral dissertation in systematic theology (mentored by R. Bertram et al.) comes from Concordia Seminary (in the "good old days" of the early 1970s). Its title: "The Historical-Critical Method: The Dividing Wall Between the Conservatives and Moderates in the LCMS Controversy." On the ecumenical scene Joe has served as consultant and member of the drafting committee for the LWF Mission Statement and more recently as Tutor & Overseas Research Fellow with the St. Simon of Cyrene Theological Institute in the UK. He grew up in the Roman Catholic communion in the Philippines, moved to the Lutheran confession in his homeland after his own Augsburg Aha! He's an insider to both traditions. Dear Ed, I am appalled that the knowledgeable Lutheran theologians mentioned by Braaten could jump into the Roman Catholic ship. Many years ago, over 30 years to be exact, I thought the claim of the Lutheran News (now Christian News) editor Herman Otten that some of these men would convert to Roman Catholicism was preposterous. Herman Otten's prediction, however, proved prophetic.*

As a former Roman Catholic I would like to ask these men

if they have considered seriously the teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. Have they, for example, studied well: (1) How Peter and his successors became Popes? Have they accepted the RC teachings on Apostolic Succession and Papal infallibility? Why the papacy has almost been exclusively European? (2) How about the RC assertion that the ordination of Lutheran clergymen and their ministry with regards to sacramental rites are invalid? Do they now admit that their ministries for many, many years in the Lutheran Church have been invalid? (3) Have they accepted the teaching on compulsory clerical celibacy? (Check the website: www.rentapriest.com)? (4) What about the teachings on Purgatory and prayers for the dead? And on Limbo (Limbus Infantum and Limbus Patrum) although it is now considered pious opinion? Do they pray for their dead and say Mass for the dead?

(5) What about the place of Mary in the Church and on invoking her through prayers? Is she omnipresent so that she can hear the simultaneous prayers of Christians in various parts of the world? Is she omniscient so that she understands all the prayers in various languages? Almost every attribute and title given to Jesus is attributed to Mary: She was immaculately conceived, had a bodily assumption, is being considered co-redemptrix and now rules as the mother of the Church and the Queen of heaven and earth. There is a Sacred Heart of Jesus. And there is a Sacred Heart of Mary. Jesus is mediator. Mary is Mediatrix of all graces. Jesus was presented in the temple. There is also the presentation of Mary. Jesus remained celibate. Mary remained a virgin forever. There are more miracles attributed to Mary and more feasts to honor her than all the miracles and feasts attributed to

all the persons of the Trinity. In fact, there are more churches named after Mary than for all the persons in the Godhead. Do these theologians ever say the 150 prayers in the Rosary where one Our Father is said for every 10 Hail Marys? Have they studied the many apparitions and miracles attributed to Mary which number more than those attributed to any person in the Trinity?

(6) Have they thought of the invocation of the saints to whom specialized tasks had been assigned? Two hundred saints invoked in the past had been dropped by Vatican II in the 60s. Does this mean that prayers directed to them have all turned out to be useless? One saint, Joan of Arc, was declared a heretic on May 30, 1431. In 1920 she was canonized. The Old Testament saints, moreover, like Noah, Abraham, Moses, Job, etc., are not invoked at all!

(7) Have they considered the Roman Catholic teaching on non-separation of Church and State as exemplified by the Vatican? (8) Have they rejected Sola Scriptura as the basis of the Church's doctrine and practice? Or, have they accepted Tradition and the beliefs and practices promulgated by the Vatican supposedly based on Tradition? Has it become clear to them concerning the place and role of Scriptures and Tradition in the promulgation of dogmas and practices of the Church? What about the forced prohibition for centuries for lay people to read and interpret the Scriptures and for anyone to translate the Scriptures in the vernacular?

(9) What about the continuing practice of Indulgences? (10) What about the denial of the sacraments for divorced persons and those who have not made a private confession to a priest? (11) Have they accepted transubstantiation and the teachings and practices relative to Corpus Christi as Biblical? (12) How about the teaching on

mortal and venial sins? (13) And the rejection for centuries of Scriptures in the vernacular and the Mass in the language of the people?

(14) Have they considered why many homosexuals and pedophiles been attracted to the priestly vocation in the Roman Catholic Church? A number of dioceses have declared bankruptcy due to lawsuits filed by victims of pedophile priests and the cover ups resorted to by a number of bishops in the RC Church. (15) Have they considered that feminism and the ordination of women have become a greater problem in the Roman Catholic Church than in any other Christian denomination? (16) What about the Roman Catholic teaching on population control, the use of the pill and the great poverty of many Catholic nations in South America and in the Philippines? (17) How about the failure of the Catholic Church in educating its members on morality so that there is utter corruption and immorality in many Catholic countries in the South? (18) Have they rejected the Sola Fide [=righteous by faith alone] teaching and accepted the excommunication of Luther?

In the hierarchy of truth, which teachings and practices have they considered not binding to a Catholic? Have they been selective in their embrace of Catholic teachings and practices? It is my hope that I will get some reactions to the above. God bless you.

Joe Fuliga Th.D.